

Janet Rady
in conversation with

Haerizadeh's



Rokni Haerizadeh Typical Iranian Wedding, (left panel of a diptych), 2008. Oil on canvas, 200x300cm

For many, the names of Rokni and Ramin Haerizadeh are synonymous with all the complexities of the newly venerated genre of contemporary Iranian art. Young, daring, controversial, socially and politically engaged, yet at once deeply conscious of the cultural legacy of their Iranian motherland, the Haerizadeh brothers' paintings, sculpture and photography continue to fascinate and excite their international audience. Their works regularly feature in auctions, fairs and exhibitions worldwide, the most notable of these being Charles Saatchi's *Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East*, which took place in London earlier this year.

Janet Rady met up with them in Dubai to discover more about their formative years and thought processes behind their work.

Rokni Haerizadeh

The younger of the two artists, Rokni was born in 1978 in Tehran into a family of four brothers. Unlike some traditional Persian families, he acknowledges that he was fortunate enough to have liberal parents who, on the whole, let the brothers do what they wanted to. Yet, having engaged with his art practice very early on in life, Rokni always felt he was different from his brothers who seemed to be more focused on professional careers (aside from Ramin, the other two went on to be a nano-technologist in Stanford, Connecticut and a pharmacist in Tehran respectively).

When asked what prompted Rokni's early artistic tendencies, he explains that his father never bought him any toys and that he was expected to play with the broken ones belonging to his older brothers. At a very young age therefore, he started to make his own. But he soon found that playing with toys was not sufficiently motivating or creative and at the age of six, he began painting. Significantly for such a young protégé, he chose from the outset to focus on the female figure, at that time using his mother as his model, a subject matter which still features heavily in his work today (although his model these days is now his friend Shirin, whom he respectfully refers to as his 'muse' (eg. Snakes and Ladders, 2005 and Masnavi Ma'navi: The Fifth Notebook (5), 2007).

One year later, on seeing his potential, his mother encouraged him to attend painting classes. But not content with one particular class, he tried out several different ones, and in order to widen his experience, therein showing his characteristic determination, Rokni took to working for his teachers in return for which they used to give him painting lessons.

Now well known for the mythical / Sufi content in many of his paintings, Rokni recalls that his first inspiration came from Persian epic poems, notably Ferdowsi's Shahnameh (eg. Khosrow and Shirin, 2008) and Rumi's Masnavi (see above), mixed with fairy tales from the West. Rokni was not alone in his exposure to this poetic tradition as it is well embedded in the Iranian psyche. His grandmother had been a poetess and used to read him poetry when young and from this time onwards, he began to use this poetry and literature as the building blocks of his illusionary world.

Often described as producing 'strange and nightmarish' works, or as Vali Mahlouji defines them "dreamed narratives"... a kind of Garcia Marquez in paint," Rokni reveals why his paintings exude this magical realist quality.



Rokni Haerizadeh MASNAVI MA'NAVI, THE FIFTH NOTEBOOK, 2008. Oil and Acrylic on canvas, 200x250cm



Rokni Haerizadeh Typical Iranian Wedding, (right panel of a diptych), 2008. Oil on canvas, 200x300cm

At the age of twelve, Rokni remembers that he started to have strange dreams. These dreams inspired and motivated him to find out their meaning, which in turn led him to his grandfather's copy of the classic volume by Sigmund Freud *How to Interpret Dreams*. By his own admission, reading the book (in English) was an arduous task but it nevertheless fascinated and captivated him. To such an extent that he used to hide under the bed covers at night, slowly reading each one of the chapters. The first three chapters took him two to three years to complete, but for Rokni this was the turning point in his life. It was, he comments, 'very unusual for anyone to be interested in Freud in post-Revolutionary Iran at this time'.

Further inspiration came to Rokni from religious sources. These he infused with Freud's interpretations of dream theories, producing works with mystical, ethereal qualities. But like many truly talented artists, Rokni was beginning to realise that there was more to art than that which his teachers were providing him with at the time. And as he became more involved with this way of philosophical thinking, he found himself becoming ever more isolated from his friends at school. Rokni, therefore, turned to his tutors and other artists for companionship and support.

Still at high school, and in order to further his artistic experience, Rokni took the unusual step of moving in to live with one of his teachers. But this soon became too restrictive as he found his work developing too much in the style of his teacher. He consequently began to move on from one tutor to another and it was these constant changes, he explains, which helped him to develop his work and for it to evolve into the distinctive, neo-expressionist style for which he is known today.

