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The Asian Art Newspaper  
Vol 22 Issue 1  
Published by  
Asian Art Newspaper Ltd,  
London

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and digital editions

## Changes of address

Information as above

## Annual print subscription

(8 issues a year)  
UK £45  
Rest of Europe £50  
Rest of World £55  
US residents US\$90  
(including airmail postage)  
Monthly except for Winter Quarter  
(Dec-Feb) and  
Summer Quarter (June-Aug)

## £30/US\$48 digital subscription

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ISSN 1460-8537

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# RAMIN HAERIZADEH ROKNI HAERIZADEH & HESAM RAHMANIAM

By Olivia Sand

While all artists in their own right, the brothers Ramin and Rokni Haerizadeh, together with their friend Hesam Rahmianiam, started to collaborate on projects, several years ago. As a result, they have become one of the most intriguing and interesting collectives, challenging, in a constructive way, all notions and concepts as they express themselves in the field of contemporary art. Exploring various ramifications, their art can be as comprehensive as including theatre, poetry, dance, literature, philosophy, science, music, and visual arts. Collectively, it is difficult to summarise their art as it is constantly evolving, as the artists have not set themselves any boundaries. Their collaboration is an ongoing work in progress that is visually pleasing, sometimes humorous, sometimes serious, but always with the same goal: to question our assumptions be they political, artistic, or sociological. Trained in Tehran, Ramin (b 1975), Rokni (b 1978), and Hesam (b 1980) are presently based in Dubai. In the following interview, they share their approach to their practice and thoughts about the art world.



Portrait of the artists (from left to right) Rokni Haerizadeh, Hesam Rahmianiam and Ramin Haerizadeh at *Forgive me, distant wars, for bringing flowers home*, OGR, Turin, Italie  
Courtesy of the artistes, OGR, Turin, Italy © Andrea Rossetti

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## NEWS IN BRIEF

and Eastern stories, and therefore perfectly suited Foujita's very similar blend of influences. The artist was also attracted to the air of innocence and joy in the tales, later saying, 'as a reaction to the violent times, I conjured the sweetest of subjects, even childish subjects'. It seems that Foujita held this work in great esteem, creating for it its own hand-carved frame – something he did for only a select few works. The work was selected for Foujita's solo 1949 exhibition at Mathias Komor Gallery and then travelled to Paris for his important solo exhibition at the Galerie Paul Pétrides in 1950, where it was purchased by a private French collector on the final day of the exhibition.

## INDIAN PAINTINGS, GIFT, WASHINGTON DC AND CLEVELAND

This year, more than 200 Rajput and Pahari paintings from the prestigious Catherine Glynn Benkaim and Ralph Benkaim Collection have been divided between two public museums, the Smithsonian's Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M Sackler Gallery and the Cleveland Museum of Art (CMA), making them both significant repositories of Indian court painting from the 1600s to 1800s.

The paintings were acquired as a gift/purchase, a generous gesture by Catherine Glynn Benkaim and her partner Barbara Timmer, making the acquisitions possible for each museum. The collection as a whole comprises representative examples of

paintings made for royal patrons in the Rajput kingdoms mainly from the present-day states of Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh and the Pahari kingdoms in Jammu and Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh. The scenes reference epic, religious and romantic literature, as well as formal portraiture, devotional themes, royal hunts and historical events.

## OBITUARY: PROFESSOR WEN FONG

The death has been announced of Prof. Wen Fong, renowned art historian and alumnus of Princeton University, who died in October 2018, aged 88. Fong was born in Shanghai in 1930, and received a classical Chinese education, including training as a calligrapher. In 1948 he went to the US to study physics at Princeton, but soon switched his major to European history, graduating in the Class of 1951. He continued at Princeton as a graduate student in the Department of Art and Archaeology, focusing on medieval art history before earning a PhD in 1958 in Chinese art history. In 1959, Fong and the late Professor Frederick Mote, professor of East Asian studies, emeritus, established at Princeton the nation's first PhD programme in Chinese art and archaeology, and shortly afterward expanded the programme to include Japanese art and archaeology. He established Princeton's Far Eastern Seminar Archives in 1958, which include more than 50,000 photographs of Chinese and

Japanese paintings, as well as one of the world's finest libraries of Asian Art. A publications fund for Chinese art history will be established at Princeton in Fong's memory.

