

## REBEL, JESTER, MYSTIC, POET: CONTEMPORARY PERSIANS

### Opposite page

#### AGUS SUWAGE

*Kama Sutra II*  
2016  
Papier-mâché, gouache, watercolor  
and tobacco juice, 223 x 242 x 7 cm.  
Courtesy the artist and Tyler  
Rollins Fine Art, New York.

### This page

#### KHOSROW HASSANZADEH

*Terrorist: Khosrow*  
2004  
Acrylic and silkscreen ink on  
canvas, 250 x 205 cm.  
Copyright the artist.  
Courtesy Mohammed Afkhami Foundation.

Past Mahmoud Bakhshi's sinister, swiveling Allah emblems resembling tulips, and Shirin Aliabadi's blue-eyed peroxide blonde defiantly blowing a pink bubble of gum, Khosrow Hassanzadeh sits aloof, in a screenprint on a massive pink canvas, cross-legged on a *gelim*—a pileless rug. Awash in acidic hues of pink and blue, he holds a “box of secrets,” a pot of flowers, and a solemn portrait of his grandfather. Behind Hassanzadeh, his son and daughter stand out before a paradisiacal scene with waterfalls and trees. Evoking the staged studio photographs of yesteryear, this portrait of the artist is naively innocent—until one reads the tag attached to its left edge. In both English and Persian, the title reads, “Terrorist.” We also find the artist's name, nationality, religion and a description of physical characteristics, lest he evade captors.

Part of the artist's “Terrorist” screen-print portrait series (2004), Hassanzadeh's work is as relevant now as when it was created during the “axis of evil” days, when George W. Bush was the United States president. Dubai-based collector Mohammed Afkhami had been in talks with Aga Khan Museum director Henry Kim concerning an exhibition of works from his collection as early as 2014, before today's spate of hostilities between the US and Iran. Given the current state of Iran's international relations, “Rebel, Jester, Mystic, Poet: Contemporary Persians” could not have come at a more fitting time. Near Hassanzadeh's self-portrait, Shahpour Pouyan's *Projectile 11* (2015), a delicate cross between a medieval Iranian helmet and a drone, was a reminder that war always reappears, each time with a new face. Below Pouyan's dangling specter, Farhad Moshiri's warplane in *Flying Carpet* (2007)—cut out of machine-made Persian

rugs that rested beside it—was ready to take flight. Wrought three years after Hassanzadeh's portrait, Moshiri's work suggests that little has changed. Indeed, the threat of Western military aggression still looms large in the minds of Iranians the world over. Despite the blood-curdling prospect of armed conflict, Timo Nasser's menacing, stainless steel sculpture *Parsec #15* (2009) hints at war's lucrative promises—flashy on the outside, yet deadly in actuality.

“Rebel, Jester, Mystic, Poet” was not a response to the current geopolitical climate. Rather, it served as an overview of cutting-edge Iranian art, while highlighting the many roles assumed by Iranian artists. The exhibition space, cleverly utilized by curator Fereshteh Daftari, abounded with rebels such as Hassanzadeh and Pouyan, as well as a host of other characters, as the show's title suggested. It was difficult not to grin before jester Aliabadi's inkjet print *Miss Hybrid 3* (2008) or Shadi Ghadirian's vintage-looking photographs of women posed with anachronistically modern devices from her 1998 “Qajar” series. Contemplative pieces such as Parviz Tanavoli's *Blue Heech* statue (2005), YZ Kami's spiraling painting *Black Dome* (2015), Mohammad Ehsai's ribbon calligraphy canvas *Mohabbat (Kindness)* (2006) and the late Abbas Kiarostami's serene black-and-white photograph from his “Snow White” series (1978–2004/2010) brought forth the collection's many mystics and poets, who at times were just as subversive as their rebellious counterparts.

The variety of artists and works is where the exhibition drew its strength. Those unfamiliar with contemporary Iranian art were afforded a glimpse of creations by masters, visionaries and emerging artists in many mediums, with works spanning three decades. “Rebel, Jester, Mystic, Poet” was the first major group exhibition of contemporary Iranian art not only in Toronto but also all of Canada, making the show all the more significant for the city's teeming Iranian community, which lovingly refers to their home as “Tehranto.”

Two pieces by Ali Banisadr and Morteza Ahmadvand brought the exhibition to a fitting close. Banisadr's apocalyptic painting *We Haven't Landed on Earth Yet* (2012), by sheer dint of its title, delivers a damning critique of humanity. Ahmadvand's sculpture and video installation *Becoming* (2015) focuses on the shared origins of the three Abrahamic religions, placing faith in their indubitable oneness. The West's relations with Iran may be shaky, but a love affair with contemporary Iranian art, both in Canada as well as abroad, is in full bloom.

JOOBIN BEKHRAD

