

# Art Radar

Contemporary art trends and news from Asia and beyond

## Altered reality and negative space: Soheila Sokhanvari – artist profile

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**Soheila Sokhanvari employs patterning to address history, politics and collective trauma.**

Sokhanvari's solo show in London takes a nostalgic look at the past, while examining the artist's desire to recover space in family events despite living outside of Iran.



Soheila Sokhanvari, 'Shahrzad', 2015, egg tempera on vellum, 50 x 20cm. Image courtesy the artist and Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery.

Much like a scientist, **Soheila Sokhanvari** uses age-old materials and techniques, such as human hair, calf vellum, egg tempera and Iranian crude oil. The artist produces paintings, three dimensional work and sculptures that take an intimate look at pre-revolutionary Iran, while teasing out narratives that are often bizarre and humorous.

Born in the historically significant city of Shiraz, Sokhanvari came of age during the events that led to the end of the Shah of Iran's dynasty (1979), the rise of the Ayatollah Khomeini and the codification of Islamic rule in Iran. Initially gaining a degree in Biochemistry, Sokhanvari successfully completed her BFA in Fine Art and Art History from Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge in 2005, a PgDip in Fine Art from the Chelsea College of Art and Design in 2006 and an MFA in Fine Art from Goldsmiths College in 2011. Sokhanvari currently lives in Cambridge, United Kingdom.



Soheila Sokhanvari with 'Touching the Void' sculpture. Image courtesy the artist and Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery.

The multidisciplinary artist's work is currently being exhibited in "Boogie Wonderland" at the **Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery** through 14 November 2015 and will be part of the "**Champagne Life**" group show running 13 January to 6 March 2016 at **Saatchi Gallery**. In 2015, her work was seen at the **Armory Show** in New York City and she was shortlisted for the Jerwood Drawing Prize.

Sokhanvari highlights "**those strange moments in history**" (PDF download), as written in the press release for the "Boogie Wonderland" solo show, "during which what we see and what we hear are out of sync". Added to this altered state of reality are clues to the artist's past – one that she was a part of and one that she experienced by default, living many years outside of her homeland.



Soheila Sokhanvari, "Boogie Wonderland" (2015), exhibition view at the Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery. Image courtesy the artist and Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery.

To create a sense of time and culture, Sokhanvari deftly employs patterning. As the artist told *Art Radar*, she uses colours and shapes to highlight the complexities that are a part of Iran:

*I think that pattern is very political and historically specific. The patterns in my work are easily recognisable as say 60's and 70's and I use them as a tool to create a sense of age and to place the work in an era. I also use patterns to symbolise the strict, autocratic conditions in pre-revolutionary Iran yet the pattern is colorful and beautiful, just like our culture.*



Soheila Sokhanvari, 'Seven Minutes to Autumn', 2015, Iranian crude oil on paper, 21.5 x 29.5 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery.

Sokhanvari's love and bold use of patterns harken back to her father's collection of clothes as a designer of men's and women's clothing in her hometown. As a model and fashion designer, he was inspired by Western fashion – or what he thought was the fashion of the time – as seen in Hollywood films. These ideas led, as the artist relayed, to an unusual "hybrid" of Persian patterns and colours with Western design, which have now found their way onto her canvases:

*I remember my childhood spending hours playing with colourful off cuts of various fabrics and that has given me an eye for colour and pattern.*



Soheila Sokhanvari, 'The Sheltering Sky', 2015, egg tempera on vellum, 23.5 x 31 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Kristin Hjellegjerde.

### **Like father, like daughter**

As a girl, Sokhanvari learned about the arts from her father, who was a self-taught miniature painter, model and fashion designer. While others were drawing in colouring books, Sokhanvari was grinding pigments, mixing colours and beginning to master the technique of using egg tempera. Egg tempera dates back to 15th century Europe and, as Soheila says, is a "labour intensive

technique". It requires that the grinding of coloured pigments with egg yolks as a binding agent. The payoff is a paint whose colours can remain vibrant for thousands of years, like those used in illuminated manuscripts.

