



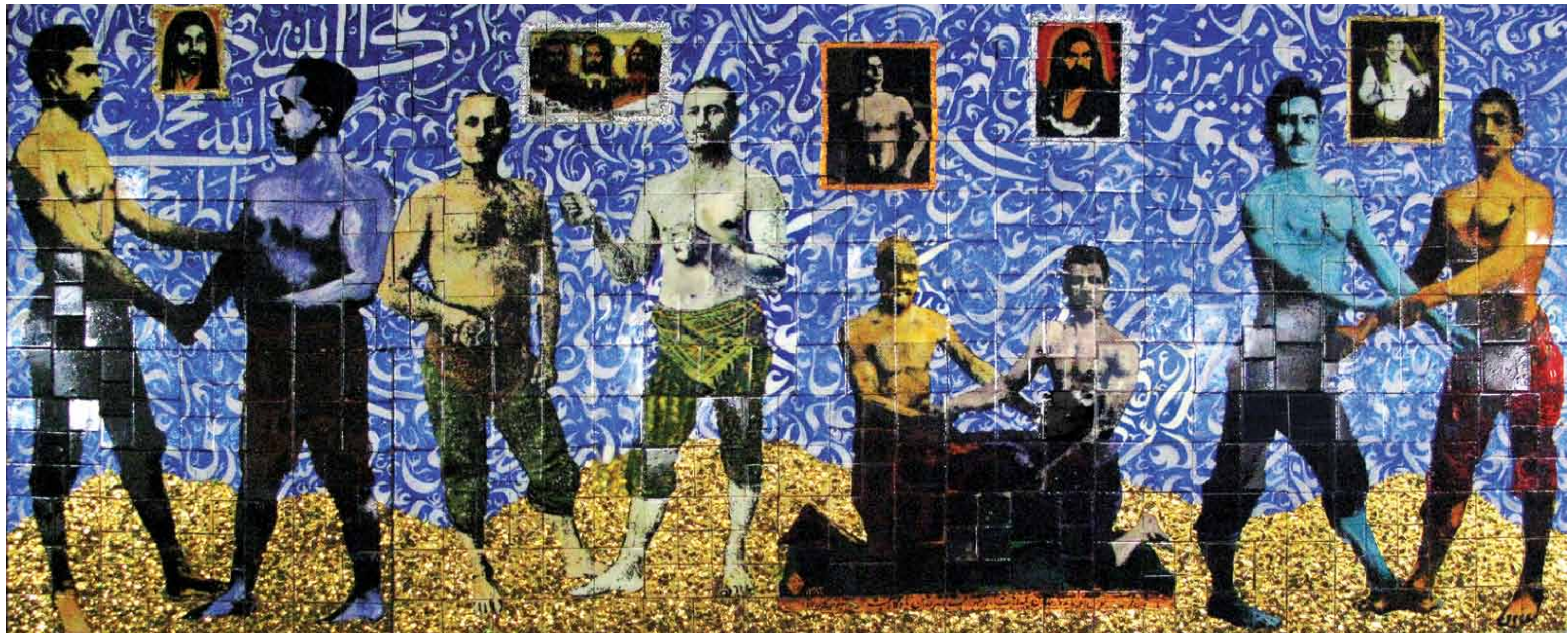


Khosrow Hassanzadeh
HAFT KHAN: THE SEVEN LABORS OF ROSTAM

March 2012

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

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Remember, 2010
Mixed media on ceramic tile
79 x 189 in / 200 x 480 cm

