

Soheila Sokhanvari Honors the Untold Stories of Iran's Feminist Icons

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WOMAN LIFE FREEDOM

Ahead of a major exhibition in London, the artist pays homage to women in Iran whose voices were silenced by the 1979 revolution.

by **Harriet Shepherd**

10.07.22



Soheila Sokhanvari, 'Only the Sound Remains (Portrait of Ramesh).' Courtesy of the artist.

About three months after the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Soheila Sokhanvari was in the nurse's office at her new school in the U.K. suffering an upset stomach. An old TV in an adjacent room was idly playing the news—flickering with violent images of protest in Iran, as thousands united in remonstrance of the nation's government. The volume was set to low, and music from a dance class across the hall filled the corridors. From that moment on, Sokhanvari's every memory of the revolution has been recalled to the beat of "Boogie Wonderland."

Fast-forward 43 years, and Iran's protests are once again the subject of breaking news broadcasts across the globe. In the weeks that have followed the death of Kurdish 22-year-old Zhina (Mahsa) Amini, at least 133 demonstrators have been killed in Iran as the country mobilizes in protest over women's fundamental human rights. This time, Sokhanvari's soundtrack has been David Bowie's "Rebel Rebel"—coinciding with her first major U.K. commission of the same name.

On display at London's Barbican through February 26th, *Rebel Rebel* is an homage to the pre-revolutionary feminists of Iran's recent past, which has gained a tragic poignance amid the nation's current protests. In her series of 28 intricate Persian miniatures, Sokhanvari honors curious creatives and pioneering thinkers who were persecuted and dismissed as *motrebs* by wider society—a pejorative slur used to describe low-class female entertainers. In vibrant portraits adorned with dazzling Persian patterns, *Rebel Rebel* celebrates poets, actors, writers, and singers who were arrested, exiled, sentenced to death, and forced to renounce their careers and possessions following the overthrowing of Mohammad Reza Shah, the former king of Iran.

It's not unusual for traditional Persian miniatures to borrow their titles from songs and folklore, but to Sokhanvari, Bowie's *Diamond Dogs* classic harnessed her paintings' sentiment like no other. "These are women who were considered whores both by the conservatives and their own families," the artist explains, "and I wanted to show my reverence for them. I wanted the song's lyrics to become a banner for the exhibition: 'Rebel rebel, how could they know? Hot tramp, I love you so!'"

Soheila Sokhanvari at the "Rebel Rebel" installation at Barbican Centre.

(Photo by Lia Toby/Getty Images for Barbican Centre)



From her choice of subjects—many of whom are relatively unknown, even in Iran—to the way in which she renders them, Sokhanvari's works are steeped in symbolism. She works with egg tempera and paints onto calf vellum—a material signaling a renouncement of the individual due to the calf's sacrificial role in monotheistic religion. They are exhibited in the Barbican's Curve against a dizzying mural based on Islamic geometries to deliberately induce delirium, resulting in what she calls "a radical decentering," which disarms the viewer to allow for a deeper contemplation of these women's stories.

To hone their likeness, Sokhanvari painted each woman from photographs, taking care to choose an image that framed them in a respectful and honest light, given that their authors had been mainly men. The resulting portraits hearken back to a time when young women were styling themselves—after then-empress Queen Farah Diba, who is herself

remembered for a vested interest in shaping and upholding Iranian art and culture. Their high-coiffed hair and characteristically '70s clothing is a stark contrast to the image of Iranian womanhood propagated by the Western media.

The portraits in *Rebel Rebel* paint a reverential and nostalgic picture of the feminist icons of Iran's past, but also serve as a pertinent reminder of the severe and fatal consequences Iranian women have faced in pursuit of their own autonomy for decades. Sokhanvari's tribute to Iran's feminist rebels traces a largely untold history that is fundamental in the understanding of the present, and in shaping a better future. "I see the project as pivotal in the story of Iranian culture," she explains. "I felt these women were fast becoming forgotten, and it was essential they be immortalized to provide an alternative narrative of Iranian women for a new audience."

As *Rebel Rebel* opens in London, Sokhanvari shares the stories of four of the women within its paintings.

Roohangiz Saminejad (1916-1997)

Soheila Sokhanvari, *The Lor Girl (Portrait of Roohangiz Saminejad)*. Courtesy of the artist.

