Art News

Soheila Sokhanvari, Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery

Soheila Sokhanvari's Oeuvre Showcased At Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery

24-09-2015

Iranian-born artist Soheila Sokhanvari's oeuvre is to be showcased through new works in the solo show Boogie Wonderland at Kristin Hjellegjerde.With a joyful colour palette reminiscent of Frida Kahlo or Gauguin, Sokhanvari subscribes to the school of magical realism that enhanced reality in which the banal and everyday take on new life and meaning by being imbued with an elevated focus. It also belies the complex political undertones of her work, allowing her to take a step back and examine events from her native country through the lens of distance and time.

She investigates the concept of collective trauma as an experience that can be told through the narratives of individuals, using mainly family photographs as her source material, alongside found imagery from pop culture and news recordings. Her work is also recognizable for its obsessive use of patterning and decoration, inspired by the idea of 'anaesthetised aesthetics', an expression used by philosopher Susan BuckMorss to capture the way in which control over aesthetics can be used to control society.

Her key area of focus is Iranian pre-revolution of 1979, a time, she says, that "led a nation to stand up collectively, when my own memory, as a child, is diminished." Taking up the Aristotelian view that inequality is the cause of all turbulence, Sokhanvari follows the idea that revolution is like a pressure cooker – a collective movement against internal pressure ready to burst forth back to a natural equilibrium if crippled for too long by artificial

impediments. Sokhanvari examines this political and social fallout through archived photographs, often black and white, sometimes analogue colour and Polaroid. "The attempts to capture this era gets mixed reactions, as some saw pre-Revolutionary Iran as fascist, while other saw it as free," explains the artist. "It is, however, an era where almost all of my memory comes from photographs and so I feel I can stand as a silent willing observer." By painting from photographs she is able to criticise the structures of society by coolly and uncompromisingly depicting every detail of her subjects and their surroundings. In doing so, she reveals the distance and emptiness between them, between the story and the reality. She also uses the notion of black and white and colour to reflect the way in which our own memories falter – "I believe our own memories are a mixture of both," she says, "as there are times that memory is unfaithful to reality – we may not remember a particular colour or detail – and so memory becomes a construct of fantasy and reality where they can both fight for the same space."

These are then painted in egg tempera on velum, creating a curvilinear art between art history and the practice of mediaeval illuminated manuscripts. During their original era, it was believed that each colour held a unique magic quality – and so each painting spoke a complex language of symbolism and association to the viewer. While these detailed readings of Medieval paintings may now be lost to us, as the exact associations and meanings of each colour and pigment are not part of the public consciousness, Sokhanvari harnesses
this phenomenon to create a similar effect with her own paintings, drawing on the minute details and colours she both finds and recreates in her source photographs to paint a new language. The use of calf vellum adds a further layer, representing the sacrificial animal of all monotheistic religions. Here, it stands as the symbol of the sacrifice of the individual.

In the case of the exhibition's title, Sokhanvari draws on a very specific memory – that of being at boarding school and watching the Revolution unfold on television while in the UK shortly after returning from a Christmas break in Iran. "As I watched the Revolution in Iran unfold on the news, Boogie Wonderland, by Earth, Wind & Fire was playing on the record player. It completely drowned out the sound from the TV, the disco music lending a bizarre soundtrack to the violent imagery I was watching on TV," she recalls. "The people's revolt literally became a 'dance', and the lyrics became strangely appropriate."

In Boogie Wonderland, her paintings present us with a revision of nostalgia, a looking back at the way things were in order to empower a new generation of self-awareness and realisation. "Nostalgia in my work, far from bolstering the status quo," says Sokhanvari, "allows us to see what is wrong with the world."

Meanwhile, her self-portrait series of drawings, paintings and sculpture examines her absence from these family photographs during her long exile from Iran. "In an attempt to regain and reclaim my presence in family events I have extracted the negative spaces between people and objects in a photograph as my own self-portrait," she says. "I depict these shapes and title them as the date of the photograph taken." In this light, the sculptures that have resulted from these shapes in turn hark to the tradition of the portrait bust in art history. These paintings and self-portraits are joined by a series of crude oil drawings created out of a 500ml vat of Iranian crude oil brought by the artist from Tehran to Heathrow in her hold luggage. "These drawings stand as a witness to this performance and hint at the narrative of the global airline security post 9/11," she says. In a sense, Sokhanvari shows us how all events; all revolutions, people, governments and political systems are interlaced. From the fallout of the Iranian Revolution to that of today's terrorist attacks and ensuing racial, religious and cultural tensions, we can look back at their source footage over and over again, she says, but we may never know the truth. After all, it's all the details.

Boogie Wonderland: Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery - 16th of October to 14th of November 2015