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THE ART OF HOPE

SAFWAN DAHOUL
AND HIS
DREAM-LIKE
CANVASES



HUNTING AND COLLECTING



*Camaraderie and a mutual affinity with both Middle-Eastern and Western culture brought together three well-traveled art professionals, who decided to embark on an exciting project: to found Sophia Contemporary in the heart of Mayfair in London. **Siska Lyssens** explores the new space*

Above: An interior view of the new Sophia Contemporary in London.
Left: Reza Derakshani. *Hunting the Ecstasy*. 2015. Oil on canvas. 180 x 250 cm.



Above: An exterior view of the gallery.
Below: Vassili Tsarenkov, Lali Marganiya and Lili Jassemi.



Lali Marganiya, Lili Jassemi and Vassili Tsarenkov, who, combined, have roots in Georgia, Russia, Iran, Germany and France, began their research trips to the Middle East, and Iran in particular, about a year and a half ago. “We visited numerous artists’ studios and galleries, art foundations and museums,” says Marganiya, who worked as an independent art advisor at the time. As it happened, Tsarenkov, who then was a manager at the St. Petersburg Gallery in London, was writing his dissertation on Contemporary Iranian art.

Struck by the undeniable quality of the country’s art, and its deplorable lack of presence in the West, they resolved to make Iran their gallery’s focus. “There are so many talented artists both emerging and established in Iran, working in different media,” states Marganiya ahead of the gallery’s opening on March 9th. But, she stresses, they “don’t get as much exposure outside of Iran. We decided to give them an opportunity to be presented on the international art stage and reach international recognition.”

A single-floor space with an industrial ceiling, elegant white walls and a warm, wooden floor, Sophia Contemporary Gallery will function as that much-needed platform. But instead of

pigeonholing their roster of artists, the three friends aim to place Iranian artists in an international context by showing their work alongside contemporary Western art in order to foster a creative dialogue.

“The relationship between Middle Eastern and Western art has always been special,” continues Marganiya. “For example, western artists like Paul Klee or Matisse, Francesco Clemente and Alighiero Boetti, were interested in Eastern art and infused it within their artistic practices. Conversely, from the 1920’s onwards, Iranian artists went to study in the academies of Rome, Paris, etc. They brought their education back home and created new artistic movements, which were a confluence of West and East.”

What interests the three founders above all are the similarities between Middle-Eastern and so-called ‘international’ artists, regardless of their country of birth. “We would like to show the things they share rather than what separates them”, says Marganiya. Sophia Contemporary strives to stir curiosity in the visitor who sets foot in the gallery, and who may not be familiar with the region’s ample output.

“I would like them to wonder at the fact that when you put an Iranian artist in an international context, you would not necessarily distinguish them as such” muses Marganiya. “No matter where the artist comes from, the artistic skills speak for themselves and are universal. Middle-Eastern artists are simply exploring contemporary issues like any other artist in the world.”

One such Iranian artist is Reza Derakshani. “Even though he moved to New York and was associated with the Western abstract Neo-Expressionist movement, I think his experience of immigration somehow stimulated him to reconnect with his Iranian roots,” explains Marganiya. “In the beginning he experimented with pure abstraction, but later on he decided to merge these abstract forms with figurative forms.”

Derakshani’s ability to reflect on his own history and Iranian identity while applying the rules of Western art practices places the acclaimed polymath in the perfect position to inaugurate Sophia Contemporary. “Iran has a great history of culture and art, and one has to wonder what would have happened in the field of art if it was connected to the rest of the world and if there was freedom for the past few decades,” Derakshani reflected ahead of his exhibition at Sophia Contemporary, entitled *The Breeze at Dawn*.

The artist will show new work from his ongoing *Hunting* series, a few pieces from his *Tree/ Pomegranate* series and “a couple of pieces of new, more abstract surfaces, combined with a verse or highlight of Persian poetry.”

In tune with Lali, Lili and Vassili, Derakshani believes it’s time to stop highlighting only the differences between Western and Eastern art. “Looking at the similarities allows us to play shoulder to shoulder in the international art scene,” he says.

Sophia Contemporary will act as a springboard to that scene, and they already have a few emerging artists lined up, too. Pooya Aryanpour, whose abstract works in ethereal colours are interlaced with mysticism and suspense, and Azadeh Razaghdoo, a female artist who uses red pigment on white canvas to create very powerful and expressive yet feminine and sensual work.

Looking at Derakshani’s *oeuvre*, with its tactile qualities, lively brushstrokes and vibrant colours, it’s understandable that he rejects classification. “I personally feel tired of being categorised as a Middle-Eastern artist, and as a consequence being measured or valued with different tools,” he declares. “As a citizen of the world, I’m here to play on the world stage.” Trust Sophia Contemporary to bring together the talented actors. ■

Reza Derakshani: *The Breeze At Dawn* Runs From 9 March until 23 April. sophiacontemporary.com