

IRANIAN STORY TELLERS

By: Ali Ettehad

Regarding the title of this article this question seems to be natural: what is the relevancy between Art and story telling? Perhaps it is better to start the question with the term "story-teller".

Who is the story-teller? The dictionary indicates that he/she is a person who tells stories; or make stories. But etymology leads us to a different way that is the purpose of this article.

"Story" is an English word derived from the Latin word "Historia"; which means exactly the same. In old French it was "Estorie"; but in a period of time this term -Historia, Estorie, Story- found another meaning and simultaneously held two different meanings: story and history. The former means telling any kind of fiction while the latter is the act of narrating a true tale. What is obvious is that the meaning of "story" overlaps the meaning of "history". Any tale, either imaginary or real can be accounted as a story. We must notice that such overlap challenges the idea of the pure history automatically since as long as there is someone as a historian then reaching the pure history is impossible. In the presence of a real person as historian, any story would be coming from a specific context.

In the late fourteenth century, the term "story" was exactly synonym to history, narrating a historical event; while in 1690 it was used as a euphemism for "lie". This date -1690- is the official date of separation of the two terms "history" and "story". What caused this separation is not an issue in this query rather how these two terms overlap and take each other's place is our main subject. We face the subject of the story-teller; a term that not only has all the references and meanings of the noun "story" but evokes new references and meanings of its own.

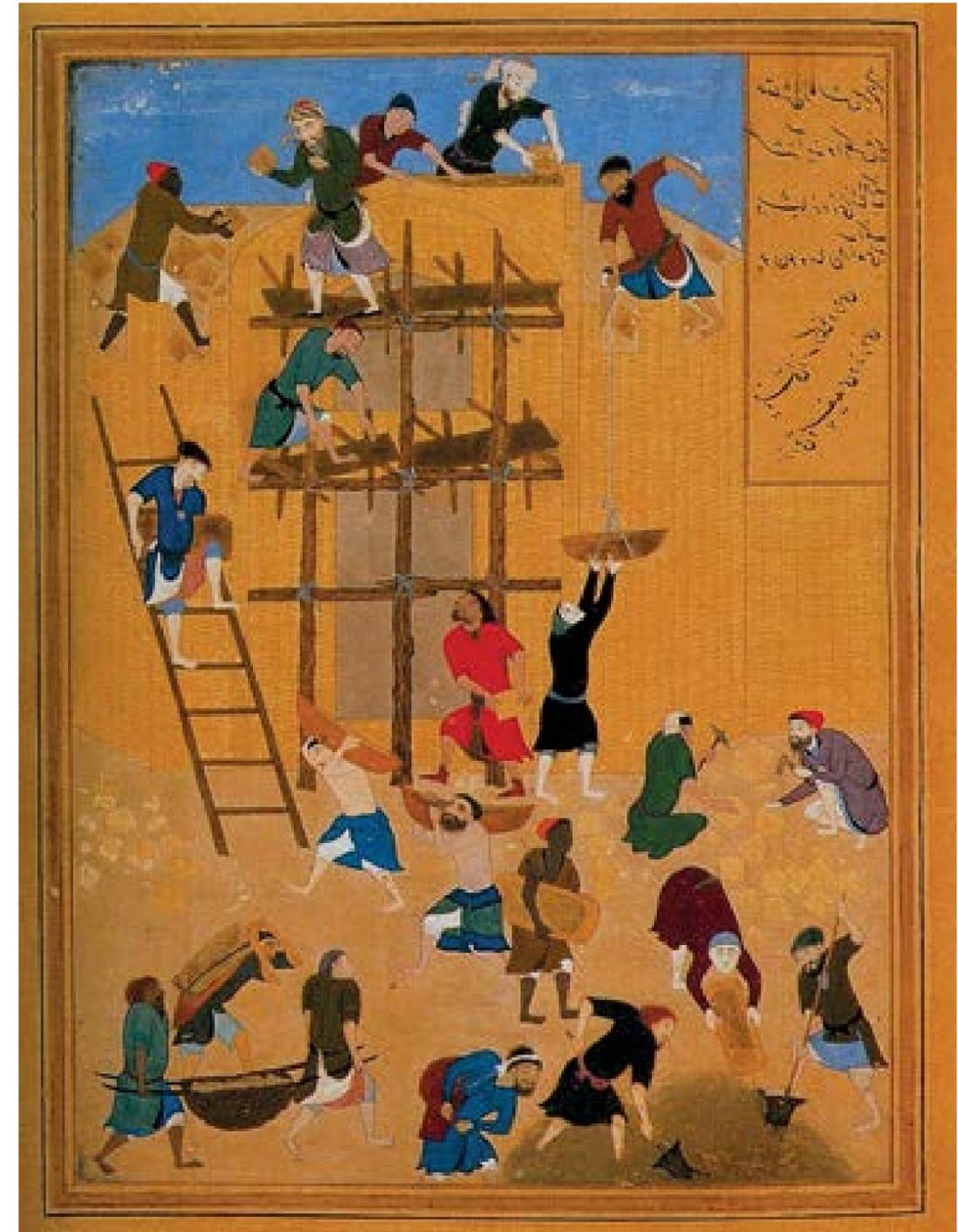
The term "story" is related to the past, meanwhile it holds the meaning of "speak", "repeat" and finally "re-define". It is due to these three implicit meanings that it prolongs from past to present. "Story" is the reflection of the past in present; and as many time as being told, makes the bridging of the past to present more updated. This is the exact reason that story-telling became a tool for representing the artist's idea in Iranian contemporary Arts. It is not necessary to search prehistoric ages for understanding the historic origins of this issue. Most of historians believe that Neolithic paintings are coming from traditions related to narrating. Instead of arguing this matter, it is better to search in the last millennium and find a relation between "Story" and "Story-teller" to make it easier for understanding this part of Iranian contemporary art.

