

Bitá Ghezelayagh

By Juliet Cestar

Several years ago, Bitá Ghezelayagh, an architect and art director of several Iranian films, decided to travel around Iran to research the Iranian art of feltmaking. One trip turned into several, and she was so inspired that she decided to stop working as an architect and, in 2004, began to create works of art that incorporated some of the Iranian traditions that she had encountered during her travels.

For *Felt Memories*, her first major series, Ghezelayagh has worked with Iranian feltmakers – who traditionally make clothing, tents and carpets – to create a collection of decorative costumes that combine talismanic symbols, silk-screen printing and embroidery. For Ghezelayagh, felt embodied qualities such as simplicity, heft and resilience. It also connected past and present, and preserves one of many traditions that she believes are being lost in contemporary Iran.

Travelling around the country also brought back memories of her childhood, during which she experienced both the Iranian Revolution (1979) and the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88). Official and non-official symbols and slogans, many of which are well known from graffiti on the walls of Tehran, are stitched and screen-printed onto the artworks. Slogans about resistance, protection and martyrdom, such as “From the blood of the young, tulips blossom” are, for Ghezelayagh, as personal as they are political, capturing particular moments from her past. They bring back memories of many things, including her grandmother, who taught her embroidery.

Tulips and keys (symbols of martyrdom), and crowns (symbols of pre-revolutionary Iran) are cut out in brass and sewn onto the garments. In other works, Ghezelayagh uses images of the renowned Iran-Iraq war hero Hossein Kharazi printed onto metal tags. These are combined with Persian phrases such as “Martyrdom

is the Key to Paradise” and the names of military campaigns or the wills of war heroes. Ghezelayagh uses 1001 tulips, crowns, keys and other talismans to reference the famous stories of Scheherazade in “One Thousand and One Nights”. In this classic tale, which originally has Persian and Indian roots, King Shahryar discovers the infidelity of his wife and declares all women to be unfaithful. He vows to marry only a succession of virgins and to execute each one the next morning. On the night of her marriage to Shahryar, Sheherazade devises an ingenious strategy to avoid being executed at dawn. She begins to tell the king a story, but does not finish it. He is forced to postpone her execution in order to hear the conclusion, but as soon as Scheherazade has finished one story, she begins another, and this goes on for 1001 nights. People in Iran, according to Ghezelayagh, have so many stories to tell.

Ghezelayagh’s most recent works feature tulips, 1001 brass cut-outs of machine guns and slogans from the streets of Tehran, such as “Are Bullets the Answer to Flowers?” Symbols of war and martyrdom are mixed for the first time with a question about the use of force.

Ghezelayagh credits Joseph Beuys, who “elevated felt into art” as one of her major influences. Beuys also believed in the potential of art to bring about political change. Ghezelayagh, who originates on her mother’s side from the Bakhtiyari tribe in Iran, studied architecture in Paris and currently lives between London and Iran, does not come across as an overtly “political” person, but rather as someone with a great pride in her country and its heritage. Travelling back and forth, she has seen many political changes in Iran. She laments the traditions, and lives, that have been lost. If a political message can be taken away from Ghezelayagh’s work, it is, in her own words: “Don’t rely on news and popular images. Iranians are sophisticated, generous and creative, with links to a very rich heritage.”

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**Bitá Ghezelayagh, *Felt Memories III*,
Mixed Media on Felt, 102 x 116 cm, 2008**
Image courtesy of Rose Issa Projects



**Bitá Ghezelayagh, *Felt Memories I*,
Mixed Media on Felt, 102 x 116 cm, 2008**
Image courtesy of Rose Issa Projects