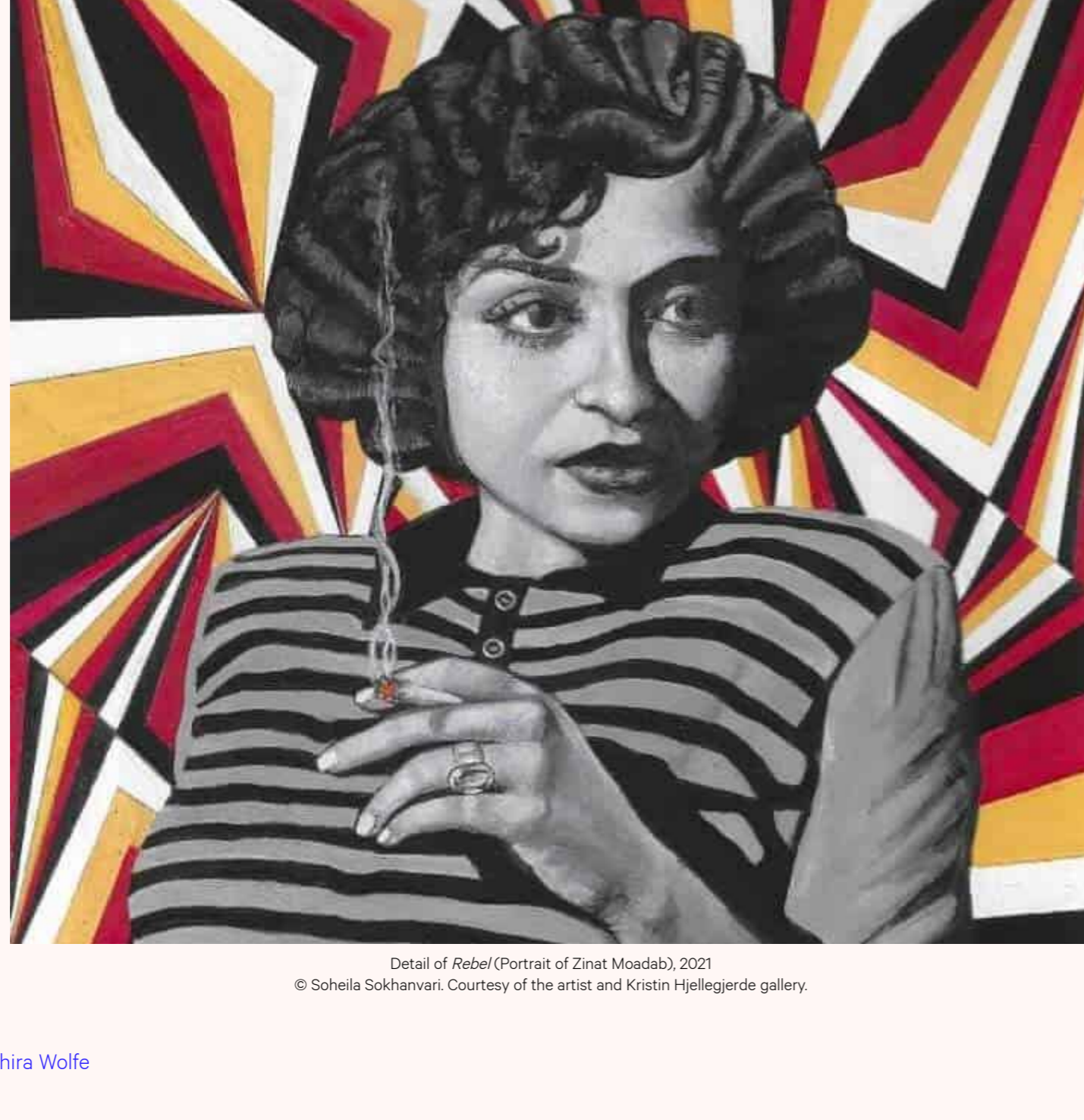


Exhibitions

The Iranian Rebel Women of Soheila Sokhanvari

Detail of Rebel (Portrait of Zinat Moosavi), 2022
© Soheila Sokhanvari. Courtesy of the artist and Kristin Hjellegjerde gallery.

By Shira Wolfe

"I hope that 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

The recent killing of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini by the morality police in Gasht-e Ershad, Iran, sparked nationwide protests against the life-threatening religious rule imposing strict norms on women's attire and personal lives. These brave protests, led mostly by young women, have resulted in worldwide solidarity, anger, and more tragic murders of teenage girls, young women, but also young men, who are speaking out loudly against the stifling regime. The [politically-charged paintings](#) of Iranian artist Soheila Sokhanvari, currently on view at the Barbican Centre in London in the solo exhibition Rebel Rebel (running through 26 February 2023), speak to these times loud and clear, depicting many brave, rebellious women and [feminist icons](#) of Iran before and during the 1979 revolution, hair uncovered, bold, and on fire.

