

My Art Celebrates Iran's Feminist Rebels; The Protests In The Country Are Giving Me Hope

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Soheila Sokhanvari

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Viewpoint

As women in Iran unite in protest over the death of Zhina (Mahsa) Amini, Soheila Sokhanvari's upcoming Barbican exhibition has gained a new level of pertinence. Here, the artist reflects on the female rebels of Iran's past and present, and the inclusive future of its feminism.

By [Soheila Sokhanvari](#)

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'The Love Addict (Portrait Of Googoosh)', 2019 © Soheila Sokhanvari. Courtesy of the artist and Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery.

The first woman I admired was my grandmother. She was a veil-wearing, illiterate and godly woman who believed in female education and independence. I called her "Azizi" – beloved in Persian – and considered her my mother, because mine was often away. She sent my mother to university despite my grandfather's disapproval, and looked after me and my siblings while my mother carried out her full-time job. She was kind, hardworking and an incredible force of positive energy.

Then there was Googoosh – our best-loved Persian pop star. I idolised her – her dance moves, her stage presence, her voice and her glamorous clothing. As a young girl, she was everything I wanted to be.

Women like these were a fundamental part of my childhood in Iran in the '60s and '70s – they helped to shape my understanding of womanhood. The country, at the time, was enamoured with the West. Owing to the "modernisation" efforts of Mohammad Reza Shah's rule, cinemas showed dubbed Hollywood films – *Star Trek* and *Sesame Street* were always on TV. Fashion was eclectic, and women could wear anything from a veil to a miniskirt, sometimes both. My father, a fashion designer, created dresses for my mother in the style of Audrey Hepburn and Elizabeth Taylor, with added Parsi embroidery and patterns.

But the West was not enamoured with us. After moving to the UK, I was disturbed by how infrequently I saw the women I had grown up admiring. The image of Iran propagated by the Western media was angry and violent. It stereotyped and Othered us, diminishing our humanity. The Iranians I saw on TV – dressed in black, punching the air, chanting violent slogans – bore no resemblance to the ones I grew up with. And, as Iranian women began to have their freedoms stripped away from them, under the rule of Ayatollah Khomeini and the newly constituted Islamic Republic, this stereotyping allowed the public to close their eyes to our plights.

'Wild At Heart (Portrait Of Poursan Shapoori)', 2019 © Soheila Sokhanvari. Courtesy of the artist and Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery.

So when Barbican curator Eleanor Nairne approached me in September 2019 to propose an idea for a solo show, I knew immediately what I wanted to do. I had been telling the story of Iranian people for years, but I was particularly compelled by the female artists in Iran who had been outlawed or forced into exile after the revolution in 1979, when women were banned from singing and dancing, their voices silenced and sexuality repressed. I was not only saddened by their stories, I really felt their pain.

The idea for *Rebel Rebel* was to create an immersive experience that would transform the 6x90 metre walls of the Barbican's Curve into a striking temple for viewers to contemplate the stories and bravery of Iranian women. I would paint a series of Persian miniatures to honour 28 different female artists whose ideas and goals had made them dishonourable in the eyes of society, and often even their own families.

The show would open with a portrait of Roohangiz Saminejad, the first Iranian actor to appear in a talkie movie, who received death threats for her unveiled appearance in *Lor Girl* (1934) two years before Reza Shah banned the wearing of scarves in Iran. It would close with a painting of Nosrat Partovi, the last unveiled woman to appear in Filmfarsi. During a 1978 screening of her only movie, *The Deer*, in Abadan, Islamists locked the doors of Cinema Rex and set fire to the building, killing a reported 377 to 470 people (the actual number is disputed). The attack is considered to be the spark that ignited the revolution.

A few days before the exhibition's installation began, I was sitting at home when I received a text from a friend telling me about the death of Zhina (Mahsa) Amini – the 22-year-old Kurdish woman who had been killed by morality police in Tehran. It was the day of [the Queen's funeral](#), and the set up for the show had been halted. The details of Amini's death were not yet clear, but the sense of loss and grief was immense. I was shocked and devastated. She could have been my daughter. It cut through my heart like a knife.

Zhina (Mahsa) Amini was not the first woman to suffer the severity of Iran's current regime, nor has she been the last. Since her violent death 16 days ago, at least 133 others have been killed in the subsequent protests for women's rights that have ignited across the nation.

'Only The Sound Remains (Portrait Of Ramesh)', 2021. © Soheila Sokhanvari. Courtesy of the artist and Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery.

The past two weeks have been extremely emotional for me. As I prepared a celebration of Iranian women and their art, the next generation was being arrested and shot while fighting for their basic human rights. I have shed many tears watching my paintings being hung, and listening to the haunting voices of the Iranian singers who make up the exhibition's soundscape – women whose voices remain illegal to broadcast in Iran.

Zhina (Mahsa) Amini's death is not the first of its kind, but it has commanded the world's attention in a way that no other has before. It has forced the West to recognise the long struggle Iranian women have fought for their basic human rights – and the dangers that they face every day.

I've always considered my art subtly political, and have often had to fight for people to see beyond its aesthetics, but in the wake of Amini's tragic passing, I am reassured of its message. As I am surrounded by so much incredible female energy – both by the women putting on this exhibition in London, and the Iranian icons within it – I feel deeply moved. As I see Iranian men standing shoulder to shoulder with women for the first time in Iran's history, chanting the mantra "woman, life, freedom", I am filled with hope for a tectonic shift in their relationship. And as I watch millions unite in solidarity, I feel the courage and resilience of women who want to imagine a better world for themselves.

I want people to be aware of the power, the sass and the inner strength of Iran’s rebel women. I want people to celebrate the resilience of women who stand up to the ugly face of misogyny and carve themselves a shiny plinth for their art. I want people to see that there is no difference between us – we are connected through our humanity – and that women everywhere should be able to have autonomy over their own bodies, no matter who, or where, they are.

Rebel Rebel runs at the Barbican Curve Gallery from 7 October

As told to Harriet Shepherd

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