

Parastou Forouhar

by Russell Harris



«SIGNS SERIES»
FOUR LAMINATED DIGITAL DRAWINGS ON ALUMINIUM 40X40 CM, 2004 -10

My first contact with Parastou Forouhar was when I saw “The Swanrider” in “Iranian Photography Now” (Hatje Cantz, 2008). This amazingly graceful photograph, so full of charm, wit and multi-dimensional irony, is simply stunning - as an image, statement, wish and window into the artist’s empathy. The placid figure of The Swanrider paradoxically screams from the printed surface, and in a succinct, restrained way echoes slogans of shared humanity and common dreams.

Forouhar draws on a large reservoir of Iranian cultural forms and uses them to create pieces with great lyrical content, even when their message is abrupt, blunt or simply full of foreboding. She goes straight to the emotive heart of the issue: various pieces exhibit unremitting pain, yet her pain is cloaked in nostalgia and echoes with good times, in divinely beautiful curves, in

poetry written over the floors and walls, and a feminine elegance.

There is obviously anger in her output too - by using the chador in photographs and in her pictogram street and building signs she hints at a subtle form of sexual domination. The genesis of these pictograms may date from Forouhar’s experience at the Tehran Academy of Arts in 1984 when, having been closed for two years during the Iranian “cultural revolution”, institutions of higher learning reopened with ostentatiously strict religious demands made on the staff and students. “The new social system of order consisted of strong religious rules that regulated public life in its smallest detail,” Forouhar remembers. The small space allotted to the woman in these pictograms reflects beautifully the male-female segregation at the Academy. The male figure even bears some of

the “anti-elegance” that was so fashionable at the time.

We might think an Iranian artist must be numb to the prevalence of blood and death in Iranian culture and imagery, but the real thing - the death of a close family member - is obviously a void in the artist’s life that somehow feeds her creativity. Forouhar’s loss is tragic, if not unforeseeable. The voices of her parents, opposition politicians in Iran who were brutally murdered in their Tehran apartment in 1998, continue to be heard through their daughter’s work.

Forouhar has referred to her “forced ethnic identification” - the disturbing reality forced upon her by whoever ordered the murder of her parents, which forever stamped part of her artistic personality as a victim of the Iranian regime. The anger at being vacuumed into a world she had left is palpable in her later output. The shapes of her bean-bag chairs are like chadored women waiting to be sat upon; the blank back of a man’s head in the photograph “Blind Spot”, and the hand peering out from the black chador in “Friday”, are perhaps the most blatant reductions of Iranian women into no more than an inviting face and genitals. They may also be a trenchant critique of the schizophrenic new rules of the Tehran Academy where Forouhar remembers the images of male and female nudes in library books being painted over in black ink.

Hinting at this official dyslexic form of teaching, Forouhar’s fabric designs in the series “Eslimi” reveal repeated genital designs intermingled with various household tools that could be used as instruments of torture on soft fleshy parts of the body. These are overlaid with reductive outlines of women in poses of abject self-denigration and a co-mingling of sexuality and implied pain. By turning violence, humiliation, trembling figures and genital motifs into a book of fabric patterns

to be flicked through like a home-furnishing catalogue, Forouhar makes a strong statement about harsh religious interpretations infiltrating the most banal and quotidian aspects of life. Dissident to its last fibre, the “Eslimi” series questions the legitimacy of an authoritarian government.

Her work also has a palpable anger that expresses itself with embroidery-like precision; measured, calculated and never wandering into that male area of redemption through destructiveness. Fortunately, the artist’s dissimulation has opened an easily accessible path to understanding the emotional, personal and political helter-skelter around the issues of identity, dislocation, gender and volcanic anger. To paraphrase the title of one of her own works, we can see in her output that of an “unfreiwillige Heimatskünstlerin” or “involuntary homeland artist”.

Edited extract from “Parastou Forouhar: Art, Life and Death in Iran” ed. by Rose Issa (Saqi Books, October 2010)

Note: As part of the «Nour Festival of Arts», in association with Rose Issa Projects, highlights from Parastou Forouhar’s recent work can be seen at Leighton House Museum, London from 1st October - 6th November (visit www.roseissa.com and www.rbkc.gov.uk/museums for more details).

Illustrations to come from Francesca at Rose Issa’s gallery

