

ETERNAL INQUIRER A REVIEW ON LIFE AND OEUVRE OF FARIDEH LASHAI

By: Ali Eftehad

The world that *Lashai* created seems to be an abstract world at the first look; but with a closer look and by acknowledging her place of birth and where she grew up we may realise that these abstract images have a huge symbolic function. The most important code in this aesthetic system is the forest. The artist was born in-between jungle and sea. The bushy jungles of Gilan (local people call it Bishê) remind Iranian tourists of the joy of vacation and return to nature; and for the citizens of this province are a mélange of happiness, fear, magic, prison, freedom, etc. *Lashai* was born in Rasht just one year after the coup d'état in 1953¹⁹. Her father was the governor of *Lahijan* and her childhood was concurrent with the socio-political turmoil of oil nationalization and the suffocating period after the coup d'état. During the past century, the rainforests of *Gilan* have been hideouts for revolutionists as well as places for governmental prisons and unofficial executions and so on. This twofold function of these forests has obviously entered the world of *Lashai's* works. In most of the stories that *Lashai* narrates in her works, either in her paintings or animated works, the forest has a permanent but twofold role. Even in her most abstracted paintings, in which she mixes different colors (for the audience who is familiar with the climate of Gilan, this color composition is reminiscent of autumn in these forests), *Lashai* turns the changeless climate of her homeland into a context for narrating the turbulent story of her country and herself. Whether portraying a national hero or a lonely tree, we see this in her distressed paintings and in her animated works where she mixes the spree mood of rabbits and crows with the sad background of her paintings!

Lashai was a multi-dimensional character and during a half century benefited from a variety of mediums for her cultural and artistic practices. After finishing high school, *Lashai* went to Germany and studied German literature at *Frankfurt University*. After that she studied glass design in Vienna. Having had two exhibitions in Italy and Germany, she returned to

Iran and had her first solo exhibition two years later in *Seyhoun gallery*. She also worked as a translator: she translated Brecht's *"The good person of Szechwan"* in 1968 in Iran. After that she translated many plays by *Bertolt Brecht, Natalia Ginzburg, Edita Morris, Jim Krause, Vassilis Vassilikos* and others. She published her first novel *"The Jackal is here"* in 2003²¹. This novel is an unusual autobiography with a poetic style. In this novel she re-reads her story from her mother's point of view and thus tells the story of three generations of Iranian women in one book. She talks about the streets and alleys in Rasht, Tehran in different decades, Istanbul on its journey to modernism and even *Qasr prison* (A prison in Iran where she was a prisoner for two years).

"I wasn't afraid when I was painting. Painting is a highly personal task. A special task that has special audience; meaning it never has wide-spreading unknown audience like literature; especially in Iran." She says about her book "It [the situation] is a bit different in the West and it [painting] has a broader spectrum of audience. Now consider literature. It is a totally different thing. You will have to deal with thousands of people; people whom you will never meet and never see...I wanted to make a collage, like modern paintings. I liked the amorphous quality of the narrator. The construction is so much like my paintings: the patchy quality and irrelevancy, just like the irrelevant moments of life which are at the same time completely relevant: some kind of collage, a complicated and obscured one. But if it [the story] has beauty and attraction in it, the reader will finish it. I lose myself in this sort of a topsy turvy situation; like an address or a phone number that I wrote somewhere and lost it after that. I have never learned to write addresses or phone numbers in a proper notebook"²³. That is how writing *"The Jackal is here"* lasted for over a decade; and yet turned into an encyclopedia that helps us to decipher *Lashai's* works. That is how the function of portrait of *Mosaddegh*, the trees, the forests, and notions like bewilderment, fear, agony and ecstasy find a