A great part of Iranian visual arts has a direct connection to narrations. A great deal of what we have known as Baghdad and Isfahan schools are the

images inescapably serving texts. During the past centuries, painting has been either a simplifier for text, or gatherer of different readings of the text in this region. It is not far a way from the function of painting in Western Europe during the middle age. Such function for painting made it so hard for the painters that there were almost no concept left except for the ones related to didactic and wisdom literature and lyric poetry. That is why most of paintings left from the last millennium of Iranian art can be categorized under titles of famous stories in Iranian literature; titles and stories, in spite of being repeated in different eras, have been painted differently in each period with different style of brush strokes, stylistic values, holding all the characteristics of that era; and this is exactly why each and every painting was a unique piece of art. And also in spite of those repetitive concepts, the role of the artist was not decreased to the level of a plain technician who is busy with recitation. It can even be acclaimed that each artist was giving a new reading from the same story. For instance, if we studied different pieces painted for different volumes of Ferdowsi's "Shahnameh" (*the book of kings*) during nearly a millennium after it was written; we would see that although the main story is coming from the old mythical and epic scripts, buildings and costumes are completely as they were in the period in which the artist was living. That is how in the illustration of "Keyumars" story (*the first human in Shahnameh whose birth is a part of this book - somehow equipollent to Genesis*) the elements belonging to the painter's time (1500 A.D.) can be easily found. Iranian painter did not try to imagine past centuries, but face history as if past and present are simultaneous in another aspect -imaginary realm. Such mechanism still lives on and can be the subject of further investigations.

CHELGIS I & II

In "Chelqis" (*2005 continuing till today*) Mandana Moqhaddam chose "Chelqis" fairy tale as her theme and names her series the same as the fairy tale. Literally "Chelqis" means forty woven braids of hair; and in this story is the name of a girl who has long dark woven braids. Due to magical powers of her hair, the girl can see the future. She is imprisoned in a Ghool (Ogre)'s ear. Once a prince sees her image on a garden's wall and falls in love with her and starts searching for her and after passing many adventures, the prince finds her. The girl is cursed by the Ghool and anyone who takes a look at her face will be turned into stone; but the prince break the spell and frees her from the Ogre's ear. This time, the girl gets entrapped by a king who is the price's father, the prince overcomes the obstacles and sets her free again and returns to his father's kingdom. Yet, the king falls in love with Chelqis and tries to kill his son to make her his¹⁰. In "Chelqis I", Mandana made a huge human-shaped object. At the first sight this figure cause the audience the illusion that he/she sees a woman from behind. But revolving



Kamal Al-Din Bihzad. The construction of castle Khavarnaq, 1494-1495. from the permanent collection of The British Museum.

around the object will show the audience that the entire body of "Chelqis" is covered with hair. The illusion of a woman with long hair is nothing but a huge amount of hair that does not even have a face. She calls this faceless object "Chelqis"; but why? Contextual knowledge of Chelqis story and Mandana's piece is the answer to this question: In this region and especially in Arab countries of this region, long dark hair is a beauty criteria for women: thus "Chelqis" is a beauty symbol in this story. In Farsi, the number forty is an adjuncts for multiplicity; and thus this number in "Chelqis" story does not show the number of woven braids but tell the audience that she has too many braids of hair declaring her unrivaled beauty.

