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Iran's Feminist Icons

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'Listen, my fellow traveller...you are the only light of this dark night,' sings Googoosh on a [video recording](#) of her song [Talagh](#). Swaying rhythmically in a sea of turquoise, the Iranian singer turns to the camera, lips a shade of rose, eyes thickly lined with kohl. She is exceedingly beautiful and knows it. Diamond patterns radiate outwards from behind, light catches on her crystal-clad hoops from the side. Moving gracefully to a roving 70s beat, she mouths words of sorrow, words of exile and words of loss – and yet still stands tall, proud, defiant. Looking straight at the camera to the viewers at home, Googoosh owns this moment, telling Iran's story as if it were her own.

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

And it is her own. Just one of 28 women to be featured in Soheila Sokhanvari's exceptional exhibition, *Rebel Rebel*, Googoosh's story rings true for many Iranians today. One of its biggest stars during the twentieth-century, she released over 200 songs between the 60s and 70s, many of which were influenced by Western pop, funk and soul. Fashionable, with a daringly short haircut and a penchant for miniskirts, she was every bit the modern, independent woman. But this all changed after the Islamic revolution in 1979, when she was briefly imprisoned and released on the condition she would no longer sing in public. Silenced and punished for her success, Googoosh felt 'erased'. But the Iranian people would not allow this; her life and work became celebrated through the clandestine circulation of bootlegged copies of her music. In 2000, Googoosh was allowed to leave Iran for the US, relaunching her career the world over; but, as her famous song *Talagh* poignantly relates in Farsi, she was now an exile in a foreign land.

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Hey, Baby I'm a Star (Portrait of Fouzan), 2019
© Soheila Sokhanvari. Courtesy of the artist and Kristin Hjellegjerde gallery.

It is Googoosh's song that greets us when entering the Curve Gallery in the Barbican. It is her bitter-sweet tale – one of punishment, persecution, imprisonment and exile, but also perseverance, irrepressible creative power and resistance – that becomes the narrative of virtually all the women represented in Sokhanvari's exquisite miniature paintings. Guiding us through the dimly lit semi-circular space, where hand-painted murals of geometric Iranian patterns swirl and spiral across the floor and 90-metre-high walls, Googoosh's song moves over beautiful faces and glamorous scenes not so dissimilar from her own in the 70s recording. There is the poet [Forough Farrokhzad](#) (1934-1967), who, though one of Iran's greatest modernist writers and its first female film director, suffered for the erotic and "scandalous" content contained in her poetry, much of which remains censored to this day. Peering out from the diminutive vellum surface, Farrokhzad clasps a black cat, which also stares curiously at us, part familiar, part creature of comfort. With cropped hair, full plum lips, big dark eyes and perfectly shaped eyebrows, Farrokhzad's chic, enchanting appearance belies the tragic life she endured.

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Rhapsody of Innocence (Portrait of Monir Vakili), 2022 © Soheila Sokhanvari. Courtesy of the artist and Kristin Hjellegjerde gallery.

Then there is [Ramesh](#), another iconic singer, seated on a rhombus patterned sofa, clothed in a psychedelic shift dress. She sits composed, legs turned demurely to the side, another cat protectively seated to her right. Like Googoosh, Ramesh's life is a tale of success in song turned sour by exile and the prohibitions of a post-revolutionary Iran. Here she is, however, a blaze of colour and patterned textiles: volutes of beige and brown undulate in the background, monochromatic harlequin material covers her sofa in the fore; peach and vermillion flowers magically appear, bursting out from the paisley blues, olives and oranges of her dress. This is the first miniature to boast a technicolour palette, leaving every surface, but for Ramesh's skin, coated in gem-like embellishments and planes of eye-watering colour. This crowning vivacity of shade and tone is Sokhanvari's way of celebrating these women; literally showing them in their best light. But it's also an act of deliberate resistance: shown without veils, in the heyday of their glittering stardom, adorned in western dress yet steeped in the artistic culture and geometric codes of Iran, Sokhanvari's women powerfully and subversively bring east and west, old and new, together.

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Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season (Portrait of Forough Farrokhzad), 2022 © Soheila Sokhanvari. Courtesy of the artist and Kristin Hjellegjerde gallery.

This subversive power is exactly what Sokhanvari resplendently displays in her works. Harnessing the Iranian tradition of miniature painting, where squirrel or cat hair brushes are used on calf vellum, Sokhanvari depicts kaleidoscopic and magical realist works of women; diminutive worlds glistening with feeling and shimmering with a worshippers' ardour for the female saints that shine within. Whilst traditional miniatures may display tableaux of aristocrats hunting or mythical heroes deep in the throes of battle, Sokhanvari's subversive scenes show female starlets of the 60s and 70s taking centre stage; dancers, singers, actresses, writers, like Googoosh, Farrokhzad and Ramesh, who were revered but punished for their brilliance, now owning the space and frame. By centring these women in and through an inherently Iranian medium and practise, Sokhanvari puts them at the heart of the Iranian story. She glorifies and commemorates their contribution to the cultural history of Iran, and invites us to contemplate them and their significant achievements too. Colour, style, elegance, beauty and an exemplary painting technique become, therefore, acts, not just of pleasure and profound meditation, but resilience and revolt. Sokhanvari asks us to look at, respect, but also glean and gain strength from the "rebel rebels" of the past, now. At a time when the rights, bodies and lives of Iranian women are under threat, particularly since the brutal death of [Mahsa Amini](#) and subsequent unlawful killings of [Hanane Kia](#), [Mahsa Mogoi](#), [Hadis Najafi](#), [Nika Shakarami](#) and many more, Sokhanvari's work has never been more needed, nor more pertinent.

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Rebel (Portrait of Zinat Moadab), 2021
© Soheila Sokhanvari. Courtesy of the artist and Kristin Hjellegjerde gallery.

Concealed in the monumentalising of these past stars is a request, a plea, an urgent desire for the current generation of women not to suffer the same fate. The work of feminist artists continues to celebrate and reclaim women of the past – as seen in the creative output of Judy Chicago, Rosemary Mayer, Lubaina Himid and others – creating a time-line of artistic foremothers, a (her)story of cultural creators and political agitators who made it possible for women to create, live and fight today. Sokhanvari adds to this legacy, centring the work and stories of Iranian women, and highlighting their contribution to the cultural fabric of Iran – and indeed the world – today. But this temple of celebration could all too easily become one of commemorative grief should the world not step in and support Iranian women now.

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Eve (Portrait of Katayoun (Amir Ebrahimi)), 2021 © Soheila Sokhanvari. Courtesy of the artist and Kristin Hjellegjerde gallery.

Staring at Sokhanvari's miniature of Googoosh – a double portrait where the singer lounges assertively in a circular straw chair, her hair lavishly loose, her gaze firmly fixed on the viewer, whilst another Googoosh stares at us from a frame on the wall – I'm reminded of how this incredible performer was silenced, suppressed, almost erased from history. As her voice pours out rich and deep from the speakers, words of exile, sorrow, loss jar against the patterned surface of Sokhanvari's sublime painting. 'You are the only light in this dark night,' Googoosh intones. They are, I think, turning to leave.

By [Hannah Hutchings-Georgiou](#)

Cover image: *Detail from Tobeh (Portrait of Zari Khoshkam), 2020*
© Soheila Sokhanvari. Courtesy of the artist and Kristin Hjellegjerde gallery.

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