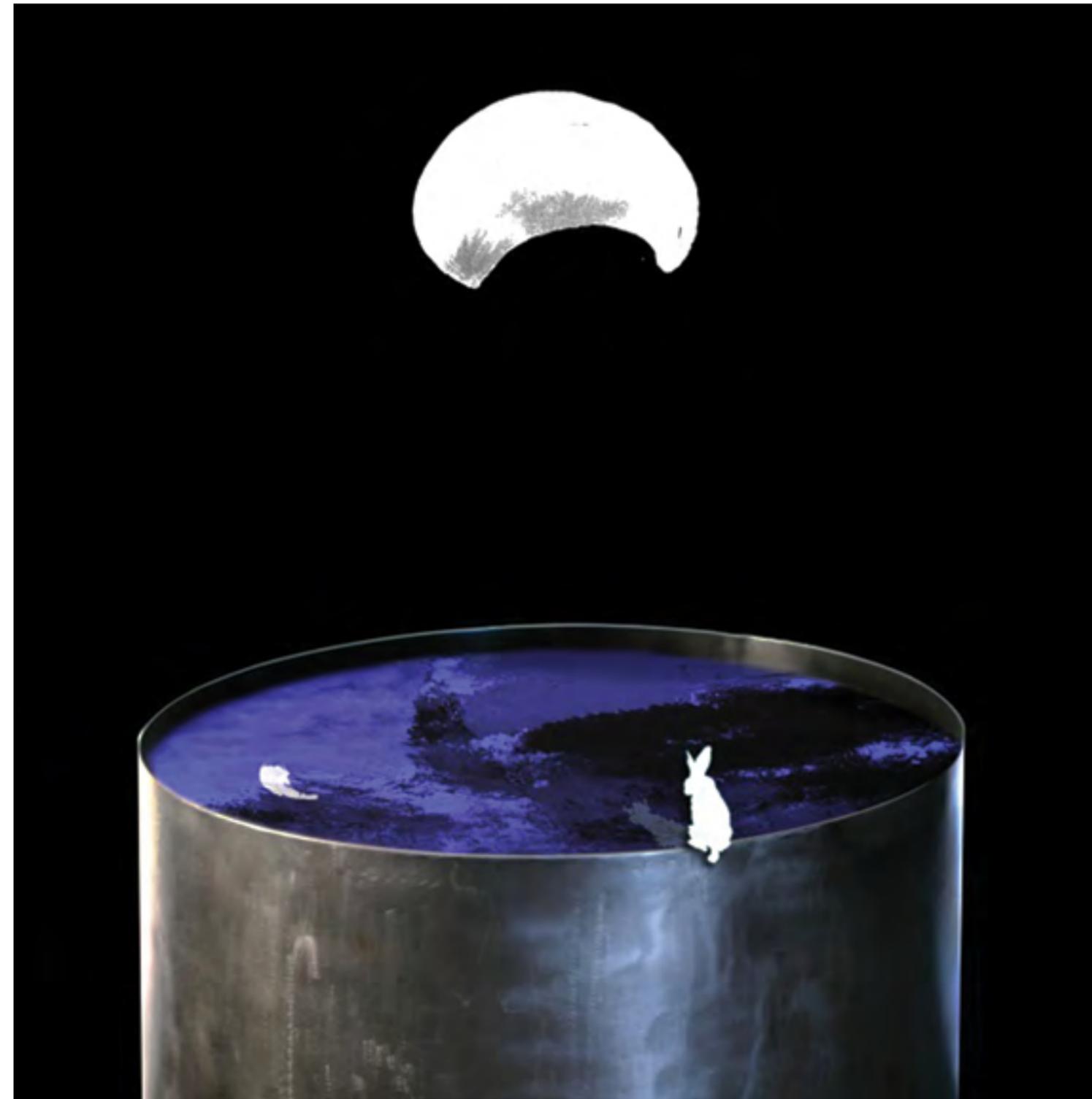
Le déjeuner au park-e-mellat (lof 3 triptychi), 2007-2012, acrylic on canvas 320x200cm. - Courtesy of the artist's estate.

specific meaning in *Lashai's* artistic existence: the meanings that can be extended to a larger scale and distributed to many people from the same country as the artist. *Lashai* is usually known for her abstract oil paintings, with her strong and bold brush strokes, or for her poetical representation of Iran's map and portraits of *Mohammad Mosaddegh*. A large number of her works are still unpopular and the aforementioned works received all the attention in the Middle East. This problem is rooted in the fact that apart from the aforementioned works, the other works are hard to comprehend. Understanding these works, unlike the other works that have become iconic pieces, needs awareness of the context in which the artist was living. The result of the artist's oeuvre could be found in a six pieced work named "*Rabbits in Wonderland*". In the artist's opinion, this piece is a synthesis of all of her artistic and living experience: overfilled by historical, cultural and political references. This work is made of six pieces of painting on which some video-animations are projected. The first piece shows the encounter of an adult rabbit with a young rabbit in a forest. The second piece is also a painting of a forest on which the image of a rabbit is projected: but

