

SHIFTING GAZES

Women Through Middle Eastern Eyes

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THE
FARJAM
FOUNDATION



Table of Contents

1. The Farjam Foundation	6
2. Foreword	
By Roxane Zand	8
3. Curatorial Essay	
Shifting Gazes: Women Through Middle Eastern Eyes	
By Amir Arvand	10
4. Exhibition Sections and Selected Artworks	
4.1. Identity and Visibility	12
4.2. Personal and Emotional Landscapes	24
4.3. Tradition, Modernity, and Cultural Memory	36
4.4. Social Commentary and Critique	56
5. Artist Biographies	74
6. References & Further Reading	78
7. Acknowledgments	79

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THE FARJAM FOUNDATION

The Farjam Foundation is a private, non-profit, and non-governmental organization. At the heart of its mission is a commitment to fostering cross-cultural dialogue through art and culture. This mission is embodied in its core asset, The Farjam Collection—a distinguished private collection that encompasses Islamic and pre-Islamic art, as well as Modern and Contemporary art from the Middle East and beyond.

The Foundation collaborates with local universities, museums, international institutions and other public entities, to promote cultural understanding through education and artistic exchange. It hosts guided tours and specialized programs for students and scholars, encouraging research and educational engagement with the Collection. Through its initiatives, the Foundation seeks to broaden global awareness and promote tolerance across cultures, using the arts as a platform for dialogue. All exhibitions and programs are non-political, free of charge, and open to the public.

Located in Dubai's DIFC, the Farjam Foundation's permanent space presents a rotating program of thematic exhibitions drawn from the Collection, accompanied by educational activations.

“ Shifting Gazes: Women Through Middle Eastern Eyes is dedicated to all the extraordinary women of the Middle East who continue to inspire, uplift, and sustain us, and who embody the spirit of our cultural legacy. ”

Farhad Jawad Farjam

FOREWORD

“The making of art is the act of uncovering what it is to be human, and in uncovering what it means to be human, the role of women in society is reflected and redefined.”

Judy Chicago

Long marginalized within the dominant narratives of art history, Middle Eastern women have, since the early twentieth century, steadily asserted their presence and agency within the region’s visual culture. While Egypt’s political and cultural modernism unfolded slightly ahead of its regional counterparts, catalyzed in part by its exposure to European avant-garde movements and a robust nationalist discourse, the wider Arab world and Iran soon followed. The role of periodicals such as *Habl al-Matin* was instrumental in shaping intellectual consciousness during Iran’s Constitutional Revolution, offering early platforms for discussions around gender, modernity, and national identity.

Within Qajar Iran, women had already emerged as figures of literary significance, initially as poets and essayists, with visual culture following suit more gradually. The transition from literary to visual self-representation among women artists unfolded within the larger framework of shifting societal norms and an evolving modern public sphere. Theoretical insights, notably Michel Foucault’s analysis of power and subjectivity, offer valuable frameworks for understanding this transformation.

Foucault posited that power is not merely repressive but also productive—it shapes subjects, even as it constrains them. This dual function is particularly significant when considering the gendered dynamics of visibility and voice. Similarly, Joseph Nye’s concept of soft power, although conceived in the realm of international relations, has been aptly appropriated in gender studies to articulate the nuanced, varied forms of influence historically available to women, such as using coercion as opposed to confrontation.

Historically, the male-dominated infrastructure of art institutions, patronage networks, and critical discourse contributed to the marginalization of women artists, many of whom were active even if without recognition in their lifetime. Yet the popularity of the female figure as subject—frequently idealized, eroticized, or allegorized—stood in marked contrast to the absence of women artists as autonomous creators. This paradox—of being seen yet unheard—remained a defining feature of pre-modern and early modern Middle Eastern art. Today, this imbalance is undergoing a profound recalibration.

Contemporary art across the region increasingly features women not merely as muses but as agents, challenging inherited visual tropes and reclaiming authorship. The exhibition *Shifting Gazes: Women through Middle Eastern Eyes* offers a compelling entry into this discourse. Culled from the Farjam Collection’s rich holdings of modern and contemporary art by its curator Amir Arvand, it foregrounds both historical evolution and the multiplicity of perspectives surrounding the representation of women.

What emerges from this selection of 27 works—14 of which are by male artists—is a sophisticated exploration of the ‘gaze’ in its many dimensions. Rather than prescribing definitive answers, the exhibition invites viewers into a polyphonic dialogue. It interrogates whether the gender of the artist inflects the visual language used to depict women: for example, are Nasser Ovissi’s voluptuous forms inherently gendered? Does Shirin Neshat’s *Faezeh* channel a female melancholy that can only be created by a female artist, or can male artists articulate similar emotional registers? And do artists like Shadi Ghadirian and Shirin Aliabadi utilize irony and satire in a way that is specifically feminine? The viewer is invited to speculate.

Arvand positions this exhibition not as a didactic narrative but as an open-ended inquiry—an intellectual and inviting space where contradictions and multiple truths are allowed to coexist. In this regard, Foucault’s notion of discursive formations becomes particularly apt: the works on display are not simply representations but interventions, acts of cultural production that reveal the contested nature of gender, modernity, and identity in Middle Eastern societies.

Ultimately, *Shifting Gazes* is not merely an exhibition about women; it is an exhibition through which a narrative lode runs like a pipeline of a vital, sustaining fuel to nourish ideas by and about women—artists, subjects, and viewers—all engaging in a shared negotiation of meaning. Its importance lies not only in recovering overlooked contributions but also in reshaping the methodological lens through which we approach art from the region.

By de-centering the male gaze and diversifying authorship, the exhibition reclaims the visual field as a site of agency, plurality, and transformation. In a world where visibility is the ultimate form of power, the ‘gaze’ on women is no longer exclusively mediated: it is now equally in the hands of women themselves.

Roxane Zand April 12, 2025

Shifting Gazes: Women Through Middle Eastern Eyes

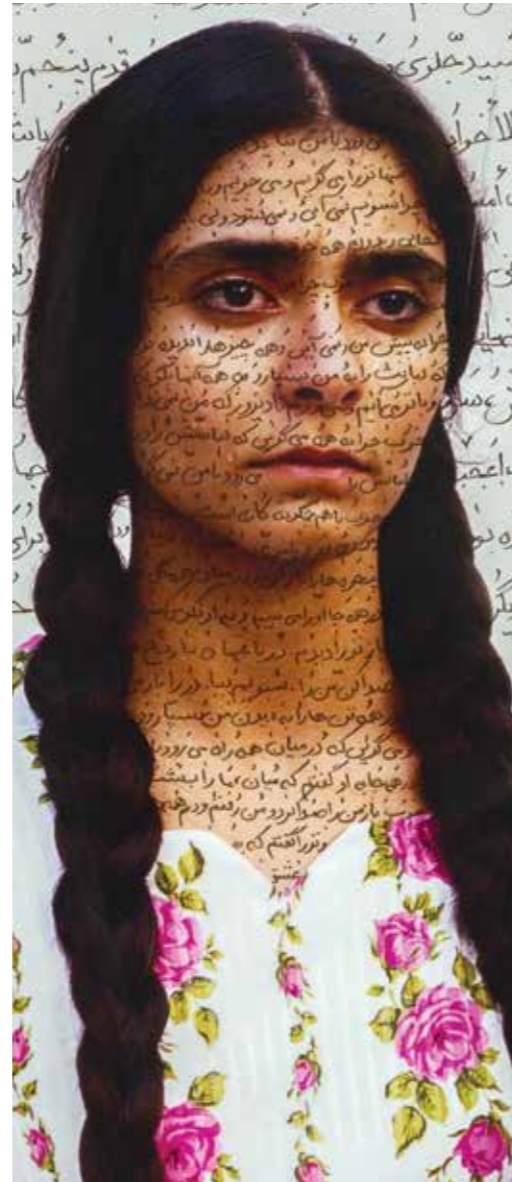
Over the past century, the image of the woman in Middle Eastern art has traversed a terrain as intricate and layered as the region itself—moving between reverence and resistance, presence and erasure, archetype and individual. *Shifting Gazes: Women Through Middle Eastern Eyes* brings together twenty-seven works from The Farjam Collection to explore how artists across geographies, generations, and ideologies have interpreted, questioned, and reimagined the female figure—not solely as subject, but as metaphor, mirror, and disruptor of cultural narratives.

In shaping *Shifting Gazes*, I found myself not only curating an exhibition but also navigating a constellation of visual inquiries—each work extending a question, each artist offering a reflection. What does it mean to see, to be seen, or to resist being seen altogether? And how has the figure of the woman been asked to carry the symbolic weight of cultural heritage, personal longing, and political thought in Middle Eastern art?

This exhibition highlights plurality and diversity of perspectives. It brings into dialogue both male and female artists - from the sculptural modernism of Mahmoud Mokhtar and Jewad Selim to the conceptual interventions of Shirin Neshat and the digital allegories of Siamak Filizadeh. What emerges is a kaleidoscopic and often paradoxical portrayal of femininity: veiled and visible, romanticized and resistant, maternal and mythic, stylized and subversive.

The show is divided into 4 separate yet interrelated sections. In a world where the manifestation of identity permeates all aspects of cultural currency, the first section entitled *Identity and Visibility*, explores works by Shirin Aliabadi, Samira Alikhazadeh, and Afsoon explore how women are seen—and how they see themselves. Whether through performative portraiture, mirrored reflection, archival montage, or pop-cultural critique, these artists address the politics of image-making and the negotiation of female agency in the public eye. Women are placed within readily identifiable cultural iconographies as a subset of their own context, in turn shedding light on the context itself.

Personal and Emotional Landscapes invites viewers into more intimate terrains of memory, longing, and psychological depth. Shahram Karimi's *Umm Kulthum* and Naeemeh Kazemi's *La La Land* paintings map a cartography of inner lives—where personal symbolism, loss, fantasy, and resilience reside. Kazemi, in particular, offers richly layered visual poetics drawn from her own isolation and imaginative retreat during lockdown, speaking to universal themes of female self-making. Beyond the known and assumed subject-matter, each artist offers a form of 'self-portrait' where even a male who depicts a female is conveying something about himself and male perception.



In the third part, *Tradition, Modernity, and Cultural Memory*, artists such as Shadi Ghadirian, and Nasser Ovissi reconfigure inherited forms to speak to contemporary concerns. Ghadirian's Qajar-inspired photographs pair antique aesthetics with pop culture objects, while Ovissi's gilded maternal icons evoke the eternal feminine, reimagined for modern sensibilities. Sculptural works by Mokhtar, paintings by Parviz Tanavoli and Fahr El-Nissa Zeid enter this conversation by anchoring femininity within historical, mythological, and spiritual frameworks. The viewer is invited to observe the hand of time in shaping our perceptions.

Social Commentary and Critique reflects an urgent concern for post-modern and contemporary artists, platforming voices that wield irony, satire, and bold confrontation. Bita Fayyazi's grotesque papier-mâché figures, Farah Al Qasimi's meticulously staged interiors, and Khosrow Hassanzadeh's empathetic urban heroines expose tensions beneath the everyday—class, censorship, and cultural contradiction. These works act as quiet interventions, inscribed with codes of dissent and humor. Whether by implication or through coded images, the viewer is asked to consider the female predicament in all its dimensions, often provoking questions rather than serving up answers.



What binds these distinct works is not only their portrayal of women, but their engagement with the very nature of the gaze. These are not static representations; they are acts of looking, refracted through regional, political, and psychological lenses. At times, they echo the aesthetics of Orientalism—only to subvert them from within. At other times, they reject such framing altogether, positioning the female subject not as object, but as originator of meaning and as force of culture.

