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Soheila Sokhanvari: The Iranian Artist Using Her Work As A Political Act

October 21, 2022 | By Simon Coates

Mahsa Amini was outside a metro station in Tehran one morning in mid-September when she was stopped by Iran's morality police. She was arrested on charges of improper dress – her hijab was 'askew', and she was wearing 'tight trousers' – and taken to a nearby police station. Three days later she was dead. Mahsa's family maintains she was beaten to death in custody. Protests against Mahsa's demise – and the ongoing treatment of women in the country – have rocked Iran in the aftermath.

"These protests are *all* about women," explains Iranian-born artist Soheila Sokhanvari. "Yet, for the first time in the history of Iran, the men have also stood up for the women, shouting 'we respect our sisters and wives'. The world sees brave young Iranians out in the streets, defying the regime and fighting for freedom hand in hand."

It is against this backdrop that Sokhanvari's new solo exhibition [Rebel](#) opened at the Barbican in London. Sokhanvari's artwork is known for mourning the passing of life before Iran's Islamic Revolution of 1979, and the decimation of women's rights in the country ever since. Pre-revolutionary Iran was modern. Progressive. Cool, even. The revolution changed everything. Fundamentalism took hold, driven by a patriarchal regime that persists today. Her new work continues this conversation by exploring the contradictions of Iranian women's lives between 1925 and the 1979 revolution. "Iranian women have historically been the optical symbol for the ruling party," she explains. "In 1936, Reza Shah unveiled women. The revolution re-veiled them, as well as banning them from singing and dancing in public. So the liberation of women represents a short window of time when Iranian women created a shining platform for their art and, though that opportunity often objectified them it, weirdly, liberated them as well."

Steeped in a melancholic but magical realism, Sokhanvari's exhibition includes miniature portraits of Iranian women. "The title, *Rebel Rebel*, is a tribute to the courage of female icons who pursued their careers in a culture enamoured with Western style but not its freedoms," says Sokhanvari. "These women include Roohangiz Saminejad, the first unveiled actress to appear in a Persian-language film, the controversial modernist poet Forough Farrokhzad, and the leading intellectual and writer Simin Dāneshvar. I wanted to speak about these icons of a rapidly dying period and to provide an alternative story of modern Iran: the story of women that fought for their platform only to be silenced by the men."

Does Sokhanvari consider herself a political artist? "While I don't explicitly use my work to gain political points, I am sharing the stories and celebrating the lives of these radical women – the historical moment in which they lived, and how their lives changed after the revolution in 1979. That is a political act."

[Rebel Rebel](#) is at *The Curve* gallery in the Barbican, London until 26 Feb 2023

Simon Coates is an artist, writer and founder of arts and activism platform [Tse Fly Middle East](#)

The Lor Girl (portrait of Roohangiz Saminejad), 2022; *Let Us Believe In The Beginning Of The Cold Season* (portrait of Forough Farrokhzad), 2022; *Hey, Baby I'm A Star* (portrait of Fouzan), 2019; *Tobeh* (portrait of Zahra Khoshkam), 2020; *Rebel* (portrait of Zinat Moadab), 2021. All works © Soheila Sokhanvari, and courtesy of the artist and Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery

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