



SHIVA AHMADI

REINVENTING THE POETICS OF MYTH

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LEILA TAGHINIA-MILANI HELLER GALLERY



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Al-Khidr 2009 (above)
Mixed Media on Aqua Board
40 x 60 in (101.6 x 152.4 cm)
On loan to the Detroit Institute of Arts,
Detroit, Michigan

Oil Barrel #9 2009 (left)
Oil on Steel
34.5 x 23.5 x 23.5 in
(87.6 x 59.7 x 59.7 cm)

Cover Image:
Yellow Veil (detail) 2009
Mixed Media on Aqua Board
22 x 30 in (55.9 x 76.2 cm)

SHIVA AHMADI

Seldom does a day go by in which Iran is not in the news. Mostly it is for all the wrong reasons, including the rounding up of opponents of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, opposition street demonstrations, and reports of secret uranium enrichment as part of an unsanctioned nuclear weapons program. It is no wonder that the country has a tarnished public image abroad. It seems like a place out of control.

With so much negative news in the mainstream media it is easy to forget that much of Iranian society is peaceful, tolerant and hard working. It is also easy to forget that the Iranian people are suffering, victims of withering sanctions that have crippled the economy. Government controlled exports of the nation's vast oil reserves keep the economy alive, providing a much needed source of foreign revenue, but also entrenching the power of the present, oppressive theocratic political regime. For Iranians, oil is both a blessing and a curse, a source of prosperity but at the same time the handmaiden of misfortune.

It is little wonder, then, that the role of oil in Iranian politics, economics and society is the subject of the work of many Iranian artists. It is certainly a recurring theme for Shiva Ahmadi, one of the most talented and recognized of a new generation of Iranian artists. Among many other things, she decorates recycled oil barrels with delicate designs taken from classical Persian miniature paintings and Islamic art (animals, rocks, shields, faceless figures, boats, arrows, and various decorative abstract patterns are common in her work) mingled with references to contemporary social and political events in Iran and the region.

Ahmadi's painted oil barrels have been acquired by museums and private collectors all over the world. But this is only one indication of their widespread success. Astonishingly poignant, they cleverly weave together two immediately recognizable cultural signifiers - the oil barrel, and classical Persian painting, which was one of Iran's earliest and most influential exports (it was the dominant influence on other Islamic miniature traditions, notably in Turkey and also in the Indian subcontinent). Ahmadi's barrels invite us to ponder the replacement of one kind of national or regional symbol with another.

But they also point to the complexity and instability of Iran today. Look carefully at the imagery painted on the oil barrels and you will find not only beautiful Middle Eastern patterns and designs but symbols of violence and conflict, such as guns, combat boots, and bleeding bullet holes, along with representations of religion, capitalism and power. Iran may be isolated politically and economically because of sanctions, but the country does not exist in a vacuum. It is also a player and a pawn in larger world issues.

Ahmadi, who was born in Tehran in 1975 and now lives in Detroit, is also concerned with the rights of women in Iranian society. She was three years old when the Islamic revolution began in Iran, but over the following decades she witnessed the implementation of strict religious laws aimed at constraining women and their rights. She graduated in painting from Azad University in Tehran in 1998 and later that year came to the United States to pursue further education at Cranbrook Academy of Arts in Michigan. She resolved to stay in this country following the deterioration of the political situation in Iran.