on the two margins of the canvas *Toto* (Italian comedian) and a crow are entering the painting happily dancing. The name of this artwork and the components, as it is obvious, are referring to *Lewis Carroll's* famous novel *Alice in Wonderland*. "*Alice was beginning to get tired of sitting by her sister on the bank, and of having nothing to do: once or twice she had peeped into the book her sister was reading, but it had no picture or conversation in it, and what is the use of a book, thought Alice, without picture or conversation?*"⁽¹⁴⁾ A rabbit then runs by them repeating "*I'm late! I'm late!*" Alice leaves her sister and follows the rabbit; but falls into a hole that ends in a different world and life: a wonderland with rules and logics which are hard to understand. *Lashai* mixed the two roles of Alice and rabbit and thus created curious restless rabbits that in the world of these works act as substitutes for her - the artist-and, from a broader perspective, the people of her homeland. "*I chose the rabbit as my central character because it is inquisitive, full of energy and so beautiful. His desire to be independent, his attraction towards new ideologies, his disillusionment, his vulnerability and his confusion certainly reflect my own inner journey. But this is not just my story. Most of us have*



Untitled, 2009, mixed media on canvas, 2x200x160cm. - Courtesy of the artist's estate.



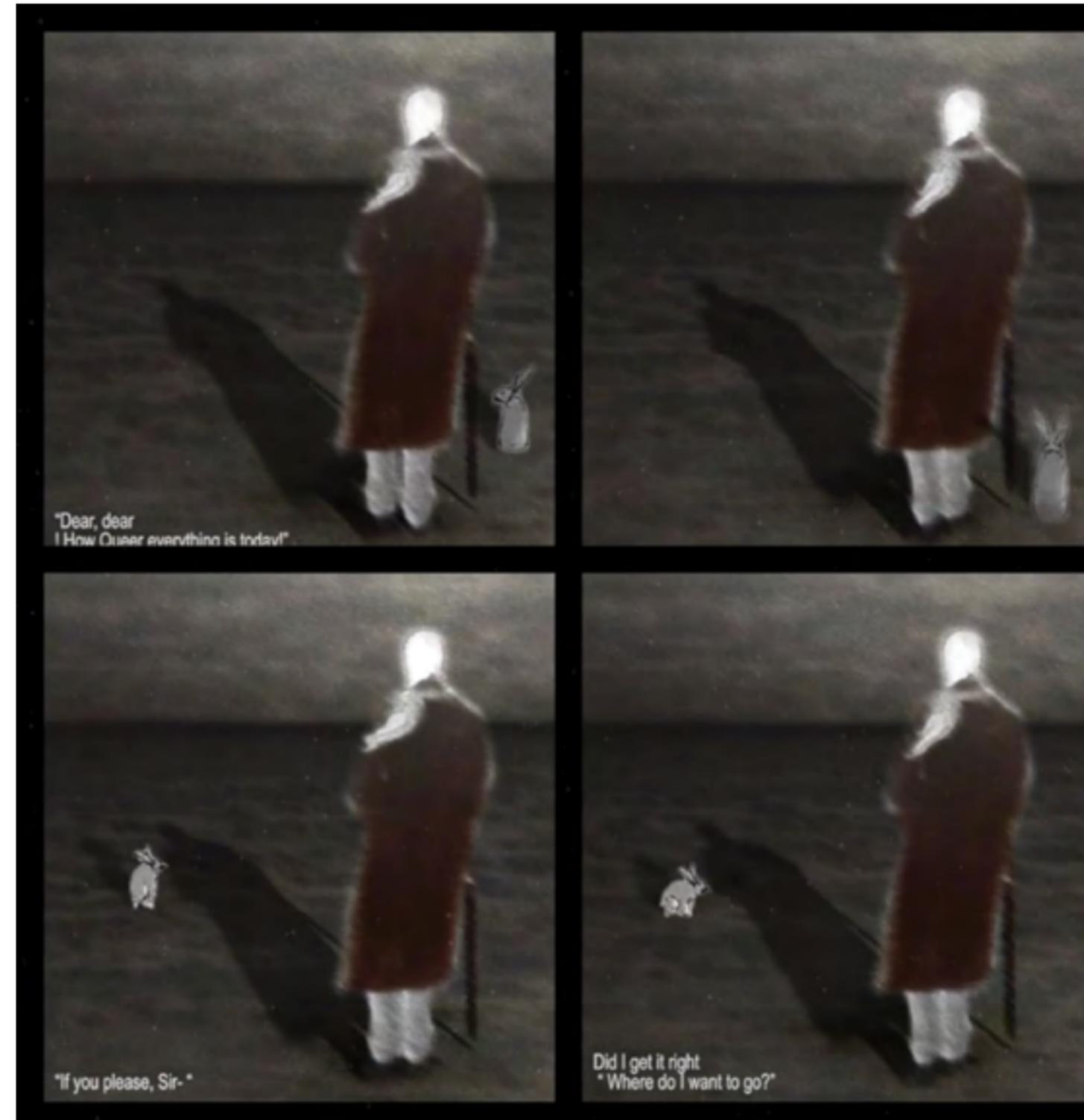
Catching the moon, 2012, sound and projected animation in a water well of stainless steel 31x78.7cm. - Courtesy of the artist's estate.

