

CCQ

a creative conversation

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Visual Poetry

Sophia Contemporary Gallery is a collaborative venture founded by long standing friends Vassili Tsarenkov, Lali Marganiya and Lili Jassemi. Their aim has been to provide an international platform for contemporary Middle Eastern artists. **Cath Roche** spoke to them about art practice in the region and the creative dialogues that exist between East and West.

Escaping the biting February wind and bustle of a busy London street, I enter Mayfair's Sophia Gallery, which is ready to open for its inaugural exhibition by celebrated Iranian artist Reza Derakshani. The cool, white space is stacked with an abundance of vibrant, large-scale paintings, jostling against each other as they await curatorial selection. Pinks, reds, blues and golds scatter throughout the space, while surface textures quietly hum. As I walk through the gallery, rich flashes of pigment invade my peripheral vision; I am enfolded in an exquisite carpet of vibrating colour.

We sit down to discuss the intense, two-year developmental journey of this gallery project. The founders describe the extensive background research and numerous field trips that eventually enabled them to handpick the artists they will represent. Five months in total were spent in Iran, visiting over 100 artists' studios. I asked them to tell me about the art scene in Iran and their experiences during the fieldtrips – what, if anything, stood out?

Vassili Tsarenkov: There has been a sort of renaissance within contemporary art in Iran. Ten years ago, there were about 10 galleries in Tehran, today there are more than 400. We arrived in an atmosphere of cultural and intellectual vibrancy and found a large, cohesive and tight knit-arts community.

Lili Jassemi: Visiting Pooya Aryanpour was a memorable experience. We are showing his work in June this year. Pooya is a well-established artist in Iran and a teacher at Tehran University of Art. He holds book clubs and philosophical get-togethers with his students, friends and colleagues, and always receives us with food and people. I suppose friendship and trust has organically grown between us.

Lali Marganiya: Mutual trust needs to be established in the gallery/artist relationship: we had to fight to create it. Initially, we didn't even have a gallery, so it was difficult for the artists to place trust in us, but we did it through hard work.

Cath Roche: So, what are you looking for when selecting artists?

LM: Firstly, we are looking for quality, which isn't difficult to find in Iran. Originality in the work is also essential, and what stands behind it – the concept. Finally, but very importantly, the connection between artist and gallery is crucial.

VT: We are also looking for skill, and this is a key aspect of Iranian art and art of the Middle East in general.

CR: Is this high level of technical skill a result of the arts education system in Iran, or other Middle Eastern countries? I'm interested to know where the focus is placed in visual arts learning – skill, tradition, innovation?

VT: There is a strong art school system in Iran. Traditional skills are embedded within the curriculum; calligraphy, book illustration and miniature painting are part of the programme. So, yes, they are incredibly skilled; but it is also important to know that Iranians are very tuned into global matters and debates. A lot of people think that Iran is cut off from the rest of the world, but that is absolutely wrong. It is one of the countries with the biggest number of Internet users per capita, and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tehran has the biggest collection of Modern Western art outside of the West, as well as one of the best collections of contemporary Iranian art.

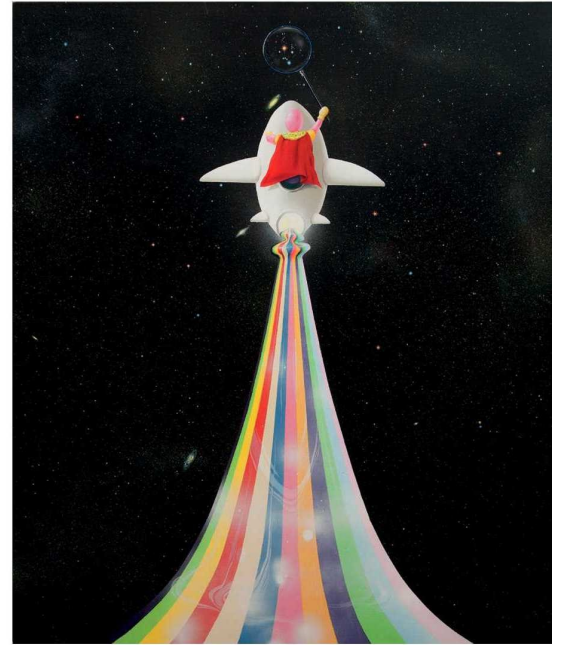
CR: Can you identify any characteristics of Iranian arts practice – I don't necessarily mean something visually identifiable – maybe more of an approach, attitude or position?

VT: On a conceptual level, I think poetry tends to permeate Iranian art and culture. Maybe this has been lost somewhat in contemporary Western art with postmodernism's cynical posturing. Some very successful artists, like Farhad Moshiri, play with Iranian culture in a postmodern way, but many have a more poetic quality to their work. The ancient Persian poets, Rumi or Omar Khayyám, are often an inspiration for them.

CR: The work of Azadeh Razaghdoust, who you also represent, is very much based on literature isn't it? You can see that clearly in her *Letters* series, but I think it's also present in all her imagery. The paint application is very poetic in its materiality: viscous paint meets delicate stains of colour. You can see the debt to Cy Twombly in her work, but there is also something that is uniquely feminine, mournful almost.

VT: Yes, and Cy Twombly was incredibly inspired by Afghanistan and Iran, as well as the writings of Iranian poets. Likewise, Twombly has been an inspiration for a whole generation of Iranian artists. So I think there is an interesting conversation between East and West here.

CR: Do you feel that there is a Western misconception that associates Middle Eastern visual culture solely with the past, bypassing contemporary artistic practice? There seems to be an emerging recognition perhaps?



