

Kamran Dibat

By Erin Mc Cafferty



Untitled, 1961, oil on canvas, 125x84cm - US collection,
Courtesy of the artist

Although intrinsically Iranian, reflecting his country's rich culture and elements of its ancient history, the art work of Kamran Diba is undeniably contemporary and over a 40 year period has changed in style in an eclectic manner. Influenced in the 1960s by abstract expressionism and the pop art of the time his work has developed from collages of Persian carpets and the study of ancient Persian manuscripts and calligraphy to controversial figuratives deemed 'sexually explicit'. Later he produced installations and audio shows, and later still - modern sculptures and photography. His most recent

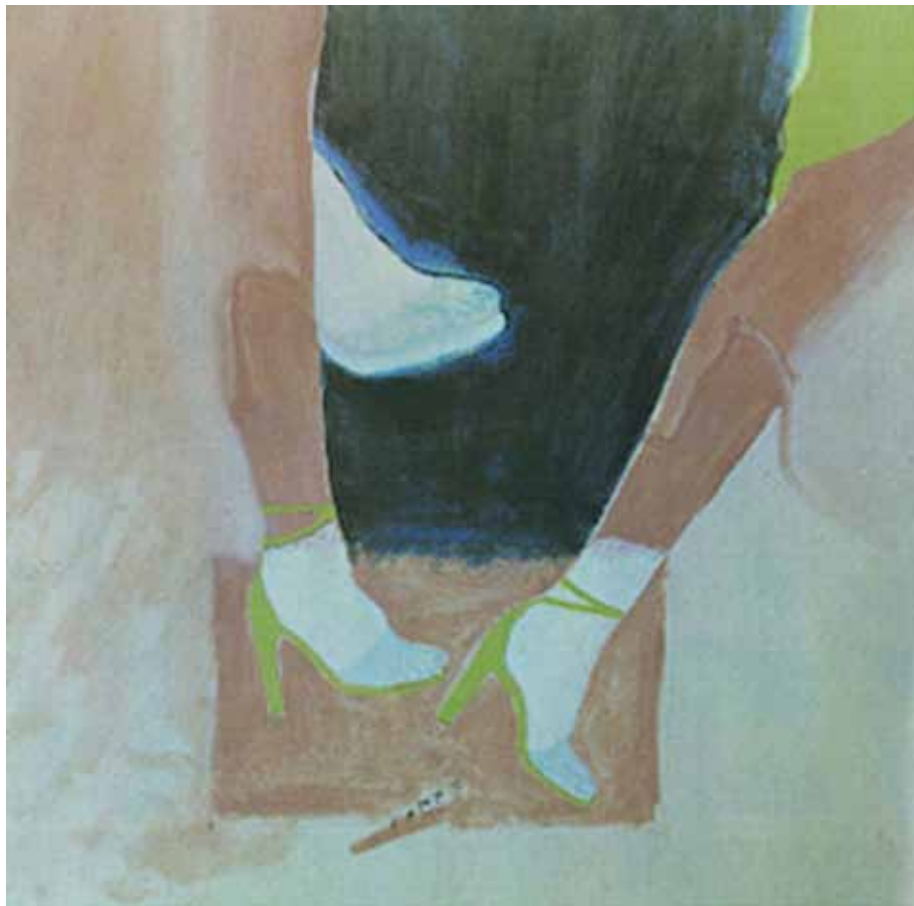
work – colorful and detailed collages in newspaper style is different yet again, making strong statements about trends in globalisation and communication.