been through a similar journey. We are all like the rabbit – lost and helpless in the hands of systems, ideologies and prejudice, unable to discern right from wrong, oscillating between hope and despair and looking for answers. Like Alice in Wonderland, we are caught in a crazy world that seems to be upside down and are desperately trying to make sense of it.⁽⁶⁵⁾ Toto and the crow come from the movie *Hawks and Sparrows*⁽⁶⁶⁾ by Pier Paolo Pasolini. In this film—which is the most political film in Pasolini's oeuvre – a father and a son (Toto and Ninetto Davoli) are travelling in a desert to an unknown destination; and a speaking crow joins them on their journey. The crow, which a metaphor for Marxist ideas, answers Toto's question "where are you

from?", saying, "my country is ideology and I am living in the capital. In the city future, Karl Marx Street, number seventy times seven." Pasolini, who was never considered an orthodox Marxist, turns left-wing ideas in combination with Christian faith into a new thing and in *Hawks and Sparrows* and Toto plays the role of this new idea. As mentioned before, in the second piece of *Rabbits in Wonderland*, Toto and the crow enter the piece but after a while the curious rabbits run away from them. In the third piece, we witness the map of Iran. The northwest of this map looks like a cat's head and thus most people analogize Iran's map to a cat whose back is bent – something like the *Cheshire cat*⁽⁶⁷⁾ in Carroll's book. Here – in the third piece—we see a



Rabbit, prelude to rabbits in wonderland, 2010, projected animation on painting, oil, acrylic and pencil, 180x195cm. - Courtesy of the artist's estate.



Dear, dear! How queer everything is today, 2010, projected animation with sound on painted canvas, 195x180cm. - Courtesy of the artist's estate.



Keep your interior empty of food that you mayest behold there in the light of interior, crows, 2010-2012, video still, oil, acrylic and graphite on canvas with projected animation and sound, 180.3x199.4cm - Courtesy of Leila Heller Gallery.



Gone down the rabbit hole III, 2010, sound, projected animation (4 min), oil, acrylic and pencil on canvas, 4 panels each 110x110cm - Courtesy of the artist's estate.

map that has its northwest section replaced by the Cheshire cat. The rabbits scatter everywhere on the map: their numbers increase quickly and cover the map totally. In another piece, black crows - symbols for ideological thinking in all of the other pieces- turn into characters from Sani-ol-molk's paintings - the renowned Iranian painter of the 19th century who is popular for his painting of *One thousand and one nights*-sitting around a table linen, each holding a book and a stick; driving away the rabbits who have come for food with their sticks, thus emptying the tableau from rabbits. In another piece a rabbit goes to *Dr. Mohammad Mosaddegh* - the leader of oil nationalization in Iran-spinning around him, asking him questions. Questions are mostly about Mosaddegh's faith, fear, the death of ideals and so on. This conversation is recorded by *Lashai* in her own voice and is played during the show. It is a free interpretation of Alice's conversation with the citizens of Wonderland. Encountering the bizarre people of Wonderland leaves Alice full of questions. Even when she is falling down the hole, she continuously asks questions. *Farideh Lashai* with her fill of ups-and-downs in life, pictures the curious spirit of Alice and the liveliness of rabbits at the same time.

