

DERAKSHANI’S HERITAGE

Interview by: Alicia Hughes

Renowned for his vibrant, richly-textured canvases, Reza Derakshani draws inspiration from his Iranian heritage, while simultaneously exploring modern-day conceptual and philosophical preoccupations. Marrying a vivid colour palette with esoteric mediums such as tar and sand, Derakshani held his first solo exhibition at the age of nineteen and has since gone on to captivate critics, collectors and art-lovers worldwide with his unique creations. "Derakshani is the Gerhard Richter of the Middle East. He is a poet who transforms a canvas to a dream", says collector Ramin Salsali. Having lived and exhibited all over the world throughout his nomadic existence, Derakshani is a critically acclaimed artist in his own right. His work stands without the label of his nationality and the associations that it brings with it. His circuitous journey between Iran and the Middle East and between Europe and the U.S. exposed him to varied and diverse artistic practices, perhaps most noticeably those of the Abstract Expressionists. Derakshani draws from a range of techniques and visual effects to reach the layered texture his works are well known for. While his paintings are critically acclaimed outside of the Middle East, Derakshani’s Iranian heritage is central to his work. Persian themes such as the rose and nightingale, fig trees, pomegranates, hunting scenes, Persian miniatures and Khosrow and Shirin are recurrent and compelling. As a poet, he is well familiar with the traditional ways in which Persian painting is closely intertwined with texts. Text and image are interdependent. An image conveys what the text cannot. His own poetry and music are woven into his canvases and in his 'Mountains' series he directly inscribes it in calligraphic Farsi, and occasionally English, into the harmonic swirl of colors on canvas.

Derakshani’s abiding commitment to beauty darkened in both palette and subject matter in recent years. Well-known for his startling versatility, The 'Mirror' and 'Identity Crisis' (FIG) series (2009-10) saw Derakshani depart from his abstract-representational paintings, known for their vibrant colors and lyrical motifs, to use a dark palette in his series of distorted portraits of Iranian women cast in shadows. Female subjects are seen through mixed media 'venetian blinds' or symbolic hejabs. Dark, and often violent, the images of these women are incomplete and fragmented, with crimson tears occasionally glowing from the shadows. Rendered in isolation, mysterious and unreachable.

Graduating to the strict palette of black and white, Derakshani's recent series is executed in only black sand and enamel on canvas. Derakshani's commitment to beauty is fundamental to his art and there is indeed a dark beauty within the artist's new series. "The Peacock Throne" (FIG) is one such artwork. Shown recently in a New York gallery, Derakshani combines black sand and enamel on canvas to depict the opulent and bejeweled symbol of Iranian monarchy and grandeur towering into the sky in a black crypt-like silhouette. Instead of dazzling gems, it is adorned only with a stark white skull. While the fissure pattern covering the skull is beguilingly delicate, the interlacing fractures are evidence of further violence and pain. Once a symbol of beauty and cultural pride, the throne is now stripped of its cultural legitimacy and significance and stands as a memorial to the loss of culture and nationhood.



1. Shirine and Khosroblue, 2006. Oil on canvas, 220x110cm. - Courtesy of Ramim Provate Museum.
2. Gol O Morgh Turquoise, 2008. Oil on canvas, 220x80cm. - Courtesy of Ramim Provate Museum.



The transition from canvas to wall installation marks a new experiment for Derakshani. The artist's minimal approach to Iranian history in its past and present form is rendered in large-scale fresco-esque works that confront, envelope and seduce the viewer. In his new sand installations, black and white predominate, colour is minimal and the works extend from wall to wall, dissolving into the space, inviting the viewer to linger and experience a full, sensory transformation with them. While continuing to reference traditional Persian iconography, his perception of light and dark lends itself to metaphorical explorations of identity and violence. Derakshani's story of Iran reveals subtle, symbolic shades of the social, philosophical and humanistic complexity of a tumultuous region, yet the songs of the nightingale and invigorating scent of rose shine through in his work, ensuring there is no dark without light. A master of challenging techniques, Derakshani's dynamic and versatile artistic practice is inextricably linked to his sensory experience of the world and his abiding commitment to the fundamental beauty around us.

