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REVIEW



THE CHRONOLOGY *OF SOUND*

Katrina Kufer considers Reza Derakshani's synesthesiac practice at his retrospective at St Petersburg's Marble Palace.

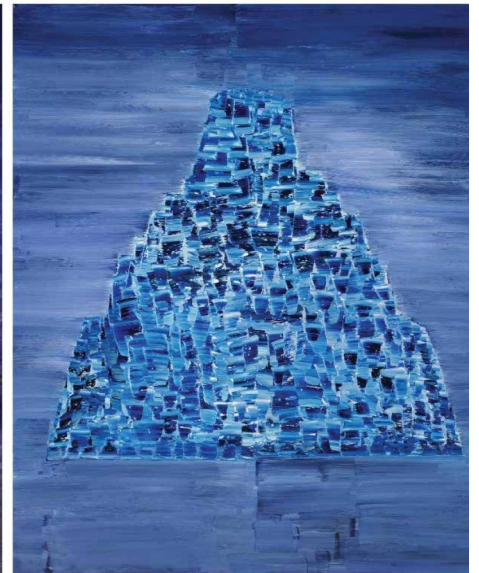


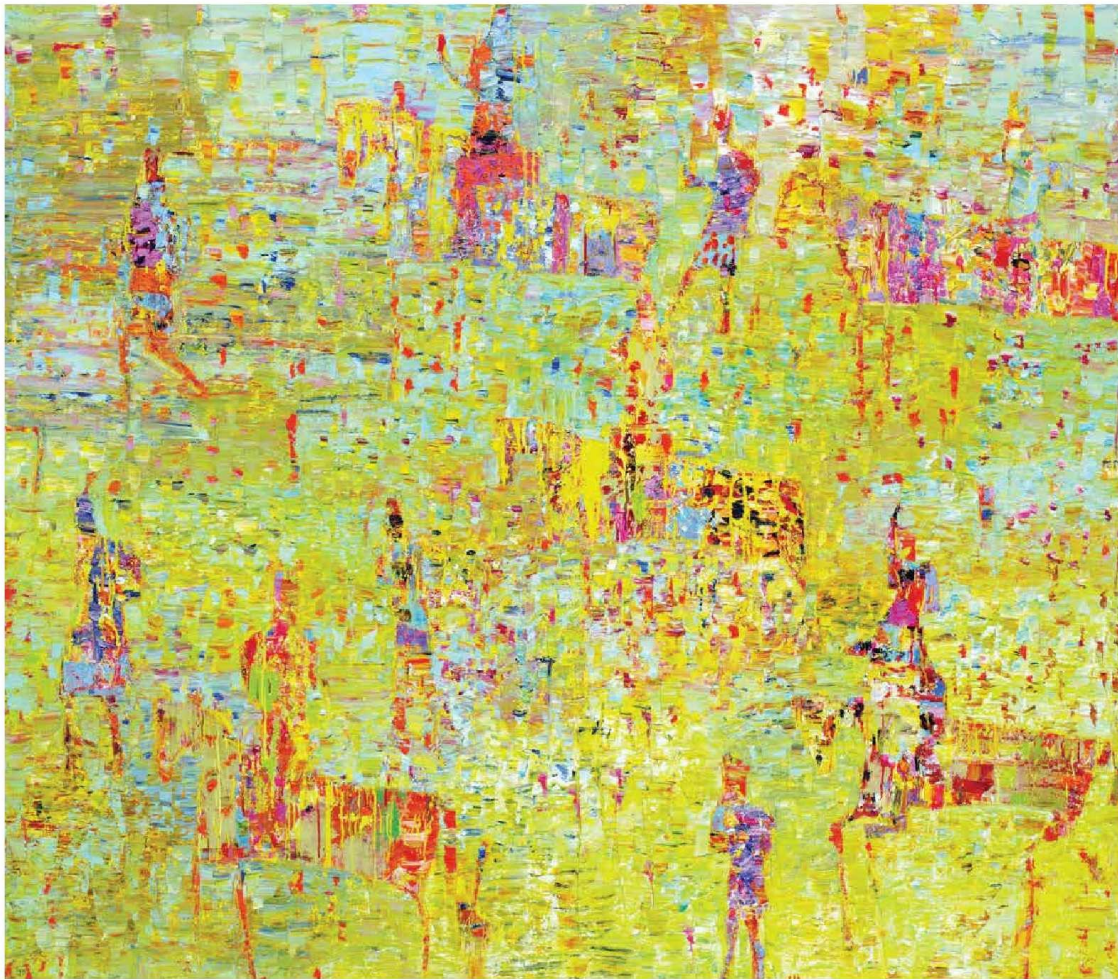
Facing page: Portrait of Reza Derakshani.

This page: Installation view. Image courtesy Carvas.

