

Self-Portrait as a portrait of Society

By Ali Ettehad.



Dialogue with Open Eyes, Neda Razavipour, 2010, video.

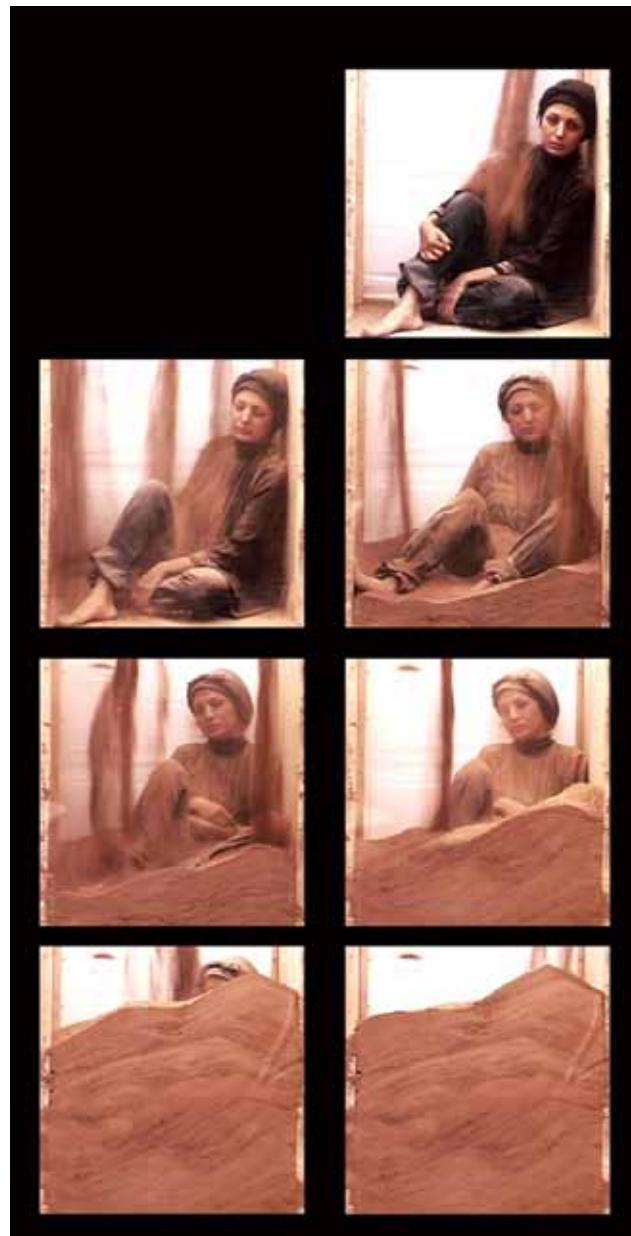
The Self-portrait does not represent a significant section in the history of Iranian Art. For more than a millennium, Iranian painters created images of a virtual world that did not exist rather than the real world they were living in. Figures in Iranian traditional paintings were quite the same size; even looking the same. Changes in the appearance and faces of such figures were not related to the real world or the experience of the painter, but to the principles of a doctrine that the painter was affiliated with. There are only a few painters who tried to maintain their connection to the reality of their age; a notable example is Kamal al-din Behzad

(1450-1535 c.). However, the last years of the 16th century and the beginning of 17th century were the prelude of a different era. King Abbas the first (1571-1629), the ruler of the Safavid dynasty, established a powerful capital and central Iran was ruled peacefully during his reign – despite the fact that the borders were still in turmoil. The safety and peace of the capital encouraged the government to open the gates to other countries and promote intercourse between Iran and other empires. This action prepared the ground for Iranian artists to assay new experiences in which Reza Abbasi's¹ workshops played a certain role. Reza Abbasi,

the renowned painter of the Isfahan school, would go to the streets and bazaars; meeting ordinary people in order to depict images more relevant to the people of his age. The paintings, either created by him or by others under his supervision, all possessed these ‘daily life’ criteria. Such an act was so unexpected for its time that the historian Qazi Ahmad writes in 1604, “Companionship with poor people, revelers and bacchanals will cause him a shaky position. He is fond of watching wrestling competition and even learning it!” (Garden of Art, Qazi Mir Ahmad Ebn-e-Sharaf Aldin Qomi, 16th and 17th century). Amongst the eye-catching artworks of Abbasi’s workshop, –apart from the works representing insignificant people of his time, –are images portraying Reza Abbasi himself. Though most of these portraits were created by Moein Mosavvar ,–his most renowned pupil, –current rules and definitions of the past centuries attribute all the works produced in an artist’s workshop –either created by the artist or his pupils –to the single, leading artist, and thus all the work will be investigated under his name. From this standpoint, we could call Reza Abbasi’s portraits the first painterly self-portraits of Iranian Art. His effort to portray ordinary people alongside the increasing importance of memoirs for artists were two elements that held promise for an impressive solstice in the Art of the time; a solstice that at first sterilized the art scene and then later led a tendency towards European-style painting pervading the art scene of Iran.

