

‘Demons and D-Artboards’

By *Alexander Barakat*



Fereydoun Ave, D-Artboards for Tibet I, 2008
Mixed media, diameter 46 cm - 18.1 in

Fereydoun Ave, D-Artboards for Tibet IV, 2008
Mixed media, diameter 46 cm - 18.1 in

Fereydoun Ave, D-Artboards for Tibet V, 2008
Mixed media, diameter 46 cm - 18.1 in

The “Demons and D-Artboards” exhibition featuring the works of Malekeh Nayiny and Fereydoun Ave offers an alternative glimpse into contemporary Iranian art recently previewed in Europe. Neither Nayiny or Ave fall into the aesthetic realm inspired by the Saqqakhaneh movement or meditate upon distinctive Iranian socio-cultural issues collectively speaking, but both artists deal with universal themes of confronting and conquering “demons”. A cohesive quality shared by the two artists’ works is the hybridization of East Asian themes. Nayiny claims aspects of her work to be inspired by her personal Buddhist practice¹, which evinces itself obscurely through her pieces except on a vague subtextual level. Ave, however, deploys the aesthetics of thangka painting rather transparently, and his work conceptually falls within a purely Tibetan context relevant to global current events.

Fereydoun Ave’s series “D-Artboards for Tibet”, in mixed media, presents nine dartboards adorned as mandalas with photographs of Mao Zedong as the central focal point in each board. At first glance, the most dramatic effect imposed by Ave’s dartboards is the contrasting intrusion of a realistic photograph of Mao, an unequivocally emotive and controversial Chinese historical figure, amidst the figurative backdrop of a definitive Tibetan landscape. Then, one is perplexed as to why Ave chose to place Mao at the centre of his mandala dartboards.

It is no coincidence that Ave’s artistic motivations may have been propelled by Tibetan driven protests during the 2008 Olympics held in China, as the year of their creation parallels that of the games. It must also be taken into consideration

¹ Nayiny, Malekeh. Personal Interview. 11 May 2009.

that Mao himself, within Tibet's history, symbolizes the turmoil and destruction of "The Great Leap Forward" and the Chinese Cultural Revolution, as well as the effects of Chinese colonialism inflicted upon Tibet². Yet due to these factors, the negative perception of Mao also incarnates the rise and urgency of Tibetan nationalism and autonomy³. Thus stated, apprehending the aesthetic and conceptual significance of the dartboards necessitates a juxtaposition drawn between Ave's "D-Artboards" and traditional mandala representations.

The mandala, or meditation diagram, embodies a particular Buddhist doctrine or a specific aspect of it, which is comprehended through a pictorial meditation proceeding from the centre of the circle. The practice of meditation serves the inner process of individuation, intended to achieve purification of consciousness through the awareness of spiritual values⁴. Placing Mao in the epicenter of the mandala permits his karmic forces to be re-exerted towards him. In Ave's case, this karmic energy emitted by the individual engaging in meditation physically re-enacts itself in the throwing of darts. Furthermore, centering Mao forces the individual meditating to acknowledge the manner in which Mao's earlier existence continues actively to persist within present day Tibet⁵.

During the meditative ritual, vibrations of mantric germinal syllables procure multicolored rays of light emanating from the central "void" – illustrated in each dartboard with the exception of "D-Artboard for Tibet VII" – in which the chanter of the syllables undergoes visions manifesting themselves within their consciousness. This process also entails the acknowledgement of all definitive characteristics of the deity, in this case being Mao, as a means to improve himself or herself and to strive for inner perfection⁶.

The quintessence of this meditative ritual lies in experiencing a void, regarding Mao as a manifestation of this "void", possessing no legitimate existence in nature⁷. Whilst experiencing this void, one envisions a purified sphere of consciousness in which Mao resides, prior to being dismissed into the void. The gesture of acknowledging Mao and his actions in their entirety, discarding him, and attempting to mend and overcome the struggles associated with him,

ultimately symbolizes the aspiration for a tremendous stride towards self-determination in Tibet. This notion is also reaffirmed through the color-pallet of Ave's darts and feathers, derived from Tibetan prayer flags waved for the sake of victory ideally leading to peace and prosperity⁸.

Yet Ave's brilliance in communicating this message demonstrates itself through his application and coalescence of sacred and non-religious artistic motifs within a secular context, for Tibetan national and cultural identity is intimately linked with Tibet's respective Buddhist practice. Popular expressions of Tibetan identity linked with religious symbolism resonate so powerfully within Tibet because Mao's communist and Cultural Revolution sought to eliminate Tibetan religious classes ingrained within the fabric of Tibetan society⁹.