## JORDAN SCHNITZER MUSEUM OF ART

Chinese artist Hung Liu and Trillium Graphics master printer David Salgado have donated 55 works of art to the University of Oregon's Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art (JSMA) that exemplify the innovative mixed-media techniques they developed in which printed and painted elements are embedded in layers of resin to evocative, gestural effect. The JSMA plans to use the Hung Liu *za zhang* acquisitions as the basis for a series of courses that will culminate in a special exhibition produced in collaboration with University of Oregon faculty and students.

## FIELD MEETING, DUBAI

Asian Contemporary Art Week's (ACAW) annual art form, Field Meeting, will for the first time take place out of New York in Dubai, from 24 to 26 January. There will be a dynamic string of pop-up exhibitions, performances, lecture-performances and discussions. In less than 10 years, Alserkal Avenue has become MENASA region's (Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia) foremost creative hub and cultural destination, housing over 60 galleries, arts organisations, and studios.

## CROW MUSEUM DALLAS

Marking its 20th year, the Crow Museum of Asian Art in Dallas has unveiled a multi-million-dollar expansion, a new name, and five new exhibitions. Heading the museum's renewal project is the exhibition, *Jacob Hashimoto: Clouds and Chaos*. Throughout the history of Asian art, clouds have served many functions: as framing devices, interstitial motifs and as compositional boundaries. The exhibition explores how clouds can function as divisions of space while remaining the apotheosis of ethereal formlessness and includes Hashimoto's latest woodblock prints, exhibited for the first time in a US museum.

## TOKYOGRAPHIE, TOKYO

Kyotographie, the international photography festival, is held annually in Kyoto for one month during spring. The event showcases about 15 Japanese and international photography exhibitions placed in iconic Kyoto architectural settings. For the first time, this programme has travelled to Tokyo. The new addition to the event is called Tokyographie and runs until 25 December throughout the city. All exhibitions are free, adjusted to Tokyo's spirit and dynamic as revised versions of the exhibitions presented in Kyoto earlier in the year. Kyotographie 2019 will be held 13 April to 12 May. For more information, visit [tokyographie.jp](http://tokyographie.jp)



View of the installation "All The Rivers Run Into The Sea. Over." / "Copy. Yet. The Sea Is Not Full. Over" (2015) shown at Asia Pacific Triennial (APT8), Brisbane, Australia.

Courtesy des artistes, (APT8) et Galerie In Situ - Fabienne Leclerc, Paris

Asian Art Newspaper: Looking at the exhibition at OGR (Officine Grandi Riparazioni) in Turin in the summer/autumn of this year, and considering that you all have your individual practice, what led you to collaborate on projects?

Hesam Rahmani: It all came about very organically in 2009. We have known each other for a very long time – since the mid-1990s – as we thought that living and working together would be a kind of project in itself. As a visitor, everything you see in our exhibitions is going through a process: nothing stays the same, everything is constantly changing as a continuation of our working practice. Working together is not really always limited to the three of us: the collaboration includes anyone we find suitable. As we live and work together, it just happens to be the three of us. However, if anyone adds to this body of work, we welcome them to participate in what we are trying to do. From the top of my head, I cannot recall any specific reason that led us to make it a collaborative practice. It came together very naturally, and maybe it was based on a need to work together.