But then Diba has never been afraid to buck the status quo. Not only an artist but a well respected architect and urban planner, he's probably most famous for founding, designing and directing the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art in the 1970s, which owns one of the richest collections of modern and contemporary artworks in the world. Born in Iran in 1937, he studied architecture and later sociology at Howard University in Washington, graduating in 1964. As a student he taught himself to paint however and it's clear the emerging contemporary art scene there had a profound influence on his work. He first exhibited in the US in the 1960s, influenced by the likes of Kooning, Rothko and Kline, he participated in group exhibitions such as the Corcoran Gallery annuals in Washington DC Gallery Realites in 1962. The following year he held a one-person exhibition of abstract paintings, also in Washington. As a student Diba had travelled frequently between Tehran and the US and while influenced by his native culture sought a way to express it in a modern form. Inspired by old Persian manuscripts, he began making collages from pieces of Persian carpets. These artworks were nothing if not contemporary and yet were characteristic of an ancient culture which was clearly important to him. He later focused his attention on abstract calligraphy, once again creating a seamless dialogue between the modern and ancient worlds. As an artist, Diba rarely remained static in style – always open to new influences he experimented with many different forms. In 1965 for example he was influenced by the slit canvases of Lucio Fontana and the collage patchwork of American artist Conrad Marca-Relli. As a result he produced raw canvas collages on slit primed white canvas. In 1964 he had come under the influence of two American female artists – Louise Nevelson and Lee Bontecou both of whom were known for their unconventional approaches to sculpture. This led Diba

to create three-dimensional works to be shown at the Paris Biennale. In a sign of the times however these non-figurative constructions were deemed 'sexually explicit' and he was forced to pull them from the show. Undeterred however the artist returned to Iran in 1965 and a year later held an exhibition at the Seyhoun Gallery titled 'Ab-Baz'. Part paintings – oil canvases of a genderless figure in different positions, which he called 'The Waterman'; part installation; part performance, Diba wrote a poem in Farsi to be read out at the show in a female voice. This was significant as it was the first time a show of its kind – which included more than just sculpture and painting – had been shown in Iran. His next exhibition held at the Zand (+Ave) Gallery reflected the influence of the British artist Allen Jones as well as the pop art movement. With the help of a photographer friend Ahmad Ali, Diba photographed the shoes of audience members at the gallery. The concept behind the show derived from a sweet childhood memory of a local shoemaker and was connected to his mother's love of shoes. "This was my first childhood exposure to someone making a fuss over proportion, style, and design details," he said at the time. It was shortly around this time that the artist became increasingly frustrated with the fact that much of the important contemporary art in Iran was simply adorning the walls of wealthy locals. Aware of the need for the country to have its own modern art museum, in 1967-68, he set about establishing The Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art. This he accomplished with the help of the former Queen of Iran his cousin – Farah Diba Pahlavi and it was the first 20th century museum in the world to be called 'Contemporary'. It was a task which took Diba nine years in total and one for which he will understandably be remembered. Not only did he design the building itself, but served as its founding director and heavily influenced the art work that it housed. In 1979 however and with the onset of the Iranian revolution, he left his beloved Iran and took Egyptian nationality. He traveled extensively in the following years –throughout Europe and the US and to and from Cairo. He produced little artwork during this time – save for a series of road paintings reflecting trips he made in the USA. He resided once more in America in the 1980s, and although he built up an extensive collection of emerging artists,



Diba, 1966, oil on canvas, 205x87cm - Property of the Gray collection, Courtesy of the artist.



Walk With Me Series, 1976, oil on canvas, size not available - Collection of Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, courtesy of the artist

painted little himself. It was not until 2007 in fact that he once more exhibited his work in Iran along with Fereydoun Ave. This was the first time he had shown in his home country in over 30 years. In 2012 Diba held an exhibition entitled the 'Tehran Project' at the Mah Gallery. This once again showed a change in style and showed just how much it had evolved since his early days. In general they were a response to globalization and a commentary on modern-day communication. These rich collages were designed to look at first glance like the pages of a newspaper but on closer inspection consisted of hand-painted images with darkened and subjugated words in newsprint and blocks of color – all of which created abstract impressions, flitting between subjects such– politics, cinema, crime, art, sport and photography. The 'Good News Bad News No News' exhibition at the Etemad Gallery in Dubai in Spring 2012 reflects a similar approach incorporating not only

modern subjects but ones that have made the headlines in the past and have clearly had an impact on him. Now aged 75, Diba continues to embrace new trends in a manner which is admirable. He will be remembered for many things but perhaps it is his vision and determination to help establish a contemporary art scene in his beloved country that will mark him most.

