



TheTehranTimes

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THE COLLECTIVE
TRAUMA: A
CONVERSATION
ABOUT ART,
FASHION AND
THEIR SOCIETAL

ROLES WITH SOHEILA SOKHANVARI

by THE TEHRAN TIMES (<http://thetehrantimes.com/author/dentelle/>) Sunday, August 14, 2016



Soheila Sokhanvari, an Iranian-born artist living in the UK, deals with mass amnesia caused by collective traumas in a humorous, bizarre and fascinatingly abstract way, with the help of magic realism and aspects from her own upbringing. To me she talks about her journey through the art world, how she tackles politics and the importance of absurdity in her creations.

Tell me about your journey through the realm of the art world. Where does your interest in art originate?

My father taught me how to paint and draw. He started his career as a fashion model and later became a fashion designer. My mother was a lecturer in Persian literature and she was correcting homework everyday. That meant both my parents were working on paper and we had lots of books around, so it is natural that I was drawn to art and literature. I guess I am a product of an era when children had to create their own entertainment. Like most children, I loved art. What made a difference in my case was the support I received. In the mid 70's the local TV station in Shiraz was providing free classes for children in the arts, and I was lucky enough to be selected for the fine art programme. These classes eventually led to a weekly children's TV show, which I participated in as an artist. It was a lot of fun as the TV professionals were helping and teaching the children to participate in the creative industry.

In what ways do you consider art and fashion to be complementary? What aspects of the different areas connect?

Art and fashion are inseparable and embody self-expression. We articulate our voices through what we wear, how we spend our money and the things that we make and do. Fashion and art have inextricable links to political ambitions and endeavours, offering a conduit for economical and societal ambitions of an individual to be realized in a visual form.

In what ways are your paintings related to fashion?

My paintings depict family photographs, ordinary people in ordinary settings, but where I enhance the patterning and colour as an additional layer. The use of over patterning and decoration in my work is to create an anxiety where the over burdening background traps people as a symbol for the way their life circumstances traps them. They become pinned like butterflies unable to move. There is also an aspect of politics to patterns. For instance one can date a pattern to an era, or to a social class. We are subconsciously aware of the politics of pattern and fashion because we judge each other based on these fashion codes.



(<http://thetehrantimes.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/The-Possessed-IIIemailIranian-Crude-oil-Lapis-LazuliMalachite-22ct-Gold-Egg-tempera-on-calf-vellum2013.jpg>)

Possessed III (2013)

(<http://thetehrantimes.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/unnamed.jpg>)

In your painting *The Sheltering Sky* from your egg tempera collection, the inverted colors of the skin of the subjects really caught my eye. Does that part have a specific symbolic meaning?

People are depicted as negative, but the sky is positive, and that is an important symbolism. The two elements in the painting rub against each other. I hope people will conclude the meaning for themselves. There is a saying that the sky is the same colour no matter where you are in the world. The title “*The Sheltering Sky*” comes from one of my favourite books by the American writer Paul Bowles.



(<http://thetehrantimes.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/The-Sheltering-Sky.jpg>)

The Sheltering Sky (2015)

What kind of societal issues are the key inspirations in your creations? Which issues do you like to portray the most?

I tend to deal with collective trauma through the narrative of the individual. However, as an artist I stand as a silent observer; I do not wish to take sides or to be didactic. It is important to let the viewer decide which side of the divide they stand. I really like the Irish writer James Joyce, who believed that the best critical space for an artist to be is as an exile, an “insider outside” as it were. I find history holds the best stories, so I am interested in events and traumas that affect a collective. Sometimes the event is represented as an abstraction and other times through the language of magic realism, because through the poetry of magic realism I can tell a multi-layered narrative without pinning the meaning down.

What role does Iran and the Iranian people play in your art?

I was born in Iran, my work centres on my family and friends photographs, so naturally my work becomes about Iran. But I hope my narrative is more universal and speaks to a larger audience. We all recognise the friends and family units and function within those structures. Frida Kahlo was a Mexican painter but we can all relate to the issues she was dealing with through her personal stories. My work is mainly about pre-revolutionary Iran as this era is my only memory of my country. It is as if Iran has frozen for me and has become the fodder for my art.



(<http://thetehrantimes.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/unnamed-1.jpg>)

How do racial issues play into your collection titled Passports?

I have 120 passports from different countries and dates, and the stamps I've created myself. Passports and photographs represent an alternative to the established portrait photography as a genre in art. Governments globally set the rigid composition for these portraits, and the portrait sits within the context of the subject's personal ID information as well as their nationality. Both personal ID and nationality are what we are judged by. The richer countries, like the US, have a very elaborate design and a more luxurious paper quality or watermark to the passport, unlike the poorer countries where a simpler and cheaper design is used. That is something I want the viewer to notice.



(<http://thetehrantimes.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Saudi-Passport-III.jpg>) Saudi woman Passport (2013)

Is humor an important narrative in your works?

I am interested in the absurd because life is quite absurd. Through humour one can address the trauma much more effectively. It will give the viewer a distance to address tragedy, which will remain with you a lot longer. The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard said that “tragic and the comic are the same, in so far as both are based on contradiction; but the tragic is the suffering contradiction, the comical, the painless contradiction”. Humour is a necessary

tool just like symbolism or poetry. For example, the American artist Philip Guston dealt brilliantly with the racism in America by painting these absurd figures dressed as the KKK members.

If you had to choose one piece from your collections, which represents you the most as an artist, which one would it be?

Cowboy Ali (2015) is a painting based on a photograph of my father taken in the 70's, which depicts him as a cowboy. But obviously he makes a rubbish cowboy. It is a humorous look at the obsession of some non-westerns with Western, and particularly American, culture. How we look at the West through the lens of Hollywood and how we construct our identity through this viewfinder. I want the viewers to address their own attitude towards the fashion aesthetics that is imposed on them.



(<http://thetehrantimes.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Cowboy-Ali1.jpg>)

Cowboy Ali (2015)

What has inspired you the most throughout your artistic journey?

Nature, life and people I meet. I am a silent observer and I see beauty in everything. I find beauty in every single face I see; everyone is beautiful and interesting in their own unique way. I believe that if we appreciated how beautiful nature is, we would take care of it a lot more.

*Soheila is represented by
Kristin Hjellegjerde gallery
To see more of Soheila
Sokhanvari's artworks visit her
website: [www.soheila-
sokhanvari.com](http://www.soheila-sokhanvari.com)
([http://www.soheila-
sokhanvari.com/](http://www.soheila-sokhanvari.com/))*

The following are Soheila's upcoming exhibitions:

22 July- 5th August 2016 2nd Contemporary Art Biennale (part 1), Niyavaran Cultural Centre, Tehran then touring in Iran. A group show.

2nd July -4th Sept 2016. Watou Art Festival, Group exhibition in Watou, Belgium. A group show.

6-9 Oct 2016 Cross Roads, The London Art Show, 6-9 October 2016. Solo exhibition with Kristin Hjellegjerde gallery

March, 2017 Dubai Art Fair with Kristin Hjellegjerde gallery, a group show.

May-Dec 2017 " I AM" a 30 female art exhibition that will premiere at Jordon, London and the USA:

May-June,2017 Jordan's National Gallery of Fine Arts, Amman.

Summer 2017 St Martin's In The Field, London (in connection with the Shubbak Festival)

Winter 2017 North America, Venue to be confirmed.

2018 (date to be confirmed) Solo exhibition *Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery.*



Maryam Dinar



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