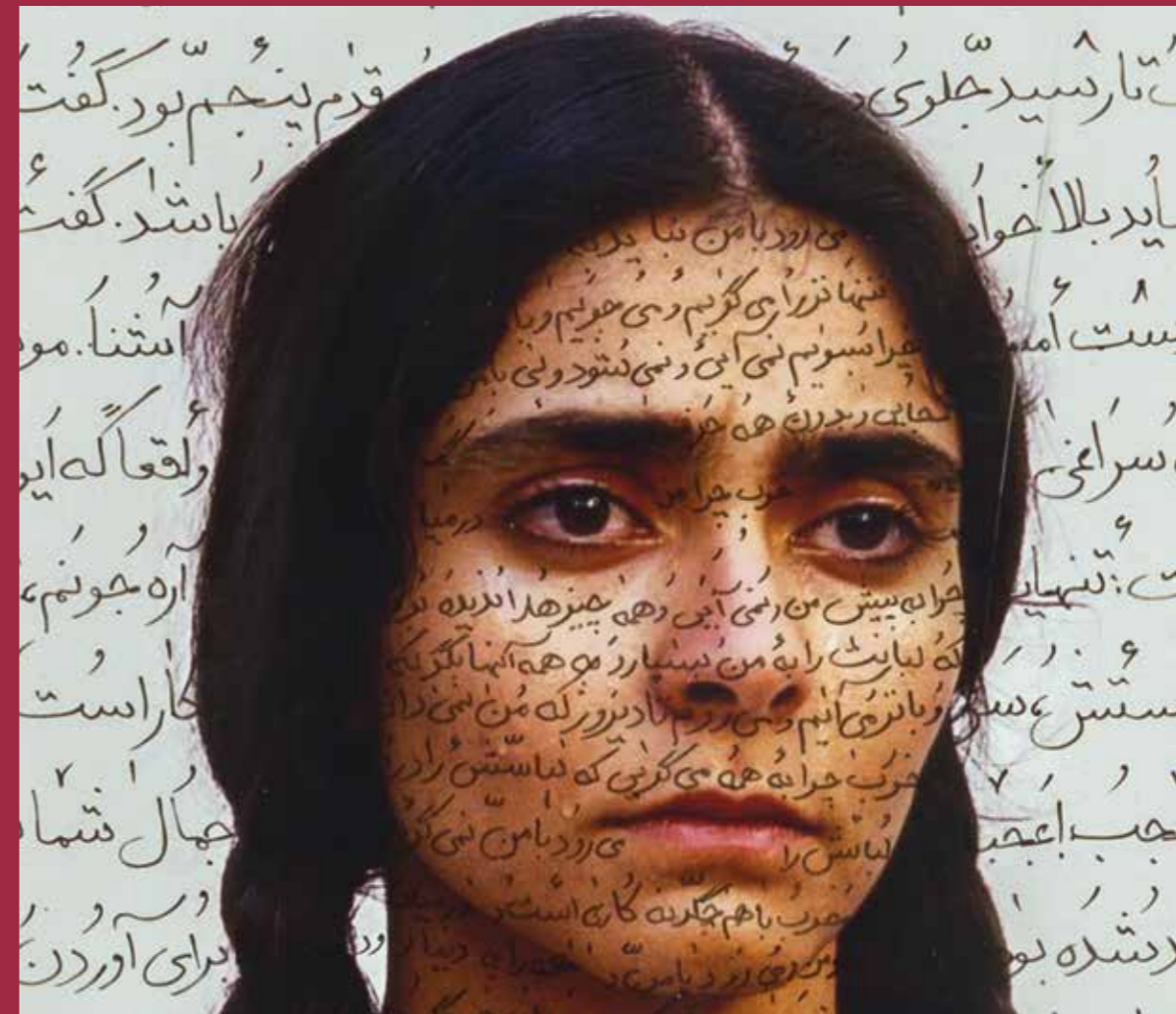
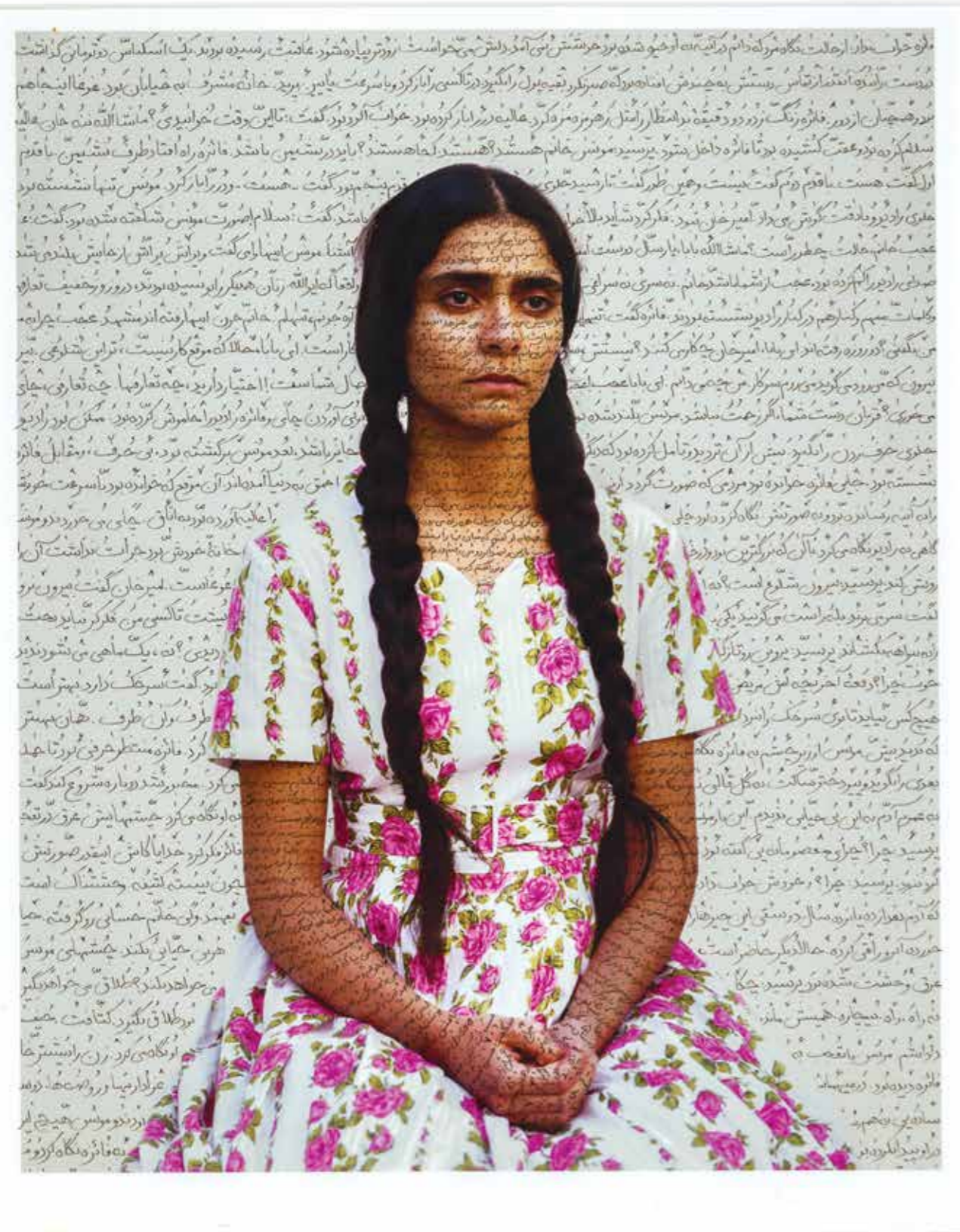
Ultimately, *Shifting Gazes* is not simply an exhibition about women—it is an exhibition shaped by them, informed by their voices, and charged with the complexities of how they are seen and how they see themselves. It offers a visual archive of shifting identities, legacies, and enduring archetypes. It asks: Who is looking? Who is being seen? And how do we understand the politics of that gaze in art, in history, and in the present? In doing so, it transforms the gallery above all into a space of reflection.

Amir Arvand

IDENTITY AND VISIBILITY

In this section, artists interrogate the complexities surrounding female identity and visibility within Middle Eastern societies. Through various mediums and artistic practices, they challenge and dissect personal and societal perceptions, highlighting the intricacies of how identities are constructed and represented. These artworks reflect on notions of self, heritage, and the shifting roles women inhabit, offering viewers profound insights into both private and public realms of female existence.





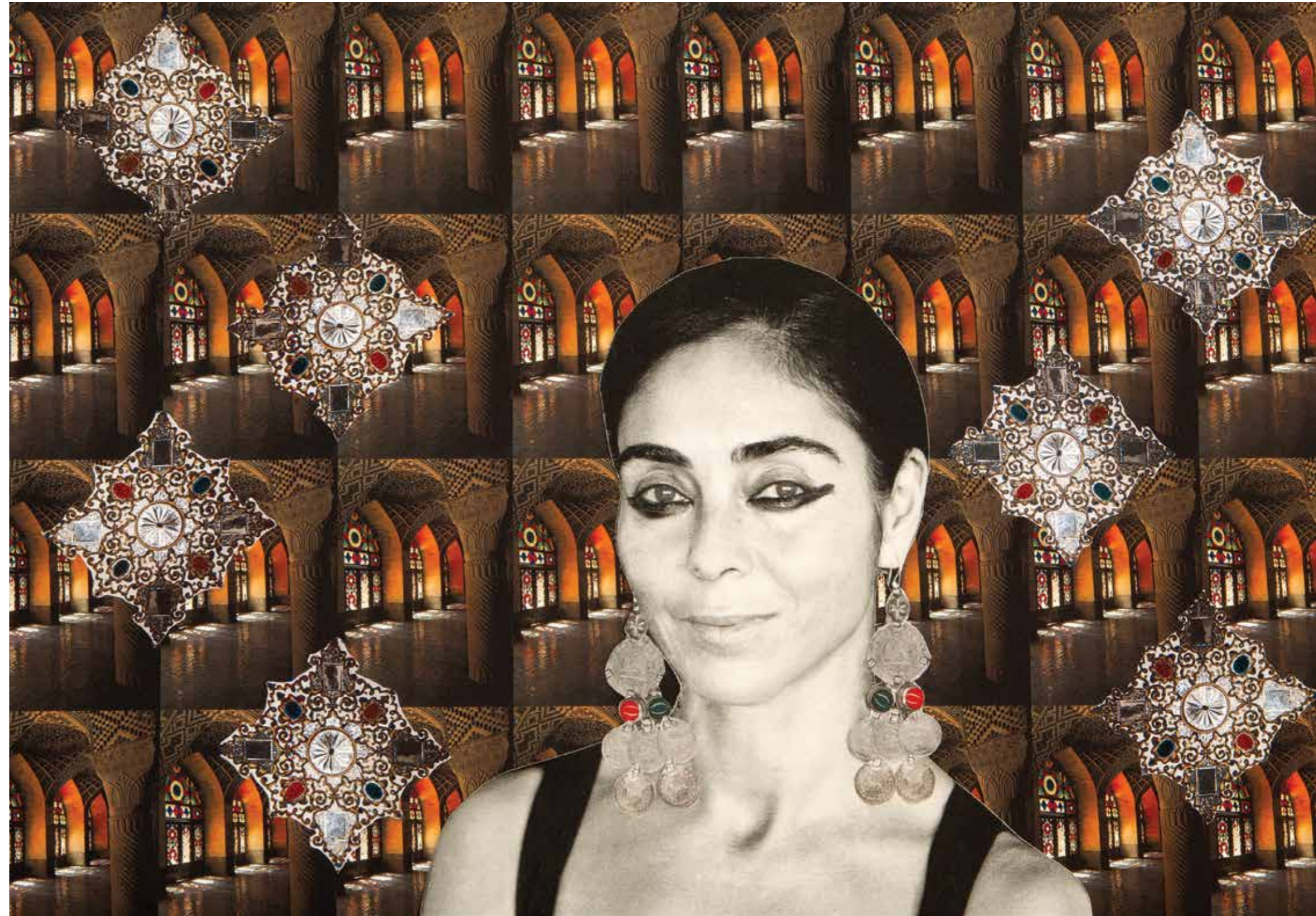
Faezeh, 2008
 Shirin Neshat (Iran, b. 1957)
 Ink on silver gelatin print; 36 x 25 cm
 Provenance: Berardi & Sagharchi Projects, London, 2008

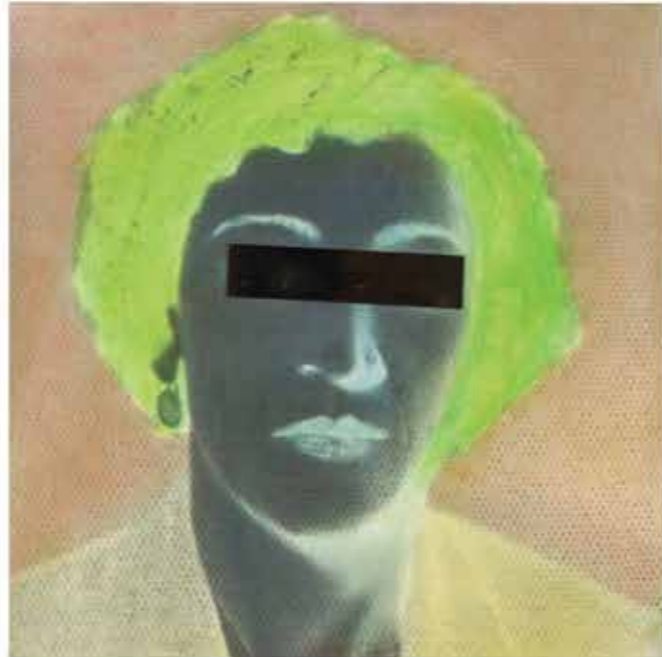
In Faezeh, Shirin Neshat employs her iconic style of overlaying poetic calligraphy onto photographic portraits, creating powerful intersections of visual beauty and textual meaning. The work presents a solitary female figure whose gaze—contemplative and distant—reflects an inner dialogue between silence and voice, visibility and concealment. Her body and the space surrounding her are covered with intricate Persian script, enveloping her in layers of language and metaphor. Known for her deeply poetic yet politically charged approach, Neshat frequently explores themes of identity, femininity, exile, and power dynamics within Iranian society. The textual elements drawn from Persian literature, poetry, or personal writings serve both as protective veils and declarations, transforming the depicted woman's vulnerability into strength. Faezeh embodies this duality, where words become both armor and revelation, encapsulating the paradoxes faced by contemporary Iranian women. This visually arresting image situates viewers in an intimate encounter with narratives of cultural memory and personal resilience, inviting deep reflection on the complex and often conflicted realities of women in modern Iran.