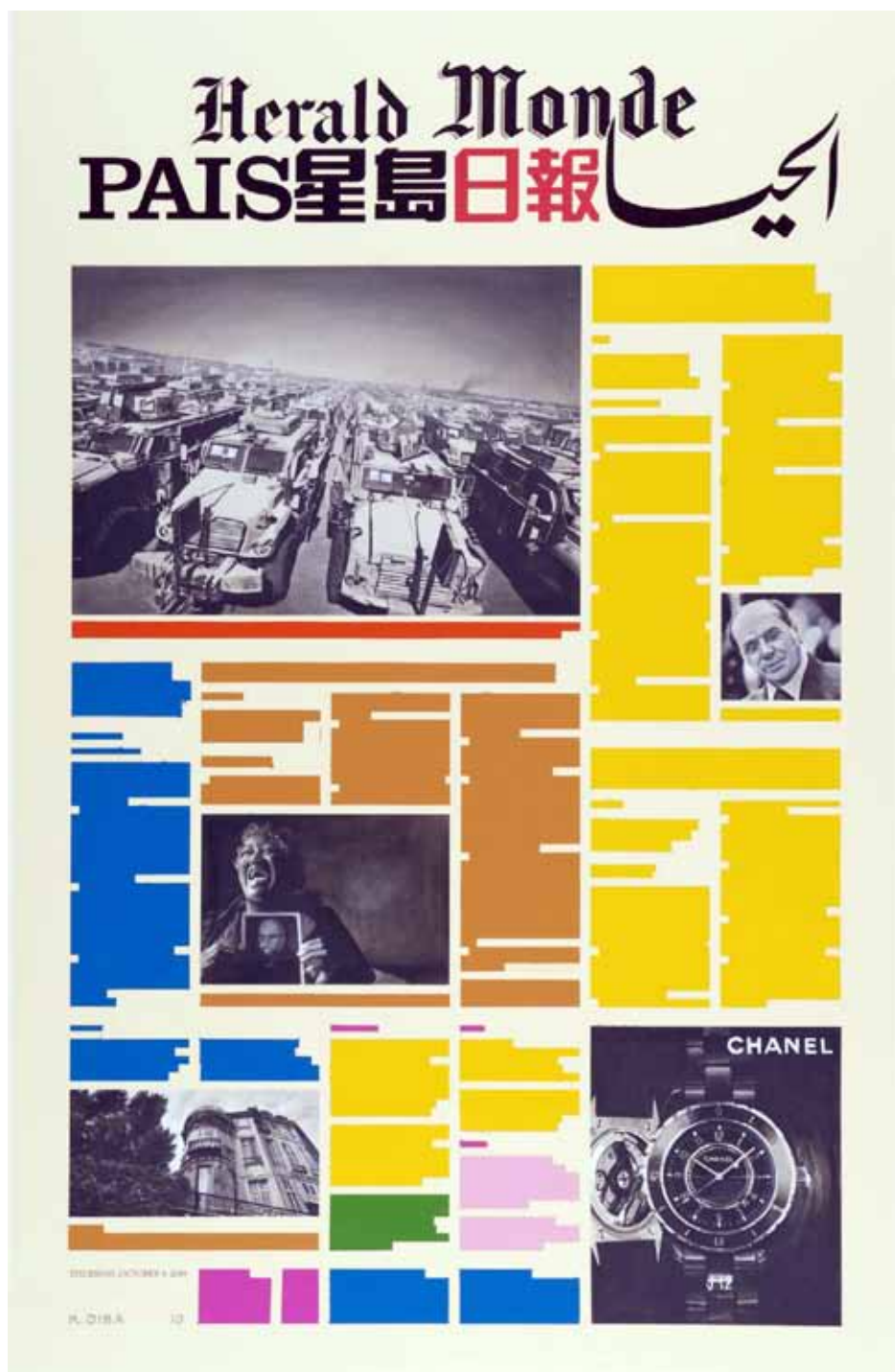
About the Writer

Erin Mc Cafferty is a freelance writer and author currently living in Dubai. She comes from Dublin, Ireland but has lived in the UAE for the last four years.

Having written for a wide variety of publications - both newspapers and magazines in Ireland, the UK and the UAE, she currently writes in-depth interviews, as well as feature articles on lifestyle, travel and the arts.

She has also ghost written a book and is working on another one at the moment.

When not writing, she likes to paint.



Italian Court, Thursday October 8 2009, 2010, Acrylic on canvas, 162 x 132 cm