



Protest in Tehran  
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Installation view of "Iran Inside Out" at Chelsea Art Museum



**Nazgol Ansarinia**  
*Untitled 2 (detail)*  
2007  
"Iran Inside Out"  
Chelsea Art Museum



## IRANIAN ART NOW by Ben Davis

"Iran Inside Out," June 26-Sept. 5, 2009, at the Chelsea Art Museum, 556 West 22nd Street, New York, N.Y. 10011

"Iran Inside Out" certainly wasn't planned to coincide with the outbreak of a protest movement in Iran. But it is impossible to look at the artworks in this sprawling, jumbled, two-floor exhibition at the Chelsea Art Museum -- featuring 34 artists who currently work in Iran (mainly in Tehran) and another 22 who are Iran-born but work outside -- without thinking about what is going on right now in the streets.

Whatever the outcome of the present demonstrations, one of their side effects is that they have torn the lid off of Western, particularly American, stereotypes about Iran. Heretofore, it was all too easy for the media and politicians to paint the giant Persian nation with a single brush. If ordinary Iranian people were mentioned at all, it was in some condescending way, as backward types we had to enlighten or liberate. The combative street protests forcefully shoved another image of Iran onto the world stage -- the image of a country bursting at the seams with lively civil society movements which have turned a dispute between two wings of the Iranian ruling class into an uprising with much wider significance (it's a bit as if, when Bush stole the election in 2000, people revolted, taking up issues of minority voter disenfranchisement and corporate influence in government).

While it would be unwise to generalize about anyone's political affiliations, the art in "Iran Inside Out" complements this breakthrough in popular discourse about Iran rather well. The art world has witnessed its own recent surge of interest in Iranian art, which has seen explosive prices at auction and the publication of surveys such as Hossein Amirsadeghi's *Different Sames: New Perspectives on Contemporary Iranian Art*. Still, for most viewers it will come as a surprise just how diverse and sophisticated Iranian contemporary art is. This show -- curated with palpable affection by Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath -- leaves in the dust any caricatures of Iranian culture as primitive or mired in tradition.

A quick sampling, just to give a sense of the diversity:

- \* Nazgol Ansarinia's black-on-white ink drawing resembling the ghost of a Persian rug -- except that when you look up close, the delicate black lines that make up her designs are cartoons of individual human figures.

- \* Mahmoud Bakhshi Moakher's lyrical spin on photo-Conceptualism, a series of 64 postcard-style images, each one depicting a different flower, along with the date and place he photographed it.

- \* Shirin Fakhim's abject sculptures -- her tributes to Tehran prostitutes -- bulbous figures made out of lumps of grotesque black fabric, shoehorned into leopard-print high heel boots, belted violently, misshapen, dehumanized and human at once.

**Mahmoud Bakhshi Moakher**  
Detail of "Rose Garden"  
2008  
"Iran Inside Out"  
Chelsea Art Museum



**Shirin Fakhim**  
Tehran Prostitutes  
2008  
"Iran Inside Out"  
Chelsea Art Museum



**Newsha Tavakolian**  
Maria  
2007  
"Iran Inside Out"  
Chelsea Art Museum



**Newsha Tavakolian**  
Maria  
2007  
"Iran Inside Out"  
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**Shirin Aliabadi & Farhad Moshiri**  
Tolerating Intolerance

\* The clear-eyed humanism of Newsha Tavakolian's black-and-white documentary photographs, chronicling the situation of "Marie," a transsexual who applied for and was allowed to undergo a sex change under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, but who has now been abandoned by her family.

What is the background for this vibrant art scene? Before the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the CIA-backed Shah was notorious for his secret police force, SAVAK -- but he was also a vigorous patron of the arts, using the promotion of advanced culture as a fig leaf in the time-honored fashion of "progressive" dictators everywhere. In these conditions, Iran developed native forms of modernism, such as the *Saqqa-khaneh* movement, which merged avant-garde stylings with themes from Iranian folk culture, and *Naqqashi-khatt* painting, which mingled calligraphy and abstraction. The isolation of Iran after '79 -- and the theocratic turn that the Revolution took -- was not particularly auspicious for the more experimental side of the visual arts (though Iran still made room for one of the world's great film avant-gardes, nurturing the likes of Abbas Kiarostami), nor was the atmosphere of despair during the murderous eight-year Iran-Iraq War (Marjane Satrapi's graphic novel *Persepolis* gives the feeling).