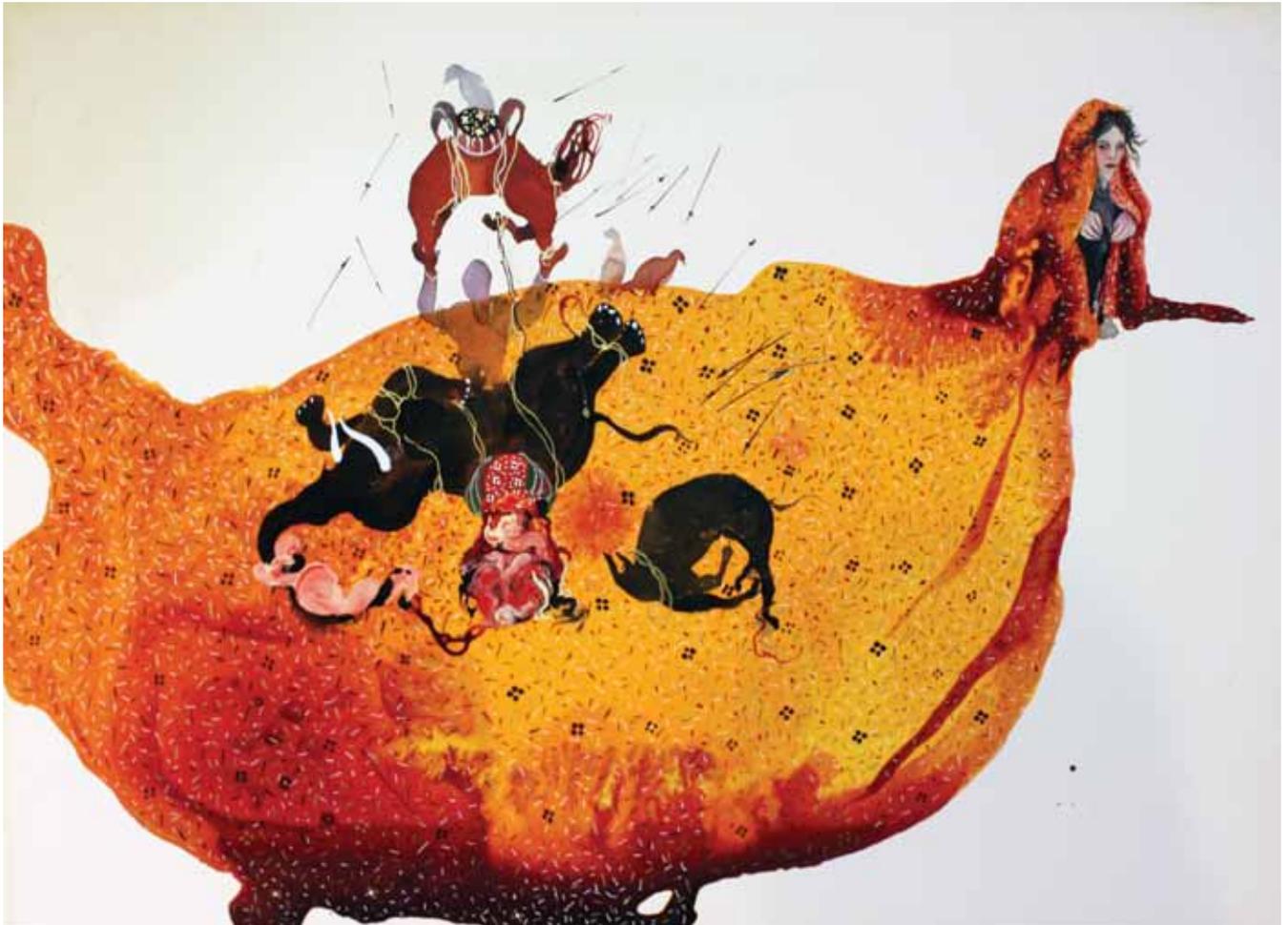
Her early watercolor paintings (she likes this medium because it is fluid and always slightly out of control much like her subject matter) addressed what the artist describes in a statement as "the political, social, and psychological aspects of women's experience in contemporary Islamic societies." She initially drew on her own experiences, gradually layering into the works wider ideas to do with the misrepresentation of Islamic societies in the West. This led to her oil barrels and other, more recent paintings with political messages to do with the politics and history of Iran and the Middle East.