The curatorial intent behind the groupings of non-chronological, chromatically-shocking, reasonably-sized paintings by Reza Derakshani is not immediately discernable. However, given that the exhibition marks the first retrospective for an Iranian artist in Russia, it becomes clear why the artist, in collaboration with his London gallery Sophia Contemporary, chose a diverse selection of works to represent his fluid practice consisting of painting, music and poetry. This is not to imply there is no strategy, or that the (seemingly) haphazard assemblage within the halls of the Russian State Museum's Marble Palace is merely documenting the progression of an artist who (stylistically and physically) started in the East, went West and came back again. There is visual dissonance, yes, but it is the only way in which this exhibition could possibly exist, because it follows the chronology of sound.

There are several layers to consider in this exhibition, and thus several different ways to broach a visual understanding. Upon first sweep of the show, the dialogue between the largely abstract paintings and the palace's traditional architecture with tiered sheer curtains becomes apparent – one in direct opposition to Derakshani's personal preference for his works to "pop against white cube walls." It does lend the works a more accessible quality however, with the artist remarking, "It feels as though I am in my own home." Then there is the question of whether his practice ought to be considered in reference to Western art history, Iranian art history or, perhaps, Russian art history (the response is all three). One may also wonder why this show is traveling from a London gallery to St Petersburg and then onwards to Kunstsammlungen Chemnitz (and more), and why Derakshani





is even showing in a Russian museum in the first place. Two of the three Sophia Contemporary founders (Vassili Tsarenkov and Lali Marganiya) are of Russian descent, which paired with Russia's cultural engagement with Persian tradition going back to the 19th century, made a Russian institution an ideal place to, as Lili Jassemi, the Iranian-German third founder, explains, "push an already-successful artist to the next level" as well as ensure that several of his pieces find homes in new collections along the way.

The show certainly is not lacking in intellectual fodder – but the most digestible approach is the how and why of the mini-narratives each hanging tells. The urge to tackle the survey of Derakshani's art from a sensorial and mood-based perspective (as the artist himself approaches his practice and process) is strong – and it is easy to become swept up in the realisation that these paintings are brought to life through an inherent quality that *can't* be seen: sound. Derakshani's use of colour and texture harks back to a preoccupation with materiality and abstraction that somehow creates an experience akin to synesthesia. What makes a

Derakshani so clearly a Derakshani may be a tendency towards fearless colour usage and references to Persian miniatures, but what holds his practice together amidst an incredibly varied body of work is the inextricable link through music.

Derakshani comes alive when the topic of music is visited, which finds its way into conversations that begin with why he never takes vacations (he's busy producing the extensive *oeuvre* that visitors only see a mere fraction of) and how his studio moved from Dubai to Austin (for six-metre-high ceilings, material accessibility and space for a music studio). He then explains how his multi-hyphenate existence is merely branches from the same tree; he may be most known for painting, but the inspiration and process is rhizomatic, pulling from all directions simultaneously without a hierarchy of influence. Even when describing a static-y lemon-lime Persian miniature painting in relation to one of his vastly different *Black Water* works, he reveals that they all originate from the same place. It all revolves around the process of searching for something new, a mindset

Facing page: *Hunting the Sunshine*. 2015. Oil on canvas.
198 x 224 cm.

This page: (Left) *The Black Water, Baroo Homeyra*. 2016.
Enamel on canvas; (Right) *The Black Water, Baroo Marzié*.
2016. Enamel on canvas.

Images courtesy the artist and Sophia Contemporary, London,
unless otherwise specified.



comparable to a “state of ecstasy that takes you to where you no longer know where you are,” as he describes it. Paradoxically, there is fluidity to the structure – just a little quirk to skew the seriousness (poignantly exemplified, but most likely unintentionally, by the accompanying video depicting Derakshani in his studio painting in a grey suit and latex gloves).

It is easy to grasp the characteristic ‘Derakshani’ visual cues – but if asked, he will say that the *Exiled Kings and Queens* series epitomises his practice due to its organic combination of “colour from the *Nature* series, darkness from my latest pieces, painterly texture and gold from earlier works... everything comes together.” This suggests, rightly, that his approach is based on improvisation rather than predetermined sketches. “The improvisation comes from music,” he elaborates. “I studied Persian classical music and it’s nature is that you study, then improvise for the rest of your life. That is the part I really love.” And that is the part he has integrated into his process, remarking, “When I listen to or make music, I see colour. I see texture.” The only period in which Derakshani ceased

to work his music and art side-by-side is when he moved to New York and was working in a more Western school, which clashed deeply with his Persian music phase. The internal conflict caused a deep creative rift that only settled when the two met again on the shared creative sphere of his cultural heritage.

This musical journey is what determines the progression of the exhibition. The entrance is lined with earlier series such as *Hunting* which correspond to the period where he returned to his roots before crescendoing to the loudest (“deafening”) room filled with his most recent, and darkest, series *Black Water* and *Blue*. “Cellos,” he says, “I would only hear cellos.” Derakshani then references a particularly challenging series made of black sand that is not currently on display, which he would like to one day exhibit; one can only imagine what *that* sounds like.

Reza Derakshani runs until 25 July 2016 at the Russian State Museum, St Petersburg. For more information visit www.rusmuseum.ru