But Iran is a country with formidable human resources; Tehran's population is something like eight million, larger than any U.S. city save New York. Compare the post-'80s Iranian art scene to that of its smaller neighbor, Iraq: The '90s and early '00s were a period of economic strangulation for Iraq; consequently, artworks by artists based within Iraq are much less adventurous than those of Iraqi artists based outside [see "[The Iraqi Century of Art](#)," July 14, 2008]. For Iranian artists, in contrast, the recent past has been marked by cultural experimentation as the country fluctuated between hardliners and technocrats who favored incorporating Iran into the "dialogue of civilizations." There is, today, a healthy gallery scene in Iran and quite a bit of cultural interchange. Iranian contemporary artists can often seem as adventurous, if not more so, than their peers outside the country.

Based on this capsule history, you can say that three factors contribute to give Iranian contemporary art its unique character. First: The country's sheer size, historical importance and cultural depth -- not to mention the fact that it has more than just a tenuous middle class -- means that its universities in recent years have been churning out many savvy artists.

Second: Despite this cultural flourishing, the challenges faced by free expression in the country are very real, a fact which leads the art scene to fluctuate between a sort of reserved elegance and a ragged underground energy. (In the "Iran Inside Out" catalogue, Majid Ma'soomi Rad describes being busted for a show featuring controversial religious imagery, and finding himself in the absurd position of having to explain to the judge what a poster was.)

And third: The post-'79 hostility to and ignorance about Iran in America and Europe has meant that, despite its relatively cosmopolitan character, Iranian art has also of necessity created its own space. It is true that the market asserts a foreign pull on Iranian artists, but until recently this pull has come principally from Gulf money in places like Dubai, and only to a lesser extent from the voracious art-power centers in New York and London. Thus, while shows of, say, new Chinese art often seem as if they are simply engaged in deconstructing Western images of China for Western consumption (more Pop-art Maos, anyone?), the Iran of "Iran Inside Out" feels like it is the product of an actual art scene. As Till Fellrath notes in the catalogue, "ironically the artists living abroad often draw more on their cultural heritage, while those inside focus more on issues of everyday life without much regard to specifically Iranian

2006  
"Iran Inside Out"  
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**Shirin Aliabadi & Farhad Moshiri**  
*We Are All Americans*  
2006  
"Iran Inside Out"  
Chelsea Art Museum



**Farhad Moshiri**  
*Woman under Electric Blanket*  
2007  
"Iran Inside Out"  
Chelsea Art Museum



**Behdad Lahooti**  
*A Cliché for Mass Media*  
2008  
Courtesy of Aaran Gallery Tehran  
"Iran Inside Out"  
Chelsea Art Museum



references" -- a self-consciousness that comes from having to deal constantly with Western stereotypes about what it means to be from the Middle East. (In what follows, I focus mainly on artists living in Iran, though there are many good artists in the show who live abroad, from Negar Ahkami, with her swirling, colorful, mythic paintings, to Mitra Tabrizian, who contributes a black-and-white photo that splices together different images from Iranian history into one tableau.)

An interesting example of the depth and contradictions of the Iranian art scene is Farhad Moshiri (b. 1963), probably the hottest artist in "Iran Inside Out." Moshiri, in fact, studied at CalArts, though he has lived in Tehran since 1991. He is often compared to Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons. Last year a painting by Moshiri featuring the word "LOVE" written in Farsi in Swarovski crystals on a black background sold for \$1 million at Bonham's Dubai. As *Different Sames* states, this type of gesture takes Moshiri "into luxury market territory," and you can see why it would work would appeal to Gulf tycoons. Yet Moshiri's oeuvre has a feisty spirit all its own. "Iran Inside Out" showcases "Operation Supermarket," his series of collaborations with Paris-based Shirin Aliabadi (commissioned by the great *Bidoun* magazine), mock ads for various consumer staples in which the labels have been altered to spell out ambiguous political slogans: A lineup of cleaning products reads "We Are All Americans"; a pair of chocolate bars proclaim the words "Tolerating Intolerance" (instead of "Toblerone").