VT: People often ask us to define Middle Eastern art and it's impossible to answer because there is so much diversity, like anywhere. The rise of contemporary Middle Eastern art in the West is a recent thing; it started maybe 20 years ago and has accelerated in the last 10 years, with the big auction houses establishing themselves in Dubai and Abu Dhabi and a growing number of galleries opening in the region. This rise will continue in the future with the planned opening of Middle Eastern branches of major museums, such as the Guggenheim and the Louvre, which will provide an institutional context to the region's art. But I think Western curators and audiences often impose their own perspectives on Middle Eastern artists; ones that either foreground ancient culture or politics. Our task is to change this misconception.

LM: London has one of the best global art scenes, so for our artists to be exhibited here, alongside all the other major galleries, enables

them to be perceived as international practitioners, rather than regional artists.

LJ: And our vision is to create a connection between Middle Eastern and Western contemporary art, curating group exhibitions from both regions and developing cross-cultural narratives without stigmatisation.

CR: Is it difficult being categorised as a Middle Eastern gallery because you are dealing with such a disparate region?

VT: For practical reasons it makes sense, but it's a bit misleading as there are so many contrasting histories amongst these countries. If you are Egyptian or Iranian, artistically speaking you will have few things in common; of course you have the legacy of Islamic arts, but those are very diverse cultures. The same can be said of Swedish →



and Spanish artists; they have the legacy of Christian art, but local histories are very different. It is important to be clear that Middle Eastern artists are not all the same. So while our gallery represents Middle Eastern art, we will actually focus on each artist's individual culture and related narrative.

CR: You have focused on Iranian artists, but what is your experience of contemporary visual culture elsewhere in the Middle East?

VT: We are most knowledgeable about Iranian art, but we are currently developing links with artists from Lebanon, Pakistan and Egypt too.

Iran has one of the most vibrant cultural art scenes in the region right now and our partner Lili is from Iran, so it made sense to us to focus there at first.

CR: Why do you think the arts scene in Iran is so invigorated right now?

VT: There are many reasons. One explanation could be that there are fewer restrictions within visual art in Iranian culture. In the Tehran National Museum you will see 15th century manuscripts with depictions of the prophet, which contradict the idea of a taboo around figurative depictions in Islamic art. Also, in the 15th century, Shah Abbas I

previous spread, left: *Untitled*, from the series, Yazesh, Hamed Sahihi, 2016, acrylic on canvas, 130cm x 90 cm, courtesy of the artist and Sophia Contemporary

previous spread, right: *Untitled*, from the series, Yazesh, Hamed Sahihi, 2016, acrylic on canvas, 150cm x 130 cm, courtesy of the artist and Sophia Contemporary

above: *Anori Gold*, Reza Derakshani, 2015, oil and tar on canvas, 152cm x 244cm, courtesy of the artist and Sophia Contemporary

prompted a sort of renaissance of Iranian art. He brought the finest craftsmen to Iran from all over the Persian Empire. Iran is a country that has always projected a huge cultural influence throughout the region and the world, contributing to its powerful visual culture.

More recently, prior to the 1979 revolution, the Shah of Iran and his wife were huge supporters of contemporary art. They built one of the largest art collections in the world and encouraged local artists by providing grants, so a contemporary art movement was already underway. The Iranian art scene then went through a revival in the 1990s, with various public art projects encouraging local artists to participate. Today you see the result of all this encouragement.

CR: The Middle East has undergone huge political upheavals in recent years. How has that impacted on artistic practice in your experience?

LJ: It is important to differentiate between Middle Eastern countries and their political and social contexts. But, generally, because the Middle East has been a conflict-ridden area for so long, artists have become sensitive to the situation and their surroundings; they partly draw their creativity from it. They balance the external narrative and perspective of their countries with their own subjective narratives, combining local and global assumptions. I don't think this necessarily makes them better artists, but it fosters deeper and more subtle creative practices where each detail is considered, not just in the visual arts, but in society in general.

CR: Conflict, or social crisis, often fosters creative energy and artists are frequently at the forefront of commentary, protest and change aren't they?

VT: People tend to reduce Middle Eastern art to something that is motivated by political conflict: some is, some isn't. We have noticed that while certain artists respond to current events, for many it takes time to process their experiences. In Iran, for example, artists in their thirties respond to the Iran–Iraq war of the 1980s; it shaped their childhood and took years for them to express this. Sometimes you can't represent things that are happening right now, the subject is too sensitive.

CR: I suppose that's similar to the German neo-expressionist painters of the 1980s who were responding to the aftermath of the Second World War?

VT: Exactly. The work of Amir Hossein Zanjani, an artist we will show early next year, is very much about authoritarianism and war. His art is shaped by his childhood experience of the war with Iraq. In Lebanon, you have painter Ayman Baalbaki, or conceptual artist Walid Raad, whose works respond to the civil war in Lebanon [1975-1990]. Recently, however, we saw some of the artists in Iran responding to the current situation with ISIS, because this is also a threat to Iran. Political events are definitely a catalyst for artists, but again they respond to their local narrative.

LJ: It is important that the artists we represent respond to their whole history, whether that's through continuity or disruption. We are searching for artists whose work is situated at a juncture between local and global, and who are aware of, and respond to, international trends and debates within contemporary art. Most significantly, though, we wish to support artists whose practices resonate beyond cultural barriers, offering universal opportunities for people to connect emotionally and aesthetically with potent visual experiences. We are very much looking forward to being part of this exciting journey—**CCQ**

Mehrdad Khataei: *Shadows* is showing at *Sophia Contemporary Gallery* 28 April - 4 June 2016

sophiacontemporary.com