

MODERNISM IN ARAB CITIES

To adequately understand contemporary art movements, it is important to pinpoint the defining moments of our cultural history that have informed them. In recent years, long overdue scholarly attention has been devoted to the nature and impact of different expressions of Modernism in the Middle East. Here, we present an overview of the main Arab schools of modernist art according to Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath at Art Dubai, as well as a selection of artworks from the Saqqakhaneh group in Iran and a long-awaited retrospective on Paul Guiragossian at the Barjeel Art Foundation, where curators Karim Sultan and Mandy Merzaban reveal how significant modernism was and how its legacy still resonates today.

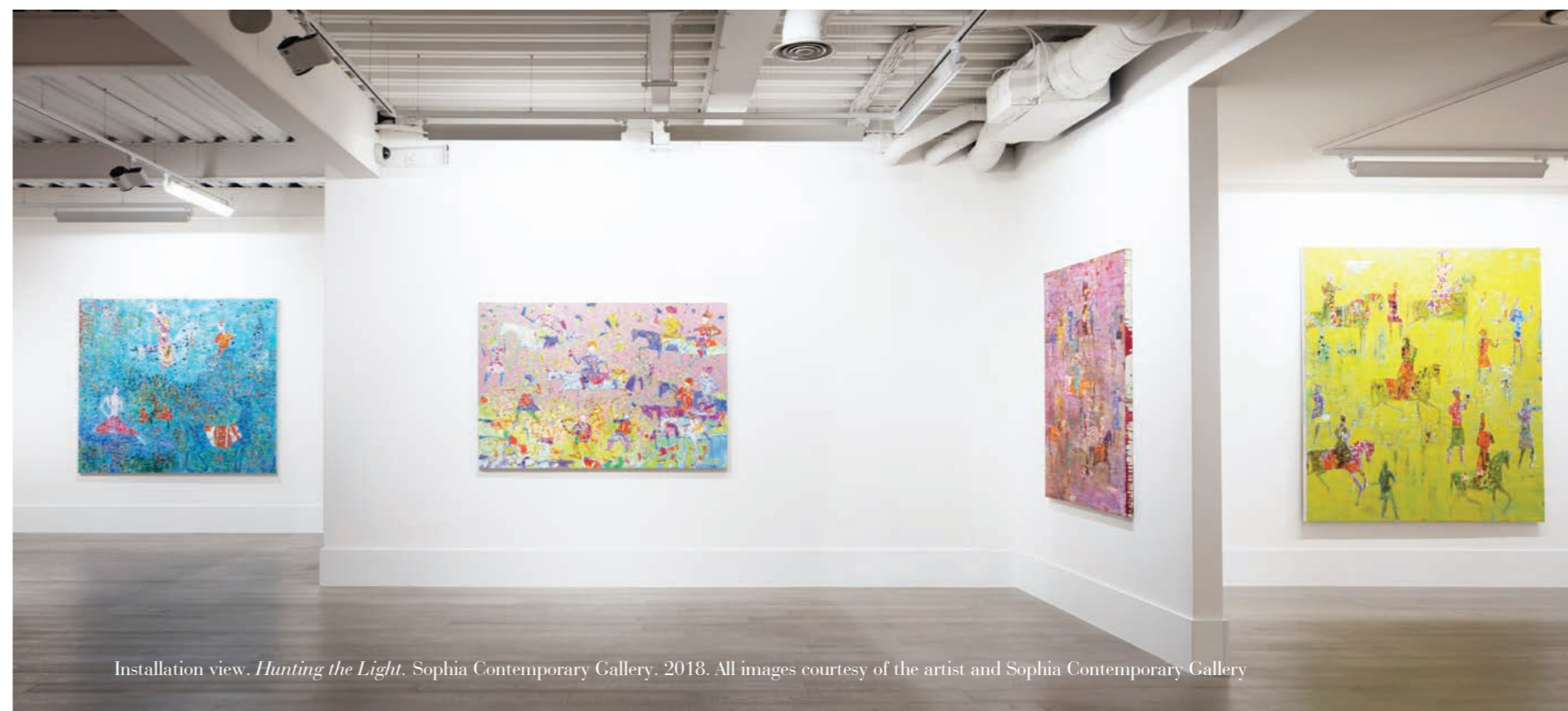
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Reza Derakshani. *Garden Party Silver*. 2016. Oil on canvas. 203 x 158 cm

THE QUEST FOR ENLIGHTENMENT

James Parry pays a visit to London's Sophia Contemporary Gallery to check out *Hunting the Light*, the latest show by Reza Derakshani. By merging abstract and figurative elements from both Western and Eastern cultures, the artist continues to demarcate and define his own personal creative landscapes.