Moshiri, it is clear, is not just producing "Iranian" versions of Hirst or Koons. One of the highlights of this show has to be his painting *Woman under Electric Blanket* (2007), an interpolation of the image of a blonde woman from a '70s magazine. The artist has painted the woman's features with a pixel-like pattern of colored blocks, rendering her as a kind of digital abstraction. The rest of the objects depicted on the canvas -- the red blanket she lays under, the pillows beneath her -- are represented using areas of sequined fabric. The result is a pleasantly kooky clash of textures, ideas, identities -- flesh is rendered as pixels, which in turn are not pixels at all, but areas of paint; fabric is rendered using other fabric, different from what it is standing for. It's tacky and brainy and decorative all at once. It's a great painting.

If we are honest, we can admit that much of the media enthusiasm inspired by the recent Iranian protest movement has little to do with the issues on the ground, and more to do with a romanticization of the protestors as "pro-Western" in some naïve way (when it is not simply based on cynical calculation that anything that humiliates a U.S. foe is good; the recent coup in Honduras has not inspired a similar outpouring). "Iran Inside Out," which opens with a section titled "In Search of the Axis of Evil," is full of work with social themes that offer an organic corrective to this tendency. A piece like sculptor Behdad Lahooti's men's urinal, printed with slogans like "Youth. Housing. Jobs. Inflation. Employment. Easy Loans," is a blunt reflection on contemporary disaffection within Iran; Lahooti's sculpture would look fine on CNN illustrating the spirit behind the recent unrest (it would provide a break from the network's doughty coverage of how novel it is that Iranians Twitter). Nearby, however, Arash Hanaei's fragmentary photo tableaux restaging the events of Abu Ghraib using action figures is a reminder that the U.S. has very little to preach about when it comes to spreading democracy, and that Iranians know it.

The biggest splash in "Iran Inside Out" is probably made by Vahid Sharifian (b. 1982). While not explicitly political, his work expresses an antic punk-rock nihilism. Tehran-trained and Tehran-based, in the past Sharafian has appropriated images of Sophia Loren from old cooking magazines, using them to proffer a kind of found surrealism. He created photos of an "imaged circle around U.S. president George



**Arash Hanaei**

From the series "Abu Ghraib (or How To Engage In Dialogue)"  
2004  
All images © artist and Aaran Gallery  
"Iran Inside Out"  
Chelsea Art Museum



**Vahid Sharifian**

Untitled, from the series "Queen of the Jungle (If I had a Gun)"  
2007-2008  
"Iran Inside Out"  
Chelsea Art Museum  
Courtesy of Khastoo Gallery



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Bush" for ICA London's recent show of "Memorials to the Iraq War." In "Iran Inside Out," he is represented by "Queen of the Jungle (If I Had a Gun)," a series of doctored photographic self-portraits depicting the wild-haired, underwear-clad artist cavorting with animals -- in a pasture boxing with a rearing black stallion, breathing a plume of fire at an attacking bald eagle in a kitchen and, yes, making sweet love to a lion.

You can't help but interpreting this work as a visceral cry against cultural conservatism -- but it's also worth quoting Sharifian's account of a conversation with BBC Persia to show that he refuses to be reduced to lampooning Iranian taboos for Western consumption: "They say: you're playing with political ideas in your work, right? I say: in which pictures? They say: In your 'Queen of the Jungle (If I had a Gun)' series. I say: what political ideas are you talking about? They say: Iranian politics. I say: Iranian politics has nothing to do with my life. They say: how is that possible? Don't you live in Iran? I say: no, I live in my own house. They say: what about the issue of identity then? I say: it stops in my room. They say: can you explain? I say: imagine that the population of New York is one person -- in that situation what meaning does identity have? They say: really? I say: yeah. They ask: who has influenced you most in your work? I say: God. They say: seriously, let's stop joking. I say: I've been serious from the start. They ask: in what conditions do you create your work? I say: before and after masturbation, but not while masturbating." Sharafian's works, it would seem, are about claiming a space of his own.