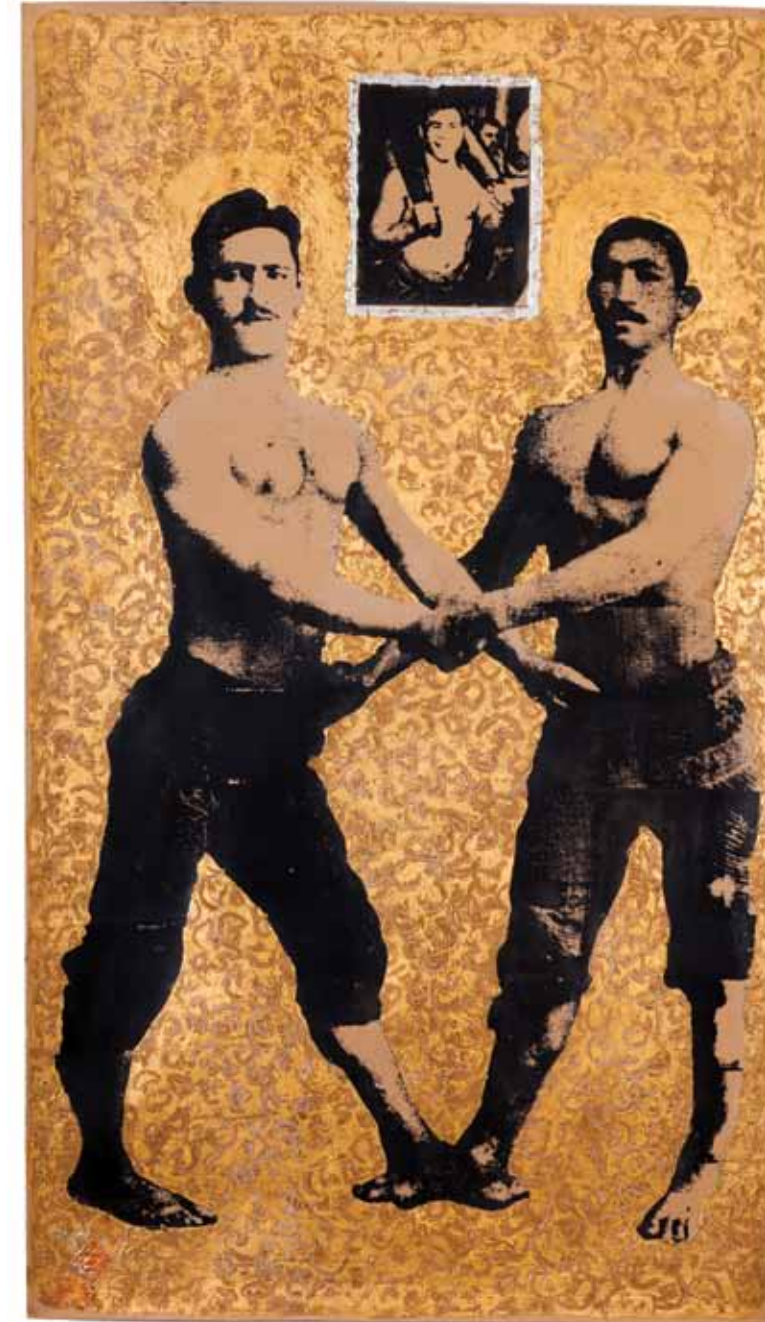
KHOSROW HASSANZADEH'S HAFT KHAN

by Shiva Balaghi, Ph.D., International Humanities Fellow, Brown University

The primary manifestation of Iran in the Western field of vision for the past three decades has been black. Enshrined in this black world of the media, Iranian men are marked by their black robes, black turbans, black beards, and black guns. Even as we part this black sea, we find Iranian men still embedded within a complex web of meanings within Iran itself. The burden of history, a lived history, weighs on this generation of Iranian men. Some part of this weight is pictorial—a revolution, a war, and an Islamic state—all deeply immersed in the power of representation.

The visual participation of men in Iranian society is heavily coded. Manhood becomes steeped in thick symbolism—of patriotism and piety, sacrifice, and martyrdom. Within this dizzying grid of representation, many Iranian men search for alternative ways of being. The struggle to define one's own models, heroes, and ultimately to define oneself becomes in no small part a struggle over representation. Ways of being are embedded in ways of seeing. In his quest to re-examine Iranian masculinity, the artist Khosrow Hassanzadeh has created various meditations on *pahlavans*, the historic Iranian strongmen noted for their virtue and courage, and who protected their communities.

Haft Khan, the majestic mural on exhibit at the Leila Heller Gallery, is Hassanzadeh's penultimate tribute to the *pahlavans* who have been a leitmotif in his art for nearly a decade now. "This *katibeh* is the completion of my *pahlavan* story," Hassanzadeh explains.¹ He is making one final work featuring his *pahlavans*, a dome shaped ceramic mural to be exhibited in Dubai. The monumental scale of *Haft Khan* echoes the inscriptions carved into the mountainside by order of the ancient Persian king Darius the Great at Bisitun. The enormity of *Haft Khan* almost seems necessary to contain the world of Hassanzadeh's imagination, so preoccupied in the past decade with local mythologies, traditional art forms, and Iranian notions of manhood.