The present show contains a dozen of her newest watercolors, all of which take immediate inspiration from political events in Iran but have, the artist insists, a wider relevance. "They are about the chaos and the instability in the world right now, whether it is in the Middle East or elsewhere," the artist told me in a recent telephone conversation. References to these events are however subtle, mingling with delicate imagery from Persian and Indian miniatures illustrating heroic stories from Islamic mythology and the Koran. Beauty and chaos, good and evil - it is all here. Our world is a bundle of contradictions.

Benjamin Genocchio writes art criticism for *The New York Times*. His latest book is *Asian Contemporary Art*, Thames & Hudson (London) and Monacelli Press (New York) 2010.



Prophet Is Born 2009
Media on Aqua Board
60 x 40 in (152.4 x 101.6 cm)



Yellow Veil 2009
Mixed Media on Aqua Board
22 x 30 in (55.9 x 76.2 cm)



Red Veil 2009
Mixed Media on Aqua Board
20 x 16 in (50.8 x 40.6 cm)



Elephant 2009
Mixed Media on Aqua Board
60 x 40 in (152.4 x 101.6 cm)



Green Veil #1 2009 (top)
Mixed Media on Aqua Board
15 x 22 in (38.1 x 55.9 cm)

Green Veil #2 2009 (bottom)
Mixed Media on Aqua Board
15 x 22 in (38.1 x 55.9 cm)



Shield 2009
Mixed Media on Aqua Board
16 x 20 in (40.6 x 50.8 cm)



Oil Barrel #10 2010
Oil on Steel
34.5 x 23.5 x 23.5 in
(87.6 x 59.7 x 59.7 cm)



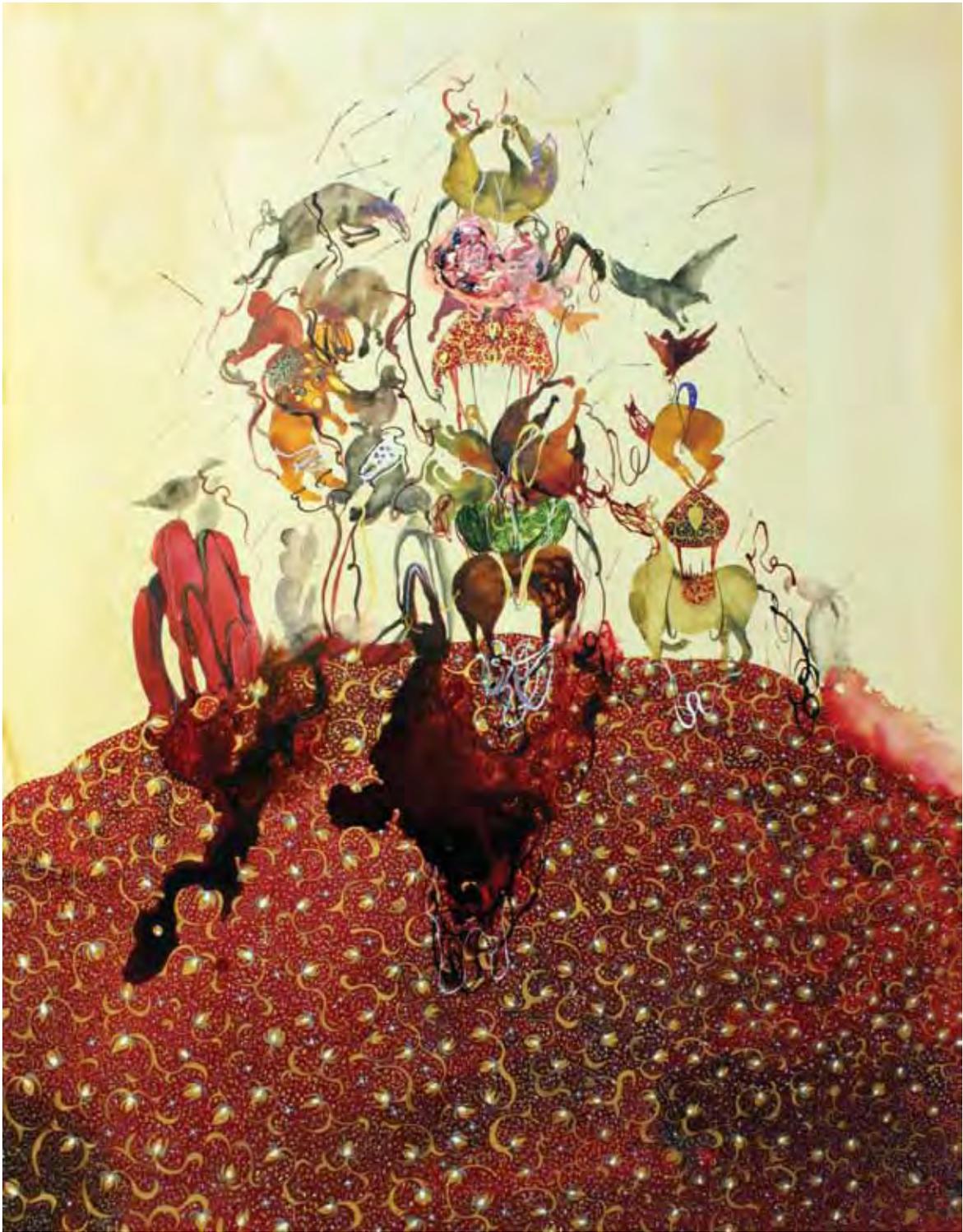
Hocus-Pocus 2009
Mixed Media on Aqua Board
40 x 60 in (101.6 x 152.4 cm)



