

# Harper's BAZAAR ART

ARABIA

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FARIDEH  
LASHAI  
AND HER  
ENCHANTING OEUVRE

AFRUZ AMIGHI'S  
UTOPIAN  
TOWERS

WINDS OF CHANGE  
MIDDLE EASTERN ART  
*at the* GUGGENHEIM  
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## TEHRAN ON THE RISE

*With the gradual opening up of Iran, the country's growing art market is on the rise. Anna Brady surveys the recent sales of Modern and Contemporary Iranian art in London as well as prospects for its future growth at home*

TO MANY IN THE WEST, Iran is a country of contrasts, its romantic allure countered by trepidation and the strained international relations of recent decades. The lifting of some of the UN sanctions that targeted Iran's nuclear programme in January has, cautiously, led to an opening up of the country. And as its crippled banking system attempts to clamber to its feet, the 'frontier market' of modern and contemporary Iranian art is intriguing both enlightened collectors and the institutions of London, Paris and New York.

Tehran's own artistic scene is also experiencing a renaissance. Depending on who you believe, Tehran has either 150 or over 400 galleries, admittedly of variable quality, fuelled by a growing and cultured affluent middle class, a globally engaged population with a thirst for art. As the sanctions were only lifted a few months ago, significant changes are yet to be seen says Dina Nasser-Khadivi, Middle Eastern Art consultant for Christie's. However, Tehran's gallery scene has always been active. "What is interesting to observe is the establishment of important foundations which are becoming increasingly present such as the Pejman Foundation which is working on several interesting projects and publications," says Nasser-Khadivi. The most significant so far has been the Farideh Lashai retrospective at the reinvented Tehran Museum Contemporary of Art, which closed in February. Co-curated by Germano Celant, it is the first time a foreign curator has been invited to work on an exhibition in Iran since the 1979 revolution.

The auction market for Iranian art, both in Iran and in the West, revolves around established Iranian modernists, many of whom moved to Europe or the US after the revolution. In this sense it is conservative, with top auction results dominated largely by a handful of names such as Farhad Moshiri, Monir Farmanfarmanian and Parviz Tanavoli (b.1937). Tanavoli holds the auction record for any Iranian artist: \$2.8 million (Dhs10.4 million) achieved by *The Wall (Oh Persepolis)*, 1975, at Christie's Dubai in 2008. "Iranian artworks have always been among the strongest (if not the strongest) section within the Middle Eastern Art spectrum given they have the broadest section of artists in both modern and contemporary art with a pretty international demand attached to them," adds Nasser-



Below: Y.Z. Kami. *Untitled*, 1993. An installation work of oil on photographs mounted on canvas. Its inclusion in the exhibition *Mass Individualism* (until May 20) at Ab-Anbar gallery in Tehran was the first time Kami's work had been shown in his native country.

Khadivi. "The demand was actually at its peak in 2008 where several artists made major world auction records, such as Tanavoli. Since then the market has experienced a correction but has remained fairly consistent and steady."

Even the Tanavoli price was small fry in the wider contemporary art market, considering American artist Cy Twombly's untitled 'blackboard' work made a record \$70.5 million last November at Sotheby's New York. Both artists were represented in Sotheby's first single-owner Modern and Contemporary art sale from an Iranian collection in London on 21 April. Dubbed *Alchemy: Objects of Desire*, the collection of artist, gallerist and collector Fereydoon Ave knitted together East and West through his art which was laid out in a room recreating Ave's home. With 18th century Persian textiles displayed alongside the work of modernists and young Iranian artists it tapped into the trend for juxtaposing periods, a snapshot of how both historical Perso-Islamic influences and 20th century Western artistic movements have fed into modern and contemporary Iranian art.

Ave's Western upbringing and Iranian heritage combined in his eclectic tastes, so while the top lot was a work by his friend Twombly (\$405,000) the highest ten prices of the 155 lot, \$2,609,508 sale were split equally between Iranian and Western artists. Before the auction, head of sale Ashkan Baghestani expected it to "set the pace" for the Iranian

market since the lifting of sanctions. "Now is the perfect time to bring the sale to the market given the growing interest in Iran from western based institutions and collectors," he said. "The quality, depth, culture and collectors are all there. It just needs to cross boundaries now, export itself." Speaking after *Alchemy* and the relaunched 20th Century art / Middle East sale, which was held on 20 April 20, Baghestani said they, "broke new ground for the Middle Eastern art market in London", citing seven new auction records, including for the Iranian artists Leyly Matine Daftary, Maliheh Afnan and Taher Pour Heidari. "Our cross marketing worked and the best selling Iranian work, Charles Hossein Zenderoudi's *Eyn + Eyn* at \$266,000, went to an American collector who has never bought in this field before" said Baghestani, "Equally Iranian buyers bought Western works for the first time, such as photographs and prints, by Twombly, Rauschenberg and Warhol. Bidding was international, from the US, UK, Europe and the Middle East, and there was also good traction in Tehran. I think there is potential for a greater evolution if the transfer of money to and from Iran is made easier." For now, says Nasser-Khadivi, most of the largest collections of Iranian art are in the hands of Dubai-based collectors. "However, Iranian Modern and Contemporary Art is a category that has had a very international following in the last ten years and not just within the diaspora but also within important international collections such as that

