

Soheila Sokhanvari's Timely Exhibition Celebrates Iran's Feminist Artists And Icons

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"Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season" (Portrait of Forough Farrokhzad), 2022 by ... [+]
The artist/Kristin Hjellegjerde gallery

Once in a while, an art exhibition emotionally intersects a moment in time. It hits a nerve, its power and meaning transformed, amplified. "Rebel Rebel" at The Curve gallery at the Barbican in London could have been a niche, gorgeously presented show visited by a few regulars to this brutalist cultural institution in the heart of the city; its political poignancy lost in translation.

Yet, the current explosive revolutionary uprising across Iran, an uprising instigated by women and led by women to the powerful anthem “Woman, Life, Freedom,” has elevated artist Soheila Sokhanvari’s delicate exhibition to a whole other level. Visiting “Rebel Rebel” following a solidarity march in London, it’s been impossible to separate the now from what came before. As the saying goes: timing is everything.



Soheila Sokhanvari "Rebel Rebel" installation view= at The Curve, Barbican
Lia Toby Getty Images

PROMOTED

Situated on the Barbican ground level, The Curve is an unassuming exhibition space open to all and free of charge. Here artists are encouraged to respond to its curious, dark, cave-like curving shape — be it via video art, performance or dance — throughout its life, often exhibiting original and, at times, hugely powerful work. “Rebel Rebel,” also conceived as a site-specific installation, successfully continues the dialogue between art and space.

Sokhanvari’s intricate miniatures of 27 feminist icons from pre-revolutionary Iran — the years predating 1979 — are painted by the artist in egg tempera onto calf vellum with a squirrel-hair brush, then set against a hand-painted mural based on Islamic geometries decorating. They are tiny, and I mean tiny, almost dwarfed by the vast 90-meter gallery space.



"Rebel" (portrait of Zinat Moadab, 2021) by Soheila Sokhanvari
The artist/Kristin Hjellegjerde gallery

This juxtaposition works well to allow The Curve to cocoon us in the world of these exceptional women of Iranian history — writers, poets, singers, actors — all activists in their own way.

We meet Forugh Farrokhzad, an iconic figure and modernist poet, a pioneer in expressing hitherto forbidden feelings, whose final poem before her untimely death at 32 in a (disputed) car accident, “Let Us Believe in the Dawn of the Cold Season,” is considered one of the finest modern poems of our time. Elsewhere we are introduced to one of Iran’s foremost writers and novelists, Simin Dāneshvar.

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There are plenty of glamorous actors on display here, too: Roohangiz Saminejad (the first unveiled actress to appear in a Persian language film), Zari Khoshkam, Faranak Mirghahhari, Fereshteh Jenabi and Zinat Moadab. Meanwhile, pop sensation and cultural icons Googoosh and Ramesh’s unmistakable voices permeate The Curve hall.



Soheila Sokhanvari at "Rebel Rebel" standing by her extravagant sculptural form
Lia Toby Getty Images

The exhibition title borrows from David Bowie’s 1974 cult pop song. It also expresses the fate of most of these women who, after 1979 and the subsequent establishment of the totalitarian Islamic theocracy, were forced to either renounce any role in public life, face imprisonment or worse or flee to exile.

The installation concludes with an extravagant sculptural form — to my eyes, part disco ball, part ornamental elements found in mosques — made of mirrors and internal projections drawn from classic Iranian cinema. The soundtrack, composed by Marios

Aristopoulos, weaves together songs by some of the most celebrated Iranian singers from the mid-20th century.

Here visitors lounge on chairs and cushions, and some lie on the floor, taking in the hypnotic atmosphere; the diminutive portraiture within this vast space encourage an intimate interaction between visitor and art. “Rebel Rebel” makes for a contemplative space, a safe space, from where to reflect on the new wave of bold, brave, fearless Iranian women leading a new revolution through words, art and action, and for some, their life and sight.



"The Love Addict" (portrait of Googoosh, 2019), by Soheila Sokhanvari
The artist/Kristin Hjellegjerde gallery

Sokhanvari was born in Shiraz, Iran, and currently lives and works in Cambridge in the UK. “The Curve has always been a magical space for me, where artists are given the freedom to tell stories in an immersive way,” she says. “When I was invited for this commission, I knew immediately how I wanted to respond: with a body of work that would transport visitors to the pulse of life in pre-revolutionary Iran and to the women at the heart of that culture.

“I hope visitors will revel in the opportunity to learn about the lives of these formidable women, who gave up everything to pursue their creativity.”

Soheila Sokhanvari's “Rebel Rebel” was created alongside Barbican’s curator Eleanor Nairne and will be at The Curve, Barbican Centre, until February 26, 2023.

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