Shirin (from the Fairytale Icons series), 2010
Afsoon (Iranian, b. 1961)
Printed paper collage on paper; 59 × 41 cm.
Provenance: LTMH Gallery, New York.

Afsoon's collage *Shirin* is an homage to the renowned Iranian artist Shirin Neshat, whose iconic presence and portraiture is central to the composition. Rendered in black and white, Neshat is set against a richly layered backdrop of repeating photographs of the interior of the historic Nasir-Ol Molk Mosque in Shiraz—its glowing arches and stained-glass windows evoking the grandeur of traditional Iranian architecture, with the artist being juxtaposed against the glorious mosque and likened to a significant aspect of Iranian heritage. Interspersed throughout are mirrored motifs reminiscent of decorative elements found in Qajar-era houses of Shiraz, forming a visual rhythm that bridges sacred space and domestic heritage.

Unlike Afsoon's other works that incorporate textual or calligraphic fragments, this piece forgoes script entirely, focusing instead on the language of pattern, repetition, and symbolism. The absence of text gives greater weight to visual form, highlighting the cultural and architectural motifs. The resulting composition celebrates Shirin Neshat not only as a figure of artistic significance but also as a symbol of enduring femininity within Iranian visual culture. Shirin becomes both portrait and cultural mirror, reflecting how Iranian women construct identity amid echoes of tradition and creative agency.





Untitled, 2008
Samira Alikhanzadeh (Iran, b. 1967)
Acrylic and mirror fragments on printed board, in nine parts; Each 50 × 50 cm
Provenance: Assar Art Gallery, Tehran

Samira Alikhanzadeh's *Untitled* installation consists of nine juxtaposed panels that merge vintage portrait photography with contemporary mixed media. In each panel, an old photograph of an Iranian woman is overlaid with shimmering mirror fragments that reflect the viewer and merge their image with the past. By "combining little mirror fragments with found portraits" Alikhanzadeh blurs the line between past and present. As we gaze, our own face appears in pieces among the ghostly visages of women from decades ago, making us part of the tableau.

Alikhanzadeh, a Tehran-based artist, is known for exploring female identity and collective memory in Iranian society. Here she creates a dialogue across generations: the viewer momentarily becomes part of the artwork and the bygone world it depicts. Culturally, the piece suggests a continuity of Iranian women's experiences across time, inviting reflection on how the past still shapes the present.

City Girl 5, 2007

Shirin Aliabadi (Iran, 1973–2018)

Lambda print mounted on aluminum in artist's frame; 100 × 150 cm

Provenance: Acquired directly from the Artist

Description:

In *City Girl 5*, Shirin Aliabadi playfully but incisively dissects contemporary Iranian youth culture, focusing particularly on the nuanced identity of urban women. Depicting a young woman leaning casually on a vividly colored motorcycle, wearing an audacious blonde wig under her loosely draped violet headscarf, Aliabadi captures the subtle tension between tradition and rebellion. The deliberate juxtaposition of glamorous western aesthetics—a tiara, dramatic makeup, and tattoos—with the culturally significant symbol of the veil comments wittily on how Iranian youth negotiate identity, self-expression, and societal expectations. Aliabadi's practice often centered around themes of pop culture, beauty standards, and everyday forms of resistance in Tehran's vibrant yet conflicted urban landscape. With humor and bold visual clarity, her works illuminate the complexities of living between multiple cultural influences—simultaneously asserting independence while navigating traditional values. Through *City Girl 5*, Aliabadi provides an unflinching look at the paradoxes and aspirations of a new generation of Iranian women, caught between local heritage and global modernity.





Untitled, 2007

Ahmad Morshedloo (Iranian, b. 1973)

Oil and pencil on paper; 119.4 x 89 cm

Provenance: Assar Art Gallery, Tehran

This large mixed-media drawing by Ahmad Morshedloo offers a window into everyday life in Iran through the artist's keenly observant eye. Morshedloo frequently documents ordinary people and domestic scenes with empathetic realism, and in this 2007 untitled work he combines pencil drawing with oil washes to achieve both precision and atmosphere. The composition likely features a group of figures in an interior setting—a family gathering or a quiet moment at home—rendered in meticulous detail. One can imagine individual faces and postures captured with the sincerity and humanity that characterize Morshedloo's art. At the same time, the addition of oil paint adds depth: soft shadows, muted colors, or perhaps a single bold hue draws the eye, elevating the scene's emotional resonance. Morshedloo (born 1973) is part of the younger generation of Iranian artists who tackle social themes subtly: gender roles, generational dynamics, or the textures of daily existence emerge organically from his portrayals of the "everyday populace".

PERSONAL AND EMOTIONAL LANDSCAPES

This section focuses on deeply introspective artworks, emphasizing emotional nuance, personal experiences, and psychological explorations. Artists here represent women's inner worlds, dreams, vulnerabilities, and strengths. These intimate portrayals reveal the emotional complexities of womanhood, inviting viewers to engage empathetically and profoundly with the narratives presented, thus bridging the gap between personal and universal experiences.



When Meeting The Man, 1929

Mahmoud Mokhtar (Egyptian, 1891–1934)

Bronze sculpture; 44 cm high

Provenance: Dr. Mohammed Said Farsi Collection, Jeddah; Christie's Dubai (2008)

Sculptor Mahmoud Mokhtar was a pioneer of modern Egyptian art, famed for sculpting Egypt's national pride in stone and bronze. His works often personify Egypt as a peasant woman (fellaha) in classical form, symbolizing the nation's awakening. *When Meeting The Man* is a compact bronze from 1929 that likely depicts a veiled Egyptian woman in a moment of encounter.

The figure's drapery is rendered with Mokhtar's signature blend of Pharaonic solidity and graceful modern stylization. Her body is heavily shrouded, evoking both ancient funerary statues and the contemporary realities of village life. Mokhtar imbued such figures with rich symbolism: the female peasant represents Egypt itself, and her act of unveiling (suggested by the title) stands for social progress and female emancipation.

Though small in scale, this sculpture carries monumental meaning. Mokhtar marries the timeless and the modern – using the visual language of antiquity (dignified pose, simplified form) to convey a forward-looking nationalist message. As with his famous *Egypt Awakening* monument, the artist here bridges past and future, depicting Egypt meeting “the man” of modernity while honoring her heritage.





Marionette, 1980

Marwan Kassab-Bachi ("Marwan") (Syrian, 1934–2016)

Oil with acrylic, glitter and pigment on canvas; 162.5 × 129.5 cm.

Provenance: Christie's Dubai sale 7935, Lot 37 (April 2014).

Syrian modernist Marwan Kassab-Bachi's *Marionette* is a large, haunting canvas that presents a lone female doll as its central subject. The "marionette" sits in the middle of a dark, indeterminate space, her body limp and postured in a way that suggests both exhaustion and acquiescence – a puppet whose strings have been cut. Marwan's brushwork, influenced by German Expressionism, builds the figure out of layered, emotive strokes: the doll's round face is rendered with bold, almost distorted features, and her small black eyes stare out blankly.

She wears make-up and colorful clothes – perhaps a frilly dress – accented by actual glitter on the canvas that makes her attire sparkle. Yet this gaiety is deeply ironic; as one contemporary described, "the doll has her makeup and bright clothes on, but her gaze is empty. All the games played with her have left marks on the outside of her body, captured in the rich texture of his work". Indeed, Marwan's *Marionette* is laden with psychological and political subtext. Created during his long exile in Europe, the work uses the doll as a surrogate for the artist's own feelings of powerlessness and displacement—"the emotions of the Arab street in the early 80s" projected onto a figure "that never left him since he wandered outside of his native country".

At the same time, in the context of portraying women, the marionette can be seen as an image of a woman (or perhaps all women) as an object controlled and manipulated by external forces. She has "no soul and no depth" of her own, yet into her painted form Marwan pours a universe of emotion. The dramatic contrast of light and dark – her illuminated, rose-tinged form against a nearly black background – draws our attention to her forlorn face and stiff limbs. Despite her empty stare, there is a hint of a "slight smirk" at the corner of her mouth, introducing ambiguity: is the puppet truly passive, or does she conceal an inner life unbeknownst to her puppeteers?

Marionette thus operates on multiple levels. It is a masterful study of color and texture – layers of oil paint scraped and built up, with flashes of unexpected glitter – and a profound commentary on the loss of agency. For this exhibition, the painting's significance is twofold: it highlights how women (like this feminized doll) have often been rendered voiceless in art and politics, and it symbolizes a broader colonial/postcolonial dynamic in which Middle Eastern subjects were treated as voiceless dolls by outside powers. Marwan's *Marionette* compels the viewer to confront the humanity in even the most "controlled" of figures, making it an unforgettable portrait of pathos and resilience.