On the other hand, women are to cover their hair in Iran today. Mandana puts the story of "Chelqis" parallel with the situation of Iranian women today. She replaced the Hijab with hair: This time instead of Hijab covering the hair, it is hair that hide a human identity. Like in the story that a woman's beauty brings her magical powers; but those magical powers are the main cause that she always has to be in chains; a total contradiction. Here she is only a woman; a sexuality without even being enjoyed of humanistic rights and virtues. "Chelqis" is supposed to be the main character in the tale; while she is nothing more than a magical object that men kill each other for. She is in chain until a man releases her; the tale is a pulp fiction; but at the same time tells the story of socio-political situation of the country.

"Chelqis II" is compound of a huge cube made of concrete that is hanged from the ceiling by four braids of woven hair. The cube is suspended somewhere in the air near the ground and all the weight is being tolerated by those four woven hair braids. The hair used in this piece is real human hair just like "Chelqis I" and this is why watching the piece is so tormenting. In many religious scripts around the world, hanging by the hair is a known torture for women in hell. In the country and culture that Mandana is coming from, this torture is for women who get unveiled in front of men except for their first degree relatives. So here, hair is the propellant for evil and also the tool for torture. This dualistic function along with the metaphor "hair as a feminine beauty criteria" cause a complicated paradox which is the main theme in this art work. In "Chelqis" series, the artist not only attaches the fairy tale of "Chelqis" to her artwork, but also by adapting this tale with her contemporary society, prepares a context in which the socio-political situation of her region can be studied.

The mythology of "The Tree of Life" goes millenniums back in Iranian culture. In "Avesta" - *Zoroastrian holy book* - this tree was called "Vispo-Baish" and it was believed that it is grown in the middle of "Farakh-Kart" sea (*la see in Persian mythology*). "Vispo-Baish" in words means "curer of all pains". In Persian mythology this tree is where "Simorgh" (*the most ancient and important bird in Iran mythology*) lives and the seeds of all plants in the world come from this tree.