Untitled I from *Remember*, 2010
Silkscreen and gold leaf on paper
83 x 48 in / 210 x 122 cm



Untitled II from *Remember*, 2010
Silkscreen and gold leaf on paper
83 x 48 in / 210 x 122 cm

“Around 2002,” Hassanzadeh recalls, “I began working on the issue of manhood. There is a culture of manhood [*farhang-e mardaneji*] that focuses on *hormat* – a man’s character, his dignity and honor. It seemed to me that there is an aspect of this notion of manhood that is being lost.” So he studied the culture of the *pahlavan*, which was becoming a fading memory. “The *pahlavan*,” he explains, “used to be an integral part of our culture. They were the caretakers of society; they were powerful men, strong men who were society’s protectors and providers. They helped people in need—whether helping to organize wedding ceremonies and memorials, or organizing relief during earthquakes. This culture has now been lost.”

Before broaching this subject, Hassanzadeh had been working on topics like the war and terrorism. Hassanzadeh had been a conscripted soldier in the Iran-Iraq war for over two years. Later, he was injured during a missile strike on Tehran. These memories became the grist for his earliest paintings. “When I worked on the war, on terrorism,” Hassanzadeh tells me, “there was an angry aspect to my painting.”

With his 2003 series, *Pahlavan*, Hassanzadeh’s work took on a different tonality. “The war itself,” he explains, “was based on a particular sense of manhood.” The series of silkscreen images was based on old historic photographs of *pahlavans* that Hassanzadeh found in photography shops in south Tehran. He cropped the photographs, painted over them, and rearranged them into collages. Hassanzadeh’s quest for new ways of imagining Iranian manhood fed his artistic experimentation, producing a vivid form of historical bricolage.

Hassanzadeh continued this quest—for new artistic forms and alternative notions of manhood—in another series of works from 2008 titled *Remember*. “When I was making these pictures,” he explains the works to me, “I was like a dervish dancing around the pictures.” Here, calligraphic notations referencing Imam Ali encircle the cropped images from historic photographs. *Ya Ali madad* is a common prayer amongst Iran’s Shiites—one that is uttered when one undertakes a difficult task, asking for Ali’s help. It is a

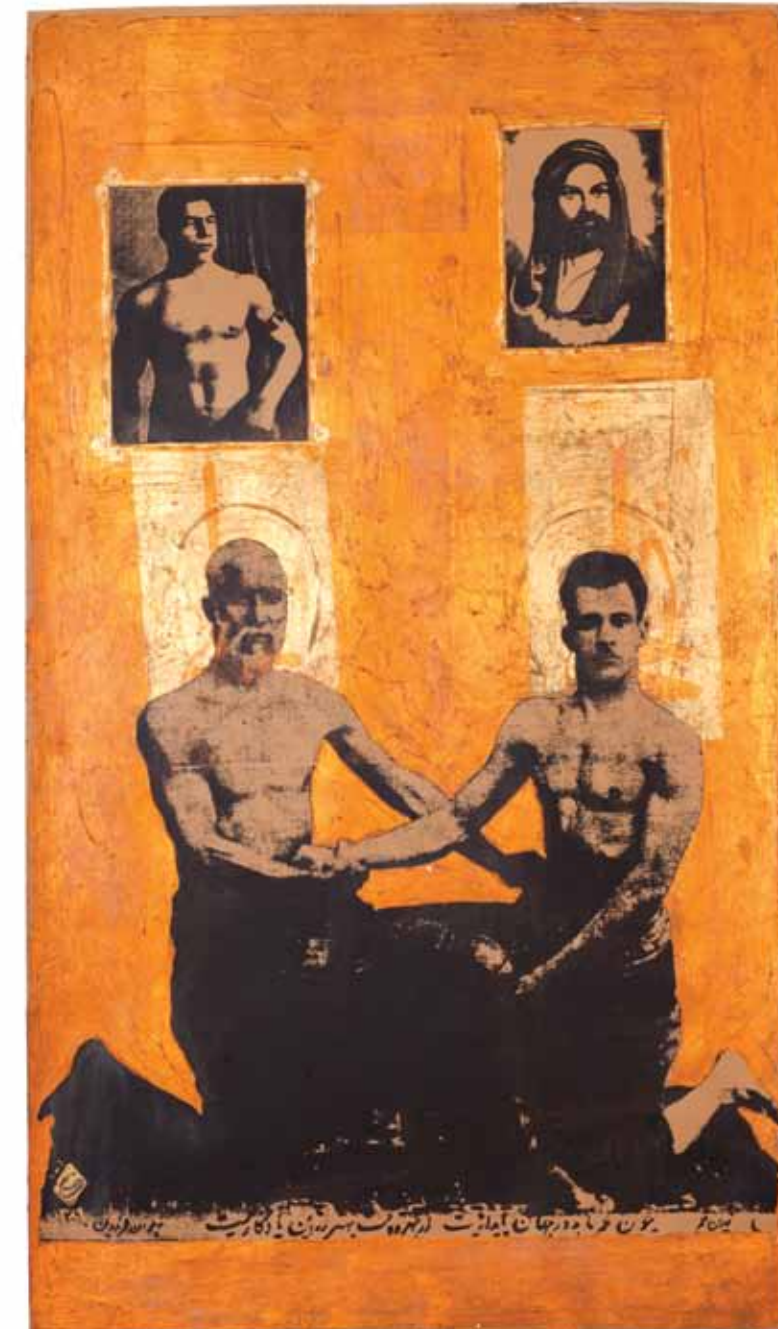
common refrain among athletes in the traditional gymnasiums known as the *zurkhaneh* and among Iranian wrestlers. “Ali,” Hassanzadeh says, “is a symbol of manhood. He is a central part of the culture of manhood in Iran.”