When she was still a student in Germany, the whole of Europe was conquered by a revolutionary spirit and Marxist movements. She challenged such ideas and, as she declared later, chose "*the other way*": Maoism! In an interview years after that period she confessed that she only chose Maoism because she didn't want to be a Marxist and that during her years of study these were the only two beliefs among students. She was carrying *The Red Book*⁽⁸⁾ in her purse for years: not even knowing what it really was. Some years later she challenged herself again and left what she didn't really know behind. When she returned to Iran, she still believed in her left-wing ideas. She left her parent's home which was located in a rich neighborhood in Tehran and rented a room in a poor district; but, just before establishing herself in her new home, she was arrested at a revolutionist friend's house

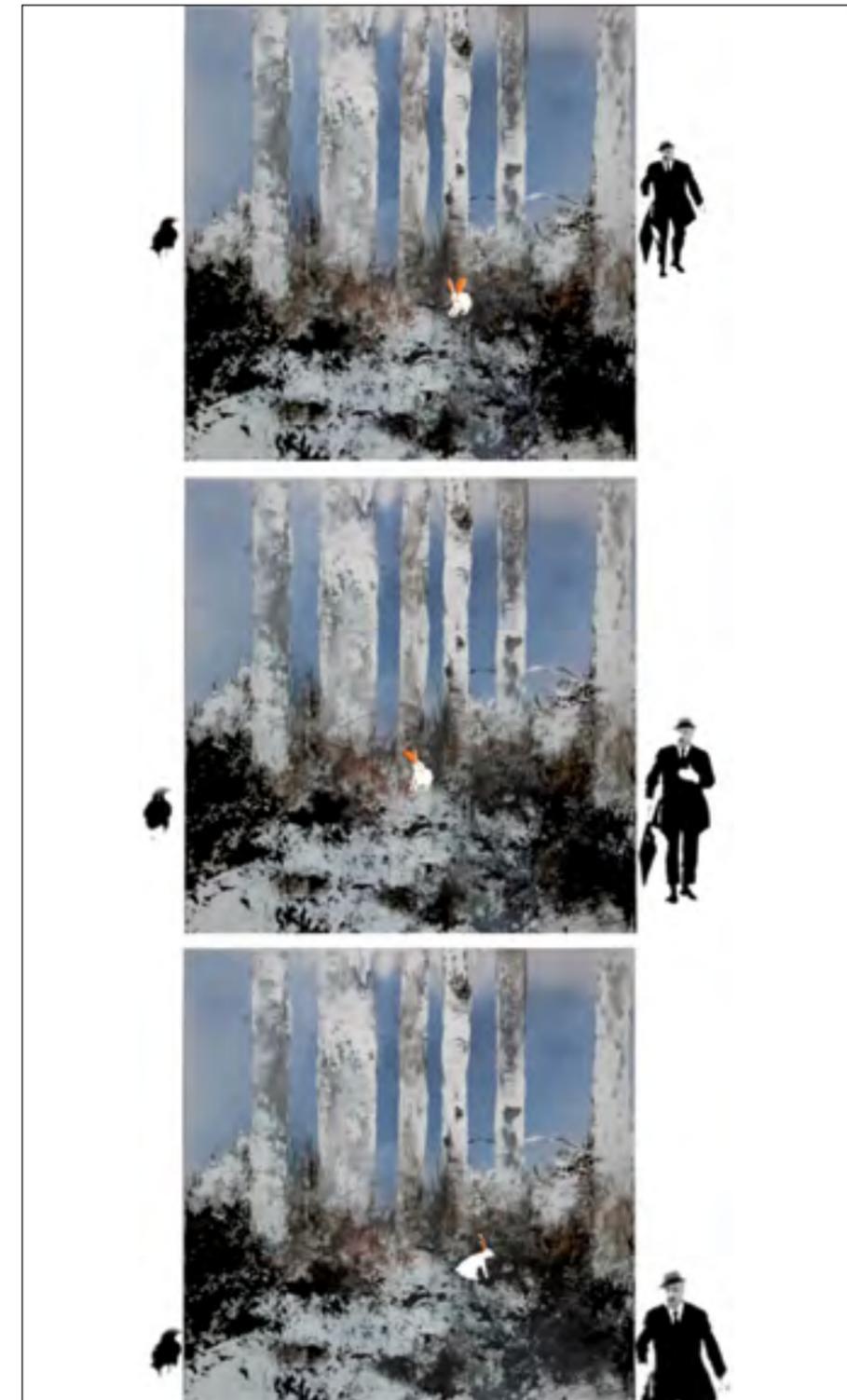
and went to prison. She continued to pursue her life questions even in jail: this time from the position of a woman who is not even in agreement with her cell mates, and who has not been sentenced to spend her time in prison for pure faith but for her curious challenging spirit. She was freed from jail three years before the Islamic Revolution and it was at this point that she decided to practice art more seriously. That is how she took a bite of cake, ate the mushroom, got bigger, got smaller, all the time changing and never reaching quiescence. Even in her last days, *Farideh Lashai* never gave up on experiencing the new. Living in Wonderland, her questions got deeper and more ontological as time passed. The last piece of *Rabbits in Wonderland* pictures an ominous destiny. It is night and a rabbit is seated on the edge of a barrel; the liquid in the barrel is something resembling both oil and the sea and is turbulent. The moon is in the sky and everything seems mysterious under the moonlight. The rabbit is alone and watching the light sparkling on the surface of the oil/sea. This piece is an elegy for those who have lost their lives searching for answers to their questions, the ones who are not among us today. It is also an elegy for the loneliness of the artist: the loneliness that was a result of her endless seeking and searching.