These formative years of high school were strengthened by his encounters with the works and writings of Western artists and authors. It was at this time that he began to develop his methodology as an artist. He distinctly recalls being given the book *David Hockney* by David Hockney in which Hockney recounts how R B Kitaj inspired him to paint 'what came out of himself'. Similarly a statement which Antoni Tàpies made that an artist has to 'forget what you have forgotten' perhaps ironically has stuck in his mind. When starting each new painting, therefore, he wipes his mind clear of his previous work and each is consequently imbued with a fresh and original thought process.

Having already participated in group exhibitions at high school, for Rokni, it was a natural progression to go onto university to study art, albeit against the wishes of his father, who

was a bio chemist and naturally expected his youngest son to follow a more traditional path.

Rokni persisted, entering Tehran University to study Fine Arts. This experience of university, however, was mixed. Whilst he acknowledges that he had two or three good tutors, he found that others were still very traditional in their outlook, frowning upon his figurative painting as being anti-Islamic. Not content with these restrictions, however, he decided to take up private classes in philosophy and history of art. And from this time onwards, painting became a way of life for Rokni who has practised his art of painting on a daily basis ever since.

Rokni's style and content of his work are continuing to develop and mature, developing a humoristic sarcastic irony in a most playfulness of form. Strikingly satirical in approach, he combines his own personal experiences of life in the Islamic Republic of Iran with historical mythologies, to subtly attack the hypocrisy of Iranian daily life today. Thus, in *Under the Sour Cherry Tree* the court musician Barbad who in his original form has climbed into the tree to impress the king, in Rokni's work becomes skewered, as a reference to the place of contemporary musicians in Iran whose music is misunderstood and vilified.

Even more blatantly searing in its criticism of the Regime is Rokni's magisterial diptych entitled *Typical Iranian Wedding 2008* (now in Saatchi's Collection) in which, inspired by Qajar Coffee House paintings, he portrays in the two halves, the male and female participants at an eponymous typical Iranian wedding celebration. On the one side, we see debauched male revellers, serving themselves from the sumptuously laden table, imbibing alcohol (forbidden for Muslims in Iran), a hashish addict and several gay men including one kissing the groom as if he were his lover; whilst on the female side, the room has an altogether more decorous atmosphere, the lights are on, the table is virtually bare, the bride sports a frothy synthetic frock and de rigueur nose job and behind her the room is full with young girls gyrating to the music of the 'King of Persian' pop, Shahrām Shabpareh, whose lyrics float in the cartoon bubble above.

In his *Police Station 2008*, one can just imagine what lies ahead for those arrested, whilst the North Tehrani (scarves perched perilously on their bouffant hairdos) and chadori women (clad in top to toe in black), wait impatiently outside.

Not a stranger himself to the authorities – he now lives permanently in Dubai and cannot return to Iran because of his artis-

tic practice - it comes as no surprise to learn that Rokni's role model and icon was the famous, mentally tortured artist Van Gogh, himself a fighter to the end. Always mindful of Van Gogh's determination, Rokni has learned to carry on, despite all the adversities which he has encountered along the way. He reiterates that his main stumbling block came from his encounters with the traditional Islamicising views expounded by his university tutors. Yet, as with many experiences in life, it was probably these very difficulties which fuelled his determination to succeed. And if Van Gogh was his role model, then Freud was his mentor. Rokni goes so far as to say it was a miracle that he discovered the psychoanalyst's seminal book in his grandfather's library. Freud helped him to progress through university and by breaking down his superstitions about dreams, Rokni began to imbue his work with a joyous, and at times, ironic sense of humour which is what makes it so distinctive today.