In 2009, the British Museum exhibited Hassanzadeh’s homage to the Iranian wrestler Takhti. The three dimensional box mimicked the *hejleh*, small temporary shrines Shiites erect to commemorate their dead. Hassanzadeh’s *Takhti* memorialized the Olympic wrestling champion who has become for many Iranians a modern day *pahlavan*. Even forty years after his death, Takhti remains a national hero. “Takhti,” Hassanzadeh told me, “is an icon, he is a part of our culture. In a sense, he has become a symbol for our country.”

All of these artistic threads lead to *Haft Khan*, in which Hassanzadeh embraces yet another art form. “It’s my first serious work in ceramic,” he explains. A photograph of his studio in Varamin shows the difficult work in progress. Each tile is shaped, fired, and decorated individually. They are laid out on a massive tabletop where they are arranged like a mosaic and assembled into a mural. The work measures 2 meters by 9 meters (6.4 x 27.75 feet) and is made up of some 728 pieces of ceramic.

Haft Khan brings together various techniques—ceramics, calligraphy, miniature painting, photography. Figures from Hassanzadeh’s older works—the *pahlavans* from the archival photographs and Takhti—are joined by images borrowed from illuminated manuscripts of the *Shahnameh*. *Haft Khan* references a central story of Ferdowsi’s epic poem, where the hero Rostam must struggle past seven obstacles, each testing his wit, strength, courage, and manhood. Across the massive work, Hassanzadeh has painstakingly calligraphied selections from Ferdowsi’s epic.

The companion works on display are from Hassanzadeh’s series, *Remember* (2010). Combining several traditional art forms, the works depict both sacred and profane icons of manhood. Echoing Safavid tile panels and Timurid illuminated manuscripts,



Untitled III from *Remember*, 2010
Silkscreen and gold leaf on paper
83 x 48 in / 210 x 122 cm



Untitled IV from *Remember*, 2010
Silkscreen and gold leaf on paper
83 x 48 in / 210 x 122 cm

Hassanzadeh's pahlavans appear before rich backgrounds of deep lapis lazuli and gold leaf textured with painstaking calligraphy. They stand before framed images of Imam Ali and Takhti. Ultimately, the experience contained within the works of art are, as Hassanzadeh explains about "a sense of being Iranian."

"Every artist finds certain visual possibilities before him," wrote the critic Arthur Danto citing the work of the art historian Heinrich Wölfflin.² For Wölfflin, this notion delimited the scope within which artists were bound. Positing the end of art history, however, Danto describes a sense of endless visual possibilities that enables "artists to appropriate the forms of past art," giving them new resonance and new meaning. Hassanzadeh's decade long journey of experimentation through Iranian form and content has ultimately become manifested in *Haft Khan* and *Remember*, beautiful works of art with richly textured cultural and social references.

