

## A CONVERSATION BETWEEN REZA DERAKSHANI AND Dr. CHRISTA PAULA



*Hunting Red, No 2.* 2009. Mixed media on canvas. 150 x 360 cm

**Christa Paula:** The pre-revolutionary decade in Iran was a period of intense creativity encompassing all sectors of cultural production from fine art to film making. Marcos Grigorian, Tanavoli, the German artist Karl Schlamming and many other now iconic names synonymous with Iranian modern art taught and exhibited in Tehran at the time. Tell me about yourself during this period.

**Reza Derakshani:** The 70s were truly exciting. I was very much an art student with long hair and attitude who also played a lot of music. I did a lot of black and white drawings and a lot of figurative expressionist paintings. At the time the art college at Tehran University was in transition from a very hard-core French academic teaching style to the wildly contemporary. There was a

battle going on between those who pushed new media and conceptual art, like Dr Mirfendereski who, when he became dean revolutionized the school, and those who favoured modern art, like Marcos Grigorian who was into minimalism and also made portraits. I loved painting so I belonged to the latter camp. I didn't have much interest in what contemporary Iranian artists were doing. They weren't contemporary enough for me to reflect what was going on internationally nor were they Iranian enough to convey this sensational originality I saw in traditional works and which influenced me much later when I was already abroad. But when the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art opened in 1977 with its extraordinary collection of western modern art and I saw originals by

Jackson Pollock and others, I had a shock. The sense of freedom, the energy and the evocative power of some of their canvases were mind-blowing. Later on, when I got into abstraction, I also bonded with the work of Grigorian and we became good friends in New York.

**CP** You went briefly to the US in 1978 but returned to Iran at the tail-end of the revolution and took a teaching position at Tehran University. Why did you come back at a time when so many fellow Iranians were in fact emigrating?

**RD** Curiosity! I was not religious nor was I aligned with a political group but I had a very strong feeling that I had to be there because historic changes were unfolding in my country. Then I was asked by the University student committee, which ran the affairs in the interim, to teach there. The first year was interesting! Despite the brutal killings of many good people connected to the previous regime we could smell the fragrance of true democracy. No one was really in power and there was a spirit of unity and love. Of course this proved to be only superficial – censorship crept in and the assertion of all kinds of social pressures. You had to fall in line or be labelled a threat. The crack-downs came in many ways and gradually a new norm was developed. Expertise was at the bottom of the list of qualifications for getting any kind of job. Most of the art teachers, including myself, were fired and cultural production became pathetic. We had no idea that it could get so bad. In the end I left to save my family, my mind and my art.

**CP** Was there a conscious feeling of having been forced into exile?

**RD** Most definitely! If you do not feel secure in your own homeland because the Revolutionary Guard break down your door and take you

into custody for fabricated reasons; if you lose your job in a general witch hunt against the University faculty; and if you have to leave your country simply in order to survive then you are in fact being exiled.

