

## From L.A. to Tehran: Mapping the Transnational State of Contemporary Iranian Art

*By Maymanah Farhat*

If Iran's modern history has led to its current manifestation as a battleground between political factions and the masses, between so-called Islamic ideals and a restless youth that seeks to participate in a highly globalized world, it is of no surprise then that its contemporary art has formed a multifaceted, multimedia transnational scene.

Although the epicenter of contemporary Iranian culture lies in Tehran, its artists are active all over the globe. From its pioneering modernist painters to its cutting-edge conceptual artists, the peripheries of Iranian art are seemingly endless, having made significant waves in the international scene over the past decade. Propelling this borderless phenomenon is a dynamic group of artists and curators whose work remains in constant exchange with events "back home" in the republic. In Los Angeles, which contains one of the largest populations of Iranians in diaspora, this is most visible with the generation that immigrated to or was born in the US shortly after the outbreak of the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and the onset of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980. With an estimated 72,000 Iranian-Americans living in the greater Los Angeles area, the city has become an important satellite of Iranian culture.

Often merging a range of influences, from the pop-culture, vanity obsessed spillover of Hollywood to Southern California's long history of underground trendsetters (active in the fields of music, visual arts and filmmaking), these artists are surrounded by a virtual clash of American "civilizations." This becomes further complicated with the introduction of the celebrated (and often nostalgia-ridden) Persian legacy and the urgency of Iran's fluctuating (and tumultuous) political narrative. A look at several artists working within this cross-cultural matrix reveals the diversity of contemporary Iranian art.

Asad Faulwell's mix-media paintings combine the intricate patterns of Islamic art and architecture with the basic design structure of Shiite political billboards (which became popular in Iran during the Islamic Revolution and have since been exported to places like Lebanon). His works are also infused with the elaborate ornamentation of Persian textiles and the principles of collage found in European Dada works of the first half of the twentieth century and those found in American Pop art a few decades later. This combination serves as the aesthetic foundation for the meeting of various political and cultural signifiers, namely those found in the Middle East's pantheon of historical figures.

In "Pillars – Iran (1882-1989)" (2009) Faulwell juxtaposes former Iranian leaders such as Mohammad Mossadegh, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi and the Ayatollah Khomeini in a phallic family tree-like structure that outlines the succession of the republic's political heads from the ground up. Islamic motifs are mixed with ancient Persian symbols, while black and white images are framed by rich colors and textures that are executed with a strong sense of design.

In "Mujahidat" (2009), the artist calls attention to both the interior spaces often relegated to women in predominantly Muslim societies and the use of female fighters in various armed struggles. Placed in rectangular form, the patterns Faulwell uses create several sections so that the composition resembles a Persian rug. The floral motifs of the various strips of fabric border a central area that contains identical photographs of a woman. Perhaps taken from a university identification card or passport, the image is in black and white, suggesting it is from the 1960s or prior to when color technology became widely in use in the Middle East. The shape of the rug, however, appears damaged or cut in half, providing the viewer with a lineage that seems interrupted. The woman is smiling, yet in one of the photographs her eyes have been scratched out, a gesture that suggests someone has tampered with the picture, attempting to undermine her being. Framed in gold, however, her image becomes forever iconified.

Elaborating on the constructs of power and the formation of histories that appear in his collages the artist attests, "My work challenges pre-conceived notions of nationality and cultural identity, creating an experience in which established labels become blurred and iconography from seemingly contrasting cultures occupy the same visual space."

Amir Fallah's drawings, paintings and mixed-media works similarly reflect the use of a range of cultural references in order to create layered compositions with pop-overtones. Sev-

eral recent canvases, which incorporate elements of painting, drawing and collage and employ a brilliant florescent palette, demonstrate Fallah's consummate merging of graffiti-art, graphic design and contemporary practices. This convergence of art, design and underground culture is also exemplified in the artist's magazine, *Beautiful/Decay*, a platform for established and emerging figures in the "creative world."