Hassanzadeh's project has been one of artistic excavation, mining Iranian cultural heritage for meaning and form. He recasts images and techniques from miniature painting and tile panels, from classical poetry to the *zurkhaneh*, from the *hejleh* to the grand inscriptions of Darius the Great. In the process, Hassanzadeh has recast and reasserted alternative notions of manhood, different ways of being a man in Iran. For as Danto claimed, "to imagine a work of art is to imagine a form of life in which it plays a role."

I would like to thank Khosrow Hassanzadeh, Eugenie Dolberg, and the staff of Leila Heller Gallery for their kind help in preparing this essay.

¹ Quotes from Khosrow Hassanzadeh are from interviews with the author in 2009 and 2012.

² My discussion of Arthur Danto comes from his essay, "Modalities of History: Possibility and Comedy," in *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 193-219.



Haft Khan, 2010
Mixed media on 728 pieces of ceramic tile
77 x 333 in / 195 x 845 cm

KHOSROW HASSANZADEH

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2012 *Haft Khan: The Seven Labors of Rostam*, Leila Heller Gallery, New York
Richard Koh Fine Art, Singapore
- 2010 *Ya Ali Madad*, Gallery Janine Rubeiz, Beirut
Haft Khan, Nathalie Obadia Gallery, Brussels
- 2009 *Ya Ali Madad*, Arndt & Partner Gallery, Berlin
Prostitutes, Scream Gallery, London
Ready to Order, The British Museum
- 2008 *Ready to Order*, B21, Dubai
- 2007 *Khosrow Hassanzadeh*, CCF, Damascus
Bache Mahal, Silk Road Gallery, Tehran
- 2006 *Khosrow Hassanzadeh*, KIT Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam
Khosrow Hassanzadeh, B21 Art Gallery, Dubai
- 2005 *Terrorist*, Silk Road Gallery, Tehran
- 2004 Serigraphy and Mixed Media, Elsewhere Gallery, Phnom Penh
Pahlavan, Janine Rubeiz Gallery, Beirut
- 2003 *Pahlavan*, Silk Road Gallery, Tehran
- 2002 Iranian Printing Art, Iranian Institute Visual Arts, Zagreb
Ashura, Gallery Janine Rubeiz, Beirut
- 2001 *Ashura* (with Sadegh Tirafkan), Unesco Palace, Beirut
- 2000 *Chador*, Seyhoon Gallery, Tehran
Falling Figures (with Bita Fayyazi), Seyhoon Gallery, Tehran
- 1999 *Daily Memorandum*, Seyhoon Gallery, Tehran
Life, War & Art, Diorama Arts Centre, London
- 1994 Paintings of Khosrow Hassanzadeh, Barg Gallery, Tehran
- 1991 Selection of Thirteen Paintings, Djamshidieh Gallery, Tehran

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2012 *Iran*, Devi Foundation, Delhi
- 2009 *Iran Inside Out*, Chelsea Art Museum, New York
Looped and Layered, Thomas Erben Gallery, New York
Jameel Prize, Victoria and Albert Museum, London
In the mood for Paper, F2, Beijing
Living Traditions, National Gallery Islamabad

- 2008 *Living Traditions*, Babur Gardens, Kabul
Breaking News, Paris
Etemad Gallery, Tehran
Word into Art, British Museum, Dubai
Fundamental, Manchester, Berlin and Brussels
- 2006 Iran.com: Iranische Kunst Heute, Museum für Neue Kunst, Freiburg
Word into Art, British Museum, London
- 2005 *West by East*, Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona, Barcelona
- 2004 *Musulmanes, Musulmans*, Parc de la Villette, Paris
Far Near Distance: Contemporary Positions of Iranian Artists, House of World Cultures, Berlin
- 2003 *Haft: 7 Artistes Contemporains Iraniens*, Ville de Boulogne-Billancourt
- 2002 Iranian Contemporary Art, Christie's, London
Second Exhibition of Iranian Conceptual Art, Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art
- 2001 First Exhibition of Iranian Conceptual Art, Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, Tehran
Iranian Contemporary Art, Barbican Centre, London
- 1999 *Children of the Dark City*, Open Workshop of Conceptual Art, Tehran
- 1998 *Experience 77*, Open Workshop of Contemporary Art, Tehran
- 1991 First Biennial of Contemporary Iranian Painting, Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, Tehran

COLLECTIONS

Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, Tehran
British Museum, London
KIT Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam
World Bank, Washington D.C.