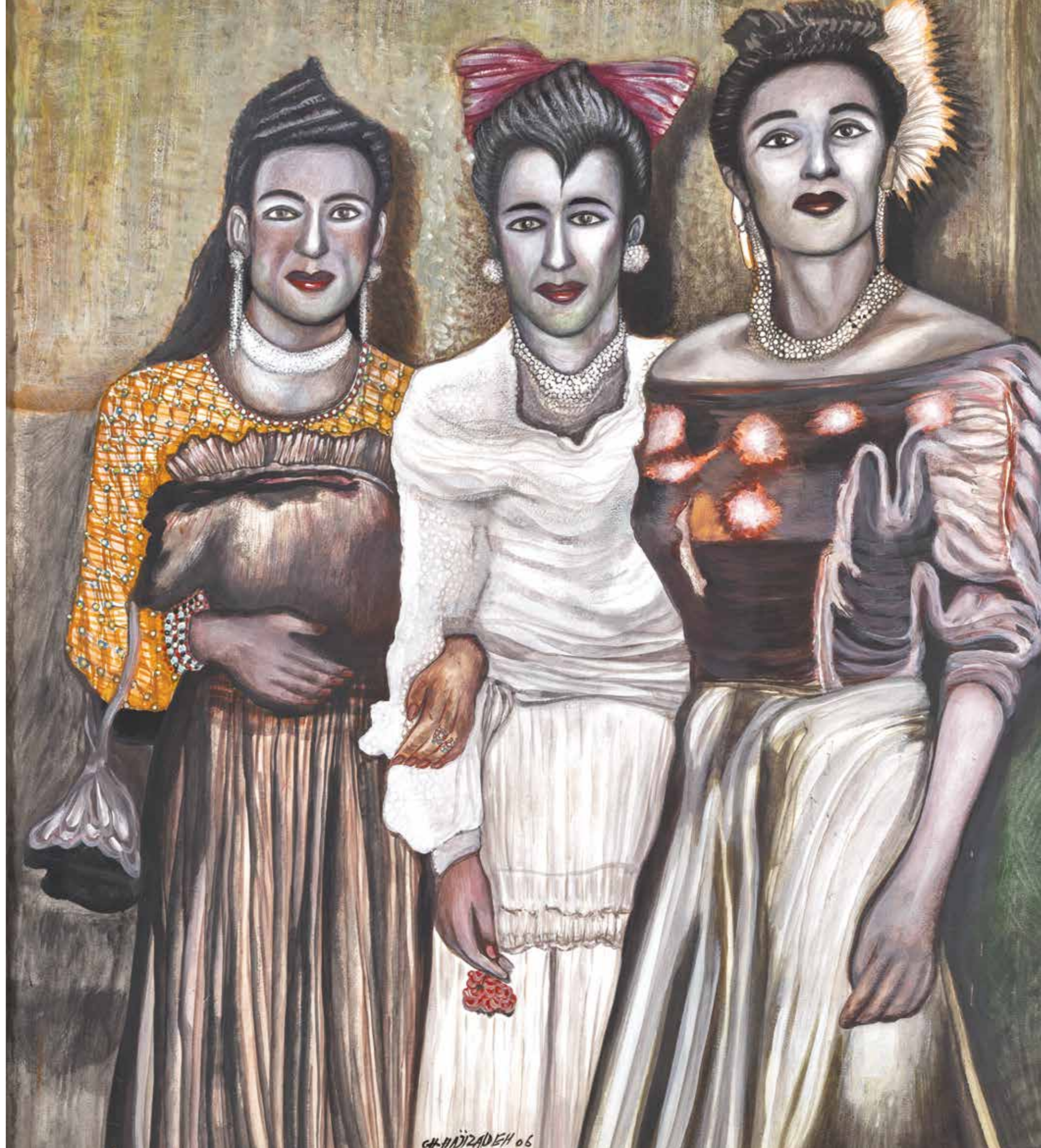
Untitled, 2006

Ghassem Hajizadeh (Iran, b. 1947)

Oil and pastel on paper laid on board; 90 x 81.5 cm

Provenance: Berardi & Sagharchi Projects, London, 2008

In this evocative, untitled painting, Iranian artist Ghassem Hajizadeh captures three elegantly dressed women, rendered with expressive brushstrokes and rich textures that blend oil paint and pastel. Evoking vintage portraiture and nostalgia, the composition simultaneously celebrates and subtly critiques the aesthetics of mid-20th-century Iranian glamour. Hajizadeh's distinctive style, characterized by elongated forms, exaggerated proportions, and pronounced expressions, lends the painting a heightened emotional intensity. Each woman's expression invites interpretation—poised between strength, vulnerability, and a profound sense of collective solidarity. By juxtaposing elaborate attire and stylized beauty with a muted, ambiguous backdrop, Hajizadeh invokes themes of memory, identity, and the complexities of historical representation. Throughout his career, Hajizadeh has explored Iranian cultural history through personal and collective lenses. Here, his nuanced portrayal of femininity quietly challenges and redefines traditional narratives, offering a layered meditation on the intertwining of personal memory, cultural heritage, and female agency.



Untitled (La La Land Series), 2023
Naeemeh Kazemi (Iranian, b. 1981)
Oil on canvas; 258 x 160 cm
Provenance: LTMH Gallery, New York

A female figure is entwined with corals and fish, submerged on the ocean floor; a face emerges and reveals a self-portrait in this complex work. An unusual busyness compels the viewer to search again and again, each time discovering something new... This composition, which is arguably the most complete and important piece from Kazemi's La La Land series, is not merely an aesthetic piece, but a visual document of "a woman's power to respond in a state of crisis."

In the La La Land series, which comprises more than 40 paintings, we encounter faces—often with anxious gazes staring beyond the frame—hidden among whimsical branches, trees, and flowers in the land of La La. The series took shape precisely at a time when Iran was grappling with its most severe social crises and political sanctions—just as COVID and the quarantine era arrived. All doors were locked, all windows sealed.

In this work, Kazemi depicts herself lying so heavily and silently on the ocean floor that she seems to be part of the earth itself, as if she has reached coexistence and kinship with it, fusing herself to it in an eternal way. Her body appears as fertile ground for growth and rooting in the world of imagination. This autobiographical work goes beyond personal boundaries and becomes a collective portrait of people who, in order to survive in a vile world, create a new one for themselves.

With a brush dipped in vibrant colours from the depths of her inner chaos, Kazemi paints her own narrative and renders the internalised La La Land—until suddenly her mind ignites with the spark of Bubble Land—a prelude to her next series of 'imagined lands', where all the external chaos is projected from her own safe space, deep in the ocean.





The Wall, 2006

Shahzad Changalvae (Iran, b. 1983)

C-print photograph on paper mounted on board; 84 x 58.3 cm

Provenance: Berardi & Sagharci Projects, London, 2008

In *The Wall*, Shahzad Changalvae utilizes compelling photographic composition to evoke themes of confinement, resistance, and the struggle for personal freedom. The starkly dramatic image portrays a woman tightly enclosed behind a translucent barrier marked by bold Persian calligraphy, creating a poignant visual metaphor for cultural, social, and psychological constraints. Changalvae's artistic approach combines photographic realism with symbolic abstraction, drawing viewers' attention to the tension between visibility and concealment. The figure's raised hand, pressed urgently against the transparent "wall," evokes an ambiguous gesture of defiance, surrender, or plea—capturing the internal and external conflicts faced by women within restrictive environments. The calligraphic element—visually lyrical yet thematically oppressive—highlights how cultural traditions can simultaneously nourish and restrain individual identity. With its powerful narrative and aesthetic clarity, Changalvae's *The Wall* invites contemplation of the invisible barriers faced by women in contemporary society, prompting a deeper dialogue on freedom, identity, and autonomy.

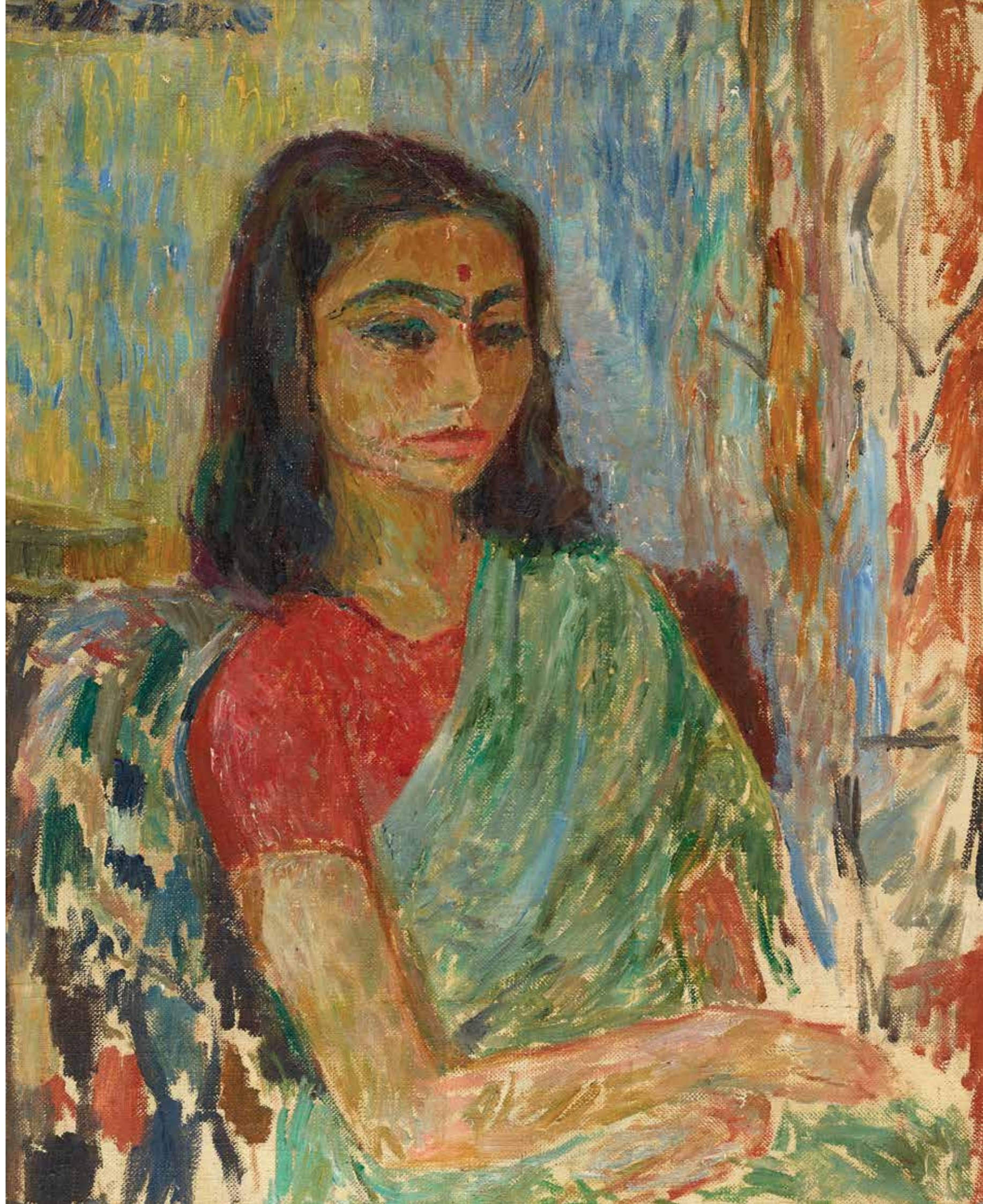


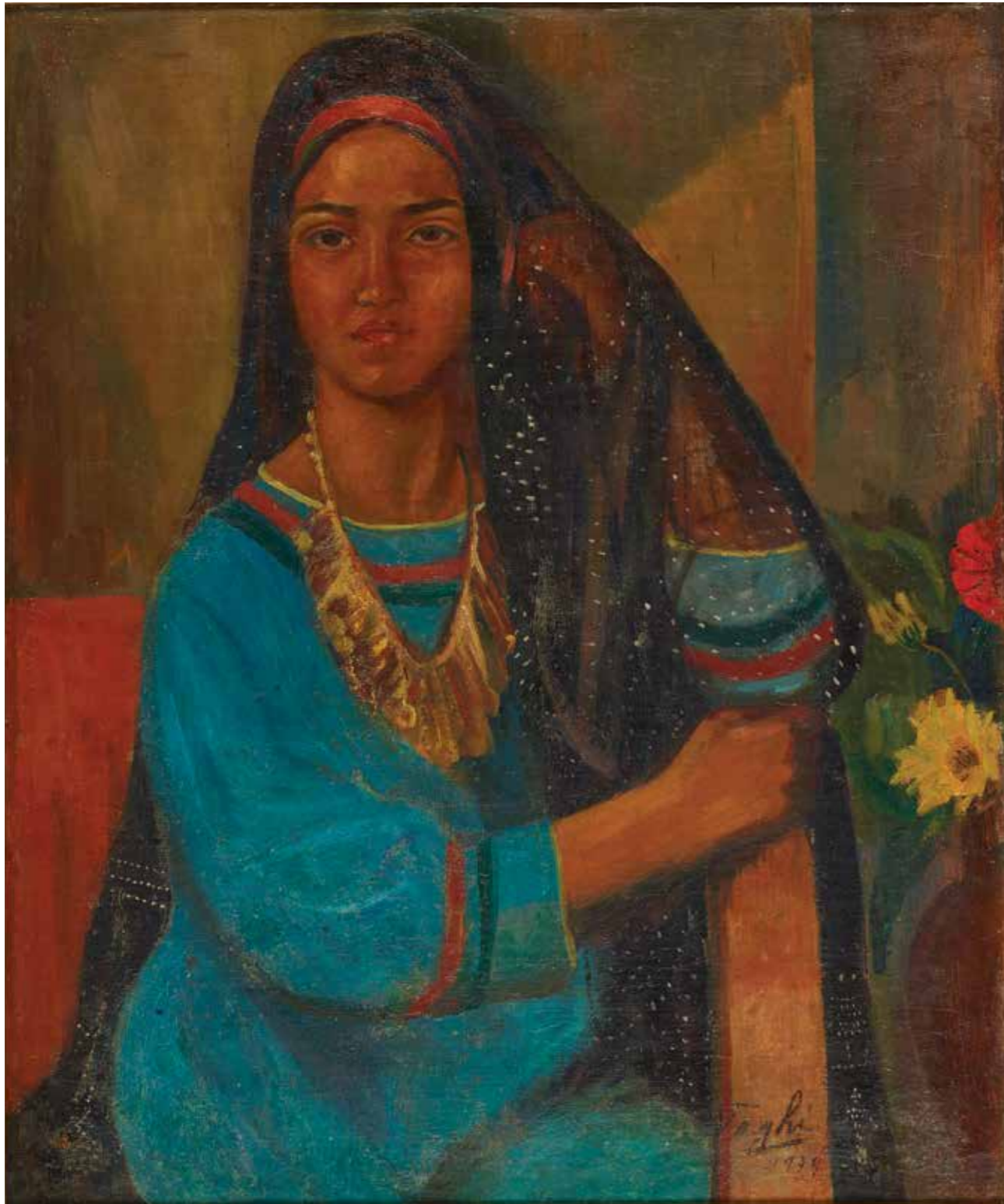
TRADITION, MODERNITY, AND CULTURAL MEMORY

Bridging past and present, this section brings together works that reimagine femininity through the lens of heritage, ritual, and myth. Here, artists adopt, reinterpret, or subvert traditional forms—from Qajar photography and Islamic motifs to modernist sculpture—offering new ways of engaging with gendered cultural memory. The viewer is invited to question the ways in which perception of women have evolved and 'shifted' from traditional constructs to contemporary discourses.

