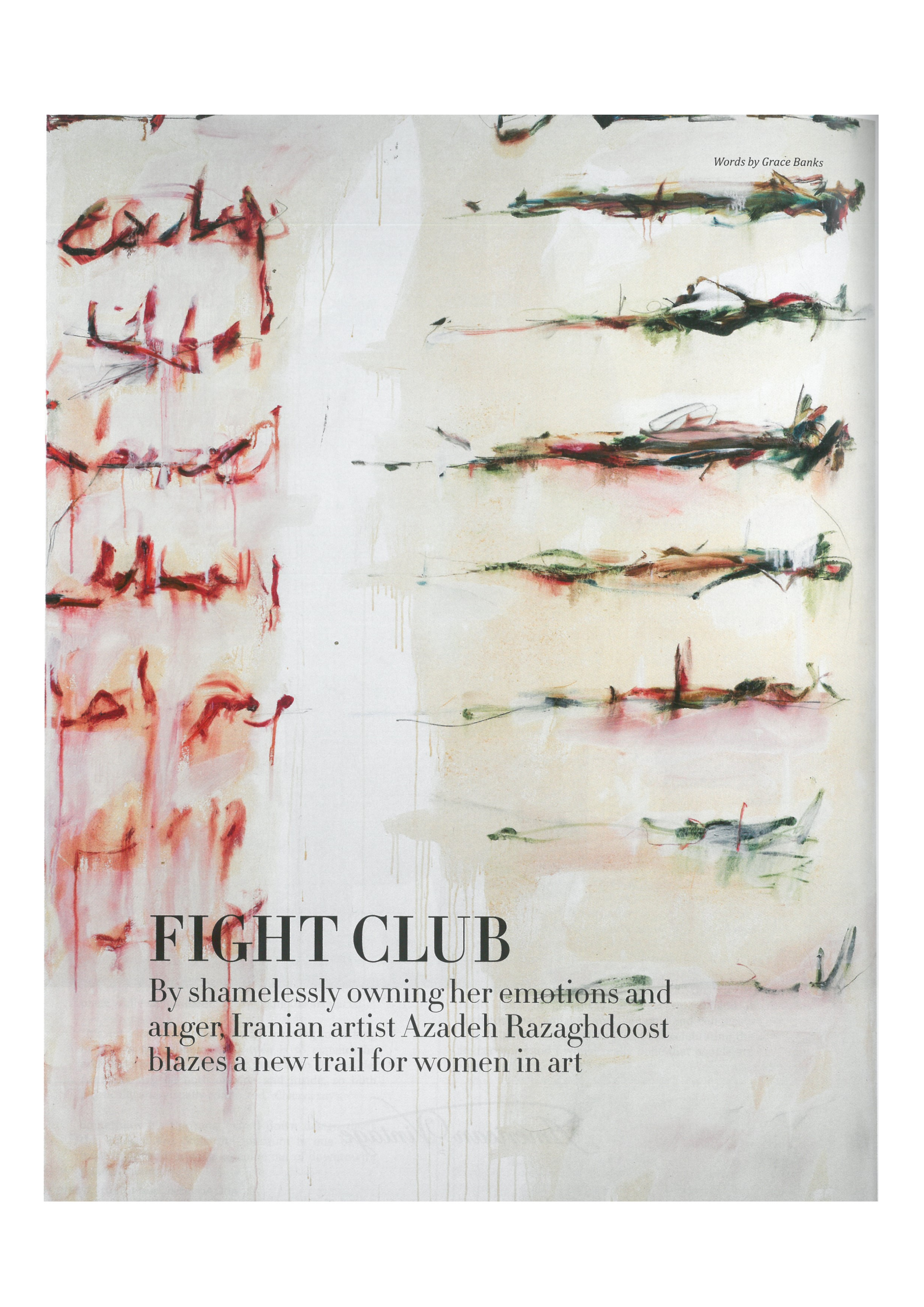


Carla Daher, Marc Jacobs, Kourou, Birk, Habib Batten, Sebastiao Salgado, Karine Tawil, Remo Ruffini, Lara Khoury

This copy is not for sale



An abstract painting by Azadeh Razaghdoost, featuring two vertical columns of expressive brushstrokes. The left column is dominated by vibrant reds and pinks, while the right column uses a palette of greens, blues, and earthy tones. The background is a mix of light beige and white, with some darker, more saturated areas. The overall style is gestural and emotional, with visible textures and drips of paint.