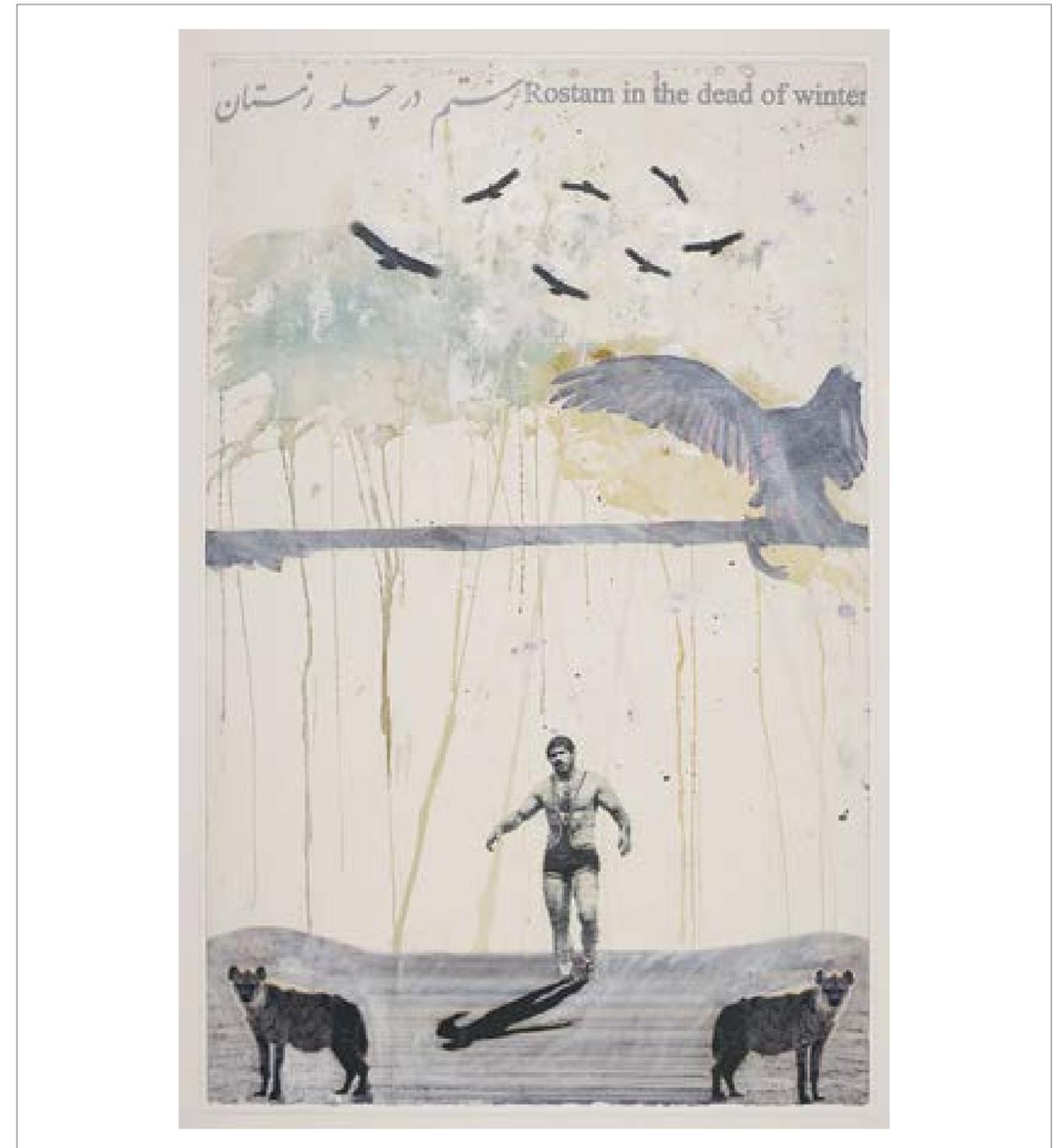
TOUBA

In post-Islamic culture its name changed to "Touba" and it is also mentioned in mystic and ritualistic scripts. In "The Red Intellect", Shahab al-Din Suhrawardi mentions that "Touba" is "Simorgh's" nest^[2]. Shahab al-

Din Suhrawardi, Shabistari and many other Iranian sophists believed that "Touba" is in paradise. In 2002 Shirin Neshat makes her video-art "Touba" referring to "Touba" myth and the novel "Touba and the meaning of night" by Shahnoush Parsipour^[3]. Neshat's "Touba" is made of two screens set in front of each other. At each, a part of the story is being screened. At the beginning there is an old wrinkled woman at one of the screens; her wrinkles resemble tree crusts; while at the other a bunch of men in uniforms are climbing a hill. It is slowly getting obvious that the woman is in the tree; or as the artist says "she is the tree"^[4]. The men climbing the hill get closer to the tree while the tree is being surrounded by walls made of bricks as in a garden; a garden with just one tree! Men climb the walls and blockade the woman/tree. In Parsipour's novel, "Touba" is a woman living at a home with four walls - a traditional environment - an enclosure that many men try to penetrate either for taking "Touba" over or to reach the "The paradise of home". In Parsipour's novel "home" is not only the familial heir but the homeland, the motherland. The story takes place in a period of time when Iranian government was getting weak and the ambassadors from other countries were trying to get concession. Parsipour's novel not only talks about the archetypes of home and the role of "Touba" (woman) in Middle East but also analyzes the political history of late Qajar. The world that is surrounding "Touba" does not accept any role for her other than those determined before in archetypes. She who wants to release herself from all these chains, at the end, rule silly and simple women and at the same time serve royal ones. So the archetype of social levels wins again and there is no denying that. Shirin Neshat's "Touba" refers to religious mythology other than studying the socio-political situation of Iran. As if the woman/tree in Neshat's video is the tree of life or even the tree of wisdom in Eden. Those walls without a gate or door remind of Eden walls whose gates were concealed before the eyes of people this time yet there is no Arc angle or flaming sword; and the woman/tree is left alone to be overcome by men in black!^[5]

