



A SHOW ABOUT NOTHING

Jobin Bekhrad reviews Parviz Tanavoli's retrospective at the Davis Museum at Wellesley College.

Amazingly, despite his widely acknowledged status as the 'father of Modern Iranian sculpture' and as one of the most important – and highest-grossing – living Contemporary Iranian artists, Parviz Tanavoli's retrospective at the Davis Museum at Wellesley College marks his first solo museum exhibition in the USA. Although he studied in the USA and taught there, Tanavoli didn't enjoy much success as an exhibiting artist, which may have been one of the factors that prompted his decision to return to Tehran, where he now spends a majority of the year in his Niavaran studio by the Alborz Mountains. "The principal aim behind my own involvement has been to grandstand a great artist's work in the USA," remarked Maryam Eisler – the collector, patron, alumna and trustee of Wellesley College whose support brought the exhibition to fruition – during the post-show dinner. "Something that is long overdue as far as Tanavoli is concerned; and by extension, to platform the vitality which is representative of Iran's art and culture."

Curated by Wellesley's Lisa Fischman, Director of the Davis Museum and Brown University's Shiva Balaghi, the humbly titled *Parviz Tanavoli* may have alternatively been called *Everything You Wanted To Know About Tanavoli, But Were Afraid To Ask*. Among Iranians and non-Iranians, collectors and the simply curious, Tanavoli is undoubtedly best known for his iconic *Heech* ('nothingness' in Persian) series of sculptures, which have graced museums and cultural institutions the world over, and become somewhat of a signature for the soft-voiced septuagenarian. Though some may deem his *Heech* sculptures to be the show's focal point, the exhibition certainly has not limited itself to a simple *Heech* extravaganza, even though that may have been enough to leave audiences in awe. Rather, it brings together works in a variety of media from a practice extending beyond half a century, as well as artefacts, videos and



ephemera that all serve to highlight his role not only as a prolific sculptor, but also as a mixed media artist, researcher, preserver of folk culture and even designer. “Parviz is incandescent,” says Fischman. “[His] 60-year career has been fuelled by unusual optimism and perseverance, a tenacity with regard to creative expression and an Avant-garde spirit matched by deep investment in the cultural traditions of Iran.”

MATTERS OF TIME

The seeds for the exhibition were sown when Balaghi and Fischman met at the launch of *Art Studio America* at Sotheby's New York, a book which Eisler co-edited. The paths of the two curators, who “hit it off immediately”, according to Balaghi, crossed again at Art Dubai and later at the Frieze Masters show in London last October, where, when discussing the ill treatment of Tanavoli's works in Tehran, they decided to stage a museum show. Though they only had four months to pull off the feat – “an unheard-of timeline,” Balaghi notes – the curators' resolve and acumen, along with Eisler's passion and drive combined for a major success. Though tour dates for the retrospective have yet to be scribbled into the curators' schedules, Fischman says that an accompanying book is in the works and for now, is thinking with relish about the exhibition's impact. “One can only imagine the massive ripple effect,” she says, “on students, faculty, scholars and the general public.” Her sentiment is echoed in Eisler's words: “It never surprises me to wonder that art is thicker than oil, its value more long lasting and its political, social and environmental effects much less hazardous. Art, I believe, can be in the service of our greater humanity; to civilise and socialise, but also to humanise.

The *Heech* series is the first to capture viewers' gazes: one is overwhelmed by the grandeur and magnificence of Tanavoli's towering, undulating figures. A giant, silver-toned *Heech I* first saw in Tanavoli's Tehran studio when I visited him there two years ago now stands in the concourse, surrounded by its counterparts in manifold variations. There are green and pink fibreglass

This spread:
Left: Installation view of the garden of *Heech* section.
Right: Installation view of the exhibition with *Fallen Farhad* (1967) in the foreground.



This page:
Installation view of *Heeches*
in different colours.

All images courtesy
Maryam Eisler.

Heeches, entwined lovers, *Heeches* above and below chairs, neon ones, *Heeches* daunting and diminutive; any form one likes, as long as it's *Heech*. With 2014 marking the 50th anniversary of the series, conceived in Tanavoli's Tehran studio in 1964, the decision to include so many of the sculptures is apt, fitting and on point. "It takes a village to make *Heech*," said Balaghi during dinner, quoting Tanavoli's daughter, Tandar, in reference to the love and support provided by his family throughout the years.

Elsewhere in the exhibition can be found Tanavoli's other sculptures, generously loaned to the museum by his many collectors in cities such as London, New York and San Francisco, public institutions (such as the British Museum and NYU's Grey Gallery), as well as the artist himself. Certain works in Iran, however, did not make it to the exhibition. "Sadly, we all share the disappointment of absent work locked in Iran, unavailable due to American sanctions," says Fischman regretfully. Fallen birds and towers in sumptuous bronze and characteristic Persian blue stand alongside gouache paintings from the heyday of the *saqqakhaneh* ('waterhouse') movement of the 1960s in Iran; Strange figures, unsettling and beautiful at once, stand on massive circular bases and smooth white plinths, looking like relics from another realm, embellished with hacked script reminiscent of Old Persian cuneiform and adorned with figures central

to Tanavoli's art – chairs, locks, hands and the like – as well as those rooted in history, such as paisley-shaped battle standards (*alam*). Of particular interest, however – as well as Tanavoli's personal favourite – is a writhing blue figure of the mythical Persian mason Farhad (known as the *kooch-kan*, the mountain cleaver), lover of the Armenian princess Shirin in the classic tale of *Khosrow And Shirin*, a character Tanavoli has long identified with, in addition to others, such as the poet. According to one pundit, the piece is so dear to Tanavoli that he carried the marvel (the only one to be encased in glass) personally on an airplane when he first brought it out of Iran.

THE ART OF SEQUENCE

Where curation and the arrangement of the works are concerned, the curators looked to Tanavoli for inspiration. As Fischman notes, Tanavoli's "visual lexicon" of symbols and motifs rooted in Iranian culture "occupying metaphorical borders" prompted her and Balaghi to arrange his work according to both chronology and theme; Tanavoli, perhaps, wouldn't have had it any other way. "[The art is] sometimes arranged in the same manner that he displays his art in his home," says Balaghi. And what of the artist's home? "Manijeh [Tanavoli's wife] and Tandar opened the doors onto a trove of treasures – it was spectacular!" Fischman recalls. "I laughed about

cleaning out the house – which, in fact, we did."

Sculptures aside, mixed media works such as the gouache-laden Qajar-era folios from the *Wonders Of The Universe* series, oil paintings and silk-screen prints of *Heeches* and Iranian symbols can be viewed in the rear corridor, as well as collections of jewellery and small design objects, a slew of Tanavoli's books about Iranian tribes and folk culture and recent publications about his various series. Balaghi and Fischman's curation here is organised, logical and aesthetically appealing and the fact that they were able to have everything prepared from scratch in only four months makes their achievement even more commendable.

Though this much-needed retrospective celebrates the *oeuvre* of a man, who is, in Fischman's eyes, "the greatest living Iranian artist", there is also another star here: at the heart of each and every one of Tanavoli's works is Iran. From references to mythical heroes, poetry and Persian spirituality, to folk and tribal aesthetics, national emblems, esoteric manuscripts and texts and the beauty of *nasta'liq* calligraphy, Tanavoli has, for over 50 years, transformed a love of his homeland into works of sublime beauty and wonder. And, as one would say in Persian, may he continue to do so for a hundred more. 🇮🇷

Parviz Tanavoli runs until 7 June. For more information visit www.wellesley.edu/davismuseum