Rokni Haerizadeh: The good thing about being together is that before presenting a work to a wider audience, it is seen by two or three critical pairs of eyes. Looking at the art in context of the 20th and 21st centuries, everything is based on that 'Genius Artist' at the top, who dominates the space. That trend was even more visible in the 1990s, and more so on a broader level with the development of architecture, with huge spaces occupied by one person. For the 21st century, I think it is time to reclassify ourselves by putting the word 'artist' behind us and rethink the core of society, as ultimately art is from the human and for the human.

AAN: Our society has not really brought anything radically new in terms of visual arts. It is interesting to see this new undertaking, all the more so as it is collaborative work (rarely two people, but almost never three) has almost disappeared. How do you view your undertaking?

Rokni Haerizadeh: We are working and living together despite never

coming up with this as a specific plan. Hesam Rahmani: As Rokni indicated, it is curious how things come together, so many things are actually not meant to be, and are not pre-meditated. When we were about to work in this gigantic space at OGR in Turin, we did not have a design sketch like an architect with everything planned out, we worked our way through and chose the people with whom we wanted to work. To a large extent, we rely on improvisation. Sometimes, we are in the middle of something and then, somebody else comes in, completely changing the direction our work. We then end up going somewhere else and understand that the work needs to go in another direction.

Hesam Rahmani: We already consider living together as a project. We designed a discipline for ourselves of reading, discussions, painting, etc, and for the past 10 years, we have been focusing on living like this.

Rokni Haerizadeh: In our work, we try to replicate global cities: bringing the cities inside, bringing contemporary life inside. Where we live can be described in a spectrum from library, film sets, cinema, theatre sets of home, studio, and a residency. In our opinion, everything should be organic and happen naturally, without force – that is why we never stop any project. At home, every corner of our house is growing physically and mentally: the books, the discussions about philosophy and the art world, about history. Basically, we have different areas where things accumulate. One of the major trends now is that we are being bombarded with information. You start your day and you are interrupted by information for which you have not asked. These channels of information are intruders, consequently we are constantly distracted.

Hesam Rahmani: Usually, when conceiving of a piece, we have a starting base and then build it up. Sometimes it fails, but we know it is half way there, but then it continues building up and up. The practice that Rokni was explaining also applies to making a very small object. We start something, we know where it is going, but we are also aware that sometimes it may just fail.

Like with every exhibition, when it comes back to Dubai, the individual

pieces are back in our hands and maybe, after two or three months, we might start to reconsider them. We recycle pieces because after we leave an exhibition space, wherever it may be, we are not the same people: we are changing, based upon everything that we have experienced while away from home.

AAN: Is the exhibition you had at OGR in Turin your largest exhibition to date?

All: Yes.

Rokni Haerizadeh: It was a challenge. We first went there in January 2018 to prepare for the exhibition that was scheduled to open last July.

AAN: OGR is a former train repair station, converted into a multi-disciplinary art centre.

Was the space challenging? Hesam Rahmani: When we first saw it, the space was empty. It is a very beautiful space and very intriguing. However, there were limitations to which we were introduced, but then at the same time, there were options and opportunities with which we could work. It was a challenging undertaking because of the dominance of the structure and the short amount of time we had to contextually and physically think about how we were going to put the show together. Rokni Haerizadeh: The architecture ended up becoming like the decoration of the work. So, yes, it was very challenging.

AAN: You are interested in a wide range of subjects from books, the arts, to theatre and philosophy. Where did you get the title of the exhibition?

Rokni Haerizadeh: The overall title of the show was inspired by poetry. We believe it is time to reconsider all the definitions that people keep repeating. Presently, we are losing time, and we have to define things in a new direction. Poetry is a base for deregulating structure and language. For us, one of the sections in our home is devoted to poets from a period, like Wislawa Szymborska (1923-2012). When we were in school, we got to know her work through the film writer and film director Krzysztof Kieslowski (1941-1996, *Three Colors*

*Trilogy*). In Iran, we have excellent translations. Sometimes, people are taking great risks to translate philosophy, or art, from other countries and we admire and adore them and their work.