European paintings that were brought to the Safavid court as a gift from noblemen and the courts of Europe made Iranian painters eager to create similar works; trying to merge the classic world of Iranian paintings with European ones -either conceptually or technically. Such a combination was not based on accurate cognition of European mentality and philosophy. It was based on a distorted landscape. Hereinafter, painters, instead of representing their surrounded environment, were in increasing technical competition to surpass each other in achieving western visual patterns in art. This routine became even more widespread until the end of Qajar period (1781-1925) by which time there was nothing left of Iranian painting in its traditional form.

Modernity seekers such as Kamal ol-molk (a painter in Qajar court)² established an art school in 1911 to teach



Earth, Simin Keramati, 2006, video.

art academically. With such changes, courtier workshops became extinct forever. Kamal ol-Molk did not only try to depict ordinary people, but also produced self-portraits that are now referred to as the first realistic self-portraits in the history of Iranian art. Eventually, with almost 70 years delay, reflection on modernism reached Iran in the 1940s. “Changes in the political situation and alteration in cultural atmosphere of Iran happened



Amirali's medical records, Amirali Ghasemi, 2009, photography.

by the entrance of allied powers (1942), indicated a new age in Iranian art. Iran suddenly was exposed to a variety of opinions and ideologies".³

D. Due to the influx of modern art in Iran, self-portrait became an accepted form. Because of the revolution in 1979 in Iran, revolutionary paintings slowly replaced individual self-portraits, and most of these paintings were produced to the standards of socialistic realism. In between these phases, there were painters who used to portray themselves amongst troops of demonstrators; something like the Mexican revolutionary murals by Rivera.

As discussed in the preface to this article, political change in Iran has always had an immense impact on its art; and importation of any form of thinking has always been followed by changes in art, both conceptually

and formalistically. The most noteworthy change that caused the self-portrait to become a widespread medium in Iranian art was the beginning of political reforms that finally led to new governmental policies in 1998. Apart from institutional and governmental changes at that time, people became aware of civil rights and started to see themselves and their acquaintances as a small representation of the whole society. The increasing importance of the artist's individuality – as a person who despite being unique is an effective component in the society –made the artist's portrait the primary focus in many artworks; the works no longer knew any boundaries for medium and representation. This current of autobiographic artworks that prevailed in mid-nineties could be seen almost ten years later in two group exhibitions, "Deep Depression" and "Deeper Depression". Although these two shows were not curated by the theme of the "self-portrait", autobiographical works played a certain, central role. What will now be discussed, therefore, are examples of self-portraits by Iranian artists over the past ten years.

"Earth" (2006) is a video-performance in which Simin Keramati gets buried slowly while looking at the camera or, in other words, looking into the eyes of her audience. In the work, it seems like someone has turned over a sandglass, and that the sands are filling the room, eventually burying the artist who is sitting calmly, trying not to bout , slowly fading away. The artist created this work in conditions in which she was struggling against discrimination against women. "Earth" is one of the quaternion series by Keramati; in each part she relates her work to one of four elements. The earth beneath her feet devours her gently, and she looks at her people from behind a cage made by glass; the audiences –the people –like the artist herself, are watching her being buried alive, motionless. 2006 was a year in which a significant number of women's civil movements were being suppressed and, even if it is assumed that the artist did not think of such ideas intentionally, zeitgeist could be seen in the videos belonging to that time. "The way I look at current issues," Keramati says in an interview, "social events or anything else is always highly personal, and the way I look at me, reflects the influences that environs have on me".⁴

In an artwork named "Dialogue with Open Eyes", Neda



Nikoo Tarkhani, Regeneration (from Song of songs trilogy, episode II), 2011, video-performance - Courtesy of Anahita gallery.