Words by Grace Banks

FIGHT CLUB

By shamelessly owning her emotions and anger, Iranian artist Azadeh Razaghdoost blazes a new trail for women in art

The press release for *Recipe for a Poem*, Azadeh Razaghdoost's first UK solo exhibition currently showing at London's Sophia Contemporary Gallery, claims her practice refers to 19th century Romantic poets. Many of the 15 pieces on view do indeed take their names from the writings of one such poet and artist, William Blake. In their wound-red gashes, intensely depicted across the canvas, and the occasional, miniscule, oblique sentence of love, it's simple to see why this allusion would be made.

Yet the reality is very different. Razaghdoost discovered Blake's poems long after she finished the works appearing in *Recipe for a Poem*: "Interestingly, I came across Blake's poems after completing the series. I found his description of a rose in *The Sick Rose* so close to my expression in my paintings, I decided to name the works after it."

Razaghdoost's art is far more aligned with the sheer rebelliousness of expressing emotions that the Romantic-era poets preached, than their actual subjects.

Born in Tehran, Iran, in 1975, Razaghdoost studied at the Tehran School of Art at the beginning of the millennium, earning a Bachelor's degree in painting. Training under the radical Iranian artists Fereydoun Mameigy and Farshid Maleki, who ritually placed the painful rawness of being at the forefront of their work, it was here she began to understand that the personal was political, and that it made great art, too.

"What is most important in my work is that I have a deeply emotional viewpoint toward my surroundings, objects and nature. It's this viewpoint that makes my art seem emotional".

What Razaghdoost takes from the Romantic literary canon then – a genre that favours a dominant male view of romance – is the process of writing poetry and the raw and shameless display of human emotion. Unlike Blake, she does not wear her heart on her sleeve, and instead presents the expression of female emotion and identity as art in itself.

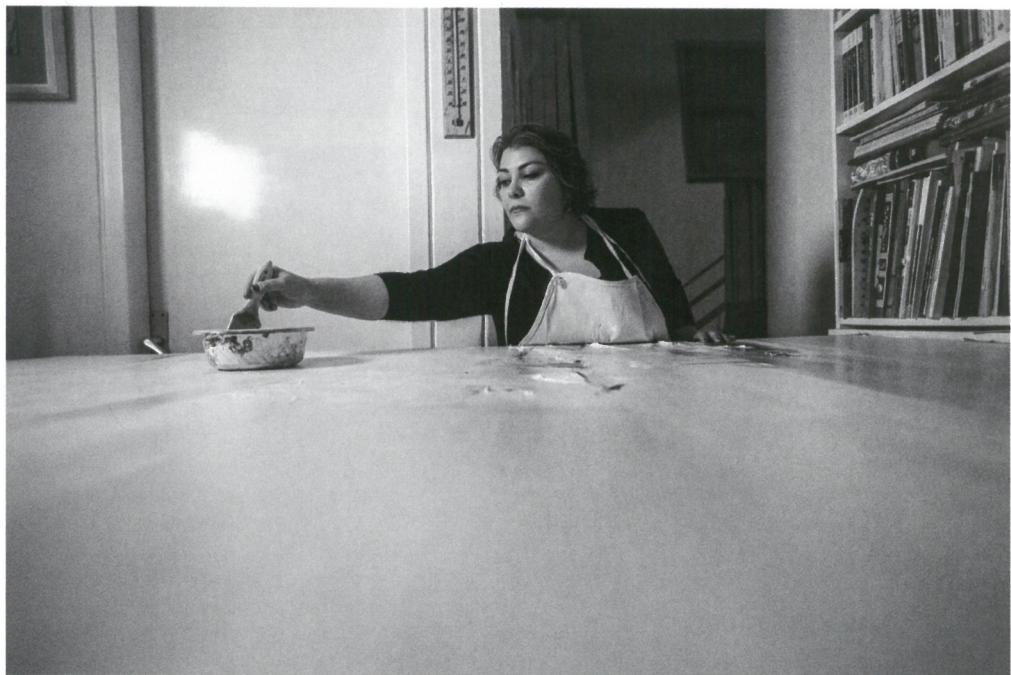
There's a lot of violence. Paintings in *The Sick Rose Series* (2008) show Razaghdoost's inescapable inclination to see violence, pain and anger, even when there might not be any.

