

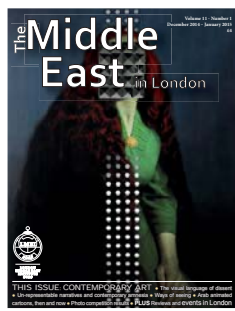
The Middle East in London

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THIS ISSUE: CONTEMPORARY ART • The visual language of dissent
• Un-representable narratives and contemporary amnesia • Ways of seeing • Arab animated
cartoons, then and now • Photo competition results • **PLUS** Reviews and events in London



Samira Alikhanzadeh,
Untitled, 2011

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East Institute at SOAS

Publisher and Editorial Office

The London Middle East Institute
SOAS

University of London
MBI Al Jaber Building, 21 Russell
Square, London WC1B 5EA
United Kingdom

T: +44 (0)20 7898 4490
F: +44 (0)20 7898 4329
E: lmei@soas.ac.uk
www.soas.ac.uk/lmei/

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The Middle East in London

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Janet Rady and *Lisa Pollman*
discuss the life and works of multimedia
artist Soheila Sokhanvari

Un-representable narratives and contemporary amnesia: Soheila Sokhanvari

Hailing from Iran, visual artist Soheila Sokhanvari creates pieces that boldly take on issues such as national identity and political events that shape contemporary life in the 21st century with bizarre, humorous and mysterious narratives. She deftly works with a variety of visual media and materials designed to encourage audience participation and reflection. Some of her series include reworked passports, contemporised miniature paintings, delicate crude oil works, thought-provoking installations and carpet paintings.

Sokhanvari was born in Shiraz, the birthplace of poets Hafez and Saadi. In the so-called 'City of Gardens', Sokhanvari learned the intricacies of miniature painting alongside her father, who was a self-taught miniature artist, model and fashion designer. Instead of drawing in colouring books, Sokhanvari ground pigments, mixed colours and painted rudimentary designs as a child. It was during this time that Sokhanvari was introduced to egg tempera technique, a process that fascinates her to this day and is represented in a large body of her work.

Sokhanvari, who earned her first degree in Biochemistry, was naturally drawn to the

alchemy behind grinding and mixing her own colours and uses precious materials such as crude oil, lapis lazuli, malachite and 22ct gold in her pieces in addition to working with egg tempera. For her 'Hoochie Coochie Man' series, she harnesses these costly materials to create sublime geometric tessellations often represented in traditional Middle Eastern art and architecture.

Sokhanvari enjoys shopping for pigments at an establishment based in Venice that has served artists for hundreds of years. For the artist, the timelessness of egg tempera acts as a perfect foil for the fast-paced, troubled present: 'Like Grayson Perry, I am interested in using an ancient technique that is associated with craft, decoration and a medieval language to speak about contemporary issues. There is something very performative with egg tempera because one becomes aware of the laborious process, which goes against our global fast-consuming culture.'

An unusual material used by Sokhanvari is crude oil, a major export product of Iran, which is surprisingly well suited as



Soheila Sokhanvari, *Shahzad the Storyteller*, 2013. Mixed media on vellum. 30.5 X 23cm

a medium. Sokhanvari first included it in her artwork in 2009 when she began her studies at Goldsmiths College. Her crude oil paintings depict a gentleness and timeless intimacy, much like sepia-tone photographs: 'Crude oil is a very versatile material. It is as stable and permanent as ink (being carbon based) and dries instantly unlike oil. It is plastic and moody: how it behaves depends upon temperature and humidity and I never know how a drawing will turn out. I always say when we first met we were enemies but now we are friends.'

Sokhanvari finds the medium suitable due to its political, economic and environmental narrative and employs it for its veiled political value. To some in the Middle East, crude oil is viewed as both a blessing and a curse: a commodity that has built dynasties and made or broken apart families, peoples and countries.

In a nod to tradition, Sokhanvari presents her work on calf vellum, a medieval staple for visual artists but also a chilling symbol of death and sacrifice. Referencing the calf as the sacrificial animal in the Abrahamic

*Soheila Sokhanvari does not consider
herself strictly Persian but a 'cultural collage'*

Each piece she completes is a chance to look at a particular event with completely fresh eyes

religions, she links this to the Iranian ideological concept of martyrdom, thereby creating a notional palimpsest of the stories of the many exiled Iranians like herself.

Although originally from the region, she does not consider herself strictly Persian but a 'cultural collage' and has spent most of her life abroad after leaving Iran to attend school in the UK at the age of ten. The idea of an artist living in exile and one who has gained particular freedoms and advantages (as well as facing challenges) is not lost on Sokhanvari. 'Exile', she says, 'can be a creative space that allows a critical discourse at the juncture of opposing cultures; it gives a voice and a distance that may not be possible from within the homeland... I would like to stress that many exiles become an insider-outsider, which means that you are neither, but you can reinvent yourself as an exile.'

Sokhanvari seeks to connect her work with the audience, with a narrative that is often cleverly hidden in the background, to be patiently discovered and savoured. Modern-day traumas that have become woven into the very fabric of society yet forgotten are fleshed out and presented in a completely different format, often through the vehicle of humour or absurdity: 'Humour brings out the absurdity of these events and makes it easier to deal with. My passport installations function firstly as found portraits that sit within the context of personal as well as national identity. It deals with experiences of an individual within a collective narrative of a nation; each stamp is a humorous hint at the politics of that country. One's passport defines how they are treated and judged.'

An important component of Sokhanvari's narrative are the titles of each work. Not content with labelling her works 'untitled', titles are sometimes chosen *before* a piece even begins. For her final year piece at Goldsmiths in 2011, her sculpture *Moje Sabz* was an installation with an antique taxidermy horse astride a bright blue orb. The meaning behind that provocative sculpture? Iran's Green Movement of 2009. An important component of this work was to provide an opportunity for the audience to connect with the piece by

doing their own research at the installation (via instructions opposite the artwork) and then interact with others at the installation. She explains, 'When I was at Goldsmiths I was researching how to represent the un-representable. I studied about Joan Miró and how he titled his "abstract" paintings after Spanish Civil War events and how the "title" became a vehicle for the narrative or the message. He was a painter [who depicted history] very much like Goya but in a different way... It was based on the above-mentioned idea of an object that can stand in for something else.'

For Sokhanvari, each piece she completes is a chance to look at a particular event with completely fresh eyes. The challenge, then, is to unwaveringly look at an event and 'bring it back on the table' for discussion. With the complexities and challenges of global politics, the economy and the environment,

she should have more than enough material to choose from.

Sokhanvari earned a second Bachelor's degree (Fine Art) from the Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge (2005), a PgDip (Fine Art) from the Chelsea College of Art and Design (2006) and a Master of Fine Arts from Goldsmiths College, University of London (2011). She has been long listed for the Global Art Affairs Foundation's Exhibition at the Venice Biennale 2015 and also has a solo show scheduled in October 2015 at the Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery in London.

Janet Rady runs Janet Rady Fine Art, a contemporary Middle Eastern art gallery based in London. See www.janetradyfineart.com; Lisa Pollman specialises in writing about Asian and Middle Eastern artists who boldly and unapologetically break new ground with subject matter or techniques. See more of her work at www.lisapollman.com



© Soheila Sokhanvari

Soheila Sokhanvari, *Holy Trinity*. Iranian crude oil on paper. 21 X 29.5cm