Green Lake 2009
Mixed Media on Aqua Board
60 x 40 in (152.4 x 101.6 cm)



Bird 2009
Mixed Media on Aqua Board
22 x 15 in [55.9 x 38.1 cm]



Red Carpet 2009
Mixed Media on Aqua Board
45 x 35 in (114.3 x 88.9 cm)

SHIVA AHMADI

EDUCATION

- 2005 Cranbrook Academy of Arts, Bloomfield Hills, MI, Master of Fine Arts, Painting
- 2003 Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, Master of Fine Arts, Drawing
- 2000 Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, Master of Art, Drawing
- 1998 Azad University, Tehran, Iran, Bachelor of Fine Art, Painting

ART RESIDENCY

Skowhegan Art Residency, Skowhegan, ME, June - August 2003

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- 2009 **Contemporary Istanbul**, Istanbul, Turkey
Abu Dhabi Art Fair, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates
Selseleh/Zelseleh, Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller Gallery, New York, NY
Iran Inside Out, Chelsea Art Museum, New York, NY
- 2008 **Conference of the Birds**, London, England
ArtParis Abu Dhabi, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates
Ahmadi & Zhang, Feldman Gallery, Portland, OR
Distant Shores: Cultural Exchange in Contemporary Art, McIninch Art Gallery, NH
Splash, Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller Gallery, New York, NY
- 2007 **Merging Influences, Eastern Elements in New American Art**, Montserrat Art Gallery, Boston, MA
Why Project, Detroit Project, Detroit, MI
- 2006 **Figuratively Speaking**, Elga Wimmer Gallery, New York, NY
- 2005 **Three Positions**, Lombard-Freid Projects, New York, NY
Oil Crisis, Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller Gallery, New York, NY (Solo show)
Atomica, Lombard-Freid Project and Esso Gallery, New York, NY
Biennial, Portland Museum of Art, Portland, ME
Cross Current, Birmingham Bloomfield Art Center, Birmingham, MI
- 2003 **Biennial Art Competition, South Bend Regional Museum of Art**, South Bend, IN
Detroit Now, Meadow Brook Art Gallery, Rochester, MI
- 2002 **Biennial Art Competition**, South Bend Regional Museum of Art, South Bend, IN
Detroit Now, Meadow Brook Art Gallery, Rochester, MI
- 2000 **Academics 2002**, Paint Creek Center for Arts, Detroit, MI
Y2K, MCCA Gallery, Detroit, MI