INTERVIEW:

Alicia Hughes: You had your first solo exhibition at 19 and have gone on to become one of the most critically acclaimed contemporary Iranian artists working today. When you look back, how would you describe the journey and the way in which your artistic process has developed?

Reza Derakshani: It's been a long journey with pain and pleasure. Hard work, awareness and dreams. An endless passion with all its joy and anxiety. A terminal love story.

Alicia Hughes: Unlike other contemporary Iranian artists who use many forms of multimedia art practices, you have remained committed to the medium of painting. How would you describe the experience of painting?

Reza Derakshani: I love painting as a medium of expression, it suits my psyche very well. I always have my music going on alongside my art. It is quite an effort to manage the time. You have only 24 hours a day, or the Day and Night together. Painting is not an easy task to master and I can say for sure that not all but a god portion of painters who turn to multimedia art forms are failed painters who don't have much to say in their work and look for a shortcut to success, which is apparently the fashion and here and there they get what they want.

Alicia Hughes: Have you considered exploring multimedia forms of art?

Reza Derakshani: At one point in my life I would love to get involved with Video installation in conjunction with my music. I have done some experimental practices and it will happen when the time is right.

Alicia Hughes: How do you see your new body of work versus your previous series?

Reza Derakshani: There has been a departure from those series. My last show in NYC was a big move from what I have been doing. I think becoming more and more minimalistic and dealing with social/historic issues is taking

me towards more massive scale works that take my painting to a different level. Also, I have the tendency to get more and more engaged with the three dimensional space. This is what I can call the overarching change.

Alicia Hughes: You have previously spoken about the role of storytelling in your work. How is this evidenced in your new work such as the large-scale fresco-style canvas and ceiling installation you have planned for your upcoming show?

Reza Derakshani: The story telling in my work is in a way very intangible, in fact it's more like a hint for the viewer to make their own story. I don't like direct messages in painting and I also don't think creating just a nice texture is enough, there has to be some mystery and poetry involved. I find some great abstract works have some elements of a story. It's a fine line.

Alicia Hughes: You have become known for using esoteric mediums such as tar and sand in your work. When did you first begin to experiment with these mediums and what prompted the experimentation?

Reza Derakshani: To me this whole thing is an experiment, as life itself is a series of experimentation.

I have always been curious and looking for new ways to enhance the technical aspect of my work.

Alicia Hughes: Your black sand installations are a fairly recent body of work, and black and white dominate these works. What inspired these works?

Reza Derakshani: It follows the same rules I just mentioned, although sometimes the concept of the work requires its own style and technique. The black sand body of works took life when I was doing a series of work on the historic ups and downs of my homeland, in fact more of the downs, to be accurate. To me there is no absence of colors, I see many shades of color in those works, they are just limited in a spectrum of Black and White.

Alicia Hughes: How does your experience of directly installing an artwork on a wall differ from working with canvas?

Reza Derakshani: The action and the feeling of getting involved with the scale and space is a different experience. It's the difference between Michelangelo working on the ceiling of the Sistine chapel and Caravaggio working on a canvas in his studio. It's not about better and worse, it's just different.

Alicia Hughes: Much of your work prompts the viewer to think about how the past intervenes into our present?

Reza Derakshani: It's clear to me that all the present occurrences of life are one way or another associated with the history and the precedents set, and that includes art and culture in particular. The idea is to use that as a step and to move beyond to reach the future. I have tried to do so with the history and traditions which I know well. You can not deny the achievements of the past and build a structure on emptiness as a foundation.



1. The Peacock Throne, 2012. Black sand and enamel on canvas, 203x178cm. - Courtesy of Ramim Provate Museum.
2. Tree of Life, 2011. Oil, tar and gold paste on canvas, 200x150cm. - Courtesy of Ramim Provate Museum.
3. Day & Night, 2010. Oil, tar and glitter on canvas, 120x230cm. - Courtesy of Ramim Provate Museum.



Devided Landscape of a Blue Monarchy, 2011, Mixed media on canvas, 140x85cm each panel - Courtesy of Ramim Provate Museum.



Hunting Nothingness, 2009-11, Oil, tar and gold paste on canvas, 190x270cm. - Courtesy of Ramim Provate Museum.