Nalini, 1949
Jewad Selim (Iraqi, 1919–1961)
Oil on canvas; 56 x 46 cm
Provenance: Bonham's London, 8 April 2014, lot 412A

Jewad Selim's *Nalini* is a sensitive portrait born from a cosmopolitan encounter in postwar London. The subject, Mrinalini Sarabhai, was a celebrated Indian classical dancer who performed in London's West End in 1949. Selim—an influential Iraqi artist studying in London at the time—met Mrinalini during her visit and painted her with a demure yet empathetic air. The portrait's loose, expressive brushwork and soft, earthy palette reflect the influence of European post-Impressionists like Cézanne and Toulouse-Lautrec on Selim's style. Broad, linear strokes define the figure with minimal detail, favoring contour and mood over realism. Mrinalini is depicted in a moment of quiet repose, her gaze turned inward, recalling the introspective portraits of Parisian performers by Lautrec. At the same time, Selim imbues the canvas with warmth and dignity, influenced by his Middle Eastern artistic roots. One of the founders of modern art in Iraq, Selim is best known for monumental sculptures like the Freedom Monument in Baghdad; yet this intimate painting highlights his gift for cross-cultural portraiture and the global reach of modernism in the mid-20th century.





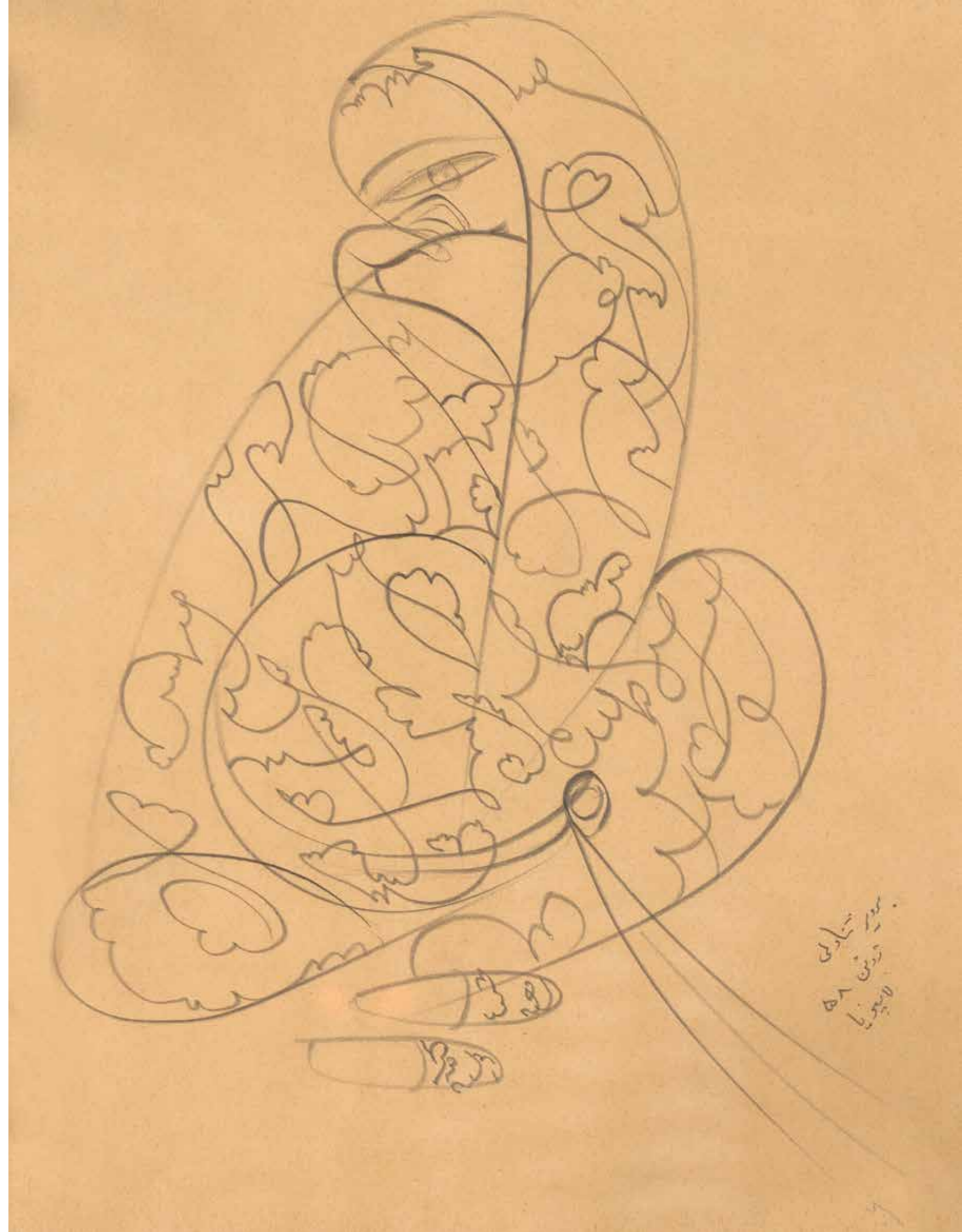
Daughter Of Abd-El Rassoul, 1939
Mohamed Naghi (Egypt, 1888–1956)
Oil on canvas; 64 x 53.5 cm
Provenance: Bonham's, London, 2 June 2010, lot 45

Description:

Mohamed Naghi, one of the pioneers of modern Egyptian painting, blends academic discipline with a deep sensitivity to national identity in *Daughter Of Abd-El Rassoul*. Created in 1939, this portrait stands as a refined tribute to the enduring strength and dignity of Egyptian womanhood. The title evokes a historical lineage—the Abd-El Rassoul family of Luxor, known as guardians of ancient tombs—casting the figure not merely as an individual, but as an heir to Egypt's mythic past. Painted in subdued, earthy tones, the subject's calm expression and assured gaze defy the tropes of exoticism often projected onto Middle Eastern women in early 20th-century art. Naghi's compositional restraint allows the sitter's quiet presence to assert itself with commanding subtlety. Through this portrait, he reclaims and elevates the image of the Arab woman, not as muse or mystery, but as a custodian of cultural continuity. A modernist deeply invested in Egypt's heritage, Naghi gives us here a painting that is both personal and monumental—one that bridges antiquity and modernity, reverence and realism.

Woman in Veil, 1958
Parviz Tanavoli (Iranian, b. 1937)
Pencil on paper; 27.7 x 21.5 cm
Provenance: Hoor Art Gallery, Tehran

This delicate drawing is an early work by Parviz Tanavoli, who would later become Iran's most renowned modern sculptor. Sketched in 1958 while Tanavoli was still a young art student, *Woman in Veil* portrays a seated female figure cloaked in a traditional Iranian veil (chador). The pencil lines are soft and economical, yet they capture the essence of the woman's form and the gentle folds of her garment. There is a quiet dignity to the figure's pose—her hands seem to rest in her lap and her downcast face is partially obscured by the veil. In this straightforward study, one can sense Tanavoli's interest in merging tradition with modern art. The subject reflects a timeless aspect of Iranian culture, while the minimalist execution hints at the modernist reduction Tanavoli would later apply in his sculptures. Tanavoli went on to become a pioneer of the Saqqakhaneh school—a neo-traditionalist art movement reimagining folk and religious motifs in contemporary forms. Though modest in scale, *Woman in Veil* foreshadows the artist's enduring engagement with cultural identity and spirituality, themes that would come to define his career.



The Earth Mother, circa late 1930s
Fahrelnissa Zeid (Turkish, 1901–1991)
Mixed media on cardboard, framed; 55 x 45 cm
Provenance: Bonhams, London, Sale 26663, Lot 9, 2021

This early drawing by Princess Fahrelnissa Zeid captures a vivid memory from her travels in Iraq in the late 1930s. Zeid, a Turkish modernist and one of the first female abstract artists in the Middle East, portrays a veiled woman balancing a pyramid of pots on her head against a distant desert horizon. The scene—inspired by rural women she observed carrying yoghurt pots at dawn—profoundly influenced Zeid’s later turn towards abstraction. In *The Earth Mother*, Zeid’s sharp, energetic lines swirl and criss-cross the paper, leaving bright ellipses of light that create depth in the figures’ flowing robes. The central female form, monumental and timeless, symbolizes fertility and the continuity of life, echoing the work’s title. Zeid merges two worlds in this composition: the spiritual atmosphere of a holy city’s skyline in the background and the earthy presence of the peasant woman in the foreground. This fusion of the tangible and the abstract foreshadows Zeid’s mature style, in which Middle Eastern motifs became catalysts for modernist expression.



Untitled, undated (c. 1970s)
Nasser Ovissi (Iranian, b. 1934)
Gold and silver leaf and acrylic on ceramic; Diameter 50 cm
Provenance: Acquired directly from the Artist