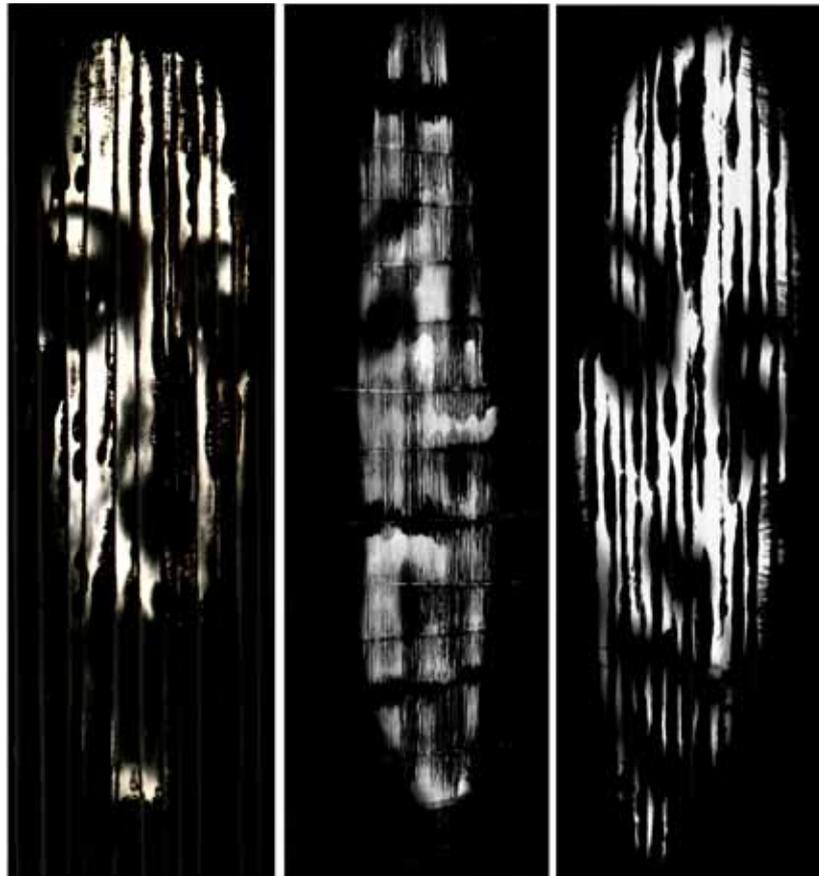
**CP** From the mid-1980s onward you started creating the kind of paintings you are recognized for today. Large expansive canvases, layers of quickly laid down materials and luminous colours creating a textured and complex surface with compositional systems footnoting miniature paintings. Yet, there seems to me also a sense of diasporic romanticism, of archiving fragments from a past that is simultaneously concrete and ephemeral. Did the reality of exile play a significant part in the development of this kind of work?

**RD** During the 1980s music took over - though art practice was always a constant. Music and poetry, which are very much related in the Persian tradition, infiltrated my visual work, and got married to the methodologies of the American abstract expressionists. During my first years in New York I spent a lot of time at the Whitney, the MoMA and the Met. I set out to learn the visual language of abstraction and to surrender to the sense of freedom that is inherent in abstract expressionism – though I am basically a figurative artist. Then I had to develop my own original language. I took the improvisational aspects of my music and applied it to painting to make sense of these principles – which worked very well. Persian music is essentially abstract though it is subjugated to certain mathematical principles and rules. In painting I was able to eliminate these constraints by focusing on what emerges unexpectedly depending on the emotionality of the moment – there are no boundaries just building up, deforming and reforming. Of course in exile

one nurtures certain notions of nostalgia and, if not consciously, one wants to assert ones identity. After all, I had been involved with Persian culture since I was very young.

**CP** As a western educated art historian, I find resonance in your work with Kandinsky and Klee (both of whom were involved with music) who postulated that modern abstraction need must connect the artist's soul to the sublime. Form, colour, texture and composition are but agents to make visible this inner necessity which in turn must evoke a response on a deeper level – call it spiritual or unconscious – in the viewer. Pollock's aim to evoke what he called 'concrete pictorial sensation' by working in a

very experiential and performative manner are related to this. Historically we know that the formulation of these ideas is partially indebted to metaphysical thought systems originating in the East, including Sufism. I have often pondered if artist's like you have not only felt an affinity between early modern art theory and practice and it's notions of the sublime and your own, in this case Zoroastrian/Islamic esoteric heritage as exemplified in Persian poetry and wisdom literature, and have thus been able to adopt with relative ease a visual language intrinsically suited to your creative progress. A more general example, of course is Calligraphic Expressionism (embodied by Mark Tobey, for example) which many Middle Eastern artist have completely made their own.



*Identity crisis.*, 300x90cm each panel,,2010

**RD** Yes, I read Klee and Kandinsky as a student, though I don't think there has to necessarily be a relationship to eastern religions. I believe that any art of quality is rooted in a spiritual source; it is universal. I have experienced it as a form of trance – or pure connected creativity – both in painting and in music. Rumi is a master of conveying this source, but Rothko and Pollock give me the same feeling in a different language. So, yes there are relationships. Understanding the Big Question, however, is a very personal journey and the ability to render it visually does not necessarily come from ever increasing intellectual knowledge or methodical contemplation. I am not a 'spiritual artist' in the sense that I consciously recycle Persian cultural icons with metaphysical meanings, but I do believe that the act of creation must have this natural flow which resolves in a miraculous moment where human life connects with a state beyond human reason. Pollock understood that and so did Rumi.