Reverting away from Tibet and Mao Zedong, one encounters a world of demons, or rather divs, through the works of Malekeh Nayiny. Nayiny's inspiration derives itself from Persian miniatures illustrating the story of Rostam and Sohrab from the epic *Shahname* (Book of Kings) and her own 'inner interpretations' based upon her Buddhist practices¹⁰. Her nine "Traveling Demons" on digital C-Print attempts to "... tackle the Divs...[by] reminisce[ing] about them through the decades of one's life..."¹¹. The divs render themselves as either black or pink, with disproportionate papier maché heads, garish cartooned faces, and plastic-like limbs. They are simply grotesque and absurd, tinged with a sinister touch of humor.

Ferdowsi's epic *Shahname* (Book of Kings) recounts the historical and mythical reign of 50 Persian kings, and the stories of the heroes Rostam and Sohrab appear in the 2nd part of the *Shahname*¹², which seems to play a critical role in approximately four of Nayiny's "Traveling Demons". In M. A. Potter's 1902 Harvard University thesis *Sohrab and Rostam* suggested that the father/son conflict between the two was

2 See Barnett and Akiner, *Resistance and Reform in Tibet*, 1994: 67.

3 *ibid*: 74.

4 See Lauf, *Tibetan Sacred Art: The Heritage of Tantra*, 1995: 51.

5 *ibid*: 17.

6 *ibid*: 117.

7 *ibid*: 117.

8 See, Beer, *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*, 2004: 60.

9 See, Kolas, 'Tibetan Nationalism: The Politics of Religion', *Journal of Peace Research*, 1996: 51.

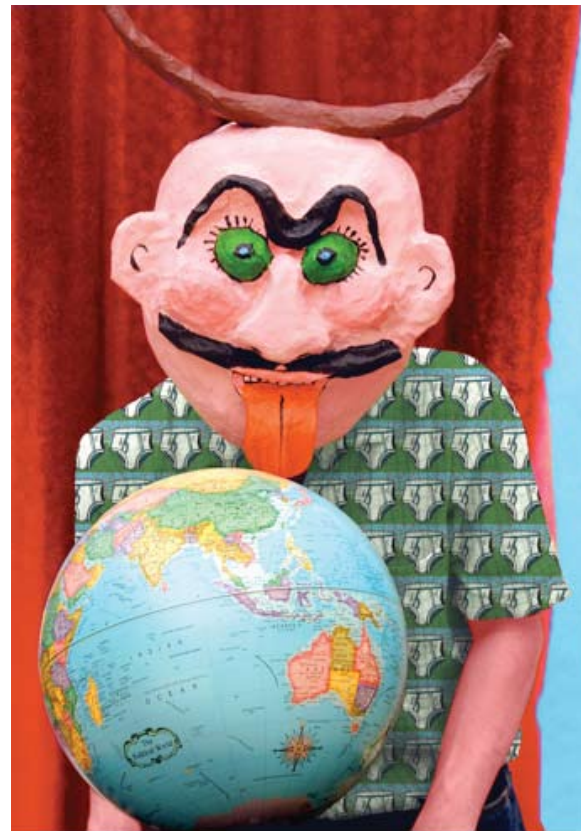
10 Nayiny, Malekeh. Personal Interview. 11 May 2009.

11 Nayiny's description of her "Traveling Demons" series - see, <http://www.malekeh.com/id31.html>.

12 See the British Library's description of the *Shahname*, <http://www.bl.uk/learning/cult/inside/shahnamestories/overview/shahoverview.html>



1



2

1 All in Pink, 2007
Digital C Print, Edition 1/12
47 1/4 x 31 1/2 inches (120 x 80 cm)

2 A Slithery Lick, 2007
Digital C Print, Edition 1/12
35 3/8 x 24 3/8 inches (90 x 62 cm)



3



4

3 Sailing Through The Red Sea, 2007
Digital C Print, Edition 3/12
35 3/8 x 24 3/8 inches (90 x 62 cm)

4 Under the Blue Sky, 2007
Digital C Print, Edition 1/12
35 3/8 x 26 5/8 inches (90 x 67.5 cm)

rooted within matriarchal aspects of Persian society¹³. “Brand New Family” portrays a presumably human green figure being trampled on by a demon couple personifying the Tragedy of Sohrab, where Rostam, oblivious of his son’s existence and identity due to his estranged wife beclouding Sohrab, kills his own son before realizing the grave mistake he has committed¹⁴. This piece signifies the demons existent within the familial dynamic. The baby carried by the ‘maternal’ demon standing over the disconnected figure connotes changes within family values over time, hence the title “Brand New Family”.

