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SELECTIONS

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Witnesses to War

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Catherine de Zegher combines the works of Francisco Goya and Farideh Lashai to provide a stunning look at similar conflicts that existed two centuries apart

When Spanish artist Francisco Goya created his devastating series of 82 prints *The Disasters of War*, between 1810 and 1820, he was protesting the horrific violence caused by the Spanish War of Independence against the Napoleonic occupation during the early 19th century. Over two centuries later, the late

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Iranian artist Farideh Lashai voiced a similar protest, in her contemporary manner, against the violence and oppression plaguing her native Iran.

In an inspired exhibition entitled *Eyewitness: Francisco Goya & Farideh Lashai*, the Museum of Fine Arts (MSK) in Ghent, Belgium, draws a chilling parallel between the work of the two artists, who lived centuries apart but conveyed a similar message of protest in different artistic media. “They enrich each other in this exhibition,” says Catherine de Zegher, the MSK’s director and curator of the show.

The MSK acquired an album of Goya’s *The Disasters of War* in 2014, and de Zegher had since been trying to show this grandiose work in an interesting manner. “I also had an ambition to show the work of Farideh Lashai,” she says, “and since she is not known in Belgium, I thought the exhibit would be a nice way to introduce her, while giving the work of Goya its contemporaneity.” De Zegher also wanted to give Lashai a level of recognition that she never received when she was living. “I’ve always been promoting the work of women, especially those who worked under difficult circumstances,” she says, “and now is the perfect moment to show Farideh’s subtle but critical art. She really deserves this international recognition.”

Like Goya, Lashai produced her art in a time of conflict. Through her drawings and prints, the artist combined Iran’s sweeping landscapes with the techniques of contemporary art to create a visual testament to the violence around her.

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Eyewitness is built both around Goya's seminal work and *When I Count, There Are Only You ... But When I Look, There Is Only a Shadow*, which was Lashai's final piece, produced between 2011 and 2013. "The timing of the work corresponded with the Arab Spring," says de Zegher. "Her work is contemporary and at the same time inspired by a long history of Persian culture, poetry and literature. The manner in which Farideh connected elements from Eastern and Western cultures is absolutely fascinating, ranging from miniatures to abstract art, and from Rumi to German playwright Bertolt Brecht."

Goya and Lashai both created exemplary artworks during eras of radical social upheaval, repression and censorship. And while their pieces chronicled the horrors of war, the two artists also infused humour, and ultimately hope, into their work. "I want viewers of the show to leave with a sense of hope and openness," says de Zegher, "and with a sense that they can do something to make a change."

Eyewitness: Francisco Goya & Farideh Lashai will travel to the Prado Museum in Madrid and the British Museum in London in 2017. As a companion to the exhibition, the MSK has also produced a beautifully illustrated catalogue featuring the work of both artists.