Installation view. *Hunting the Light*. Sophia Contemporary Gallery. 2018. All images courtesy of the artist and Sophia Contemporary Gallery

Complex and enigmatic, Reza Derakshani remains one of the most arcane of the many artists working in the Iranian diaspora. Part of the intrigue undoubtedly stems from his background – he grew up in a family of nomadic pastoralists, who moved around the plains and foothills of the Kopet Dagh mountains on the Iran/Turkmenistan border. Several months of each year were spent living in a tent. The majesty of those landscapes continues to influence Derakshani, an enduring motif that still provides a psychological and physical backdrop to his works – except that he has exchanged the open vistas of his homeland for those of Texas, USA, where he is now largely based.

Today, Derakshani describes himself as an “Iranian-American”, a reflection of a duality of values and approaches that has come to define not just his body of work but the man himself. He was a precociously young talent, earning money for his family as a boy by copying famous works by artists such as Ingres from art books and then selling them. He held his first solo show at Tehran's Ghandriz Art Gallery at the age of 19, graduating from the University of Tehran in 1976 before leaving

for the USA and further studies in Pasadena, California. He subsequently returned to Iran to teach, only to leave the country again after the Islamic Revolution. Apart from a few years of temporary residence back in Tehran (he left again because of the increasing restrictions and his own worries over self-censorship), he has spent all his time since then living overseas – with notable stints in New York and Italy – and has not returned to Iran at all since 2010.

This latest show brought into sharp focus Derakshani's genius at synthesising Western style and Eastern content. It was while living in New York during the 1980s and 90s that he first became immersed in the world of Abstract Expressionism. He was in close contact with artists such as Francesco Clemente, Marcos Grigorian and Cy Twombly, and spent many hours in the Whitney, the MoMa and the Met – time and experience that have come to play an important role in the development of his oeuvre. At first he painted purely neo-expressionist works, but soon began to incorporate his own take on Persian cultural motifs on large canvases characterised by the dynamic brushstrokes that were such a hallmark of the Abstract Expressionists. With

Reza Derakshani. *Hunting Gold and Red and Blue*. 2016. Oil on canvas, 178 x 203 cm

12 previously unseen paintings, *Hunting the Light* marked the latest incarnation of the vivid trademark style that Derakshani has made his own, and in particular an extension of three ongoing series: *Hunting*, *Garden Party* and *Shirin and Khosrow*.

From a distance the dramatic swathes of colour and seemingly amorphous form of these latest works seem entirely abstract, but closer inspection reveals there to be much more at play. Emerging from the backdrop vistas are dispersed ranks of figures, processing across the canvases – elongated and stretched horses, horsemen, foot soldiers, some distinct, others less so – moving in a careful choreography orchestrated by the artist to a simultaneously hidden yet curiously tangible rhythm. *Hunting Colours* (2016) exemplifies

the way in which Derakshani abstracts the world of the traditional Persian miniature's focus on royalty, hunting and horsemanship; *Garden Party Red* (2016) conjures up the idyllic Persian garden as a metaphor for heaven, the afterlife and paradise; while *Shirin and Khosrow* (2016) continue to play out their tragic romance (described in the Persian *Shahnameh*, the Book of Kings) in a beautifully layered, bejewelled and crafted kaleidoscope that calls to mind Paul Klee's famous affirmation, "Colour is the place where our brain and the universe meet."

There is a musicality to these latest works that is arguably more vibrant than in earlier pieces, although it has been present in virtually everything Derakshani has touched. A profound interest in music is as much a

Reza Derakshani. *Shirin and Khosrow*. 2016. Oil on canvas, 187 x 204 cm. All images courtesy of the artist and Sophia Contemporary Gallery

part of him as is his visual creativity (as indeed is poetry, especially the works of Rumi). On first arrival in New York, he earned a living through music, playing traditional Persian instruments like the setar, and it was a seamless and instinctive segway to incorporate musical forms into his pictorial art in a creative flow. He has always actively participated in music making, even starting a band specialising in a fusion style when last in Iran, and in recent years has recorded and performed live with the legendary The Doors drummer, John Densmore.

A master of creative reinvention, Derakshani continues to demonstrate how the most successful forms of abstraction arise from a connection between the artist's soul and a sense of the sublime.

It's a journey whose coordinates may be fixed, but the scope for spiritual and artistic diversions remains great. At their heart is a dilemma prompted by changing times and geographies, etched in Derakshani's own life. "The existing series will always constitute the foundation of his practice and will constantly be conceptually and aesthetically reinterpreted," says Lali Marganiya of Sophia Contemporary Gallery. "Reza will undoubtedly explore new themes in his artistic practice, but I believe they will continue to reflect on the history of his Persian identity with notions of displacement, migration and modernity." 📍

Hunting the Light ran at Sophia Contemporary Gallery in London from 26 January–8 March 2018.