

Soheila Sokhanvari: Rebel Rebel Glitters at The Curve

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Recipes, Restaurants

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Sokhanvari shines a light on the unsung heroines of Iran's recent past

British Iranian artist Soheila Sokhanvari takes over The Curve gallery at the Barbican Centre, transforming it into a contemplative space devoted to Iranian feminist icons from the years preceding the 1979 Iranian Revolution. The artist's first UK-based major commission could not have come at a more pertinent moment as protests continue across Iran and the world, sparked by the death of the 22-year-old woman Mahsa Amini after being detained by Iran's morality police.



Soheila Sokhanvari: Rebel Rebel, Installation view
Barbican Art Gallery, 2022 © Lia Toby / Getty Images

The exhibition is comprised of 28 jewel-like egg tempera miniature portraits of these Iranian women. The portraits are set within a huge Islamic star mural painted over the entire 90-metre-long curved wall that gives the gallery its name. The paintings are complemented by sculptural works: a mirrored monolith sheds kaleidoscopic reflections of light at the exhibition entrance, acting as an amuse-bouche to the show. Two sculptural

totems that encase holographic dancing Iranian women punctuate the space whilst the exhibition culminates with a larger suspended semi-reflective glass star sculpture containing a projection inside.



Rebel (Portrait of Zinat Moadab), 2021. Egg tempera on calf vellum
Elizabeth and Jeff Louis Private Collection

For those who haven't had the pleasure of visiting yet, The Curve is surprisingly much as its name would suggest: a huge curved corridor, with hugely tall ceilings and no natural light. It sits nestled behind the Barbican concert hall, making use of the negative space. Opened in 2006, this venue tends to host younger or emerging artists and perhaps more experimental installations than the Barbican Art Gallery upstairs.



Soheila Sokhanvari: Rebel Rebel, Installation view
Barbican Art Gallery, 2022 © Lia Toby / Getty Images

Sokhanvari's response to the grand proportions of this setting is to go small – whilst the mural compliments the large scale, its function is to serve the small portraits, drawing the eye to them. The artist's choice of egg tempera on calf vellum evokes the ancient history of religious icon painting in the west: her feminist icons turned literally into icons to be adored. The paintings are back-lit, they radiate light and warmth.



Soheila Sokhanvari:Rebel Rebel, Installation view
Barbican Art Gallery, 2022 © Lia Toby / Getty Images

The use of geometric pattern and a flattened background in the portraits is in keeping with icon painting tradition, but her patterns blend East and West. We see depicted in the painted backgrounds a Persian rug or an ornately tiled floor juxtaposed with Op art style wallpaper and curtains. This gives the viewer a sense of the complicated cultural composition of pre-1979 Iran, its occupants pushed towards modernisation and Westernisation, whilst retaining strong Iranian heritage and tradition. Sokhanvari believes that pattern is often political, rather than simply decorative. A little research uncovers that there is significance to each element of the paintings: for instance, one features an Islamic star pattern that is also based on the structure of the COVID-19 virus.

Sokhanvari describes herself as a cultural collage between East and West (she left Iran for Britain as a child). She successfully creates an atmosphere that stitches together these different influences and politically charged subject matter with a deftness and ease that can only come from an intimate knowledge of the subject. The exhibition's title is taken from the David Bowie song, whilst the patterns evoke carpets in Kubrick movies and the monolith is taken from '2001: A Space Odyssey': the cult references root the viewer in a familiar time, that of the 60s and 70s. The dim lighting, Persian pop songs and patterned mural distort this familiarity, evoking the rich culture of Iran at that time.



Portrait of Artist Soheila Sokhanvari

Soheila Sokhanvari: Rebel Rebel, Installation view
Barbican Art Gallery, 2022, © Lia Toby / Getty Images

The soundtrack to the exhibition is a playlist of music from the Iranian stars pictured, helping to transport the viewer to the time the artist is alluding to. The music seems fairly benign until the viewer learns that since 1979 it is illegal for a woman's voice to be played on the radio.

It is doubtful that either the artist or the Barbican programming team could have anticipated how timely this exhibition would be when it opened. Women young and old across Iran are protesting their treatment under the Islamic Republic of Iran. This exhibition illuminates those that came before this generation of strong women, fighting for their place in society and finding a way of modernising without losing their identity. It does so without ignoring the obstacles faced by these and many other women in Iran, rather, centring their struggles in dealing with the shifting political sands that they encountered.



The Love Addict (Portrait of Gogoosh), 2019 © Soheila Sokhanvari.
Courtesy of the artist and Kristin Hjellegjerde gallery.

The exhibition literature includes a carefully researched biography of each of the women depicted in the exhibition, compiled by the artist and researchers. Each story is more gripping than the last, for example, the story of Googoosh (see above image) who began acting at the age of 3, born to an acrobat and entertainer, appearing in her first film aged 7. She went on to become a music star, releasing more than 200 songs in the 60s and 70s whilst popularising the mini skirt and 'Twiggy' haircut that was known in Iran as the 'Googooshi'. Googoosh remained in Iran after the 1979 Revolution and in 2000 was finally allowed to tour again for the first time, singing to Farsi audiences worldwide. She released her latest album in 2021.



Soheila Sokhanvari: Rebel Rebel. Installation view
Barbican Art Gallery, 2022 © Lia Toby / Getty Images

On one level, this is a beautiful and serene show that has a very calm atmosphere and Sokhanvari fulfils her promise to create a devotional space. On another level it is a political statement about the past, present and future of Iran and the place women must forge for themselves within it. The smart part is how these two opposing ideas are brought together, to create a nuanced and intricate picture of Iran that is both informative and poetic.

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The Curve
Barbican Centre
Silk Street

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