"To me, the thorns of roses are like the thorned-crown of Jesus and the red blood could be Jesus's blood," she says.

Indeed, blood features highly in large chunks of her work. It's almost as if paintings such as *The Storm of Roses* (2016) and *The Branches Die of Love* (2009) started with blank canvases hanging in the room of a crime scene. But the connotations aren't bad, she insists: "Blood is a sign of vitality. It gives life and meaning to my works. I draw inspiration from the crimson colour of blood to create elements such as roses, hearts and wounds."

It's this sweet spot that Razaghdoost exists in, the intersection of pain, loss and love. "For me sickness, life, death, love and lust are everybody's main life experiences, this is why they are so important and fundamental to me; these concepts have been unconsciously hidden in my works."

Coloured pigments are masterfully poured and arranged onto the white canvas in an artistic gesture reminiscent of Action Painting and Abstract Expressionism. Life is spattered in a whirlwind of emotions, and colour radiates an unrestrained eroticism culminating in glowing hearts and feminine attributes set on a pure white background. Contrasts collide and grapple with



"I DRAW INSPIRATION FROM THE CRIMSON COLOUR OF BLOOD TO CREATE ELEMENTS SUCH AS ROSES, HEARTS AND WOUNDS."



This page, left: Untitled, 2011, from the 'Letters' series. Below: Untitled, from 'The Sick Rose' series, 2008. Previous pages: 'Through Air Where Roses of Black Gunpowder Burst,' 2011, from the 'Letters' series. All works oil and pencil on canvas, courtesy of Sophia Contemporary Gallery

each other in a visually enthralling yet tender language. At times, existential dualities seem to be so closely knit together that contrasting desires and the looming danger of decay become a single whole.

To classify Razaghdoost and her art is difficult. "The inspiration for my paintings is usually spontaneous. But you can find similarities with poets and the inspiration behind their writing. The same way in which a poet uses words to make a poem, an artist uses materials and the surface to make a painting."

She is obsessed with the process of feeling and with the authenticity of work that confronts human emotion head on. Her description of her practice is like a dramatic story arc in itself: "Using pencil is like a climax or an ending in my works. The lines work as a border between the abstract surfaces, points and free drops of colours."

Razaghdoost is adamant that she will not be cast in the stereotypical role of rebel Middle Eastern female artist dealing with politics and issues affecting the Middle East. "Overall, I believe that most Middle Eastern artists have a political point of view that I don't favour," she says, "I'm an artist who lives in the Middle East but works against the trends in the region. I am not a political artist and not interested in political art, so I don't see myself as an artist with a Middle Eastern view." She is resolute: "I get tired of being analysed by factors of Middle Eastern art... artists who refer to history and deal with specific cultural aspects like calligraphy."

As Middle Eastern art gains more traction in the West, becoming increasingly popular and more collectable, type-casting is an issue that many artists of the region are concerned with. Razaghdoost says this concern is particularly felt in the nations of the Persian Gulf, countries which have an important role in the artistic landscape.

"Middle Eastern art is often defined by its audience, be they in the region or outside, as socio-critical and political. However, I am interested in neither thinking about the political changes in this region nor painting them."

In fact, Razaghdoost manages to swerve geographical context entirely, and instead, creates her own artistic canon for herself, and for other artists to follow — a genre where the personal greets the political with equal measures of warmth, and rage.

Azadeh Razaghdoost's 'Recipe for a Poem' is at the Sophia Contemporary gallery in London's Mayfair until 10 February 2017. sophiacontemporary.com