ROSTOM

"Rostam and Sohrab" is one of the most celebrated series by Iranian artist Fereydoun Ave created in 2000. He continued ideas like "Rostam and Sohrab" in his later series "Rostam In Late Summer" (2000), "In Search of Heroes" (2003), "Persian Miniatures" (2003), "Rostam in the Dead of Winter" (2009), "Radioactive Rostam" (2010), "Rostam in Late Summer Revisited" (2010). "Rostam and Sohrab" is a renowned tragedy in Persian epic literature. Rostam is the most famous hero in Persian epics and a great part of Ferdowsi's Shahnameh is about him. The story of Rostam is so celebrated among Iranians that his name is almost synonym to patriotism. His past though is quite contradictory. His origins, from father side, goes to one of the most ancient mythic royal families and from mother side to one of the most important mythic antagonists in Iran "Zahak". Rostam lives for six hundred years. During birth he was so big that they had to cut his mother womb to get him out, at the end after six hundred years of glorious life and championship, Rostam was murdered by his step brother. Among all the stories and tales about Rostam, the story of Rostam and Sohrab is one of the most important ones. "Sohrab" is the son of Rostam and Tahmineh; a



Fereydoun Ave. Rostam in the Dead of Winter. 2009, mixed media and digital print on paper, 110x75cm. From the permanent collection of the British Museum.

child that Rostam has never seen. When Sohrab comes out of age and finds out who his father is, decides to fight against the king of Iran and offer the throne to his father as a gift. It was destined that without knowing each other, the father and the son fight. The son gets killed by the father; but before he dies Rostam finds out about his identity. All Rostam's effort for curing his son was pointless... Sohrab dies. This theme has been illustrated many times. Almost all schools of Iranian traditional paintings have painted this story. In the series "In Search of Heroes", Ave portraits Iranian wrestlers. In other aforementioned series he uses the image of Abbas Jadidi - Iranian wrestler who has been the world champion in 1998. 2 years before Ave starts his series. But the question is why chose wrestling? Wrestling and Polo are the eldest sports in Iran and have been mentioned even in ancient Persian scripts. Polo is long forgotten; but wrestling is still one of the most popular sports in Iran. Thus, in search of long gone heroes, wrestlers might be the best choice for substitution. It is somehow like the situation of Japanese Sumo wrestlers in Japanese culture where popular champions with a sacred aura. Fereydoun Ave has always been searching for the long gone past in his oeuvre; but instead of seeking it in history, he tries to find its reminiscence in today. "Rostam and Sohrab" series is the result of his search in which he depicts the encounter of old and new in a new contextual history. Abbas Jadidi whose been chosen as a substitute for Rostam by the artist, entered the national team by defeating Rassul Khadem who was not only younger but the champion of the world. Yet, in "Rostam and Sohrab" the images of Jadidi and his rivals are blurry as if searching the glorious heroes of the ancient time will lead us to transient images of athletes in media. In this series Abbas Jadidi is being portrayed fighting and glorious, but in later series he is alone among vultures, hyenas or even summer fruits. Even when it seems that there are many characters in the frame; it is he who is being multiplied. He is alone, like Rostam at the end of the story who was fallen in a trap full of spears set by his step brother!

KAMAL UD DIN

A return to the past: One of the most celebrated paintings by Kamal Ud Din Behzad⁽⁶⁾ is what we know today as "The construction of castle Khavarnaq"⁽⁷⁾. This painting was produced as an illustration for the book "The Seven Beauties" by "Nizami Ganja"⁽⁸⁾ and it depicts the building of Khavarnaq castle. This castle was offered by one of mesopotamia's rulers named Neoman to Yazdegerd I⁽⁹⁾. Constructing this castle was prolonged to the sovereignty of Yazdegerd I's son, Bahram V. In "The Seven Beauties",

Nizami tells that a day before unveiling the brand new castle, Neoman and the castle's architect Senemmar goes for a visit. Neoman knew that Senemmar had a secret for building such a fine dome known only to himself. Afraid of Senemmar using the secret for another building except for the king's castle; Neoman throws Senemmar from the highest point in Khavarnaq and murders him. "The Construction of Castle Khavarnaq" is a multi-layered story. In Middle Persian the term "Khavarnaq" means "having a beautiful ceiling". Such a name reveals that this castle's dome is a unique one; so Senemmar has built a construction that could make him the best architect of his age. They say that this castle had seven involute chambers each colored differently. In "The Seven Beauties" Nizami tells that on each chamber there painted an image of a beautiful woman on a wall hence seven beauties coming from seven different realms in the world. At the end, after years of hard work, the main dome for this castle was complete and the irony is that Senemmar got thrown off the same dome he had been working on for so long. The story was originally told to be from 410 A.D.; while Nizami tells it in 1197 and Bihzad paints it in the duration of 1494-1495. There is almost 500 years time lapse between each time that this story was being told. Bihzad, made this story-telling an excuse to show the procedure of building construction in his own age around 12th century; while portraying the tragic destiny of so many workers who lost their lives building what we know as prominent masterpieces of architecture in history alongside with Senemmar's death. Thus in one hand "The Construction of Khavarnaq" is the only piece in ancient Iranian painting in which the procedure and the tools for building a construct is being depicted and on the other hand the echo of sympathy for unknown workers whose lives were lost during this way, can be heard after more than 500 years; another 500 years after the piece was painted so that we look at it and re-read it.