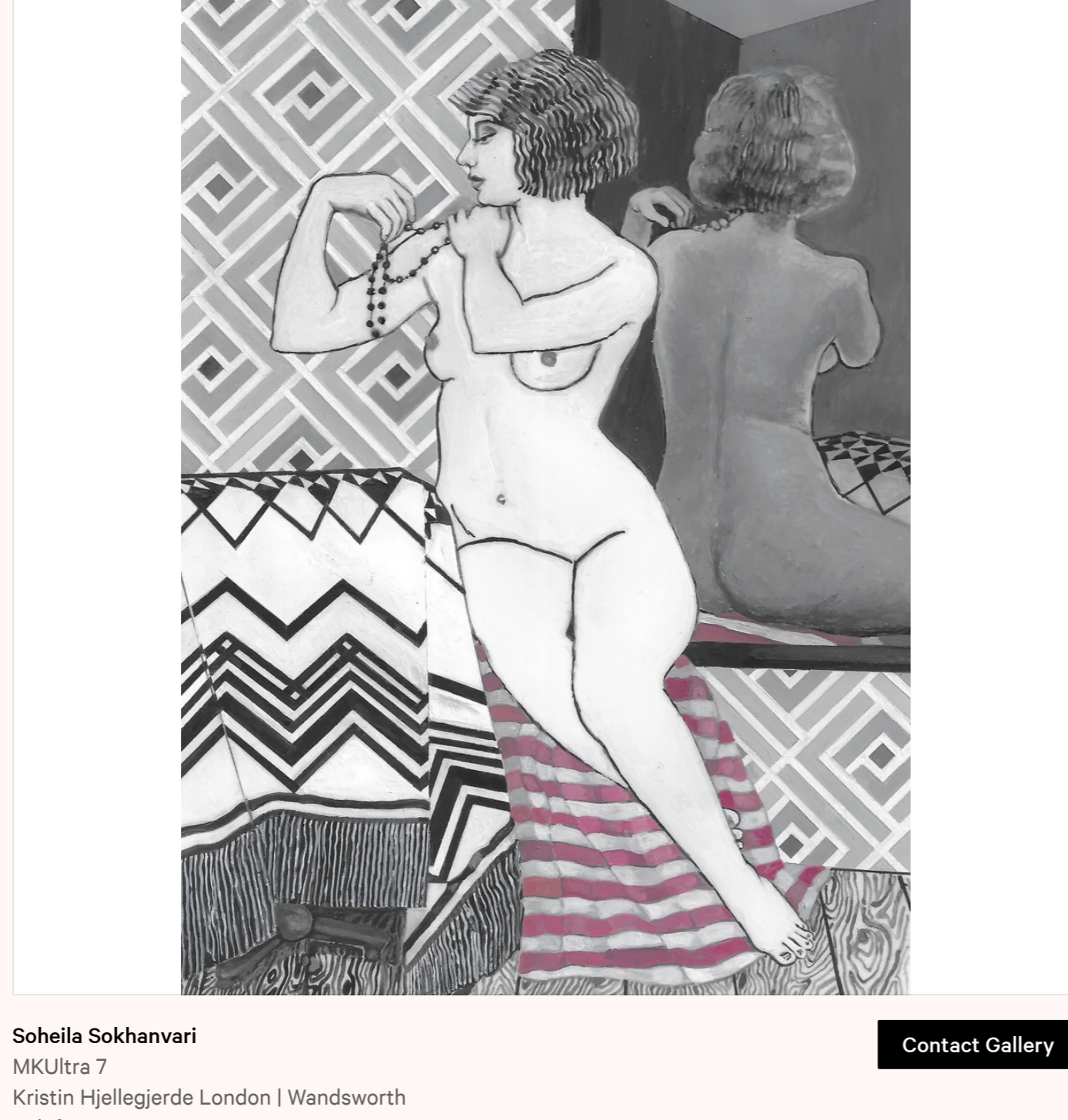
Soheila Sokhanvari
MKUltra 10
Kristin Hjellegjerde London | Wandsworth
Ask for price

Contact Gallery

[f](#)
[t](#)
[in](#)

Soheila Sokhanvari – A Story Stuck in 1978

Artist Soheila Sokhanvari was born in the city of Shiraz in Iran and left to study in the UK in 1978, a year before the 1979 Iranian Revolution. She remained in the UK ever since and only returned to Iran twice. As such, she considers her story stuck in 1978, and continuously returns to that pre-1979 period in her work. Sokhanvari has a fascination with painting glamorous Iranian women, portraits of Iran's female stars who were at the center of popular culture in Iran before the revolution. After the 1979 revolution, many of these women were forced into exile or made to abandon their art, pushed more and more into silence and submission.

Soheila Sokhanvari
MKUltra 7
Kristin Hjellegjerde London | Wandsworth
Ask for price

Contact Gallery

Rebel Rebel – Miniature Heroines

Borrowing the exhibition title for her show at the Barbican from David Bowie's 1974 cult pop song, Soheila Sokhanvari created a moving, multi-layered exhibition paying tribute to 27 female icons including Forough Farrokhzad, the beloved and controversial modernist poet, Roozhangiz Saminejad, the first actress to appear in a Persian talking picture, and Ramesh and Googoosh, two celebrated Iranian singers. Some of the stories of these women are well known and documented, such as the story of Forough Farrokhzad, who dared to write about her own sexuality and desires and was both admired by many and repressed by society, or that of Kobra Saeedi, a celebrated poet, actress and dancer who was arrested following the 1979 revolution and forced to sign a letter of penitence and confiscation of all her assets. She was consequently abandoned by her family and became homeless. Other stories are more elusive, less documented, but through her art Sokhanvari makes them important again and asks us to pay attention to who these women were.