Razavipour combines a number of recorded close ups of herself to makes a video containing the artist's portrait staring at the camera, trying not to blink. In this video, Razavipour tries to gaze at her audience in complete consciousness in order to transfer parts of her subjective ideas to that audience. She describes her work:

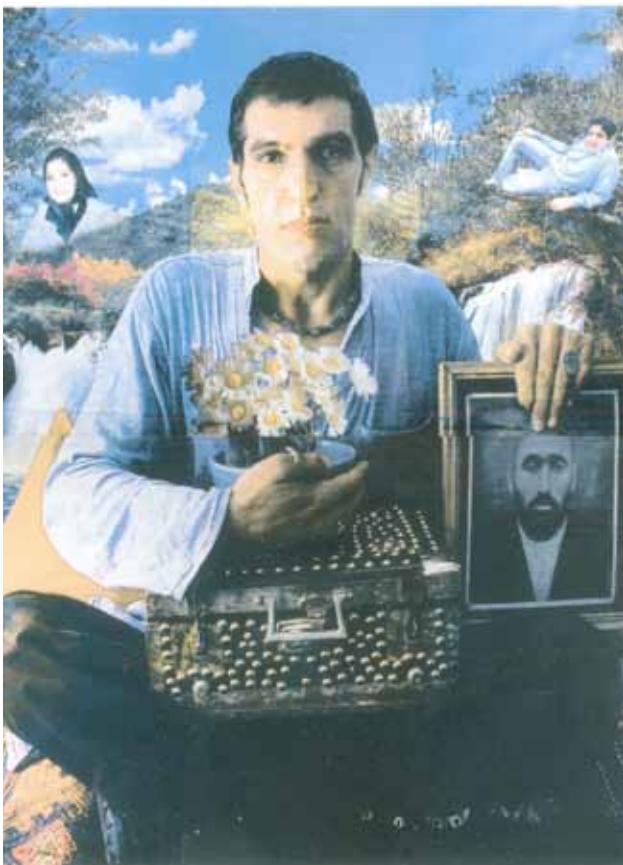
"This video is about dialogue, or the impossibility of dialogue. However, if I always wanted to believe in dialogue, these days the silence is becoming unbearable". By "these days" she meant the early days of 2010; the days that Tehran's citizens were struggling to return and reform, and make a change in government policies – after the street outbreaks,- at a time when the capital was entering the realm of dejection & sadness.

"Dialogue" is a term that added to the political discourse of Iran through the activities of reformists, and is a term that was eradicated from the political vocabulary after their [the reformists] elimination. "Dialogue with Open Eyes" is an elegy for this sudden elimination.

In the last days of 2009, Amirali Ghassemi portrays himself with a different attitude. In his solo exhibition "Amirali's medical records" , in Azad art gallery, he showcases his medical records, X-rays, prescriptions,

and lots of his personal items in a fair-like show. Between all the irrelevant objects and documents of his genetic diseases there were some large photographic self-portraits, portraying the artist at a time when his dermatitis condition worsened because of Tehran's polluted air. Ghassemi has been battling with skin diseases for a long time⁵. The burn marks and sores on his face were worsened the same year that demonstrations were taking place because the tear gas used by security forces to suppress the riots was so far-reaching that it caused Tehran to be polluted beyond the usual level.

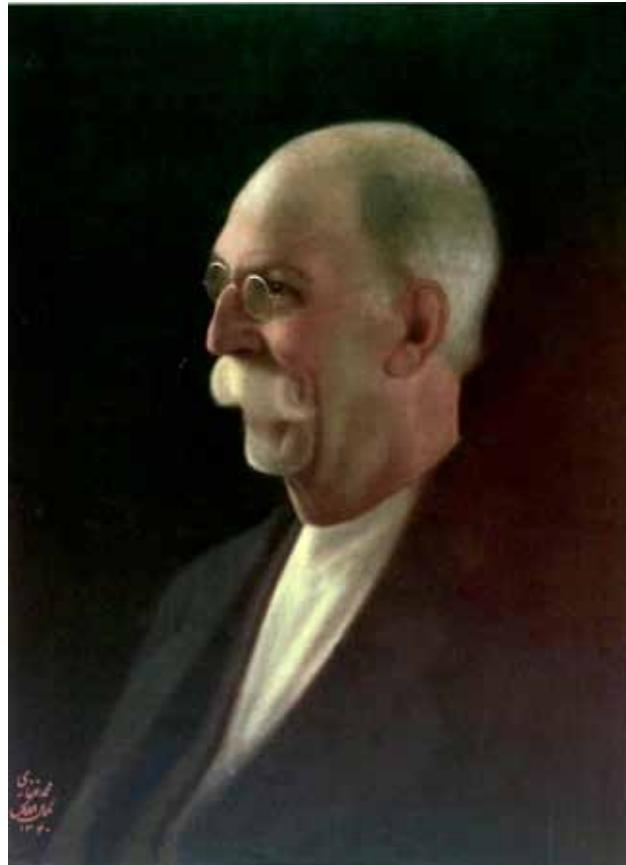
Artist Nikoo Tarkhani uses self-portrait as a groundwork to analyze macroeconomic policies. In her series "There is a Charge for the Eyeing of My Scars", she breaks the familiar forms of flowers and birds that are used in a form of Iranian traditional painting called "Flower and Bird". Turning calm birds into bloodthirsty creatures that pull out the veins of the female figures in the paintings, we see the artist seeking blood and a passive woman calmly waiting for her death. "In 'There is a charge for the eyeing of my scars' these motifs are a symbol of tradition. The contemporary artist (who comes from a traditional background) here suggests



