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THE SUPPLEMENT

15

CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS TO WATCH

SOPHIA CONTEMPORARY GALLERY

- The new addition to Mayfair's contemporary art scene discusses emerging markets, being discovered and artists-to-watch

Founded in 2014, Sophia Contemporary (sophiacontemporary.com) is an art gallery situated in a 3,000-square-foot space in the bustling art hub of Mayfair, London – seconds from the world renowned Victoria Miro Gallery (victoria-miro.com). The gallery aims to represent a diverse range of work from both emerging and established artists from the USA, Europe, the Middle East and Asia, working across all media.

This bright, defined space was established by three international contemporary art advocates, including: Vassili Tsarenkov, born in Russia and raised in Paris, who was previously the manager at Mayfair's St. Petersburg Gallery (stpetersburgcollectiongallery.com) and Lali Marganiya, an independent art advisor of Russian and Georgian origin. Completing the trio is Lili Jassemi, a former consultant in European Affairs in Brussels and a specialist in Iranian culture.

I sat down with Sophia Contemporary's founders for a fascinating discussion about their love of Iranian contemporary art, industry experience, and advice for contemporary artists and first-time collectors.

To kick things off, I spoke with Iran specialist Lili about her fascination with Iranian art. "Being a melting pot at the crossroads of various cultures and borders Iran has accumulated, adapted and integrated multiple influences within its art and culture. The contemporary art scene is the result of this intertwined dynamic, which make for very interesting art," she said, adding: "Contemporary Iranian artists have been under-represented in the past, which had to do mostly with the relative isolation of the country due to Western sanctions." With more than 400 galleries in Tehran alone, Jassemi admits that the scene is now changing very quickly as the country opens up to the

West – especially as, according to Lili: "Iranian artists have a high level of technical skill as a result of the arts education system in regards to universities and the system of mentorship in private ateliers."

It is important to note that traditional skills sit at the heart of Iran's vibrant art culture. "Traditional handcraft skills are embedded within the curriculum – artists are educated in miniature painting, book illustration, drawing and calligraphy. This makes Iranian artists, who have had the chance to be part of this public/private hybrid system, very talented artists who can utilize their skills to serve their originality and innovation," Lili said. While, at first, Iranian art seemed central to Sophia Contemporary, the gallery is now expanding its efforts in representing artists from further afield. For instance, a recent exhibition has included the work of American artists as well as Indian artist Rina Banerjee, whose work you could have previously seen at the Freer-Sackler Museum in Washington (asia.si.edu), the Bronx Museum in New



From left to right: Vassili Tsarenkov, Lali Marganiya, Lili Jassemi



Installation view of Robert Kelly, *Black On Bone*, Selected Works at Sophia Contemporary Gallery.

York (bronxmuseum.org), and even the Musée Guimet in Paris (guimet.fr).

When discussing the three founders' former experience, Vassili pointed out that "Sophia Contemporary Gallery is the result of a two-year project," adding: "We have spent the past two years visiting countless artist studios in the Middle East and around the world, and meeting with many collectors, curators, art critics, museum directors and, of course, artists. Our idea was to go as often as we could on field trips in order to meet the artists and see them working in their own environment."

While the trio hold a significant amount of experience between them, it seems that the key to Sophia Contemporary's success is, quite simply, hard work and knowledge of the industry.

I went on to speak to Lali about where they look for new talent and, if you're an artist, how you might hope to get found and considered for an exhibition at the new Mayfair space. She told me: "We do research a lot through the Internet and in publications, looking at Instagram, artist websites, art magazines and so on. We go on field trips and visit artist studios regularly and try to attend as many graduate shows as we can. Art fairs are also one of the best places to scout talent. And very often, artists are recommended by friends,

collectors, curators and by our artists themselves." Lali added: "My advice to emerging artists: Invest in a well-designed website with an up-to-date portfolio and try to get your artworks in as many venues as possible (fairs, group shows, graduation shows, and so on). This is the best way to start to get noticed."

Without hesitation, I then came out with one of my favourite questions and asked Sophia Contemporary's trio to suggest two emerging artists to watch. After some thought, they didn't disappoint.