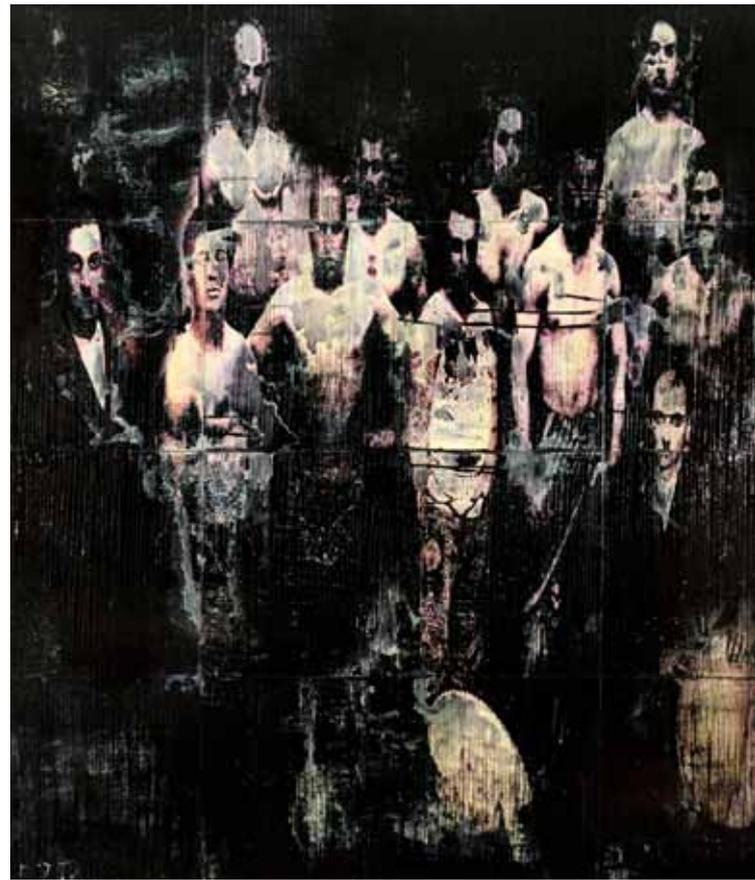
**CP** A process of individuation as well as a tapping into universal principles?

**RD** That's absolutely so, these have to come together. In art one wouldn't work without the other.

**CP** But wasn't exactly this experiential mode of 'knowing' favoured by Sufis as a vehicle on the path of spiritual discovery?

**RD** That's true but only a few succeeded to get there, though the path in itself is important. The path is your practice. I strongly believe that the capacities for creativeness and spirituality vary for each individual.

**CP** The last two decades were marked by a tremendous resurgence in the production of painting especially in Europe. This started with



*Chauvinism. 2008. Mixed media on canvas. 200 x 180 cm Collection Sam Bardaouil, New York*

the Transvanguard in Italy, Baselitz and Kiefer in Germany, Basquiat and Schnabel in the States but I'm also thinking of contemporaries like Ofili, Neo Rauch, Paula Rego and Peter Doig to name but a few. I feel very comfortable looking at your work in the context of this revival. Like them you happily amalgamate a multitude of idioms, personal, intellectual, cultural and art historical. Edward Said called it an 'essential awareness of the simultaneous'.

**RD** I don't really feel a bond with Ofili but with the rest: yes. But this also relates to the previous topic; I think it's about levels of capacity and levels of satisfaction. It's about the wandering soul and the inner search to find it. Inspiration is a similar process and I have always favoured

expanding systems of multiplicities in almost all aspects of my life, though with experience it becomes less self-conscious. One could call it living life to the full. I play many different instruments which have enhanced my awareness and are the source of much joy. I work on a dozen paintings at the same time – some of them very different from one another.