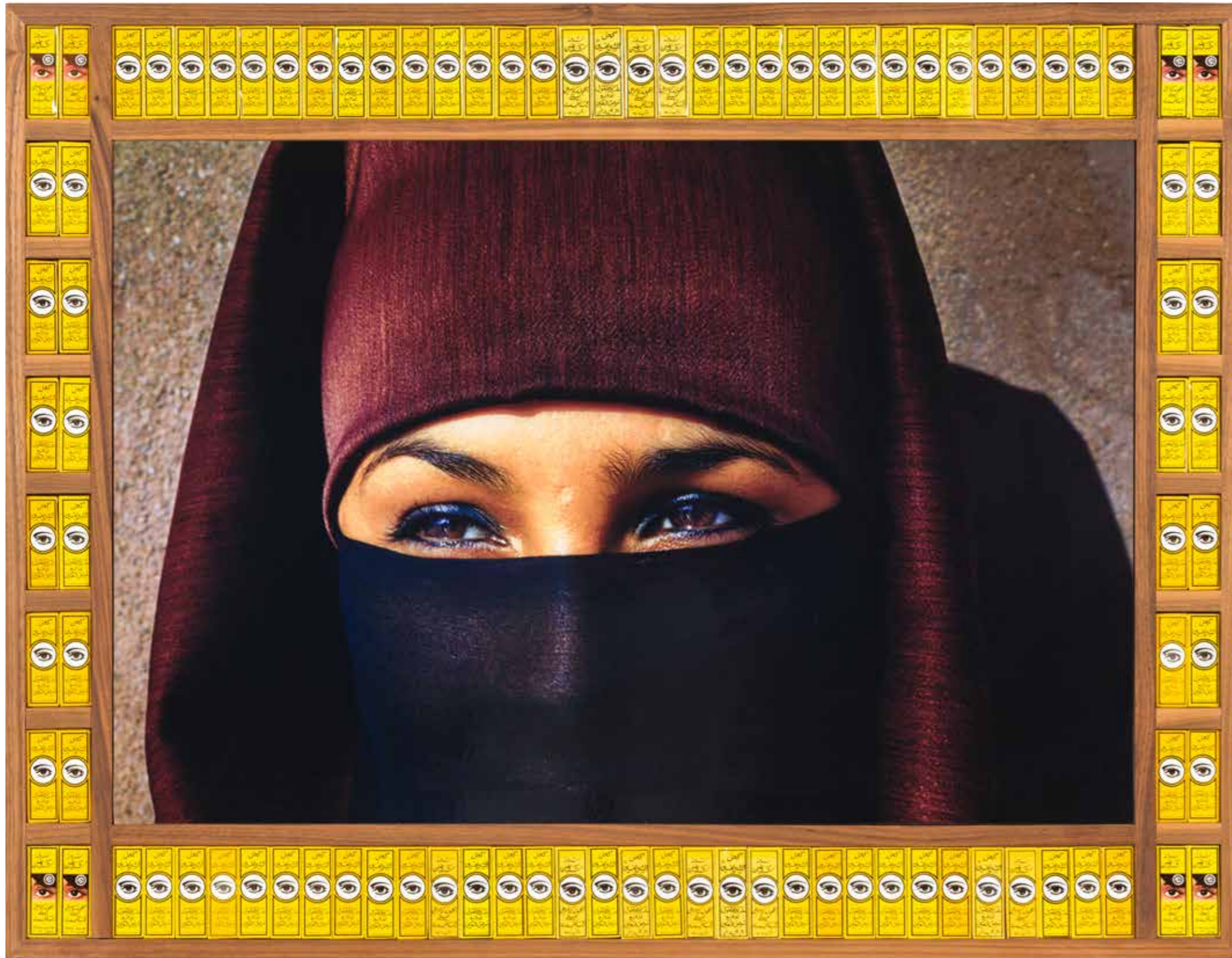
Iranian artist Nasser Ovissi is renowned for his opulent fusion of stylized traditional Persian imagery with contemporary art techniques. This decorative ceramic plate exemplifies Ovissi's graphic yet lavish style: the surface is adorned with 22-karat gold and silver leaf alongside acrylic paint, creating a shimmering tapestry of color and metallic gleam. Though untitled, the piece is far more than a functional object—it becomes a vibrant tableau in which the central female figure, seated atop a horse and strumming a lute, embodies grace, sensuality, and mythic resonance. The woman's elongated form and serene expression reflect Ovissi's recurring fascination with femininity as both poetic ideal and cultural symbol. Her presence evokes the women of Persian miniature painting—noble, adorned, and timeless—reinterpreted here through a modern visual language. By choosing a plate as his medium, Ovissi links his expression to centuries-old Iranian ceramic traditions, referencing the famous blue pottery of Kashan. The interplay of gold and silver detailing with bold acrylic gestures blends the grandeur of Safavid ornamentation with a contemporary painter's hand. The result is a radiant celebration of female presence in Persian art history—an artistic homage to beauty, heritage, and enduring identity.





Mother and Baby, undated (mid-20th century)
Nasser Ovissi (Iranian, b. 1934)
Oil and 22k gold on canvas; 51 x 41 cm
Provenance: Acquired directly from the Artist

In *Mother and Baby*, Nasser Ovissi turns to the universal theme of 'Madonna and Child' or maternal love, infusing it with his distinctive Persian flair. The painting portrays a mother tenderly holding her infant, a scene rendered timeless by Ovissi's use of 22-karat gold leaf alongside oil pigments on a deep red background, possibly referencing the womb given the way the stylized, deeply expressive figures are contained inside an egg-shape cocoon. This interplay of gold and red paint lends the work a devotional aura, reminiscent of gilded Byzantine icons or illuminated Persian manuscripts. Ovissi, who often celebrates feminine beauty and cultural nostalgia in his art, treats motherhood as something sacred and radiant. The mother's visage may echo the idealized faces of Persian miniatures or the serene Madonnas of Renaissance art, bridging Eastern and Western iconography. By applying precious gold directly onto the canvas, Ovissi elevates the intimate subject matter—conveying that the bond between mother and child is as precious and enduring as the materials themselves. The result is a heartfelt homage to motherhood, glowing with warmth and reverence.



Classic Saida, 2000

Hassan Hajjaj (b. 1961, Moroccan)

C-print photograph with vintage kohl cosmetic boxes in artist's frame, 67.4 × 87.5 cm.

Provenance: Christie's Dubai, 19 April 2011, Lot 70.

Bold, funky, and unapologetically chic, Hassan Hajjaj's *Classic Saida* is a photographic celebration of contemporary Arab womanhood. The work features a stylish female figure – Saida – captured in Hajjaj's hallmark fashion-meets-pop-art style. Dressed in a mash-up of traditional Moroccan attire and global streetwear flair, Saida confronts the camera (and the viewer) with confidence and charm. Hajjaj (born 1961 in Morocco) has often been called the “Andy Warhol of Marrakech” for his bright colors and playful appropriation of brand graphics. Here he not only takes the photograph but also designs its decorative frame, lining it with real vintage eye kohl boxes whose bold Arabic typography and logos form a rhythmic border. This framing both complements and contextualizes the portrait: kohl eyeliner is a beloved cosmetic across the Middle East, historically used by women, so the boxes create a kind of pop-culture halo around Saida – crowning her as an icon of Arab femininity. Culturally, *Classic Saida* turns Orientalist clichés on their head. Instead of a passive odalisque, Saida is cool and self-possessed, meeting our gaze.

Her pose and the collage of patterns exude joy and empowerment, showing the world that Middle Eastern women can be arbiters of style and attitude. The photograph's high-gloss finish and candy-colored palette draw us in immediately, but it is the twinkle in the subject's eyes and the deliberate mix of cultural signals that make us linger. Hajjaj's warm regard for his muse is evident. In *Classic Saida*, he gives us a portrait that is as much about personality as it is about politics – quietly yet defiantly celebrating Arab women in a globalized era.



Untitled (from the Qajar Series), ca. 1998
Shadi Ghadirian (b. 1974, Iranian)
Silver bromide print, 75 × 50 cm.
Provenance: Christie's Dubai, 24 May 2006, Lot 111.

Another work from Shadi Ghadirian's groundbreaking Qajar Series, this Untitled photograph offers a compact yet eloquent commentary on the continuity of women's experiences across time. In this work, a poised Iranian woman wears Qajar-period attire – sumptuous patterned textiles, long flowing skirt, and a delicate hijab – all meticulously arranged as if for a 19th-century portrait sitting. Ghadirian, however, infuses the scene with a quiet subversion: the inclusion of a clearly modern item within the traditional setup, collapsing a century of change into a single frame. The approach is never harsh; instead, it's imbued with a gentle humor and respect. The smaller format of this print draws us in intimately, as if leafing through a family album full of secrets. The visual pun embodies a poignant truth: the core of a woman's identity – her strength, creativity, and intellect – transcends eras, even as the external trappings of life evolve. Ghadirian's art invites a dialogue between generations, rendered in warm tones, elegant composition, and a dash of rebellious modernity.



From the series *Enjelha*, 2012
Siamak Filizadeh (b. 1970, Iranian)
 Digital photomontage on canvas, 179.5 × 136 cm.
 Provenance: Aaran Gallery, Tehran.

In this large-scale work from his *Enjelha* series, Siamak Filizadeh orchestrates a vivid collision of Iran's past and present. The artist's background in graphic design and photography comes through in the dynamic composition: a digitally crafted tableau that could be mistaken for a monumental oil painting at first glance. Filizadeh (born 1970) is known for weaving Iran's history and mythology into modern urban scenes, often with cinematic flair. In *Enjelha* (meaning "Angels"), he populates the image with symbolic characters and iconic motifs – one can imagine archaic Persian heroes or heavenly figures intermingling with present-day Tehran's cityscape. Through saturated colors and razor-sharp details, the work captures the imagination like a still from an epic film. Notably, Filizadeh often includes strong female figures in his narratives, from mythical heroines to contemporary women, to underscore the multifaceted role of women in Iranian culture. Here, the juxtaposition of an angelic presence with twenty-first-century reality can be read as commentary on the guardianship and grace that women (the unseen angels of everyday life) provide amid a turbulent modern world. Simultaneously scholarly and satirical, the piece invites viewers to decode its many references – from literature to pop culture – while ultimately celebrating the resilience of Iranian identity.



خونتکالایه برقص
 خونتکالایه برقص
 نبینک که باز نیتست
 منتظر هیست
 بتوجیتت بتبتنتین
 بایدیابت بقص

SOCIAL COMMENTARY AND CRITIQUE

Artworks featured in this section demonstrate sharp observation, satire and humor, to critically address societal norms, gender expectations, and behaviors imposed upon women. The artists actively engage with the cultural and social fabric, exposing contradictions and challenging stereotypes. This critical perspective prompts viewers to reconsider entrenched perceptions and invites dialogue around societal change and progress concerning women's rights and roles. Increasingly, the artists' role as social commentator is growing – both as mirror for society and as provocateur in the contemporary world.



Killer Queen, 2014
Arash Nazari
Oil on canvas; 150 x 120 cm
Provenance: Artist's Collection

Killer Queen (2014) by Arash Nazari is a richly layered composition that interrogates inherited visual codes of gender, strength, and cultural memory. At its center, a headless female figure, poised in a self-coronating gesture, raises a *Kulah Khud*-style helmet—a distinctive domed steel helmet with finial, traditionally worn by Persian warriors. By placing this emblem of martial authority in the hands of a sensual, fragmented female body, Nazari inverts historical hierarchies and invites a re-reading of power through a contemporary, feminist lens.

The patterned red wallpaper and the finely rendered Persian carpet ground the scene in the aesthetics of Iranian domestic and decorative traditions, while the figure's costume and posture evoke both Qajar portraiture and modern fashion photography. The absence of a face intensifies the symbolic charge: identity becomes a construct, and power is performed rather than inherited. In this work, Nazari reclaims iconography and reconfigures it—turning the relics of conquest into instruments of self-determination.





Gossiping, 2009

Bitā Fayyazī (Iran, b. 1962)

Painted papier-mâché sculpture; Each approx. 82 × 45 × 40 cm

Provenance: B21 Gallery, Dubai

In *Gossiping*, Bitā Fayyazī presents two figurative sculptures rendered in vibrant papier-mâché, each embodying the universal yet deeply localized ritual of women gathering, conversing, and sharing intimacies. Both figures stand enveloped in intricately patterned chadors, their bodies subtly twisting towards each other in a posture suggestive of whispered secrets and shared confidences. The carefully detailed, textured surfaces—one covered with vivid, stylized red roses, the other inscribed with flowing calligraphy—symbolize the duality of public versus private identities. Fayyazī's distinctive aesthetic combines whimsicality with underlying commentary, transforming the everyday act of gossip into an intimate theater of female solidarity, communication, and community. Fayyazī's choice of papier-mâché—a traditionally domestic, humble, and tactile medium—further underscores themes of intimacy and accessibility. Through these compelling and tender figures, the artist evokes both the strength and vulnerability embedded within the hidden realms of women's lived experiences, celebrating their quiet agency and resilience.



The Trendy, 2009

Bitá Fayyazí (b. 1962, Iranian)

Painted papier-mâché sculpture, 75 × 38 × 18 cm.

Provenance: B21 Gallery, Dubai.

Bitá Fayyazí's *The Trendy* brims with playful irony and social insight. Crafted in her signature medium of painted papier-mâché, this sculpture likely portrays a contemporary young woman – “the trendy” figure – decked out in fashionable attire or attitude. There is a whimsical contrast between the subject's modern, of-the-moment persona and the artwork's deliberately rough-hewn, traditional craftsmanship. Fayyazí, who came of age amid Iran's post-revolution cultural shifts, imbues the piece with gently satirical commentary on the push-pull between global trends and local customs. The figure's pose or accessories may wink at Western pop culture influences (a stylish handbag? bold sunglasses?) now woven into urban Iranian life. Yet Fayyazí's treatment remains affectionate rather than critical. The sculpture celebrates the creativity and individuality of a new generation of Middle Eastern women, suggesting that being “trendy” is not merely superficial but can signify courage and self-expression. At the same time, its quirky, handmade quality reminds us of the persistence of heritage: even the trendiest youth stands on the shoulders of tradition. Balancing humor with humanity, *The Trendy* encapsulates Fayyazí's warm, observant take on the evolving role of women in her society.



Female Sculpture, 2009

Bitá Fayyazí (Iranian, b. 1962)

Painted papier-mâché sculpture; 67 × 13 × 20 cm.

Provenance: B21 Gallery, Dubai.