About the writer

Ali Eftehad is a visual artist, art critic and art director. He currently lives and works in Tehran, Iran. He has written a considerable numbers of critiques and essays about art, both in and outside of Iran, and published in different art magazines. His main focus is on art in Middle East and its roots. He aims to analyze the art from the region 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. His projects as an artist or art director are focused on the socio-political situation of middle-east through searching the ancient persian mysticism and literature.

Endnotes:

⁽¹⁾ Jantigh and Chelqis. Persian Tales by Seied Abolqhasem Anjavi Shirazi. Vol. II. P. 193. Amirkabir Publications, 1974.

⁽²⁾ "The Red Intellect" (Islamic Philosophy and Theology). Iranian Institute of Philosophy & Free University of Berlin: 1ST edition, 2011.

⁽³⁾ Tooba and the Meaning of Night. by Shahrnush Parsipur. The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2008.

⁽⁴⁾ "The Making of Tooba" - A Documentary by Shahram Karimi, 2012.

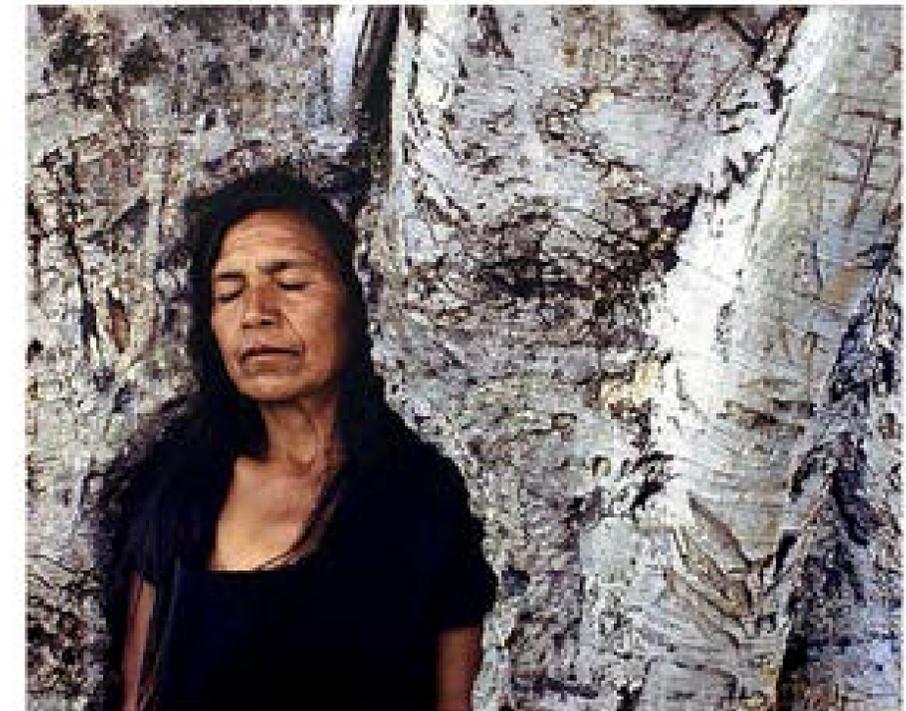
⁽⁵⁾ "So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life". Genesis 3:24, King James Version.

⁽⁶⁾ Kamal Al-Din Bihzad (c. 1450 - 1535).

⁽⁷⁾ The construction of castle Khavarnaq, in al-Hira, c. 1494 -1495.

⁽⁸⁾ The Seven Beauties (Persian: Haft Peykar) romantic epic by Nizami of Ganja written in Persian in 1197.

⁽⁹⁾ Yazdegerd I (meaning "made by great wisdom") was the fourteenth Sassanian king of Persia that ruled from 399 to 420 A.D.



Shirin Neshat, Tooba, 2002, video-installation. Courtesy of Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York .