AWARDS AND FELLOWSHIPS

- 2009 Kresge Artist Fellowship, Kresge Foundation, Detroit, MI
- 2008 Nominated for Altoid Award by The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, NY
- 2004 First Prize, NYC 6th National Juried Exhibition, New York, NY
First Prize, Biennial Art Competition, South Bend Regional Museum of Art, South Bend, IN
- 2003 First prize, Michigan Fine Arts Competition, Birmingham Bloomfield Art Center, Birmingham, MI
- 2002 John & Irene Sowinski Scholarship, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI
Graduate Professional Scholarship, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI
Second Prize, Michigan Drawing Biennial Exhibition, Ford Gallery, Ypsilanti, MI
- 2001 Thomas C. Rumble University Graduate Fellowship, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI

BOOKS AND CATALOGUES

- 2009 **Iran Inside Out: Influences of Homeland Diaspora on the Artistic Language of Contemporary Iranian Artists**, Anthony Downey, Chelsea Art Museum, New York, NY, pages 18-19
- 2008 **Different Sames: New Perspective in Contemporary Iranian Art**, Hossein Amirsadeghi, TransGlobe Publishing Limited, London, England, pages 62- 63

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Genocchio, Benjamin, "Import/Export in the Heat of the Moment," **Art in America**, November 2009, Issue 10
- Kino, Carol, "Iranian Shine, Assisted by Expatriate," **The New York Times**, August 2009
- Wei, Lilly, "Selseleh/Zelzeleh" at Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller Gallery, **ArtNews**, October 2009
- Cotter, Holland, "Iran Inside Out," **The New York Times**, July 2009
- Nazhand, Nazi, "Abu Dhabi Report," **Artnet Magazine**, November 2009
- Kaylan, Melik, "The View From Here," **The Wall Street Journal**, August 2009
- Waxman, Lori, "Art Galleries: Iran as You've Never Seen It Before," **Chicago Tribune**, October, 2009
- Genocchio, Benjamin, "A Dialogue Between Tradition and Innovation," **The New York Times**, November 7, 2008
- Brown, Joel, "New American Art, Informed by the East," **The Boston Globe**, September 2007
- Biro, Mathew, "Contemporary Developments in Drawing," **Contemporary 21**, August 2006
- Crawford, Lynn, "The Mind's Eye," Web link: <http://www.markszine.com>, March 2006
- Rutter, Ben, Art Review, "It's Pronounced Nu-cle-ar," **New York Art**, September 2005
- Roberts, Bryony, Art Review, Art in the City "Why Don't We Do It in the Road," **L Magazine**, August 2005
- Haddad, Natalie, "Displaced," **Real Detroit Weekly**, April, 2004
- Bolleber, Luise, "Gallery Welcomes Detroit Now," **The Oakland Post**, June 2003
- "Room for Interpretation," **Real Detroit Weekly**, December 2002
- Pilgjan, Ellen, "Expats on Show," **Metro Times**, April 2004
- Sousanis, Nick, "Review of Exchange at Forum Gallery," **TheDetroitier.com**
- Sousanis, Nick, "Review of New Shoes at Tangent Gallery," **TheDetroitier.com**
- "Review of On the Wall at Tangent Gallery," **Real Detroit Weekly**, June 2003
- Tysh, George, "Wild at Heart," **Metro Times**, June 2003

COLLECTIONS

- Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, MI
- The Farjam Collection, Dubai, United Arab Emirates
- TDIC Collection, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates
- His Highness Sheikh Mohammed Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi

VISITING ARTIST AND LECTURES

- 2009 New Mexico State University, Albuquerque, NM
- 2008 Pacific Northwest College of Art, Portland, OR
Broward College of Arts, Miami, FL
- 2007 University of Chicago, College of Fine Arts, Chicago, IL
Reed College, College of Arts, Portland, OR
Wichita State University, College of Fine Arts, Wichita, KS
Cornell University, College of Fine Arts, Ithaca, NY

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