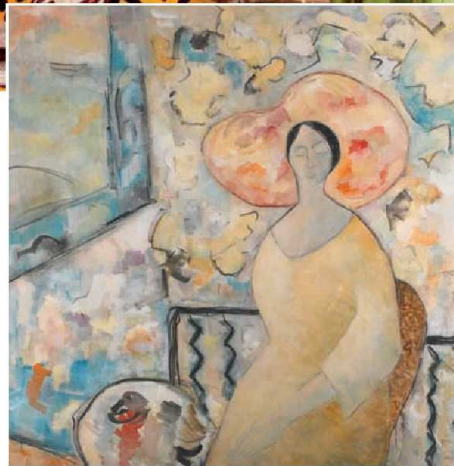


of Peter Marino, Leon Black and The Rubell collection, to name a few."

In March, the first commercial gallery in London largely devoted to Modern and Contemporary Iranian art, Sophia Contemporary, opened in Mayfair. The timing, shortly after the lifting of sanctions, was due more to chance than design says co-founder Vassili Tsarenchov. "When we started, there was no deal in sight, although the removal of the sanctions has definitely increased the attention of collectors," says Tsarenchov. "Many artists working inside the country have previously had very little international visibility so we wanted to promote them to a wider audience." Iranians, however, have always been globally engaged says Tsarenchov. "The new generation are very cosmopolitan and tuned into international artistic debates. A few years ago there were only a handful of galleries in Tehran, now there are over 400 with openings every week. The diaspora also has an impact as many Iranians are collecting in the US and the UK."

Of Sophia Contemporary's opening exhibition of Iranian painter Reza Derakshani, one painting sold to an Iranian collector and others to American, German, British and Russian buyers. "It's something new and fresh, adds Tsarenchov. "It has been behind an iron curtain, but now relations with the West are improving the art market is growing."

Tsarenchov is also considering holding



Above: Sotheby's Head of Sale Ashkan Baghestani seated in a curated display of Alchemy: Objects of Desire, the auction house's first-ever single-owner Modern and Contemporary Iranian Art Sale presenting the collection of major Iranian artist and curator, Fereydoun Ave. Left: Mollieh Afman. *Lady in a Hat*, 1961. Oil on canvas. The painting made a new record for the artist at auction when it sold to a private collector for \$89,914 at Sotheby's London on April 20.

pop-up exhibitions in Tehran itself, possibly in collaboration with local galleries. One such gallery, Ab-Anbar, established in 2014 in downtown Tehran, has recently borrowed works from international heavyweight galleries Lisson and Gagosian for its group exhibition, *Mass Individualism A Form of Multitude* (15 April - 20 May). Gallery director Salman Matinfar and curator Azadeh Zaferani were keen to include the work of two artists who have never shown before in their native Iran: Shirazeh Houshiari, a London-based artist represented by Lisson Gallery, and Y.Z. Kami, who is with Gagosian and lives in New York.

Despite numerous galleries, auctions are rare, but on 27 May, the fifth Tehran Auction of Modern and Contemporary Iranian Art will take

place. Last year's sale totalled 210,400,000,000 IRR (approximately US\$6.9 million) from 122 lots, a figure founder and director Shirin Tavakolian, also of the Shirin Art Gallery, which has bases in New York and Tehran, hopes to increase again.

However, despite the sanctions being lifted in theory, logistics remain tricky due to a wariness among international corporations says Matinfar. "Many insurance companies are still afraid to work with Iran. Eventually we got the artworks here but, although we managed to get insurance from UK insurance companies, I have had to self-insure those from the US."

The scene may be vibrant and enthusiasm palpable, but it is hampered by such hurdles, one barrier to the first Tehran Art Fair, which according to its website is slated to run from November 10-13 but yet to be confirmed. Until the banking system reestablishes itself and international trust improves, a major art fair in Iran seems an ambitious dream and, for now, London and Dubai remain the centre of this young market. One thing is sure: modern and contemporary Iranian art is a rich and relatively untapped seam. Just tread carefully. ■