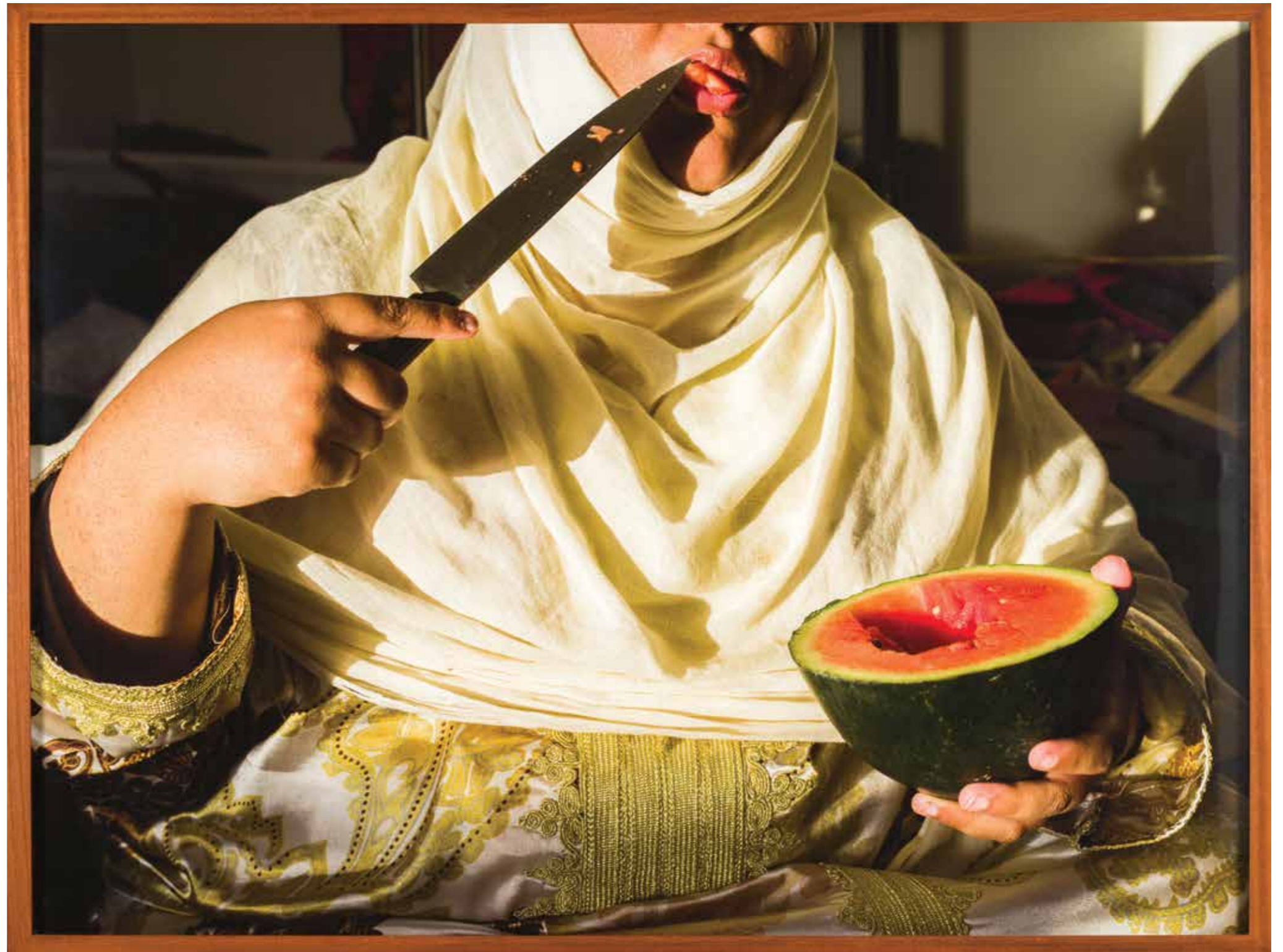
In *Female Sculpture*, Bitá Fayyazí presents a solitary figure that distills the essence of womanhood into a compact, unadorned form. The work's title, intentionally generic, suggests that this piece is meant to represent a woman in the abstract – an archetype or universal figure – rather than a specific person or character. True to Fayyazí's style, the sculpture is handcrafted from papier-mâché and painted in muted tones. The figure's shape is slender and elongated (the dimensions indicate a tall, narrow form), perhaps depicting a standing woman with minimal detail. Her arms might be at her sides or gently cradling her abdomen; her facial features are likely understated or absent. This reduction of detail focuses attention on the posture and presence of the figure. Despite its simplicity, *Female Sculpture* carries symbolic weight. The verticality of the form, rising 67 cm high but only 13 cm wide, gives it a totemic quality – one is reminded of prehistoric mother goddess figures or fertility idols, reinterpreted in modern materials. Fayyazí's choice of papier-mâché connects to craft and ephemerality, yet by designating the piece "*Female Sculpture*," she positions it within the fine art context, asserting that the subject of the female form is worthy of direct, titled examination. The sculpture's surface may show rough brushwork in earthy colors – perhaps shades of terracotta, ochre, or off-white – evoking clay or ancient stone.

This textural primitiveness links the work to ancient cultural artifacts, as if the artist unearthed an idol of a forgotten matriarchal society. In reality, Fayyazí is very much a contemporary artist, but she frequently taps into collective memory and social issues. One could interpret *Female Sculpture* as a commentary on how women have been depicted across time: often idolized or abstracted, yet seldom allowed individual agency in representation. By leaving the figure anonymous and simply calling her "*Female*," the artist highlights how women throughout history have been generalized – a counterpoint to the specific, named women portrayed by other artists in the exhibition. However, there is also a sense of reverence. The figure's poise – upright and forward-gazing – and the very act of sculpting her in a stand-alone piece suggest an homage to womanhood itself. In the quiet of the gallery, *Female Sculpture* stands almost like a guardian. It asks viewers to consider the fundamental qualities of its subject: nurturing, resilience, creativity, or continuity. In the context of Middle Eastern art, it subtly nods to the region's ancient civilizations (with their statuettes of goddesses and fertility figures) and brings that lineage into a modern framework.



S Eating Watermelon, 2015
Farah Al Qasimi (Emirati, b. 1991)
Archival inkjet print; 152 × 114 cm. Edition 1/5.
Provenance: The Third Line Gallery, Dubai.

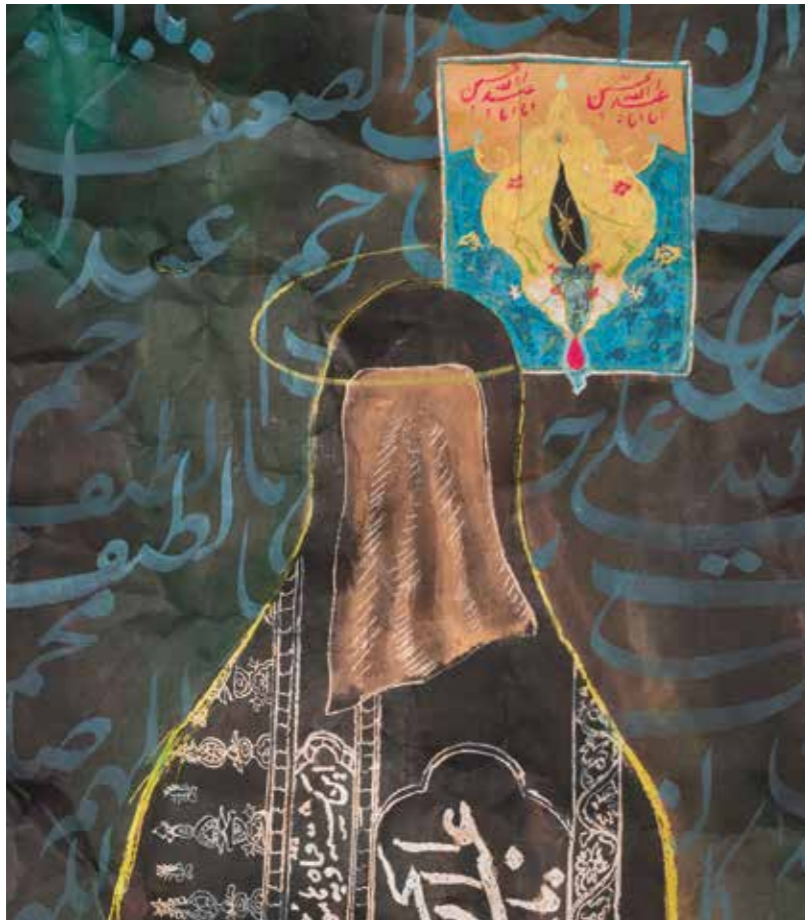
Farah Al Qasimi's photograph *S Eating Watermelon* captures a candid moment in vivid color: a woman (identified only by the initial "S") seated in a domestic space, mid-bite into a slice of watermelon. At first glance, it's a simple, even mundane scene of everyday life in the Gulf. Yet Al Qasimi's keen eye transforms the ordinary into a subtly theatrical tableau. This work is part of her *Arrival* series, in which she "explores the UAE's colonial past through the history and development of photography in the Gulf," often highlighting everyday events that become symbolic. Here, the act of a woman eating watermelon – juice likely dripping, the fruit's red flesh contrasting with patterned surroundings – is both luscious and vaguely threatening. The composition is carefully arranged with traditional clothing and dramatic lighting of the interior. Al Qasimi engages "in a dialogue about the unspoken social norms and values" of her society. The subject's face might be partially outside the frame or obscured, a common device in the artist's work to comment on visibility and privacy, especially for women. Viewers are presented with what seems like a private, "mundane action" that nevertheless feels performative – "a completely real, even intimate moment" that gives "the impression nonetheless that a performance is taking place". This tension between authenticity and staging is central to Al Qasimi's art. Culturally, the piece can be read as a quiet subversion: a woman indulging in the simple pleasure of fruit may hint at appetite, desire, and agency within the confines of domestic life. By elevating a commonplace scene to art, Al Qasimi celebrates the inner lives of Gulf women – inviting the viewer to contemplate what lies behind the social façade, and how small acts can speak volumes about freedom and constraint.





Venus and Fish No. 3, 2009
Hassan Sharif (Emirati, 1951–2016)
Acrylic on paper; 84.1 x 59.5 cm
Provenance: Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, Dubai

In this wryly titled piece, conceptual artist Hassan Sharif uses bold color and playful form to challenge our expectations. *Venus and Fish No. 3* is part of a 2009 series in which Sharif took a simple motif and subjected it to wild chromatic experimentation. Here, any recognizable “Venus” or “fish” is obscured by unruly swaths of color—Sharif has effectively unhinged the content from its referent in favor of a freewheeling exploration of pigment. The paper is covered edge-to-edge with gestural brushstrokes in boldly contrasting hues, creating a sense of vibrant chaos. Yet beneath the apparent randomness lies Sharif’s characteristic method: a balance of rigorous repetition and spontaneous accident. A pioneer of contemporary art in the UAE, Sharif was known for injecting irony and humor into minimalist or pop imagery. In this work, the classical reference to Venus (goddess of beauty) and the mundane fish are both upended—their forms subsumed into a “chromatic experiment” that invites viewers to ponder art’s ability to transform meaning through color alone.



Untitled, 2000

Khosrow Hassanzadeh (Iran, b. 1963)

Medium: Mixed-media painting on reused paper scroll (commonly used for fruit bags in Iranian markets); 105 x 242 cm
Provenance: Gift from the Artist

In this striking and unconventional mixed-media work, Khosrow Hassanzadeh utilizes humble, recycled paper—typically found in Iranian fruit and vegetable markets—to create an impactful scroll-like piece. Against the backdrop of this culturally evocative material, Hassanzadeh portrays a solitary female figure cloaked entirely in a black chador inscribed with Persian calligraphy. The figure's face is hidden, emphasizing anonymity, yet her form resonates powerfully through symbolic motifs of religious and cultural identity. Surrounding the figure, layered calligraphic script intertwines religious and poetic references, creating a richly textured tapestry of meaning. The juxtaposition of everyday materials with elevated cultural and spiritual symbolism encapsulates Hassanzadeh's ongoing exploration of identity, faith, and the often-overlooked narratives of ordinary people. Through this innovative use of humble market paper, the artist evokes the daily lives and silent resilience of women, whose stories remain obscured yet deeply embedded within Iran's social fabric. Hassanzadeh's thoughtful work compels viewers to engage with questions of visibility, spirituality, and the tensions between tradition and modernity, honoring the everyday realities of Iranian culture through the powerful language of contemporary art.