About the Writer

Ali Eftehad is a media Artist, Art critic and curator. He currently lives and works in Tehran, Iran. He has considerable numbers of critiques and essays about Art in Iran and outside, published in different art magazines, he is mainly focused on art in Middle East and its roots: trying to analyze it in a different way; to investigate it not as an exotic phenomenon but to go deeper and introduce it to his readers in a better way. Amongst his curatorial projects "Auto-portraits" I & II and "The Other", "Garden, palace, prison and garden again!" and "1001 EVENINGS" could be named which also shows his interest in the theme "identity" and "Contextuality".

End Notes

1. The 1953 Iranian coup d'état (known in Iran as the 28 Mordad coup) was the overthrow of the democratically elected government of Iran, and its head of government Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh on 19 August 1953, orchestrated by the United Kingdom (under the name 'Operation Boot') and the United States (under the name TPAJAX Project). The coup saw the formation of a military government under Mohammad-Rez Shah Pahlavi, who progressed from a constitutional monarch to an authoritarian one who relied heavily on United States support to hold on to power until his own overthrow in February 1979.
2. *Shāl bānu* (The Jackal is here). *Baztab Negar*. Tehran, 2002.
3. An interview with *Lashai* by *Leyli Farhadpour*, *Shargh* (daily newspaper), 1 Dec. 2003.
4. *Alice's adventures in wonderland*. Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (Lewis Carroll), 1865, London.
5. *Farideh Lashai tells us stories through art: Through characters real and imaginary*, by *Jyoti Kalsi*, Gulf news, Weekend Review, November 19, 2010.
6. *The Hawks and the Sparrows* (Italian: *Uccellacci e uccellini*, literally Bad Birds and Little Birds) is a 1966 Italian film directed by *Pier Paolo Pasolini*. It was entered into the 1966 Cannes Film Festival. The movie is a post-neorealist story about Totò, the beloved stone-faced clown of Italian folk-stories.
7. Illustrated by John Tenniel.
8. "The little red book" is a book of selected statements from speeches and writings by Mao Zedong (Mao Tse-tung), the former leader of Chinese Communist Party, published from 1964 to about 1976 and widely distributed during the Cultural Revolution. The most popular versions were printed in small sizes that could be easily carried and were bound in bright red covers, becoming commonly known in the West as the Little Red Book. It is one of the most printed books in history.



stills from, Toto, 2010. Projected animation on oil, acrylic and pencil on canvas, 190x 190cm. - Courtesy of the artist's estate.