

## Nikoo Tarkhani

*By Kiarash Alimi*



**Video Still from “Regeneration” the second part of the trilogy Song of Songs, 2011, a video-performance, 7 minutes - Courtesy of Anahita Art studio.**

*The hysterical emergence of a feminine life, from the inmost private through to her public, with the artworks she creates, is the marrow of what Tarkhani does for a living; so outrageously narcissistic yet self-enhancing as if she has a feedback loop within herself. What she has done over the past ten years is the living verbatim of the transformation of a self-manipulating isolated scapegrace into a socialized undisputed siren. Her works run the gamut from true to life oil paintings to video art, but the main nucleus stays the same. Herself, and herself alone. Barbed, bared, fainted. Mutilated, amputated, scarred.*

Among the young Iranian female artists, Nikoo Tarkhani presents a rather different body of work because she brings a handful of regional concerns into a personal debate. Her obsession with herself in her work allows the title auto-portraitist to sit at the top of the mighty gates of her identity. Her work encompasses various feminist related topics and their interaction with the foundations of Middle Eastern traditional interpretations of a feminine life style. She challenges gender both as a given title and as a condition employed by one's self as a differentiator of an identity. She thus aims to replace an traditional association or two with

new ones in order to live a better feminine life or to set her ancient fears, wishes and resistances free. Student of a realist painting atelier, Tarkhani began her career with a series of nude auto portraits. Along with ample works of the artist, early nude self-portraits are all *prima oil color plates* illustrating the bust of the artist while having her feminine sexual features masked, removed or vanished into background. Effigy of the nude artist, intentionally missing almost all of her entire sexual identity, is the juxtaposition of myriad metaphors. As she poses for herself she becomes an original inauthentic<sup>1</sup> figurine who caresses herself, taunts the author and vanishes through the plane and motionless world from whence she once sprung. This pristine silent dynamism of shifting gestures freezes in time.

In the series "This is not a woman" she portrays central psychoanalytic questions of the woman. By questioning the thing that the woman conceals within the veil, Nikoo opposes what she reads from attraction, sexuality and desire and reduces her body to a sometimes sexless imaginary identity. However, the identity takes shape even during the absence of her sexual features as the woman. In the poses she desperately longs for a never arriving moment of revelation; the 'jouissance' that is to retrograde as it moves towards the very end of the author's neurotic speech. In this short burst of clarity both the viewer and the persona are suffering at the same time. As a token bestowed upon revenge they deliberately introduce themselves as an antithesis of the other's comfort. Nikoo, as she has portrayed herself, is a nearly faint seductress hopelessly playing her last card. Numbly, her flesh and skin make enquiry as she caresses the absence of her objective femininity. This is the paradox of her veiling hands whose fondles contemporaneously mask the reference to its eroticism. This neurosis is accompanied by a meticulously rendered context of repeating tiles ornamented with floral symmetries. Although the beauty of each portrait is devoured by pain and drenched in imperfection, and every inch of this harmony is anything but expected, she managed to appear within a traditional stillness of conservative boredom that reproduces itself in absolute narcissism: the traditional normative that has nurtured her existence and tended to keep her safe from harm; the tradition of the father. .

Nikoo understands and accepts her definite feminine subjectivity as she begins to embody the disembodied neighbor woman. While she illustrates her naked body as the fleshly indisputable truth, she defines her embodied self as the support for her specificities that are declined by the overgeneralized desire of the father. Yet, it also depicts the long-running wish/fear of the father toward the flesh. Not only do the norms and venues aggressively responded to her *nouvelle* body by blaming their obscenity, but also did the images in the frames. As the bodies are caressed by their owners they reveal a discomfort in the subject considering the presence of the father. Father sets the blame of guilt while Nikoo portrays the same sensation. Using this structure and having her body as a support to validate her standpoint, she develops her unique association with the father; the father as the reaction of the father. Partially related to the region's feminist community, in her work she has never offered an alternative reading to the patriarchy but rather she has represented the feminine as a radically different text than those of the father. Similar to the other artists in the region, she depicts the feminine as a repressed subject, but she also claims that the repressors and the structure in which the repressions are applied are crucial factors when defining a Middle Eastern female subject. This way the seemingly interminable issue of feminine subjectivity in the Middle East steps in a new direction. Using this approach she not only concludes the feminist story in a different way but she also provides a fine illustration of the establishment moment of a patriarchy and the initiation of a feminine subject to the cult of the father. In her entire catalogue, Tarkhani takes a fluctuating approach to portrait painting. As she reproduces herself in her earlier works, aware of the other's gazing eye, she tends to pose or impersonate a certain gesture. The gestures are conscious of the gazing eye, hence the persona is concealed by herself. Though it is neither of pure shame nor of a willing postponement in the revelation of the divine, obscurity remains the centerpiece of the works. The covered elements are illustrating an absence of what is to be presented as the subject matter of the plates. The images are agonized in the intentional declination of the subject's gender. In her early nude series the tormenting presence of a supposed audience enunciates



Video Still from “Scarlet letter” the third part of the trilogy *Song of Songs*, 2012, a video-performance, 14 minutes - Courtesy of Anahita Art studio.

itself as it is inseparably entwined through the shame she exposes in her gaze at the metonym; the absent metonym of the father; the father who possessed the structures in which her spoken subjectivity is rendered. Though we share the same and opposite discomforts by being considered as the metonym of the father, the disintegration becomes a more vibrant trait in our encounter with the piece. While primarily she takes the father as the entity that defines the woman, secondarily the work defines itself as a reaction to the revolt, and finally as a cult of which both father and the repressed are members. Nikoo introduces a layered ambiguity to the father that can shelter the father in all of the three forms. The father is either absent or ciphered in the spectator as its metonym. Her search through the social conventions goes far beyond her time and deals with

the issue throughout the history. With her reference to Hawthorne’s romantic novel *The Scarlet Letter*<sup>2</sup>, Tarkhani challenges the symbolic realm of public ethics as a female subject encounters it in her home country. In *The Scarlet Letter* she revisits her earlier reading of the father and sets her keen eyes to show how the father historically governed the feminine agenda.

