

FINANCIAL TIMES

Iranian women show joyful defiance in Rebel Rebel at the Barbican

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Soheila Sokhanvari's glittery exercise in 1970s nostalgia has become a vital exhibition for the moment



Soheila Sokhanvari's 'Rebel (Portrait of Zinat Moadab)' (2021) © Soheila Sokhanvari

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The title, *Rebel Rebel*, is David Bowie's. The soundtrack mixes 1970s pop, film scores and folk ballads. The vibe is dizzying funhouse — a mirrored disco-ball setting opens with a tessellated glass monolith inspired by Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, casting strange lights and shadows as you move around it.

But the paintings with which Soheila Sokhanvari transforms the Barbican's Curve into a glittery memorial hall follow Persian courtly miniature tradition. Based on archival photographs, beautiful intricate portraits in egg tempera, laid on with a fine squirrel hair brush, recreate the glamour and individuality of women stars of stage and screen in pre-revolutionary Iran.

It's a fabulous installation — seductive, engrossing, straightforwardly narrative rather than conceptual. Sokhanvari grew up in 1970s Shiraz, trained as a cytogeneticist at Cambridge university, then became an artist drawing on diaspora experience. *Rebel Rebel* was conceived as an exile's nostalgic evocation, but it launched last weekend as far more: a vital exhibition for the moment, unpacking parallels and a hinterland to current events in Iran, as schoolgirls and students rip off their headscarves in protests following the death of Mahsa Amini, arrested by morality police for a hijab infringement.



Sokhanvar's 'Tobeh (Portrait of Zari Khoshkam)' (2020) . . . © Soheila Sokhanvar



... and 'Rhapsody of Innocence (Portrait of Monir Vakili)' (2022) © Soheila Sokhanvar

Kobra Saeedi, a nightclub dancer and film-maker performing under the name Shahrzad, thrusts towards us from an undulating red/blue ground, head jauntily angled, gaze circumspect, cigarette between long fingers. Seated with elbows resting on raised knees, legs apart, she looks like a cabaret lead from Weimar Berlin — powerful, in control. But storytelling was this Scheherazade's undoing. With her 8mm camera, Shahrzad documented protests against the introduction of the mandatory veil in 1979, was arrested, imprisoned for years in a psychiatric institution, lost all her possessions and remained homeless decades after her release.

She is among some 30 voices silenced by the 1979 Revolution (women are still not allowed to sing in public in Iran) and brought to life by Sokhanvari's defiantly joyful art.



Sokhanvar's 'A Dream Deferred (Portrait of Haydeh Changizian)' (2022) © Soheila Sokhanvar

"A Dream Deferred" renders ballet dancer Haydeh Changizian in delicate leaf gold. "Rhapsody of Innocence" depicts Monir Vakili, a soprano whose mournfully sweet lullaby "La Laiee" ("Can you hear how the panther moans in the mountains?") echoes across the gallery. "The Woman in the Mirror" is a fragmented portrait of actor Fereshteh Jenabi in a claustrophobic interior. For her film *Speeding Naked Till High Noon* (1976), explicit about female erotic pleasure, she received a death sentence in 1979, went into hiding in Tehran, and eventually died by suicide.

Each woman's biography is recounted in an accompanying booklet, and there are survivors' tales too. "The Dancing Queen" features belly dancer Jamileh in dark fedora and loud checked trousers: the first woman to adopt a gender-bending, macho *jaheli* style, she was still performing in Los Angeles into the 21st century. In the titular "Rebel", Zinat

Moadab, with crinkled bob, smoking, reclines against a modernist pattern of pulsing diagonals; a poster girl for early Iranian cinema, she also flourished in America, and aged 99 still lives in California.