“What a Difference a Shirt Makes” also examines demons within a contemporary setting. It may possibly be a representation of Rostam who matured into a man in weeks, set off by the depiction of the boy with a moustache in the background¹⁵ behind the seated demon. The mobile phones on the boy’s shirt obviously denote the technology generation, linking Rostam’s miraculous maturation and the speed and development of the technological world of the 21st century, with the demon emblemizing the evils existent within the modern era.

The slaying of the divs of Mazandaran plays a significant role in the last of Rostam’s seven heroic deeds, also represented within several of Nayiny’s prints. It should be noted that these div-s were enemies of the Persians, colossal in size, and possessed anthropomorphic qualities¹⁶. This scene, for example, is depicted ornamentally in the background of “All in Pink”. “A Ruin from the Past” highlights the scene of Rostam slaying Div-e Sefid in the background, indicated by both the text and the illustration in the form of a Persian miniature transformed into a mural backdrop, with one of Nayiny’s divs standing in the middle ground between two cell like windows on the wall with a green filled bag cast towards the corner in the foreground.

Several of Nayiny’s prints seem irrelevant to the Shahname, such as “Under the Blue Sky”, where an overtly revealed and provocative feminine figure is blown up on a billboard that is

exposed in what appears to be a public and accessible domain possibly resembling a snapshot of somewhere in the Middle East. One can question whether or not Nayiny is attempting to make a statement regarding gender and sexuality within that region of the world and the respective “demons” associated to it.

Overall, the depictions of the demons themselves are not as blatantly obvious as they may come across, yet their over-empowering presence seems purposely designed to offer a stark contrast between the aesthetic overstatement of the demons and the presumed subtlety of the conceptual subtext and symbolism within the works. What is so intriguing about Nayiny’s demons is their ambiguity for they detach themselves from gender, age, and culture; less vague associations regarding these aspects can be made via their garments and the environment in which they are presented.

The works of Fereydoun Ave and Malekeh Nayiny comprising the “Demons and D-Artboards” exhibition may not necessarily leave a remotely substantial impact upon contemporary and modern Iranian art, and its overall intrinsic value assigns itself based upon its derivation and exploration of East Asian themes. Ave’s series will certainly attract attention due to the fact that he, functioning as a contemporary Iranian artist, chose to make an aesthetic statement promoting pro-Tibetan activism. Despite their attempt for conceptual complexity, Ave’s “D-Artboards for Tibet” is not aesthetically executed at the same calibre as “Rostam in Late Summer (1998, paint on cardboard)”¹⁷, yet they supplement his artistic versatility in his attempt to proclaim himself as the Iranian equivalent of Cy Twombly while hastily producing mediocre work to be held for numerous forthcoming exhibitions. Nayiny’s demons dispense an unexpected lightheartedness in comparison to other works identified with her, such as “Three Uncles (1997-8, digital image)” and “Mom and Hamoush (2001, digital image)” seen in the British Museum’s “Word into Art” exhibition¹⁸; however, some may find that they pale in comparison to such works.

Furthermore, if examining “Demons and D-Artboards” in an optimistic light by delving beneath the surface of the expression of impersonal and inner demons as the exhibition’s predominating theme while dismissing the papier maché headed demonic caricatures and Mao centred mandala dartboards, it is simply polarizing the human conscience

13 See, Rosenberg, *Folklore, Myths, and Legends: A World Perspective*, 1996: 466

14 See the British Library’s description of The Tragedy of Sohrab, <http://www.bl.uk/learning/cult/inside/shahnamestories/storyeight/sohrabdeath.html>.

15 See the British Library’s description of The Birth and Childhood of Rostam, <http://www.bl.uk/learning/cult/inside/shahnamestories/storyfour/birthofrostam.html>.

16 See, Curtis, *Persian Myths*, 2005: 49.

17 See, Rose Issa’s, *Iranian Contemporary Art*, pg. 110.

18 See, Venetia Porter’s, *Word into Art*, pg. 105.

through the possibility of inverting negativity and pessimism in order to achieve peace and constructive optimism within human existence. Thus said, considering how exaggerated such a statement is in juxtaposition to the work, one can question its sincerity and become skeptical toward the possible imposed gesture of the exhibition itself capitalizing upon the nouveau Orientalist interest in contemporary Middle Eastern works and its association with such a cliché sentiment directed towards a naïve audience.

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