**CP** In 2003 you moved back to Iran. May I ask you to simply reminisce for a moment?

**RD** I was living in Italy at the time and wasn't really thinking about returning. I had bad memories. Then I got invited by a semi-private institution, the Khane e Honarmandan (House of the Artists) to show in Tehran. It all happened very quickly. I opened with a music performance and the reception was great. There were a lot of young and curious kids hungry for art. Many people from the Diaspora had started to come home and Tehran was a melting pot full of interesting characters trying to start one thing or another. Galleries were very active and demand was high. It was exciting and I felt HOPE for real change. For a while I commuted back and forth and instigated a number of projects. I put a band together with very young and talented musicians and we created quite a buzz with our fusion music. I'd been modifying Persian instruments in search of new sound and we experimented with that. But the band didn't last long and all the young members were thinking of leaving the country. Even so, I was hopeful and decided to make a base for myself in Tehran. Of course I was aware that the system was damaged, crippled even, but it got worse after 2005. Restraints, unhealthy competitions, character assassination... it started to uncomfortably resemble the Iran I left behind twenty years ago. You could see the dust of militarised religious colour settling on the work

of many artists and the international art world in guise of wealthy Iranian patrons on the outside gobbled it up. High prices were paid for poor or inexperienced work. Of course there were exceptions, but few of those were included in landmark exhibitions.

**CP** Looking over your recently published monograph, the main part of which is dedicated to reproductions of your work from 2003 onward, it is apparent in the sheer volume of your output that this period was extremely productive for you. It also includes a number of new series, such as Identity Crisis, Circus of Life and Gold Bones which contrast hugely (to)with your previous work. The latter two can neither be shown in Iran nor be illustrated anywhere in the Islamic world.

**RD** Yes, at first I rebelled by playing with ever more intense colours and non-political content, creating beauty as an antidote to my creeping disillusionment. Creating beauty also became a battle to fight the establishment by reminding them of Hafez whose first element of creation is the mastery of the art form; the content, while of course important, is secondary. Many of my famous series – Shirin and Khosrow, the Miniatures, and the Voice which later became the Circus of Life - were conceived when I was still abroad, perhaps, as you said through the eyes of a diasporic romantic digging in the archive of his beloved Persian cultural heritage. I don't think the new work made in Iran is fundamentally different; it simply expresses the flip-side of the same coin. It is dark and traumatic. But they are not records per-se, they are not photographic montages simply pasted onto canvas, they are my reflections on what I observed and felt. Even the obscured portraits of women which by some may be read as clichéd references to Hijab, have universal aspects.

**CP** Women have always featured prominently in your art as well as your poetry. Would you like to discuss this?

**RD** Women have been an inspiration to artists throughout history, and I suppose I am no exception. The series *Identity Crisis* is completely dedicated to women: It started when I bought a massive pack of old records of Persian music at the Friday market. The covers showed dozens of female singers. I almost cried; both for the loss of female voices which can no longer be heard publicly and for the theft of their freedom of expression. With *Identity Crisis* I investigated the loss of this freedom, the obliteration of character, vanishing beauty and the loss of precious human connections because of religious/political dictates.

I was raised in a family with a part-time single mum and five sisters in a male dominated religious society. It made me think from childhood about the inequality between genders. In the decades preceding the revolution there were many creative and intellectual women inside the country. But with the revolution they became prime targets – from head to tow.

**CP** On the one hand you are a quintessentially Iranian contemporary artist, on the other you are part of an international contemporary painting revival with its roots in modern art. Especially now that you have left Iran again, where do you see yourself in relation to current Iranian cultural production?

**RD** If the art market and the media will want to buy me only on the condition that I happen to be an Iranian/Middle Eastern artist then I guess I better just store my works or give them away to friends and be happy. At the moment, I feel that I have contributed enough to the Iranian part in me. Perhaps I can learn to ignore my feelings for my beautiful troubled homeland;

*Hiking in Darakeh*. 2007. Mixed media on canvas. 220 x 130 cm  
Collection Amir H. Etemad, Tehran



perhaps I can learn to put aside my personality and wear a wider lens and see an endless horizon – perhaps not. But there will always be my music. My passion for art is based on freedom – so framing it with my own hands would be akin to committing suicide. In the end, it's about mastery of the art form and the creation of beauty.



*Day and night/tree of knowledge*, 2008. Mixed media on canvas. 220 x 360 cm  
Collection Mr and Mrs Tehrani, Tehran



*The tree, the boat and frightened man.* 2008.  
Oil and tar on canvas. 200 x 75 cm  
Collection Amir Gheisari, Tehran