Ramin Haerizadeh

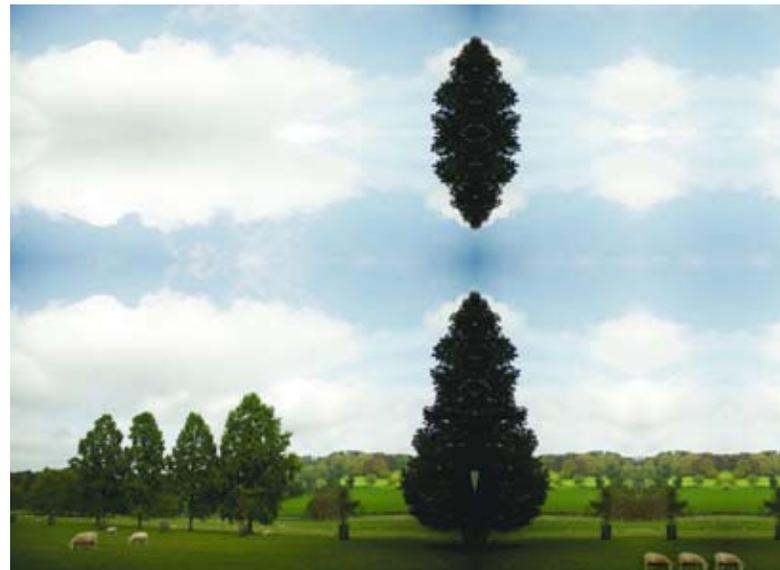
Having explored the background to Rokni Haerizadeh's lifelong passion for painting, his creative inspirations and his journey along the path to stardom, it seemed only natural to delve into his elder brother, Ramin's account of his chosen route in life. Renowned for his innovative handling of photographic techniques, often combined with his work on canvas, through his increasingly bizarre images, Ramin invites his viewers into a strange Alice in Wonderland world, where nothing is quite as it seems.

Ramin was born in 1975, four years before the Revolution took place, so he was not old enough to remember life under the Shah. Yet from an early age, as he explained, he always wanted to study and work in cinema. As a young boy he had developed a passion for the subject and during his time in high school at the end of the 80's and beginning of the 90's, Ramin used to spend hours at a time watching film upon film. The inspiration for his interest in the medium was fuelled in no small part by his mother's uncle, Ismael Kushan, a seminal figure in the world of Iranian cinema. For it was he, who in 1948 had released the first Persian language talkie made inside Iran, thereby laying the foundations for the Iranian cinema industry. Ramin recalls how he loved going with his great uncle to his studio to watch him at work.

Despite this yearning however, as the elder brother, Ramin's parents had other ideas for their son's chosen career. His parents rigorously disapproved of Ramin's artistic interest and the influence that Ismael Kushan was having on his life, taunting him to compare himself with the celebrated Abbas Kiarosta-



Ramin Haerizadeh Men of Allah (21), 2008, 150 x 100 cm, C-Print
Edition of 10



Ramin Haerizadeh Wonders of Nature (32), 2007-2008. C-print, 100x150 cm
Edition of 10

mi, in contrast, Rokni was being encouraged to go to painting classes, while Ramin was made to stay at home to study (although he admits that he and his brother, by way of filial affinity and conspiracy, would often discuss and work together on Rokni's paintings). Consequently, in 1994, as a concession to his parents' wishes (and also, as he readily admits, as an escape from military service), he entered Tehran University to study Economics. But as typically happens when a young impressionable man is made to do something against his wishes, his grudges against his parents and the world at large welled up. As time went on, he became increasingly more and more defiant. So, whilst still at university, he began to take classes in photography and to draw and it was not long before he gave up his studies in Economics to pursue even more passionately his lifelong interest in the cinema and photography.

Circumstances, however prevented Ramin from entering into his preferred world of cinema, and instead he chose to study photography under the celebrated Iranian photographer Massoud Ma'ssoumi. Not long after, in 1995, he entered his first photography competition in Germany. A string of group photography and painting shows followed in Iran, until when, in 2003, he was selected by the Silk Road Gallery in Tehran to have his first solo exhibition. Since then, not a moment has passed without him being included in shows both in Tehran and more recently, Dubai (where he now lives) as well as internationally. Perhaps the most celebrated of these are the recent Saatchi exhibition in London 'Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East', in which he partnered with Rokni on works in the same show and lately in the Chelsea Museum's all encompassing 'Iran Inside Out'.

Although it is by no means true to say that the fairy tale has now ended happily, or that Ramin can be assured of riding off into the sunset of success as if in one of his beloved movies, one thing which is certain is that the antagonism he encountered from his parents has all but vanished; indeed by contrast they are now fully supportive of his chosen path and are naturally proud to see their son portrayed in the media alongside the great Kiarostami.

But what of Ramin's works? Now known for his wickedly phantasmagorical satire on the contradictory and often hypocritical position of men and women in Iranian society today (for example his *Today's Woman* or *Men of Allah* series of 2008), his work from the preceding years seemed to have started off by taking a much less critical stance. Here we see in his 'Wonders of Nature' images from 2006 to 2008, what appear at first glance to be simplistic, even very pretty, large scale, depictions of Islamic architecture and verdant land-

scapes. Mosques, madrasas, kiosks, fields with cows, snowy mountains and trees are instantly recognisable in their almost quasi 'National Geographic' rendering... but look again. Why are there two domes, one on the ground, one floating and reflected mirror image in the sky; why are the clouds square, repeated in abstract patterns and why are the trees and buildings suspiciously evenly proportioned and symmetrical? This is Ramin at his most subtle and intellectually challenging. Here, through masterfully balanced and constructed repetition, he ingeniously subverts our expectations of normality, inviting us to engage with and reinterpret this neo-realistic world.