Sokhanvar's 'The Lor Girl (Portrait of Roohangiz Saminejad)' (2022) . . . © Soheila Sokhanvar



... and 'Eve (Portrait of Katayoun (Amir Ebrahimi))' (2021) © Soheila Sokhanvar

The portraits begin in monochrome, evoking Iran's black and white talkies. "The Lor Girl" commemorates the first film (1932) to show a woman without a headscarf: its heroine, played by Roohangiz Saminejad, dared to shout back at the male characters. Sokhanvari emphasises Saminejad's rippling glossy black hair; her costume, a field of tiny dots, pressurises the space, enlivening the figure. The film inaugurated a new era of Iranian cinema challenging cultural norms, and was a box office hit, but Saminejad herself was so often physically threatened that she gave up acting and changed her name.

Many of the women celebrated here went into exile in 1979; those remaining were imprisoned . . . None worked in Iran again

"Everyone wanted to kill you because a Muslim woman didn't have the right to act", she recalled. Forough Farrokhzad, portrayed here as a big-eyed beatnik in a black turtleneck, suggestively cradling a cat, was similarly harassed and ostracised after publishing erotic poems, and died in 1967 in a car crash — one of a suspicious number of young women from Sokhanvari's cast killed in road accidents.

Behind these tragedies lie the complexity and unfinished legacy of imperial Pahlavi rule (1925-79), when reformist westernising agendas — the veil was banned in academic institutions and state workplaces — urged glamour yet were disorienting in a historic conservative context. Alluring appearances were promoted while clerics versus culture-makers fought a furious battle over women’s equality and rights of expression. Sokhanvari’s immersive *mise-en-scène* and eye for fashion — her father was a designer of western-style outfits — quite brilliantly evoke that psychedelic social reality, a delirium between desire and hope, oppression and fear.

Everything flickers, uncertain and tantalising. Razzle-dazzle geometric patterns line The Curve’s 90-metre wall and floor. Dancing holograms spin and whirl, and from within a multi-faceted dangling sculpture “The Star”, film sequences blur into one another. The magic of cinema meets the overpowering decorativeness of Islamic architecture. A mosque’s embellished interiors are intended to induce a trance-like sense of God’s greatness; Sokhanvari aims to “create a temple for these iconic women”.



Sokhanvar’s ‘Hey, Baby I’m a Star (Portrait of Forouzan)’ (2019) © Soheila Sokhanvari

Bursting into saturated colour, her portraits unfold Iran's uneasy move towards modernity in the 1960s-70s. In "Hey Baby, I'm a Star" Forouzan, highest earning film-Farsi actor, looks nervously awkward in a low-cut pink minidress. But actor Zari Khoshkam in bright yellow shorts and knee-high boots on a striped sofa would be comfortable in a David Hockney portrait from swinging London.

In "Bang", Faranak Mirghahari, wearing a red-and-black checked dress, wields a gun; in the 1962 film *The Last Hurdle* she shoots her way, literally, through patriarchal society.

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Najmeh Bozorgmehr

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To where? Like all Sokhanvari's figures, Mirghahari is fixed, pinned in place within an ornamental geometry — here bright red tessellated shapes. These allusive, ambivalent backgrounds veer between dynamic pulsing abstractions and all-over filigree webs, suggesting sometimes the energy for change, sometimes the inescapable net of repressive culture.



Many of the women celebrated here went into exile in 1979; those remaining were imprisoned, though mostly released on signing "letters of repentance". None worked in Iran again. But their story is not over: as *Rebel Rebel* enacts, their art lives on in the collective imagination, reaching new generations.

After the Revolution, bootlegged copies of singer Googoosh's funk and soul music, for example, circulated widely, along with reminiscences of the chic short hair cut, the *googooshy*, which she had popularised. "They tried to erase the memory of me, but they couldn't," she says now. (She was allowed to leave Iran in 2000.)



Sokhanvari's 'The Love Addict (Portrait of Googoosh)' (2019) © Soheila Sokhanvari

Sokhanvari paints the 1970s Googoosh as a picture within a picture, a recollection looming larger than life, in "The Love Addict". Like every image here, it is poignant yet optimistic, affirming art's power as protest, its impulse for liberty and change shared with the girls today chanting "Woman, Life, Freedom".

To February 26, barbican.org.uk