Khosrow Hasanzadeh, Terrorist, 2004, silkscreen, acrylic on canvas, 320x200cm - Collection Kit Tropenmuseum.

that, in spite of their enchanting appearance, some parts of tradition leave deadly wounds upon the body of every single aspect of the community”⁶.

In her video-performance trilogy “Song of Songs”, Tarkhani she puts herself more recklessly in the position of an icon for the history, culture and foretime of the women of her land. In “Metamorphoses”, she sits in front of the camera peeling off her skin with affliction; in “Regeneration”, she sews her lips together, eye to eye with camera; and in her third video-performance, “Scarlet Letter”, she sews the word “I” on her forearm. She is unremittingly trying to analyze and reprove the role that the historic experience of her land has imposed on her as a woman. In all of her works, by symbolic reconstruction of the agony caused by adjunct identity, she puts her audience in a condition through which they can regard the social situation they have become accustomed to from a different aspect that is



Self portrait of Kamal ol-molk - 1921, Courtesy of Saadabad collection.

so fresh, explicit and bold that it could perhaps bring her compatriot audience out of their passivity. This way, Tarkhani’s works do not refer to a particular period in the history of Iran but to the totality of this land’s past. Mehrdad Mohebali is an artist who chooses an intermediate path. He starts his work with the pretext of Iran’s current changes and then directly injects historic elements, such as a person, outfit, furniture, interior design etc., and so combines today events with the past. The artist repeatedly portrays himself between the characters of his paintings, either in the position of characters of the past or contemporaneous ones. “He purposely paints his self-portrait to represent the condition of his country as inevitable. Iconic representation of self in these works could be interpreted in other ways as well, ways that punctuate the psychological dominance of socio-political patterns on each citizen of Iran. This would mean that if a



Mehrdad Mohebali, *Yellow Cake Syndrome*, 2011, Acrylic on canvas, 180x180cm - Courtesy of Etemad gallery.

pattern did exist in a realm as broad as a country it is certainly rooted in the historical memory of its citizens. In Mohebali's paintings no one defines a role for one self; instead everyone is playing the role they are asked. The iconic example for this passivity could be found in the historical faith in accepting destiny⁷.

Although the self-portrait is only a small section in Khosrow Hassanzadeh's body of works, the series "Terrorists", which contains portraits of the artist, his mother and sister, is one of his most significant series.

"Terrorist" is a critical phase in the artistic career of Khosrow Hassanzadeh. The process of self-transformation has brought him and his relationship to the world full circle. He is no longer looking in at his own society with a strictly incriminating eye (War, Prostitutes), nor is he looking out for signs of culture and identity (Chador, Pahlavan). Terrorist seeks to reclaim the right to self-representation and a declaration

of independence. It fails on both registers: "self-representation" here is an appropriation of Western values and the work can only become "independent" if the artist's intended viewer is Western. This extremely radical failure makes it become unique in the non-Western art scene⁸.

Apart from Hassanzadeh's approach to Art in the Middle East and his efforts to challenge the predominant attitude that western organizations have towards the art of this region, the "Terrorists" series was formed in a period in which media contention between Iran and the U.S is culminating (i.e. today); one calls the other the "grave devil" and the other's reciprocal choice of name is "the axis of evil"! In such a situation, the artist presents portraits of his family members and himself in their ordinary clothing, positioned between flowers and their memorable things, under the name of "terrorists" in order to be called by the name that the other has



Moin Mosavar, The portrait of Reza Abbasi, (from Reza Abbasi's workshop), 1676, 19x11cm - Garrett collection Princeton University (G 96).

