



THE BREEZE AT DAWN REZA DERAKSHANI

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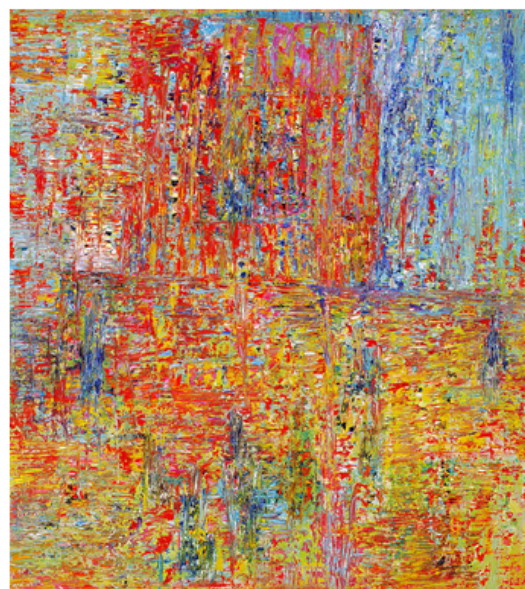
UNITED KINGDOM **IRAN**

Reza Derakshani prioritizes color and texture over form. His current show, “The Breeze at Dawn” at Sophia Contemporary in London, bears testimony to this. The Iranian painter and performance artist’s quasi-color-field paintings throb with chromatic intensity, incorporating both texture and materiality on large-scale canvases. Working with a unique palette-knife technique, Derakshani deftly scrapes and strokes the paint, expertly manipulating it until it peaks and dips in ways that are rhythmically, palpably physical.

Also a professional musician, Derakshani’s visual language has a delightful lilt to it, some might say a lyrical force. His works resonate with the same visual and aural power as works by Wassily Kandinsky. Like his predecessor, Derakshani infuses his canvases with a sort of energy that produces multi-sensorial epiphanies, not far from Kandinsky’s so-called synesthetic improvisations and compositions. The working process of Derakshani, wherein he scratches the paint and teases it until it produces a distinct materiality, fills the canvas with vigor. Combined with the chromatic qualities of his paint, the dense layers expose even more underlying color.

Born in Iran and having lived in the United Arab Emirates and the United States, Derakshani is a transcultural rover. His works marry various aesthetic traditions to produce rich, postmodern composites, conveying the essence of 13th-century Persian poet Rumi’s poetry with the same ease as the frenetic brushstrokes of Abstract Expressionism. And yet, it is clear that Derakshani has not forgotten his Persian origins.

In *Garden Party at the Red Castle* (2016), Derakshani’s textured impasto application and vibrant palette seem to come straight from an Impressionist’s canvas. These are combined with the theme of Persian gardens, ones that were historically built by kings to represent paradise (referred to as *pari-daiza* in Persian, meaning “enclosed space”) on earth. Rich and saturated colors seem to overflow, providing a sumptuous visual feast capturing the dazzling afternoon gaiety. The large canvas pulsates with vivacity, the visual lyricism setting the tone of the party in procession. Focusing on the essence of the resplendent afternoon, Derakshani introduces the theme, before revealing the subject of the painting. The festive atmosphere precedes the show of forms.



REZA DERAKSHANI, *Garden Party at the Red Castle*, 2015, 198 x 178 cm. Courtesy the artist and Sophia Contemporary, London.

Derakshani's ongoing "Pomegranate" series (2015–) conveys the sense of rootedness the artist has to his Iranian heritage. The series celebrates the pomegranate, a significant cultural symbol representing fertility and love. The fruit also signifies the religious diversity and similarity that ties together the two faiths of the artist's home country: Zoroastrianism and Islam. In *Anari Gold* (2015), the dichotomous relationship between pre- and post-revolution Iran is manifested in a canvas split visually in two segments. The obvious allusion to the culturally significant fruit is obvious in both the title (*anar* translates to "pomegranate" in Persian) and the work's honeycomb-like appearance, which suggests the arils of the pomegranate. The bejeweled arils are depicted in green, white and red—the colors of the present-day Iranian flag. The golden background connotes the country's pre-revolution insignia depicting the lion and the sun, which was changed after the revolution. In *Those Roots Drink Quietly! #2* (2015), from his "Abstract" series, Derakshani combines the allegorical fruit with a mixed materiality, joining oil, tar and gold paste. An indecipherable line taken from Rumi's poetic works, scrawled at the bottom left of the painting, gives the work a palpable sense of cultural identification with the artist's country of origin.



REZA DERAKSHANI, *Hunting the Night*, 2015, oil on canvas, 198 x 224 cm. Courtesy the artist and Sophia Contemporary, London.

The exhibition also features new works from Derakshani's ongoing series entitled "Hunting" (2015–). The series celebrates a famously glorified royal pursuit immortalized in Persian poet Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* (c. 977 and 1010 CE), which is Iran's national epic. Derakshani combines this traditional tale with a primordial depiction of hunting, evocative of early cave paintings, then extends the prehistoric portrayal to incorporate rich, visual colorations in blue, white, green, red and pink. The semi-abstract works hint at figuration; vague shapes of hunters on horseback in multiple stances can be discerned. The figures vary from static pre-hunt preparedness to mid-hunt dynamism. *Hunting the Sunshine* (2015) is another chromatic celebration of the hunt with frenetic strokes feverishly scraped to create a delightful pastiche.

Despite being a modern nomad, Derakshani clings to his heritage, infusing his art with cultural hints that reinforce his identity. Cultural mainstays like the Persian tragic romance epic *Khosrow and Shirin* come alive, translated through the neo-expressionist canon. Tradition is revived and reinterpreted through the lens of the postmodernist zeitgeist. Derakshani engages with traditional and modern aesthetics, both visual and aural, adapting and molding them. From the wild blue and yellow flowers of his birth village of Sangsar, where he was raised in a black tent, to the lyricism of modernists like Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Jasper Johns and Gerhard Richter, the artist finds beauty and inspiration everywhere, which he transposes and transmutes. His works, while carrying an innate, dynamic energy, offer a meditative quietude.



REZA DERAKSHANI, *Hunting the Ecstasy*, 2015, oil on canvas, 180 x 250 cm. Courtesy the artist and Sophia Contemporary, London.

"The Breeze at Dawn" is on view at Sophia Contemporary, London, until April 23, 2016.