

## Christina Eberhart in conversation with Parviz Tanavoli

The Iranian-born sculptor is something of a feature on the map of artists from the Middle East. Born in 1937, he offers, in many ways, a context and continuity to the surge in art emerging from the Middle East, but Iran in particular. Having exhibited as early as the 60s, Tanavoli is a master in a sense. His work has been exhibited across the world, including at the British Museum and the MOMA. Christina Eberhart had the chance to sit down with him at a recent art fair to gauge his reaction on the current trend towards Middle Eastern art, and about his own work and leanings.

**CE:** How do you perceive what is happening in the Middle Eastern Art Scene?

**PT:** I think this is a very exciting and productive time for Middle Eastern Art and it's being prompted with the construction of new Museums and Cultural Centres in the area.

**CE:** How do you think this is affecting artists?

**PT:** A lot has to do with the attention of the governments, not all of them, but there has been a lot of encouragement for the arts in the last five or six years. The small countries in the gulf are building fantastic structures to house art. For example in Abu Dhabi and Qatar. Of course we are not new to this phenomena. The Museum of Contemporary Art in Teheran was built 35 years ago. It acquired a marvellous collection of modern and contemporary art, from Pop Art to Impressionism. With this contemporary art was promoted, so what we are finding now, is that this model is continued in other countries. First Jordan opened the Royal Museum and other countries followed like Kuwait. This is a very interesting time in the way that museums and art



**THE WALL AND THE SCRIPT I, 2005.**

Bronze, 67 \* 41.5 \* 18 cm, 4/6

Private Collection

Exhibited at Meem Gallery

Credits: Copyright Meem Gallery / Photo by Mathew Lazarus



**HEECH AND CAGE V**, 2006.  
Bronze, 38 \* 13 \* 14 cm, 2/6  
Private Collection  
Exhibited at Meem Gallery  
Credits: Copyright Meem Gallery / Photo by Mathew Lazarus

institutions and the artists are collaborating.

**CE:** You are of the most experienced artists from the region. What advise would you give the so-called emerging artist and students of art. What do you think are the issues they should tackle today?

**PT:** I don't see a difference between Middle Eastern artists and an artist anywhere else in the world. They are all artists, all searching for a way to express themselves, and all very much involved with their own culture. In terms of the issues, Muslim artists live in a culture with references to the Koran, and so whereas before they were very limited, today they find, that except for nudity which is still a taboo, they have the freedom to express themselves in all the various mediums available. They are free to choose and as you can see, what emerges is very rich and takes on all forms and includes all media. The kind of explosion that is happening is fascinating.

**CE:** In your own art you have found a way within traditional means to move from what is essentially modernism forward into the present and the contemporary. Can you tell me more about your *Heech* pieces?

**PT:** Well you see, I also feed from my culture, and 'my nutrition' and influences stem not from a western cultural background. Rather it is Iranian. So that is why I like to reference Iranian poetry, Iranian mysticism, Sufism and the Literature. And although we do not have a tradition of sculpture, or in the plastic arts and 3-dimensional arts, we have other art forms and they are very inspiring too. So when I express myself with one word like 'heech' which equates with nothingness, which is a concept rooted in Iranian Mysticism and Sufism, I find it is still modern and has a contemporary quality.

**CE:** How do you think globalisation and commercialism of the art market affects artists today?

**PT:** Oh I don't think anybody can deny the influence on art. The globalisation of the art and commercialisation of the art is a fact and is universal and no matter where you are, you are bombarded with all of these vibes.

Today even if you somewhere that is not surrounded by museums of art, through the media you are always aware of what is happening in the arts. This is something that did not exist ten years ago, when we were rather left alone. But today we are forced to be aware and to follow what is happening in the rest of the world. Artists are bombarded with information from all source and some people think this is a great advantage but on the other hand it can be very disturbing too. If you don't get lost amidst all this chaos, and you can still find your self and your individuality, that is a great achievement.

**CE:** So do you think that expressing your individuality in art is the most important thing? Or do you think it should go beyond that and reach for the political or aim to change things?

**PT:** Well, any artist is politically minded or socially involved and still the art market demands individuality. The art market does not like imitation, the art market is not keen on followers and no matter how good your thoughts and your concepts are, if you are following a style or content other artists are using the art market does not like it. That is why artists are in a constant struggle and this struggle is very serious. Years ago for artists who lived in a village there was only a little competition, but now you are the artist of the world and even if you find the tiniest way of expressing yourself differently it is already great. Nobody expects you to invent cubism again or invent modern styles, but you have to be that one step forward, or different. That is very much desired.

**CE:** When I look at your pieces for example 'The Wall' there is a kind of reversal that takes place, where I am looking at something solid and stable, which at the same time implies 'nothingness'. Can you tell me more about the element of purity in the form of your work?

**PT:** I believe in simplicity. The kind of form that is known in the West as minimalism. It means you want to be brief in the way you express yourself, as brief as you can. This concept always attracted me and rather than filling up the whole canvas with lots of words I prefer to use just one word and the same applies to space.

I choose a simple form and always enrich the surface of that particular shape so in a way it makes it more contemporary and you know it falls into the school of our days.

But the rest of it is very personal the meanings and concepts are personal and remain the artist's secret so-to-speak. No matter how it is interpreted maybe the artist has better ideas behind it and this is personal to him or herself, but that does not really matter, because how people use it and see and interpret it for themselves is also very important.



**HEECH AND CHAIR VI, 2008.**  
Bronze, 18 x 9 x 7 cm, 6/12  
Private Collection  
Exhibited at Meem Gallery  
Credits: Copyright Meem Gallery / Photo by Mathew Lazarus