bestowed up on! Yaser Yaghoubzadeh, in his self-portrait, holds an intermediate experience as well. In the work that was exhibited in the show “Auto-portraits II” in 2010⁹, he paints himself with wide-eyes and open-mouth behind a window from which red roses are hung. Yaghoubzadeh’s face is full of fear and wonder. We certainly cannot interpret this piece without knowing what he has experienced in his life. He lives and works in a house with a window that which looks onto one of the main squares in Tehran named “Enghelab”, which intriguingly, in Farsi, means revolution! This window

in fact showed him one of the largest and most bloody demonstrations and street fights in the history of Tehran. Thus, in the self-portrait, the artist stands in the darkness of his room while his face is glowing from the fire in the street. The dried roses hung from the window could be interpreted as souvenirs from an ordinary life or the bloodstains smudged on the window.

Afsoon is an artist who follows an entirely different path. A significant part of her artistic career is devoted to reproducing images from before the Islamic revolution, hence in her self-portraits she uses her childhood photo

for this reproduction. She prints old pictures onto photographic paper through the etching technique and adds ink onto the still wet paper; a laborious time-consuming technique that turns the artist's personal past into a symbolic image of her homeland's history. She writes about her subjective idea, "I have always been interested in the past and the way it always plays a part in our present".

What Afsoon says about her style of working could also be applied to Mehrdad Mohebali and Nikoo Tarkhani's works. Thus, the works that have been discussed in this article as examples of Iranian self-portraits are just representatives of an outstanding tendency towards this artistic approach in Iran. Whether the works refer to the past or are set in current age, they all use the artist's "self" as a context to re-describe a civic story. Today we can witness numerous examples of Iranian contemporary artworks in which the artist abstracts a vital public story into his/her portrait; a mechanism that has been working as an artistic language for more than a decade. The image of "I", in spite of being unique and unrepeatable—due to characteristics such as time-place, geographic region, history, culture and policies—is fully connected to the land that "I" is rooted. When an artist inserts the theme "I" into his/her artwork, the work will inevitably relate to every element in the artist's life by an automatic mechanism. The land in which the artist is living, the artist's home, personal affairs, major policies of his/her homeland, historic memory of his/her people and everything that connects "I" to its surroundings makes it "I". An ineffaceable bond, just like the word "I", exists in Nikoo Tarkhani video-performance in which she sews "I" on her forearm. Even if she overcame the pain and tore up the fibers; the scars of needles remain forever!

About the writer

Ali Ettehad is a media artist, art critic and curator. He currently lives and works in Tehran, Iran. He has written a considerable numbers of critiques and essays about art, both in and outside of Iran, and published in different art magazines. His main focus is on art in Middle East and its roots. He aims to analyze the art from the region in a different way, to investigate it not as an exotic phenomenon but to go deeper and introduce it to his readers in a better way. Amongst his curatorial projects are "Auto-portraits" I & II and "The Other", both shows which reveal his interest in the theme "identity".

Endnotes

- 1) Reza Abbasi also Aqa Riza (but see below) or Āqā Rizā Kāshānī (c. 1565–1635)
- 2) Mohammad Ghaffari (1847 - 18 August 1940), better known as Kamal-ol-Molk (also Kamal-al-Molk), was an Iranian painter and part of the Ghaffari Clan in Kashan.
- 3) Ehsan Yarshater, Contemporary Persian Painting, in Highlights of Persian Arts, New York, 1979, P.363.
- 4) An Interview with Simin Keramati by Khosrow Khosravi, Art Tomorrow, Vol.3, 2011
- 5) in a curated show "Auto-portraits I" by Ali Ettehad in April 2009, Amiraki Ghasemi shows a video in which the nonstop itching of his skin was the main theme.
- 6) "The wounds are deadly", by Ali Ettehad, The Daily Star, February 14, 2011. Read more: <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Culture/Arts/Feb/14/The-wounds-are-deadly.ashx#ixzz25F9FJlez>
- 7) "The people who bow their heads" On Mehrdad Mohebali's works, by Ali Ettehad, Contemporary practices, Vol. X, 2012 Read more: <http://www.contemporarypractices.net/essays/volumeX/Mehrdad%20Mohebali.pdf>
- 8) Tehran Studio Works: The Art of Khosrow Hassanzadeh, edited by: Mirjam Shatanawi, "Terrorist" by Sohrab Mahdavi, Saqi Books, 2007
- 9) "Auto Portraits II", Curated by Ali Ettehad, Silk Road Gallery and Mohsen Art Gallery Read more: <http://www.aliettehad.com/2012/04/13/auto-portraits-ii/>