

## The people who bow their heads On Mehrdad Mohebaghi's works

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**Don't Worry About The Oath Of The Horatii**, 2011, Acrylic, 100x160cm - Courtesy of Etemad gallery.

Mehrdad Mohebaghi's works have been transformed during these past five years in such a way that allow us to divide his body of works into two different parts of before and after. The works in each period have been created with different techniques regardless of egregious difference in the ideas.

In this review we aim to focus on his recent works; meaning after his aforementioned transformation. The works that he has created in this period are hardly separable and dividable into different series. Although he adds new ideas and motifs to his paintings every year but the elements of his past series always find a way to overflow to his new ones; and this is the main reason that makes his series inseparable.

It is not rare that in some of his paintings a character or a frequent act from past series gets repeated in new ones. For instance in the middle of Readers series Mosaddegh who is the main character of his next series appears and plays the role of a mediator between these two series. Therefore to investigate Mohebaghi's works it is best to analyze contents and motifs.

In most of his recent works, the artist portrays characters while reading. The books are stocked in corners; as if each character enthusiastically is reading –apathetically– in order to finish a book and begins to read another one. The experience resulted from reading is an indirect experience that transfer to the reader's mind by words and subjective ideas. These works are about people who

got used to refer to other's experience. In the artist's point of view "book" is a metaphor for this reference; as if these people are afraid of experiencing reality and this concern would not even let them to have a day-dream. At the same time there are white sheets of paper spread in some paintings. The portrayed people ignore these white sheets. Mohebbali believes that these blank papers are these people's share of documenting their own personal experience; the share no one pays any attention to! This way the book becomes a tool for self-censorship and denial of individual choice priority. In this realm, lived experience loses its importance and instead formerly documented experience obtains originality. In the early works produced with this theme, people are isolated, deprived from society, reading books in nowhere land; it seems they are performing a ritual. But in the latter works the number of people is getting more and more and those timeless nowhere lands getting replaced by Iranian modern houses. There is no sign of any ritual anymore and people are represented like they are clearly doing their duties. Written books yet refer to the tendency of axis of power towards converging public beliefs. Mehrdad has been working on this idea in some of his former single works more clearly. In those works he pictures televisions that are showing governmental programs; the programs that are massively satisfy or persuade the audience. The news of such programs like 1930s and 1940s method of propaganda, tells selective truths and thus change them in a way that even the program host is aware of!

All the televisions pictured in Mohebbali's works are old fashioned in order to emphasize on decades of such propaganda in his homeland context. In a three parted artwork, the artist portrays himself as a surgeon in green gown, performing surgery on an invisible thing by an intangible tool. For better understanding the surgeon character, we need to review the new meanings of this word in recent political vocabulary in Iran; combinations such as "economic surgery", "political surgery" and ... that have been added to Iranian government's directory. Old television sets shows political characters associated with governors of Iran in the back ground. The aforementioned artwork brings physicians, nurses, patients or the other staff or medical tools in his works. This entrance, in the beginning, is



**Classifieds, 2011**, Acrylic, 170x150 cm - Courtesy of Etemad gallery.

thematically decentralized; but slowly characters, their outfits, and the colors find a dramatic function. This is even evident in his compositions which are clearly loyal to dramatic and stage photography.

Mohebbali gathers these series in a bigger collection and name it Mr. Passive. By doing this he tries to underline his recent works idea more than ever. He is analyzing and investigating the passive role of his compatriots. These people –even as protagonists or antagonists– are playing their determined roles; the people who never aim to change their stories and their behavior and actions are the direct result of their situation or their historical memory. These works claim that there is no absolute role among mass population; and each character of this social story acts due to the condition they are situated in. This way, even a national hero is just a passive object for a nation's demands. Or as the artists interpret it; a national hero is the one who is



**Bad Yellow #1**, 2011, Acrylic, 100x160cm - Courtesy of Etemad gallery.

chosen not to live in order to create life opportunities for the others. Mohebbi chooses Mosaddegh as an icon for such a role. Dr. Mohammad Mosaddegh the prime minister of Iran around six decades ago was the leader of the movement for oil nationalization in Iran.

He empowered by his people's will led the revolution; and after 1953 coup d'état has been dismissed and convicted in military court and spent three years in prison. After finishing his sentence, he lived the rest of his life in exile. But there is no document or pictures of his years in prison or exile and thus this period of Mosaddegh's life is lost in misty pages of history. The artist tried to create an imaginary tableau of this national hero days in exile; this image might not be consistent to reality but it has certain considerable socio-political meanings. In an iconic work, Mohebbi brings Mosaddegh to contemporary world and sits him among numerous newspapers. This time the old man is searching for a job among pages of job opportunities; the work that he would never find because he is now an

expired hero and the simplest social collaborations are withhold from him.

In some other works physicians, nurses and their relations to their patients have been used as a metaphor for analyzing social character's relations. The one who plays the positive/protagonist character and the other who accepts the role of antagonist have equal share. Mohebbi puts himself in patient and doctor place at the same time; the story of these works but is not about treatment progress but about control and public supervision. Patient's general conditions are getting monitored intermittently and from time to time different things are getting implanted in their bodies. It seems however that no one is unsatisfied with the show that occupies one's whole life and no one refuses playing this show. The patient character, which is artist's self-portrait, covered in leads is waiting calmly for the medic—which is artist's self-portrait again- to get his work done. The nurse in yellow but is staring at the audience turning her back against the two auto-portraits in order





**Bad Yellow #3**, 2011, Acrylic, 100x160cm - Courtesy of Etemad gallery.

to make the situation seem more natural. In this work, colors refer to variety of meanings. The color green is a floating signifier in Iranian culture from thousand years ago till now which has had carried different and sometimes contradictory meanings. It has been the color of public resistance against imposed reigns in seven and eight centuries; then transformed into the color for religious government in sixteen century; in recent decades and during the war between Iran and Iraq become the color of military uniforms and then security and anti-riot forces; and finally in its most recent role it has become the symbol of demonstrators against present government. The color yellow has also certain meanings. Diplomatic crisis in Iran caused by nuclear activities has been inseparably linked to the scientific term “yellow cake”. Yellow cake or in the other hand Urania is the basic fuel for nuclear reactors. Producing this material in Iran caused several boycotts and resolutions against Iran by other countries. Besides in Persian literature yellow is synonymous to words such as terror and dread. Considering this, Mohebbali

use these colors as the proper colors for many of his character's outfits. He purposely paints his self-portrait to represent the condition of his country inevitable. Iconic representation of self in these works; could be interpreted in other ways as well that punctuates psychological dominance of socio-political patterns on each citizen of Iran. Meaning if a pattern existed in a realm as broad as a country it is certainly rooted in the historical memory of its citizens. In Mohebbali's paintings no one defines a particular role for one self; instead everyone is playing the role they are asked to. The iconic example for this passivity could be found in the historical faith in accepting destiny. As if the people in those frames –who at the artist's view are representative for real people outside the frames- always bow their heads in front of the axis of power, traditional patterns and moral ethical teachings and consider them immortal and eternal phenomenon.

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