Not everything in this diverse show is quite so madcap. Iran is probably the most poetry-literate society in the world, and a number of the works have a poetic quality to them. The small boxes and crude figurines of Houman Mortazavi (b. 1964) are inspired by mementos the artist observed left on gravesites during the Iran-Iraq War. These items -- a small black-lacquer windup toy beating a little tin drum, for instance -- are unlovely in one sense, in another sense charged with pathos, a contradiction Mortazavi deliberately mines for effect ("One sees a gold fish as a symbol of Norouz [Iranian New Year] while Homer Simpson calls them 'unprocessed fish sticks!'," he writes). The works get their full gravity from their social component -- they are meant to be picked up, handled, connected with. Khosrow Hassanzadeh (b. 1963), similarly, works with the form of the shrine. *Pahlavian II, Ready to Order* (2007-2008) is a memorial to a wrestler, featuring a black-and-white cutout of the shirtless star surrounded by props and fake flowers, something like a deluxe-sized Joseph Cornell box. It too takes its full meaning when you understand it as part of a social practice -- it is the development of a series the artist began with the idea of memorializing unknown people (and, we are told, Hassanzadeh "is willing to extend his services to anyone who would like to see themselves *Ready to Order*.")

Given that notions about how women are treated contribute to the idea that Islamic-influenced cultures are uniquely hostile to "Western values," gender and sexuality have a special place in "Iran Inside Out," with one sub-section of the show memorably titled "From Iran to Queeran and Everything in Between." It is worth noting the difference between how such themes are taken up by artists inside and outside the country, though. The Berlin-based Shahram Entekhabi, for instance, offers his series "Islamic Carding," for which he has taken cards advertising escort services, and covered them up by drawing on black hijabs with a permanent marker, so that only the women's eyes stare alluringly out at the viewer. Tehran photojournalist Abbas Kowsari, on the other hand, presents a series of photos documenting the exploits of the first graduating class of female cadets from Tehran's police academy (in 2005), showing



**Houman Mortazavi**  
*Stranger*  
 1993  
 "Iran Inside Out"  
 Chelsea Art Museum



**Khosrow Hassanzadeh**  
*Pahlavan II, Ready to Order*  
 2008  
 "Iran Inside Out"  
 Chelsea Art Museum



**Shahram Entekhabi**  
*Islamic Carding (detail)*  
 2007  
 "Iran Inside Out"  
 Chelsea Art Museum



**Abbas Kowsari**  
*Women Police Academy*  
 2007  
 "Iran Inside Out"  
 Chelsea Art Museum

women expertly wielding firearms and engaged in car chases, all clad in the very same conservative garb.

Entekhabi's gesture seems a fairly typical riff on the clash of civilizations, Islamic conservatism versus European license. Kowsari's image feels like a rejoinder. It doesn't deny that there are oppressive forces facing women -- the image of woman rappelling down the side of a building in cumbersome black robes is its own bit of found surrealism. But it does present a more complex, contradictory image of the forces bearing on women's lives in Iran (of course, according to the artist, training for the all-female police squad has since been discontinued).

Indeed, it is the overall complexity of "Iran Inside Out" that is its strength. It requires some investment to pick apart and understand where each piece stands, what it all means. But it is worth the investment -- all the more so given the show's unexpected timeliness.

In the ground-floor gallery is a work by the Berlin- and New York-based Shahram Karimi, sometime collaborator with Shirin Neshat. Hung overhead, it is a tapestry made of rice sacks. On it are memorialized the faces of Iran's "cultural and political activists" -- artists, scholars and journalists who have in one way or another been persecuted for their beliefs in the country's history. On a wall nearby, the work is accompanied by a key, listing names and professions. . . but to be honest, the history is too rich for me to pretend that I could sum it up. It is a measure of this show's success, however, that I leave it wanting to. Above all, Karimi's work is a reminder of how rich the tradition of Iranian contemporary culture is, how rich the tradition of struggle, and how foolish we are if we condescend to it.

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**Abbas Kowsari**  
*Women Police Academy*  
2007  
"Iran Inside Out"  
Chelsea Art Museum



**Shahram Karimi**  
*Traces*  
2003  
"Iran Inside Out"  
Chelsea Art Museum