DOCUMENTARIES

Paint! No Matter What, Iran, 1999, Maziar Bahari
Art of Demolition, Iran, 1998, Maziar Bahari

PUBLICATIONS

Studio Works Tehran, The Art of Khosrow Hassanzadeh,
Saqi Books, 2006



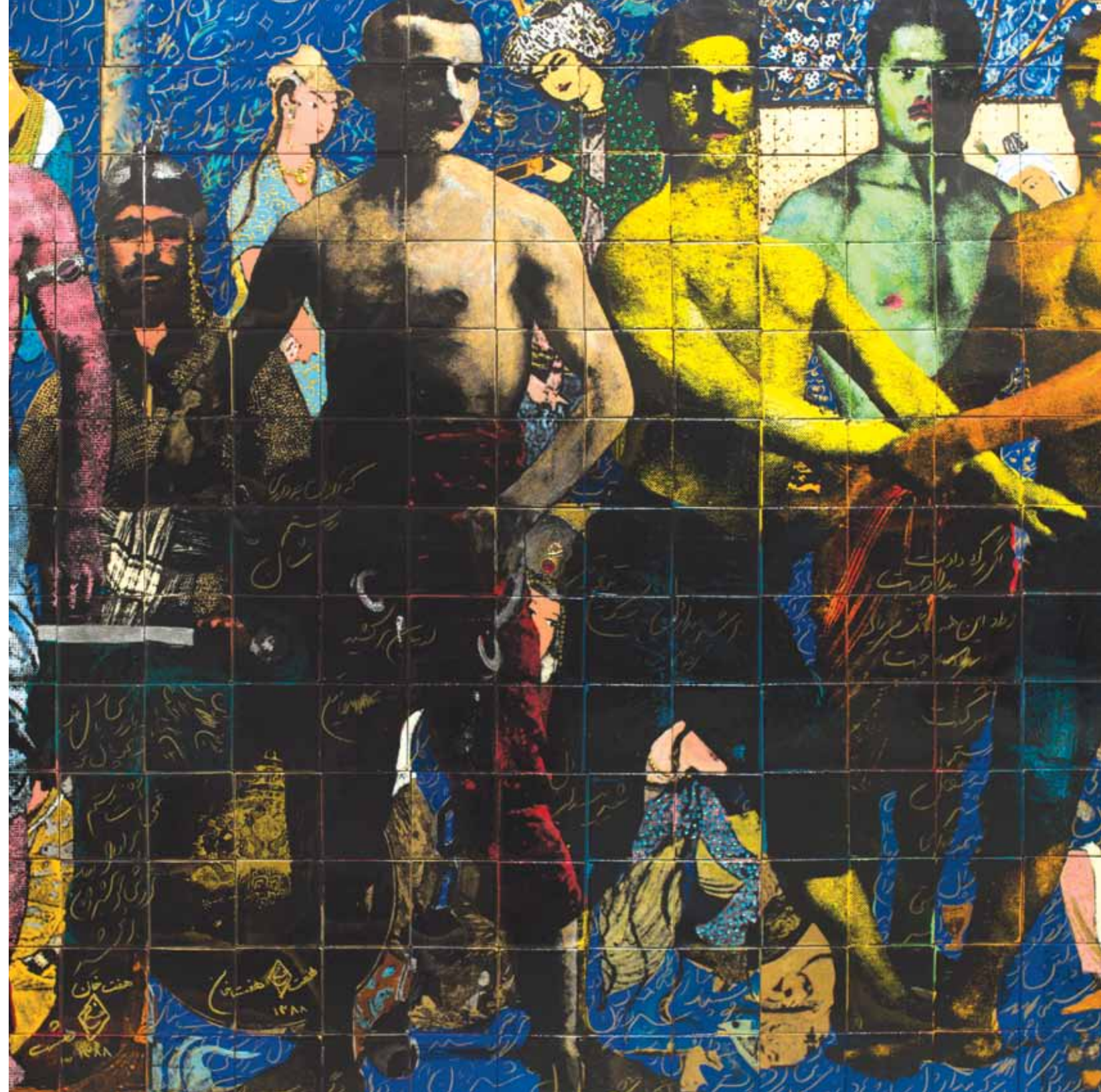
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Cover image: *Haft Khan*, 2010 (detail)
Mixed media on 728 pieces of ceramic tile
77 x 333 in / 195 x 845 cm

canvas





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