Courtesy of the artist



“Roohangiz is the first woman to appear in *Rebel Rebel*. She was the first woman to star in a Persian-language film, and appeared unveiled. I remember Roohangiz speaking in an interview about the death threats she received for her appearance in *Lor Girl* (1934) and having to live in anonymity for years afterward. Filmmaker Abdolhossein Sepenta had to shoot the movie in India, because it was still taboo to appear without a veil in Iran at that time.”

Kobra Saedi (b. 1946)

Soheila Sokhanvari, Kobra (*Portrait of Kobra Saedi*). Courtesy of the artist.



“Better known as Shahrzad, Kobra Saedi was born to a very conservative family who strongly objected to her wanting to become an actor. She ran away from home in her late teens and put herself through college by performing in downtown theater and dancing in cabaret. By 1978, she had starred in 27 movies and directed three. She was also a renowned poet and dancer. Following the 1979 revolution—like many of her contemporaries—she was arrested and taken to Evin Prison. After signing a letter of penitence and confiscation of all her assets, she was released. She was abandoned by her family, and consequently became homeless. It wasn’t until 2015, when owing to the generosity of some of her past contemporaries, and a documentary film made about her life, she was given a small one-bedroom hut in slums outside Tehran.”

Forough Farrokhzad (1934-1967)

Soheila Sokhanvari, *Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season (Portrait of Forough Farrokhzad)*. Courtesy of the artist.



“Forough Farrokhzad was Iran’s most famous feminist poet and documentary filmmaker. She received an incredible amount of negative attention and disapproval for daring to write about her sexual desires. She was gravely injured after crashing her car on a snowy day in Tehran in ’67, and I remember her lover, Ebrahim Golestan, speaking about carrying her lifeless body in his arms to the nearest hospital. The private clinic refused to accept her, because its director disapproved of Farrokhzad’s lifestyle and poetry. Her work was banned for many years after the revolution, and recently very few of her poems have been republished, with many extracts remaining censored.”

Googoosh (b. 1950)

Soheila Sokhanvari, *The Love Addict (Portrait of Googoosh)*. Courtesy of the artist.



“Googoosh was (and still maybe is) Iran’s most famous pop-star and actor. She was the country’s biggest fashion icon—all her hairstyles and clothes were copied by Iranian women of all ages. Growing up, I didn’t realize how difficult and complicated her life was, I just saw her as my favorite singer, and tried to emulate her—singing and dancing in front of the mirror. She was imprisoned for almost a month after the Iranian Revolution, and didn’t perform again until after 2000, after 21 years of silence, when she moved to Canada.”

Fereshteh Jenabi (1948-1998)

Soheila Sokhanvari, *The Woman in the Mirror (Portrait of Freshteh Jenabi)*. Courtesy of the artist.



“Little is known about Fereshteh Jenabi (born Fereshteh Jenabi Namin), other than she played in 11 films between 1971-1978. In two of these films—*Resurrection of Love* (1973) and *Speeding Naked till High Noon*—she appeared semi-nude, and was portrayed performing sexual acts and reaching orgasm. Following the revolution, she received the death sentence for such appearances, and, fearing for her life, went into hiding. She subsequently struggled with addiction, and it is not clear if she died by suicide or from an accidental overdose. She passed away in 1998 at the age of 50.”

Forouzan (1937-2016)

Soheila Sokhanvari, *Hey, Baby I'm a Star (Portrait of Forouzan)*. Courtesy of the artist.



“Born Parvin Kheir-Bakhsh, Forouzan became famous for her sex appeal and risqué onscreen dancing, which made her extremely appealing to the largely male audience of Iranian cinema—so much so that her presence in any film was a guarantee for the financial success of the production. Pre-revolutionary Iranian cinema was akin to Bollywood, and young female actors like Forouzan had little opportunity to take serious parts—perhaps not dissimilar to the plight of Western actors like Marilyn Monroe. Forouzan remained in Iran after the Islamic revolution, despite many others fleeing the country, and was summoned to the Evin Prison, where she was made to sign away all her assets. Her house was seized and became a center for the young revolutionary magazine, but she would come every day and water the garden before quietly leaving. She died in 2016 in anonymity.”

Nosrat Partovi

Soheila Sokhanvari, *Baptism of Fire (Portrait of Nosrat Partovi)*. Courtesy of the artist.



“Nosrat Partovi’s is the last portrait of *Rebel Rebel*. She was only able to star in one film—1974’s *The Deer*—before the revolution. It was this film that was screening in Cinema Rex on August 19, 1978 when a fatal arson attack killed as many as 470 people (the actual numbers are unknown.) She was the last woman to appear unveiled in an Iranian film.”