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Iranian art proves a hit with collectors at new London gallery

Sophia Contemporary Gallery, which specialises in contemporary art from the Middle Eastern region, launched this week

by ANNY SHAW, GARETH HARRIS | 10 March 2016



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The artist Reza Derakshani at the opening of Sophia Contemporary Gallery in London. © Julija Svetlova

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London has become a hotbed for contemporary art from the Middle East and wider region in recent years. Sophia Contemporary Gallery, which opened yesterday (9 March), is the latest to join a growing roster of commercial and non-profit spaces showing Arab art in the UK capital, including Ayyam Gallery, The Mosaic Rooms and P21 Gallery.

The Iranian-born artist Reza Derakshani launched Sophia Contemporary Gallery's new space with an exhibition of 18 paintings, which nearly sold out on the opening night. Priced between £60,000 and £150,000, works went to collectors in the UK, US and Germany, according to Vassili Tsarenkov, the Russian dealer who co-founded the gallery with the Russian art adviser Lali Margania and Lili Jassemi, a specialist in Iranian culture. The Breeze at Dawn runs until 23 April.

Derakshani's near sell-out success is not altogether surprising: the Austin-based painter, poet and musician has a strong following in the West and the Middle East, and his works are collected by institutions including the British Museum, New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art. Meanwhile, the State Russian Museum in St Petersburg is organising a retrospective of the artist's career from 26 May until 25 July, which is then due to travel to Germany's Kunstsammlungen Chemnitz in the autumn.

"Derakshani's art is at the confluence of Eastern artistic traditions and Western contemporary practices while reflecting the globalised world that we live in, which fits perfectly with our gallery vision," Tsarenkov says.

Interest in Iranian artists has been growing steadily over the past ten years, but the lifting of sanctions on Iran in January has opened the door to the art scene inside the country. "Iranian artists based in Iran used to have little visibility outside of their country due to its relative isolation. There is now a tremendous eagerness on the part of Western collectors and institutions to discover the art scene there," Tsarenkov says.

As well as representing some of the most established contemporary artists from the Middle Eastern region, Sophia Contemporary Gallery also has its sights on a new generation of emerging artists. The gallery's stable includes Mehrdad Khataei, Pooya Aryanpour and Azadeh Razaghdoost. The next exhibition will feature works by the Tehran-based mixed-media artist Mehrdad Khataei (28 April-4 June).