Slowly she begins her imagery by narrating a disintegrated subject torn into incapable chunks of human neurosis between what she is and what he desires of her ‘I’. As the path continues, Nikoo transcends our place as she forces us to take part in her disintegration experience. It is during this experience that she proposes scenes from her personal journey in the context. A subject already deeply wounded by the incompatibility of generations, in the series “There is a charge”, Nikoo



**Video Still from “the first part of the trilogy Song of Songs, 2012, a video-performance, 14 minutes - Courtesy of Anahita Art studio.**

presents herself as the victim attacked by sparrows and nightingales, the native fauna of a world of ornaments reminiscing classic Persian gardens, love and poetry. In the fright of a long winter to come, birds are gathering food, plucking Nikoo's body, unearthing her vessels and leaving her in a still agony. It seems that she believes her traditional roots have grown in a hostile ground. As the roots scatter around, filling the soil with the porous botanic presence of an individual, the attributes of the two merge together shaping an inseparable duet of non-harmonious desires. Neither the birds nor the agonized narrator are willingly participating in this traumatizing carnival. In this series the scar is presented in a rather unfamiliar body; here the scar is not a mark that remarks a past. She depicts the genesis of the scar. Her imagery narrates the tale of the disobedient and the punishment

it recalls. Moreover, she reads her punishment as she remembers it, hence the unity of herself and the imposer. The two dimensional floral margins and ornaments that have long symbolized the ideal realm of *Khayal*<sup>3</sup>, contrasting with the materialized three dimensional body of the dug, reveal the subjective presence of the wound. Again in a different setting, she presents whatever she has suggested throughout her painting career in her videos. In the song of songs she reappears holding a concise interpretation, a golden key to her entire lexicon of objects and metaphors. In this code of codes she presents a more polished and mature version of her reading of the father, the formation of the 'I' and her statements on gender. What addresses a new chapter in her works is that as she moves forward she refuses auxiliary meanings. By the virtue of such refusal she





**There is a charge for the eyeing of my scars**, 2010, Oil on canvas, 100x120cm - Private collection.

empowers and purifies the integrity of her concepts with their metaphors, metonyms and objective existence. This primal integrity that has evolved within the paintings can be seen in the piece where Nikoo paints a portrait on a fragmented tile wall of small canvases. The painted tiles can be rearranged according to audiences' intention. The fragments are depicting a portrait painting in one arrangement and a geometrically ornamented lace Iranian flag in a completely different arrangement. As the audience tries to reconstruct the individuated subject of the portrait they distance themselves and the image from the conventional collectivist signifier of the geography. The spectator is left responsible, somewhere between over-specification and over generalization; he either accepts the paradoxical nature of the subject by a passive observation or he participates in a final modified product which not only includes the same exhibition of the paradox but also includes one's unsuccessful attempt

in the paradox's resolution. This purification and integration strategy lives its more mature life in most of her videos. It lives where the baffled 'I' is repelled by the father, where lips are sewn by the thread of the 'I' and where 'I' stands as the desire of the other. [Plate 6] Though the protest against the father, both as an epitomized unsurpassable truth about the life of the protester and also as the history of such a struggle, the dominant content of these protests becomes evident. Thus, what delivers a sentimental quality to this art is the unrivaled inclusion of the subject in her art. The Shehrazade of Nikoo's story is herself. Unpolished and ragged she might be in the pictures but she promises a word by word truth in the story.



**Deaths without burial**, 2009, Oil on canvas, 80x648cm - Private collection.

#### Endnotes

- 1) *As intended* by Trilling, L. 1972
- 2) *The Scarlet Letter* was first published in March 16, 1850. The story takes place in 17th century Massachusetts. A young woman named Hester Prynne commits adultery with a preacher. The authority marks her with a scarlet rag of cloth on her breast depicting the letter 'A'. The letter 'A' represents her act of adultery and it is considered a public badge of shame. The novel takes a critical approach to the concept of sin as a public belief confronted with a love story of a preacher and a young woman whose husband is lost in a marine journey back to America.
- 3) *Khayal* or *Khyal* is a symbolic context consisting of fantasy, imaginary entities and counterfactuals that are assembled or reconstructed by one's mind. It has been used as a frequent subjective foundation for literature and visual arts of Persia after Mongol invasion. Regarding its transcendental nature, *Khayal* is emptied of the material, thus refuses to use of perspective, causality and concepts alike.

#### Bibliography:

1. Lacan, J., 1966, *Ecrits*, Fink, B., 2002, W. W. Norton & co., New York.
2. Newman, S. 2004, *Interrogating the Master: Lacan and Radical Politics*, *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society*, UWAP, Issue 4, pp. 298-314.
3. Glynos, J., Stavrakakis, Y. 2008, *Lacan and Political Subjectivity: Fantasy and Enjoyment in Psychoanalysis and Political Theory*, *Subjectivity*, Issue 24, pp. 256-274.
4. Borch-Jacobsen, M. 1991, *Lacan: The Absolute Master*, 1st Edition, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA.
5. Deleuze, G., Guattari, F., 1983, *Anti Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, University of Minnesota.
6. Trilling, L. 1972, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, *The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures*, 1st edition, Harvard university Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts pp. 102-105.