In previous works the influence of painter Phillip Guston was apparent in Fallah's approach to applying medium and the drawing of forms. His latest works uphold a different element of the late American artist's oeuvre, one found in the exploration of space and the creating of ephemeral worlds that are littered with representations of inanimate objects and the meeting of random subjects. In fact Fallah's construction of fort-like tree houses (both in three-dimensional and two-dimensional forms), can be compared to Guston's own obsession with creating intimate, near-claustrophobic spaces, which stemmed from a childhood experience of getting lost in his art while "hiding" in a cramped closet of his family's home. Guston's insistence on injecting sociopolitical commentary into the majority of his work is also visible in Fallah's paintings.

Fallah's mixed-media works such as "An Alter for your Life, For your Death" (2008), demonstrate the frequent rendering of fort-like structures, which first gained international attention in 2007 when the artist built and installed these "shelters" in several locations around the world. Making their way into works on paper that are mounted on canvas, these forms still bare the multidimensionality of the installations, executed with numerous spatial planes so that the resulting structures seem somewhat off kilter. A technique that the artist asserts is the "mastering of clumsiness and awkwardness."

"Most artwork that I like," he continues "has a certain awkwardness to it. I love the idea of pushing an image to the edge to where it almost doesn't work."

Although whimsical, these canvases possess staggering social inferences, those aimed at the amalgamation of his cultural background, as seen with cutouts of Persian vases and Islamic artifacts and references to American psychedelic culture and Western philosophy. The various compartments in which his figures and objects appear are reminiscent of the division of interior spaces seen in examples of Persian miniature painting. The work also alludes to the new-age, quest for "eternal youth" culture that has run rampant in Los Angeles, yet has been a fixation in various cultures throughout the history of mankind.

In "Terminated" (2008), this is further enunciated with a multileveled edifice that is scattered with images of skulls (alluding to the universal symbol of death) while occupied with the muscle-barring poses of action movie star-turned California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. A polarizing figure, the "Terminator's" political run has been one marked by inconsistencies, controversy and state-wide financial crisis. Is Fallah commenting on the politician's term or the overt self aggrandizing postures of world leaders? Countless skulls are dispersed throughout the artist's architectural form, some falling off into the endless void of yellow that dominates the lower part of the composition. A previous insight made by Fallah about the use of these structures might provide hints as to his intentions:

"As I started making the first drawings of these fort/tree house structures I realized that they also resembled images of war torn Al-Qaeda bunkers and/or refugee camps. The idea that an image can function both as a place of joyful childhood imagination and exploration and simultaneously as desolate war-torn space intrigued me."

Accordingly, his striking mixed media works offer viewers an environment that is on the verge of collapse.

Roya Falahi's photographs similarly resonate with a strong political slant. Extending her observations to notions of femininity and Iranian identity (and the misconceptions of such) Falahi seeks to undermine the viewer's perceptions. Working within an American context, the artist affirms, "In my work I approach photography, more specifically portraiture through a mix of sculptural and performative terms...My aim with this series is to create a disorienting experience for the viewer. To make a space that confuses the viewer's senses and intellect..."

Her 2006 series "Camos Tactics (It Smells Like Blood)" is a selection of bold portraits of a female protagonist that the artist has meticulously fashioned with macabre undertones. Rendering monochromatic images executed in various shades of bright red, the artist strives for a shocking effect. The identity of a veiled woman is both obscured by a large clown nose and various cloth fabrics that further conceal her features. Every inch of her subject's body is covered, as she even wears gloves. Dressed from head to toe in red, she recedes into the background of the photograph, a weighty comment on the frequent marginalization of women.