Ramin's fascination with symmetry, as he explains, initially came from examining the balanced, visually satisfying forms of traditional Persian religious and secular architecture. Building on these clear elements of his cultural heritage, in his provocative 'Men of Allah' series, Ramin playfully appropriates the traditionally garish, Persian ornamentation, patterns and compositions found in the architecture and decorative arts, particularly those of the Qajar era including carpets, mirror works and miniature paintings. Inspired additionally by performances of the traditional popular religious plays of Taaziye theatre in which the martyred Shi'a descendant of the Prophet, Imam Hussein is ritually honoured, and where women are forbidden to appear or perform, Ramin, through his digitally manipulated photographs, creates a series of humorously mutated bearded and blatantly bare self-portraits. Deploying images of his own exposed body parts in miniature, he creates contorted and contrived, sexually charged bacchic revellers, shrouded in garish garb and vulgar tattoos. Commenting on the ambiguous position of male/female roles in society and humorously shocking in their portrayal, here for the first time, Ramin has begun to question the boundaries of decency and legitimacy of morality in Iran today, a position which clearly lies uneasily within such a totalitarian regime and which ultimately has cost Ramin his freedom to continue to live in Iran. Jumping back swiftly, however, into the technicalities of these surreal images, Ramin explains, perhaps somewhat perversely, that they were inspired by his mother who bought him a scanner and, after unsuccessful attempts at scanning negatives, started using his own body. Similarly, the clothes all came from his mother's cupboard.

Re-examining the historical influences and cultural inspirations for Ramin's subject matter, we find ourselves back in the world of architecture. Often through the exigencies of climate, mosques and private houses often shared the design of an inwardly looking internal courtyard surrounded by four equal open air iwans, one on each side. Whether by cause or as a result, this typically introspective architecture inclined the social

mores of the people to become increasingly more inwardly focused. Life was (and still is) lived in a state of contradiction, on one level in public and on another in private - in public, women appear shrouded in the private world of their veil, whilst in private, they are free to wander around as they wish. The contrast therefore between inside and outside began to take on significance quite unknown in the West. As Ramin says he 'considers the whole world as my home'. He continues 'there's an interior and an exterior, and depending on how obscene or extreme you are, then your interior can become vast.' And it is in this direction that we should look next at Ramin's Today's Woman series.

Now living in Dubai as a result of his criticism of the regime back home, and unafraid of censorship, Ramin is free to be himself again. Using mixed media and collage instead of a purely photomontage technique, the artist takes a decidedly satirical and introverted Monty Pythonesque view of a Western world colliding with the Islamic Republic of Iran. Snippets taken from newspapers and magazines portraying anonymous women, each supplanted with an image of his own hirsute face are pasted alongside a melange of randomly placed adverts for hand cream, artificial constructs of Ramin's legs and other body parts growing directly out of his head and the iconically charged Iranian symbols of athletes, the Iranian flag, 1970's cars, the singer Googosh, etc, etc. He works intuitively without any specific motivation, continuing until he reaches the point at which he is satisfied with the result. A result which, supercritical of the regime, reveals the absurd tension between concepts of patriotism, religion and grandeur and the fundamentally mundane. 'That dichotomy of absurdity is what I look for. I want to have fun with all this seriousness.' And it seems that Ramin's lampooning will stop at nowhere. Not content with mocking an Islamic Republic, Ramin has now turned his gaze on his own fellow Iranian artists. In the ultimate spoof, he has taken one of Shirin Neshat's celebrated Women of Allah works in which two chadori women appear brandishing guns in front of calligraphic background and as you might have guessed, he has superimposed his own hairy face on theirs. Where to next we wonder.

All images are courtesy of B21 Gallery



Rokni Haerizadeh SNAKES AND LADDERS, 2005
Acrylic on Canvas, 150x200 cm



Rokni Haerizadeh Police Station, 2008. Oil on canvas, 300 x 200 cm



Ramin Haerizadeh Sweet Shirin
mixed-media on canvas, 200 cm x 220 cm