Most of Sokhanvari's vibrant portraits of Iran's female heroines are miniatures, often measuring around 15 x 20 cm. Through this creative decision, the miniatures first of all reference the tradition of Persian miniature painting realized with the traditional technique of egg tempera on calf vellum by grinding color pigments. Secondly, where the combination of realistic black-and-white faces with brightly colored clothing and backgrounds could have become kitschy on a larger scale, the miniature approach instead creates a beautiful sense of intimacy, drawing the viewer into the intricate Persian patterns in the background, and inviting to examine the souls of these women through close observation of their faces.



Soheila Sokhanvari Rebel Rebel, installation view Barbican Art Gallery 2022 © Lis Toby Getty Images

Throughout the exhibition, a soundtrack composed by Marios Aristopoulos with music by some of the stars from the exhibition like Ramesh and Googoosh reminds visitors how much political resonance the voices of women from Iran carry: to this day, there are still strict restrictions on broadcasting a woman's voice in Iran.

Soheila Sokhanvari, *Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season* (Portrait of Forough Farrokhzad), 2022

Forough Farrokhzad was Iran's most famous feminist poet and documentary filmmaker. In her first published poem, she wrote openly about her sexual desires and became a controversy almost overnight. When she divorced her husband, she lost custody over her son and the court separated her from him, accusing her of having had several affairs. Farrokhzad died in a car crash in Tehran in 1967. After the Islamic Revolution, her poems were banned for over a decade.



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.

Soheila Sokhanvari, *The Love Addict* (Portrait of Googoosh), 2019

Googoosh was Iran's most famous pop star, actor, and fashion icon. Iranian women of all ages copied her hairstyles and clothes. After the Iranian revolution, she was imprisoned for nearly a month. She did not perform again until 2000, when she moved to Canada. Today, she lives in LA where she continues to make music.



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

The exhibition culminates in mirrored sculptural forms with internal projections of classic Iranian cinema, where the lives, the presence, and the voices of some of these women are returned to them as they perform on screen. Because what happened to most of these women portrayed in Soheila Sokhanvari's portraits? Their fates included arrests, exile, death sentences, and almost always a renunciation of their artistic careers and passions.

Sokhanvari's paintings and the full experience of the exhibition at the Barbican refuse to let the stories of these women fade into oblivion. They are also allies in the struggle that continues today and is once again a fight over, and at the expense of, female bodies and minds.

Relevant sources to learn more

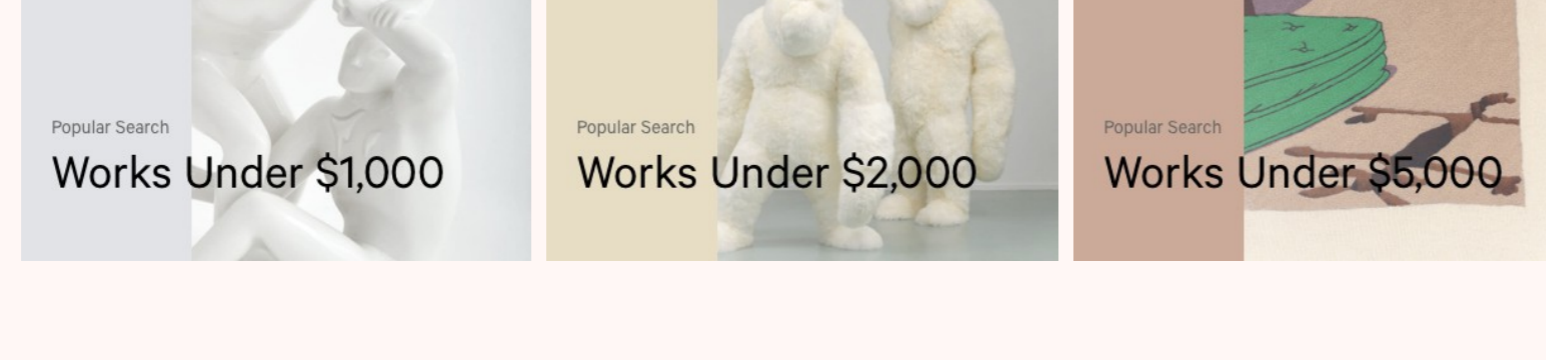
Keep reading on Artland Magazine

[Land of Dreams – Interview with Shirin Neshat](#)[Female Iconoclasts: Barbara Kruger](#)[The Art of a Movement: Protest Art And The Artist As Activist](#)

Other relevant sources

[Visit Rebel Rebel at Barbican Centre London](#)[Discover available works for sale by Soheila Sokhanvari on Artland](#)
[f](#)
[t](#)
[in](#)

Wondering where to start?



Previous

Next