Shown in a number of poses and settings—eating a meal, drinking from a glass or standing with her hands on her hips—the artist gives the viewer no leeway, hers is a subject



Asad Faulwell Pillars - Iran (1882 - 1989), 2009  
Collage on canvas, 48" x 24"

that stands both guarded and defiant yet “hidden” from the viewer’s gaze. Although vulnerable to visual scrutinizing, she remains seemingly unaffected, as she goes about her daily routine. The woman of Falah’s images is at once constrained and empowered, creating a dichotomy of representation that is anything but simple.

As Falahi confirms, “My photographs use issues of disguise and concealment to play with the conventions of photography, beauty and display, while creating a dialogue concerned with identity politics.” If through Falahi’s work we are to establish an idea about Iranian femininity and the complex web of identity politics that informs it is that things are never what they appear to be, regardless of our perceptions.

While artists in diaspora are confronted with the negotiation of various cultural trajectories, those in Iran face an equally complex environment, with a political atmosphere that is magnified to extremes in every aspect of life. There the push and pull between government-sanctioned culture and a population that is all too well-versed in the latest global trends in art, technology and fashion makes for a unique, if not contradiction-filled, brand of twenty-first century society.

Take for example the photographs of internationally-recognized artist Shadi Ghadirian, whose work also frequently explores issues of women. The Tehran-based artist, who is one of the country’s leading photographers, has made a significant impact on the global art scene with her “Qajar Series” (1998-2001) and “Like Every Day” series (2002), both of which explore the politics of gender within a contemporary framework.

Although the black and white images found in the “Qajar Series” show her female family members and friends dressed as though living in nineteenth-century Persia, they are accentuated by objects of a “modernized” existence, one marked by the influence of Western culture through globalization. A can of Pepsi, a boom box and other symbols of “progress” point to the increasing homogenization of culture (and the inevitable meeting of various societies), while the artist insists on bringing women to the forefront of these issues.

This was furthered in her “Like Every Day” series, which consisted of a number of images titled “Domestic Life.” As part of a long line of Iranian artists that have explored feminist issues in their work (a precedent that is significant to Roya Falahi’s photographs), the identities of Ghadirian’s female figures are buried not only beneath the mounds of fabric that make up their chadors but also by everyday objects such as tea pots,

brooms and rubber cleaning gloves that point to an overt domesticity. A direct reference to the domicile-subservient roles often thrust upon women around the world, the collection of photographs has resonated with viewers at home and abroad.

Perhaps her most arresting examination of these issues to date, Ghadirian’s “Nil, Nil” photographs (2008), speak of the normalizing of war and its seeping into domestic settings. Similar to American artist Martha Rosler’s “Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful” (1967-72) photomontages, which sought to highlight the impact of the Vietnam War on American culture and society while emphasizing the saturation of catastrophic images in the mass media, Ghadirian’s works illuminate the looming presence of conflict in Iran.

From the violence of the Islamic Revolution to the collective trauma of the Iran-Iraq war, today’s Iranian society remains wounded from its history. Threats of an American invasion and/or an Israeli attack are also ever-present. This is coupled with an acute sense of political frustration that seems to run through a significant portion of Iran’s population (as seen in the recent standoffs resulting from the 2009 elections). The artist thus taps into local tensions that have not only been informed by foreign relations but years of internal political turmoil. In one image a bullet appears wedged between cigarettes. In another an army jacket is hung in a closet filled with women’s clothing, while a grenade is neatly placed alongside condiments in the door of a refrigerator. Anything but subtle, these images not only speak of modern Iran but highlight the current state of international conflicts in which an increasing number of women are subjected to the suspension of everyday life by the harsh realities of war.

As seen in the work of Asad Faulwell, Amir Fallah, Roya Falahi and Shadi Ghadirian, Iranian art today is not only striving to change the face of contemporary Iran—it is reaching out to the global community at large. By remaining entrenched in international issues and continuing to work with a deep sense of artistic trends, these artists are transforming how culture can inform politics in profound ways.

These artists will be exhibiting at the Guild Art Gallery in New York from October 6-October 31st. For further information please see [www.theguildny.com](http://www.theguildny.com)