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Shahzad, 1996–2005
Ahmad Amin' Nazar (Iranian, b. 1955)
Hand-colored etching on paper; 38 x 28 cm
Provenance: Hoor Art Gallery

Ahmad Amin' Nazar's *Shahzad* draws inspiration from the legendary storyteller Scheherazade (Shahzad) of *One Thousand and One Nights*. Originally produced as an etching in 1996 and later hand-colored with watercolors in 2005, this work revives a classic Persian tale through a contemporary artistic lens. Rendered on an intimate scale, the image likely features the heroine Shahzad amidst a fantastical narrative scene. Amin' Nazar is known for blending traditional Persian miniature-style elements with modern techniques, and here delicate watercolor hues wash over the finely etched lines. The composition invites close inspection: one might discern ornamental details, patterned textiles, or imaginative creatures from the famous tales. By invoking *Shahzad*, Amin' Nazar pays homage to the power of storytelling—a cultural cornerstone in Iran—while also commenting on the role of women as bearers of knowledge and creativity. The fusion of printmaking precision and the artist's personal hand-coloring gives *Shahzad* a unique texture, bridging past and present.

Artist Biographies

Afsoon (b. 1961, Tehran, Iran)

A self-taught artist, Afsoon spent her early years in Iran, later moving to the United States and eventually settling in London in 1988. Her work merges Eastern and Western elements, utilizing mediums such as linocuts, watercolors, photography, collage, and etching. Afsoon's art often combines text and imagery, reflecting her nomadic life experiences.

Samira Alikhanzadeh (b. 1967, Tehran, Iran)

Samira Alikhanzadeh studied painting under Aydin Aghdashloo and earned her BFA in 1996 and MA in 1998 from Azad University in Tehran. Her work incorporates acrylics, mirrors, and found photographs, exploring themes of memory and identity.

Shirin Aliabadi (1973–2018, Tehran, Iran)

Shirin Aliabadi was a multidisciplinary artist who studied art history and archaeology at the University of Paris. She is recognized for her work addressing the hybridity of Iranian youth culture and expressions of women's empowerment.

Ahmad Amin Nazar (b. 1955, Abadan, Iran)

Ahmad Amin Nazar studied Fine Arts in Tehran and spent eight years in Cologne, Germany, where he joined the Society of Painters. His work is characterized by figurative painting with a strong understanding of academic rules and design skills.

Farah Al Qasimi (b. 1991, Abu Dhabi, UAE)

Farah Al Qasimi is an artist and musician who studied photography and music at Yale University, receiving her MFA in Photography from the Yale School of Art. Her work often examines postcolonial structures of power, gender, and taste in the Gulf Arab states.

Shahzad Changelvae (b. 1983, Tehran, Iran)

Shahzad Changelvae is an Iranian artist whose practice encompasses sculpture, installation, and photography. She earned her BA in Graphic Design from the University of Tehran in 2006 and her MFA in Sculpture from Yale University in 2015. Changelvae has taught courses and workshops at institutions including the American University of Beirut, Yale School of Art, and SUNY. She currently resides and works in Brooklyn, New York.

Siamak Filizadeh (b. 1970, Tehran, Iran)

Siamak Filizadeh graduated from Tehran Azad University with a BA in Graphic Design in 1995. He is known for his digitally manipulated photographs that blend historical and contemporary themes, often reflecting on Iranian culture.

Bitā Fayyāzī (b. 1962, Tehran, Iran)

Bitā Fayyāzī is an artist who works within a performative and markedly social practice. She began her artistic journey with pottery and later focused on sculpture and installation, challenging traditional definitions of art in Tehran.

Shadi Ghadirian (b. 1974, Tehran, Iran)

Shadi Ghadirian is a leading contemporary photographer in Iran. She graduated from Azad University in Tehran with a BA in photography and her work often explores themes related to women's roles and identities in post-revolutionary Iranian society.

Ghasem Hajizadeh (b. 1947, Lahijan, Iran)

Ghasem Hajizadeh is a contemporary Iranian–French painter and a pioneering figure in Iranian Pop Art. He graduated from the High School of Fine Arts in Tehran in 1967. Hajizadeh's work often utilizes old family photographs and historical images as the basis for his paintings, exploring themes of nostalgia and cultural identity.

Hassan Hajjaj (b. 1961, Larache, Morocco)

Hassan Hajjaj is a self-taught artist known for his work in portraiture, installation, performance, fashion, and interior design. He lives and works between London and Marrakech, blending contemporary art with traditional Moroccan elements.

Khosrow Hassanzadeh (1963–2023, Tehran, Iran)

Khosrow Hassanzadeh was born to a working-class family and served in the Iran-Iraq war before studying painting at Mojtama-e-Honar University. He was known for his work as an actor and visual artist, often addressing political and social themes.

Naeemeh Kazemi (b. 1981, Tehran, Iran)

Predominantly a sculptor, Naeemeh Kazemi began painting in 2020 during the lockdown when she couldn't access her studio. Working from her apartment in Iran, she created canvases that transported her to fantastical places. Kazemi's work has been featured in galleries such as Leila Heller Gallery in Dubai.

Marwan Kassab-Bachi (1934–2016, Damascus, Syria)

Commonly known as Marwan, Kassab-Bachi was a Syrian-German painter renowned for his expressive portraits and treatment of the human face. After studying Arabic literature at the University of Damascus, he moved to Berlin in 1957 to study at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste. Marwan became a professor at the Akademie der Künste in Berlin and remained there until his passing.

Mahmoud Mokhtar (1891–1934, Tanbara, Egypt)

Mahmoud Mokhtar is considered a pioneer of modern Egyptian sculpture. Born into a farming family, he developed an early interest in modeling figures from the mud of the Nile. Mokhtar was the first student to enroll in the Egyptian School of Fine Arts in 1908 and later continued his studies in Paris. His work often blends Pharaonic imagery with modern European sculptural aesthetics.

Ahmad Morshedloo (b. 1973, Mashhad, Iran)

Ahmad Morshedloo received his BFA in painting from Azad University and an MFA in painting from the University of Art in Tehran. He is celebrated as one of Iran's most unique social painters, focusing on themes of human conditions and societal issues.

Artist Biographies

Mohamed Naghi (1888–1956, Alexandria, Egypt)

Mohamed Naghi was an influential Egyptian painter and a pioneer of modern Egyptian art. Born into an aristocratic family, he initially studied law at the University of Lyon in France before pursuing painting in Florence, Italy. Naghi's passion for developing and improving his nation's arts led him to establish studios in Alexandria, Luxor, and Memphis.

Arash Nazari (b. 1980, Tehran, Iran)

Arash Nazari is an Iranian contemporary artist whose mixed-media and photographic works explore identity, memory, and societal tensions. Known for merging symbolic abstraction with everyday imagery, Nazari addresses themes of cultural identity and personal freedom within Iranian society. His work has been exhibited in major galleries internationally, including Shirin Gallery (Tehran/New York) and Leila Heller Gallery. Nazari currently lives and works in Tehran.

Nasser Ovissi (b. 1934, Tehran, Iran)

Nasser Ovissi studied Law and Political Sciences at the University of Tehran before pursuing fine art at Beaux Fine Art in Rome. His work is characterized by stylized figures of Persian women and horses, blending traditional and modern elements.

Jewad Selim (1919–1961, Ankara, Turkey)

Considered the founder of modern art in Iraq, Jewad Selim was born to a family originally from Mosul. He studied art in Paris and Rome before returning to Baghdad, where he played a pivotal role in shaping the Iraqi art scene. Selim's work often reflects a blend of modern abstraction and traditional Mesopotamian influences.

Hassan Sharif (1951–2016, Dubai, UAE)

Hassan Sharif was a pioneering conceptual artist from the United Arab Emirates. He studied at the Byam Shaw School of Art in London and was known for his experimental works that challenged traditional art forms in the Gulf region.

Parviz Tanavoli (b. 1937, Tehran, Iran)

Parviz Tanavoli is an Iranian sculptor, painter, educator, and art historian, often referred to as the father of modern Iranian sculpture. A central figure in the Saqqakhaneh movement, Tanavoli's work revisits Persian traditions through modern sculpture. He has created works in various mediums, including bronze, ceramic, and fiberglass.

Fahrelnissa Zeid (1901–1991, Istanbul, Turkey)

Princess Fahrelnissa Zeid was a Turkish artist best known for her large-scale abstract paintings with kaleidoscopic patterns. Born into an elite Ottoman family, she was among the first women to attend art school in Istanbul. Zeid's work combines elements of Islamic, Byzantine, Arab, and Persian art with modern abstraction.

References and Further Reading

Exhibition Catalogs and Anthologies

• Salwa Mikdadi et al. – Forces of Change: Artists of the Arab World (1994): Exhibition catalog from the National Museum of Women in the Arts (Washington, DC) spotlighting contemporary women artists from across the Arab world. This pioneering show – one of the first of its kind – featured essays by scholars and artists (including Laura Nader and Etel Adnan) and documented the diverse creative expressions of Arab women artists in the late 20th century, challenging stereotypes by emphasizing their agency and “forces of change” within their societies.

• Wijdan Ali & Khalid Khreis (eds.) – Breaking the Veils: Women Artists from the Islamic World (2002): A touring exhibition and catalog organized by the Royal Society of Fine Arts, Jordan, featuring works by over 50 female artists from 22 Islamic countries. The project’s aim was to “break the stereotyping of women in Islam” by showcasing the creativity of Muslim, Christian, and other women artists within Islamic cultures. This catalog offers a broad survey of women’s art from the Middle East and beyond, carrying a message of cultural diversity and understanding.

• David A. Bailey & Gilane Tawadros (eds.) – Veil: Veiling, Representation and Contemporary Art (2003/2006): An influential catalog accompanying a groundbreaking exhibition (InIVA, London & Modern Art Oxford) that brought together contemporary artists examining the veil’s symbolism in modern culture. Through essays and artworks by Muslim and non-Muslim artists (e.g. Shirin Neshat, Jananne Al-Ani, Ghada Amer), this volume explores the veil as a complex intersection of gender, religion, and identity – confronting Orientalist tropes and highlighting the veil’s multifaceted meanings in both Eastern and Western contexts.

• Kristen Gresh – She Who Tells a Story: Women Photographers from Iran and the Arab World (2013): Museum of Fine Arts, Boston exhibition catalog introducing twelve leading women photographers from Iran and various Arab countries. Through stunning photographic works ranging from documentary to conceptual, this book addresses themes of gender stereotypes, war, identity, and the challenge to “nostalgic Western notions” of Middle Eastern women. It provides both critical essays and artists’ biographies, amplifying the voices of women who “claim the right to tell their own stories” through images.

• Linda Komaroff (ed.) – Women Defining Women in Contemporary Art of the Middle East and Beyond (2023): A recent exhibition catalog from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, showcasing 75 works by women artists born or living in predominantly Islamic societies. Far from being “voiceless and invisible,” these artists use painting, photography, sculpture, and video to redefine and empower women and to challenge persistent stereotypes. Spanning generations and regions from North Africa to West Asia, the catalog’s essays and images illuminate how female creators engage with rapid social and political changes, offering personal and universal narratives that reflect a shared female identity in diverse Middle Eastern contexts.

Acknowledgments

Exhibition Curation and Design
Amir Arvand

Catalogue Editors
Amir Arvand
Roxane Zand

Graphic Design
Kiamarz Morad
Somaye Farrokhi

Exhibition Installation
Equinox Fine Art Solutions

Print
Al Ghurair Printing and Publishing, Dubai

Social Media and Exhibition Coordination
Sharry Von Ocampo
Ian Tagle

Sincere thanks are also extended to the entire Farjam Foundation team for their tireless efforts and commitment in serving the UAE public throughout years.

Title:

Shifting Gazes: Women Through Middle Eastern Eyes

An exhibition by The Farjam Collection

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Print:

Al Ghurair Printing & Publishing LLC

Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Publisher:

The Farjam Foundation

Dubai, United Arab Emirates

www.farjamfoundation.org

Contact Information:

Email: info@farjamfoundation.org

Phone: +971 4 327 7636

Instagram: [@farjamfoundation](https://www.instagram.com/farjamfoundation)





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