Sokhanvari purchases her pigments from an apothecary-like shop in Venice that dates back hundreds of years. Although the process requires time, the artist told *Art Radar* that she likens it to a form of resistance to our fast-paced contemporary existence:

*I use the same labour intensive technique, grinding and making my own colours as a way of slowing down the art process, which in an era of digital art production and fast consumer society, I see as a form of anarchy and resistance. Following the ideas of William Morris and his fellow artists who fought industrialisation as a way of fighting capitalism.*



Soheila Sokhanvari, 'Untitled', 2015, egg tempera on calf vellum, 17 x 23.5 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery.

## Precious materials and black gold

In addition to egg tempera, Sokhanvari uses precious materials such as crude oil, lapis lazuli, malachite and 22 carat gold in her work. Iranian crude oil is a significant material to the artist, due to its historical and environmental implications in a post 9/11 world. In fact, a 500-millilitre vat once accompanied her from Tehran to Heathrow in her carry-on luggage – an irony not lost on Sokhanvari. The artist values it as a very "versatile" medium. Sepia-like in tone, carbon based oil – much like ink – dries instantly but is unpredictable and can be influenced by temperature and humidity.



Soheila Sokhanvari, 'Beach Boys II', 2014, Iranian Crude oil on paper. Image courtesy the artist and Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery.



Sokeila Sokhanvari, 'Baptism of Solitude I', 2015, artist hair on vellum, 30 x 35.5 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery.

Sokhanvari's canvas of choice consists of calf vellum, a traditional material dating back hundreds of years and used in both artwork and sacred texts – such as Gandarian Buddhist texts, Sifrei *Torah* and Gutenberg's first *Bible*. In addition to being smooth and durable, Sokhanvari chose it for its symbolism.

The calf represents sacrifice in monotheist religions and the idea of an individual's sacrifice or martyrdom. In a further nod to the artwork of medieval times, Sokhanvari utilises colour and canvas to depict a new language, despite the fact that colours no longer represent specific "magical" properties as they once did in the period's illuminated manuscripts.

#### **Another dimension**

Recently, she has woven human hair into vellum in her "Baptism of Solitude" series. These works are based on the idea of the negative space representing Sokhanvari in family photographs, while exploring the relationships and rules pertaining to their hair



throughout history. Of particular interest is the artist's intention to "reclaim her presence" in this three-dimensional series. As the artist told *Art Radar*:

*These hair drawings are based on a series of works created on the concept of the self-portrait. On my return to Iran after a long absence, I realised that I was missing from many family photographs. So, I marked out the negative spaces between people and/or objects in these photographs as a place that I ought to have been, as a way of reclaiming my presence in these events. These abstract shapes became my self-portraits.*



Soheila Sokhanvari, 'Moje Sabz', 2011, antique taxidermy horse, jesmonite, automobile paint and metal. 135 x 145 x 170cm. Image courtesy the artist.

Sokhanvari has also dabbled in sculpture. One of her most well-known pieces in that oeuvre is called *Moje Sabz*, featuring an antique taxidermy horse astride a bright blue orb. The title references Iran's 2009 Green Movement – a play on words that Soheila often integrates into her pieces and exhibition titles. For the "Boogie Wonderland" exhibition, Sokhanvari has included a sculpture called *Touching the Void*. In this work, Sokhanvari told *Art Radar* that she places the three-dimensional work opposite the egg tempera drawing to represent one complete work:

*Some of the abstract shapes from these negative spaces have a strangely organic form and I am drawn to realising them as a positive shape. That way, these shapes become like a portrait bust that connects to a history of portrait sculpture. Making the negative space into a positive space is an interesting concept for me. When I was thinking about the self-portrait series, I was drawn to this quote from Salman Rushdie: 'Most of what matters in our lives takes place in our absence.'*