Photography by Julija Svetlova

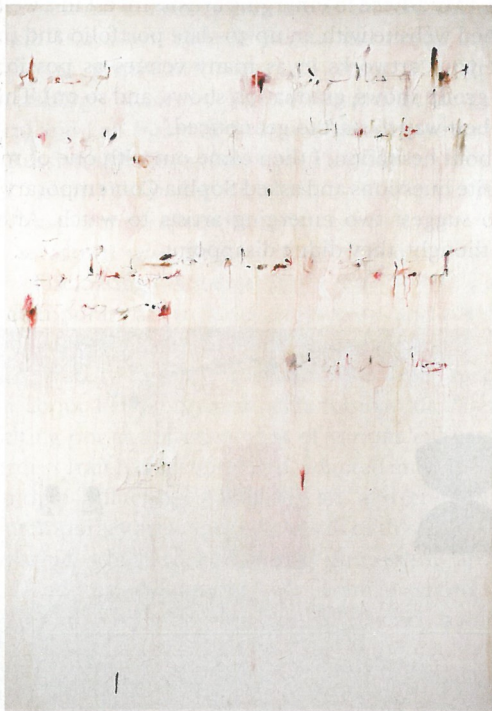
AZADEH RAZAGHDOOST

Born in Tehran, Iran, in 1979, Azadeh Razaghdoost is an Iranian painter based in Karaj, Iran. Razaghdoost received her BA in Painting from Tehran University of Art in 2002 and her work is in the permanent collection of the Vallpalou Foundation, Lleida, Spain. Azadeh's work has been widely exhibited internationally, including at the Kunst(Zeug)Haus Museum in Zurich (kunstzeughaus.ch) and Isfahan Museum of Contemporary Art in Isfahan, Iran.

Sophia Contemporary describe Azadeh's work as a flurry of "coloured pigments that are masterfully poured and arranged onto the white canvas in an artistic gesture reminiscent of Action Painting and Abstract Expressionism. By interrogating the essential tensions underpinning existence and exploring the emotive properties of colour, Razaghdoost creates a truly poetic and idiosyncratic visual language at the confluence of life's most fundamental impulses."

Azadeh will have her first ever UK exhibition with Sophia Contemporary, which will run from 24 November 2016 – 18 February 2017.

Discover more at azadehrazaghdoost.com



"Recipe for a Poem" by Azadeh Razaghdoost



"Dear Theo" by Azadeh Razaghdoost

RINA BANERJEE

Born in Calcutta, India, in 1963, Rina Banerjee grew up in London, England, and eventually moved to New York. A former scientist – receiving her BA in Science in Polymer Engineering at Case Western University in 1993 – Banerjee received her MA in Fine Arts from Yale University in 1995.

Banerjee compiles seemingly random objects and materials to assemble imposing, often vibrant installations with a loosely political message.

Rina has exhibited internationally and her works are also included in many private and public collections, such as the Whitney Museum of American Art (whitney.org), New York; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco (sfmoma.org); Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (centrepompidou.fr); Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia (pafa.org); Queens Museum, New York (queensmuseum.org); and the Brooklyn Museum, New York (brooklynmuseum.org).

Discover more at rinabanerjee.com



“Under the Wandering Reach” by Rina Banerjee



Sophia Contemporary Gallery, Exterior.

I will, without doubt, be taking Sophia Contemporary's advice onboard and keeping both Azadeh and Rina on my radar, and I recommend that you do the same.

Investing in your first piece of art is always daunting, which is why I couldn't help but ask for Sophia Contemporary's advice on collecting, to which Lali replied: "I would say, first and foremost, buy with your heart. Collecting should be a way to expand your horizons and not just an investment. People who buy only for investment generally do not do very well. And people who start buying pieces they fell in love with, which challenged them or moved them, often become lifelong successful collectors. Find artists that speak to you and you will always enjoy living with their art. There are no rules in art and this is what makes it so interesting and creative. Of course you can follow the hype but it generally never lasts long. The best way is to educate yourself by going to galleries, museums, auctions etc., and soon enough you will be able to make informed decisions."

If you're looking for contemporary art events to attend, Sophia Contemporary recommend:

- **Frieze Art Fair** (frieze.com) – The gallery took part in Frieze Master's in October in the Collections section curated by Sir Norman Rosenthal.
- **Art Dubai** (artdubai.ae) – "The main art fair for modern and contemporary Middle Eastern art."
- **FIAC** (fiac.com) – "A personal favourite that is smaller and more intimate than the mega art fairs such as Frieze and Art Basel."
- **Venice Biennale** (labiennale.org) – "A great place to see art from all over the world in a non-commercial context."

To finish up, the Sophia Contemporary trio revealed some tidbits on their development and what we can expect to see from the gallery over the next few years: "We plan to keep promoting art of both the East and West, while growing our roster by

including talented emerging and established artists who we believe deserve to be represented in London and beyond. We put a lot of emphasis on providing an institutional context for our artists. We have, for instance, participated in the organisation of two solo Museum shows for our artist Reza Derakshani this year: A Retrospective at the Russian Museum which took place in May – July 2016, and a show of new works which took place at the Kunstsammlungen Chemnitz in Germany in October. We plan on continuing to advocate for our artists and hopefully make institutional exhibitions and residencies happen for them. Finally, in the future we hope to take part in many art fairs around the world, including the Dallas Art Fair (dallasartfair.com), the Armory Show in New York (thearmoryshow.com) and Art Brussels (artbrussels.com), among others.”

With a taste in contemporary talent that sets them apart from the pool of galleries in and around London, and specifically Mayfair, Sophia Contemporary is a gallery on the up that should be on your radar.

Upcoming Exhibitions:

Azadeh Razaghdoost: Recipe for a Poem

Painting

24 November 2016 - 18 February 2017

Alfred Basbous

Sculpture

Mid-February 2017 - exact date TBC

Discover more about the gallery, its founders and upcoming exhibitions at sophiacontemporary.com

Written by Daniel Dunt