AAN: You are all artists in your own right. Are you planning on keeping both practices?

Rokni Haerizadeh: We do believe in the individual as the core of our undertaking. That is why we do not put a name on our collaboration, because we constantly attract other members. In addition, we feel individuals are most important for our collective. Hesam Rahmani: The individual practice always feeds the collective and vice-versa.

Rokni Haerizadeh: Some works are based on collaborations with several people. Our video *Black Hair*, for example, is a result of numerous discussions we have had at our house with friends. Somehow, we were all disappointed and felt a certain precariousness in regards to our future and the art scene. As we come from the Islamic World, we have a spectrum to deal with – on one side is the advanced thought and philosophy of Western art and on the other hand, there is the prophet Muhammad with all the related traditions and restrictions. As we were talking with our artist friends and reading books, everybody brought something that was relevant to the topic and based on that, we made this video. We do not want to call it 'a group with members', as we are very flexible and organic. We believe it is important to embrace the opposite side of your thoughts. Sometimes, the three of us are very angry with each other, but suddenly, when one of us suggests going another way we get the whole spectrum and incorporate opposite points of view.

Hesam Rahmani: We do not always agree with each other. For example, we called the series *Where's Waldo?*, 'negotiation fields', because on those pieces, most of the time, we were disagreeing and there were misunderstandings. For example, Rokni came up with an idea and I executed it whilst doing something completely wrong! We nevertheless continued with the piece without saying it was 'wrong', or suggesting that it should be put aside. We continued working on that mistake and suddenly, something else came up. This is a very common pattern in our practice we work on things together and build them up.

Rokni Haerizadeh: We find it is important to embrace contradictions and consider them in order to bring completely opposing sides to the negotiation table. We try not to exclude anything. That is why a great deal of our work is about multitude and impurity. We work at finding a way to create a dialogue.

AAN: You have been based in Dubai for several years. What was the reason for the move?

Hesam Rahmani: In the beginning, we were advised by friends, who themselves were in trouble, not to go back to Iran until further notice. Rokni Haerizadeh: It was under the leadership of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (who was President from 2005 to 2013) that the government in Iran started paying attention to artists and to various underground movements. Ramin Haerizadeh: That was also the

time they started to be sensitive about everything and began to kick everybody out.

Rokni Haerizadeh: In Dubai, the working environment is just more welcoming. Considerable progress has been made in Dubai, it is a place you can cast your dice. It is more optimistic and you can actually do something. For us, it is a much better atmosphere. Being there is positive and we can focus on our way of thinking, rather than being in Iran where there is discipline, patriarchy, and fear at your back.

Hesam Rahmani: In addition, with Iranian passports, you cannot really go anywhere else, and therefore, Dubai was the closest destination.

AAN: For your work dealing with issues in Iran, do you find it easier to address them being away from Iran, having that certain distance?

Rokni Haerizadeh: We all often joke amongst ourselves about the two distinct ways to approach theatre: a 'Konstantin Stanislavski' way and a 'Bertold Brechtian' way. I think people who are immersed in Iran are Stanislavskan, whereas we would rather adopt a Brechtian way of thinking. We like to keep a distance emotionally and then rethink everything.

Hesam Rahmani: A certain distance is beneficial in order to remove the emotions that the media makes you consume.

Rokni Haerizadeh: We can rethink the moral hidden messages, and issues related to class... For example, some of the refugees: they are brave people, miserable people, sometimes 200 of them on top of each other in a boat. The media usually only focus on crying children, and not on women or men.

AAN: As the media tend to focus on one aspect of the situation, how do you get your message across, making sure people take the time to look and try to understand your work?

Rokni Haerizadeh: In the piece addressing the issue which was featured at OGR in Turin, we first of all started to create a tactile ambience in the space. When you walk on a painting completed on the floor, you have to rebalance yourself. With that ambience, we try to invite the audience to look and think based on the tactility of the space. When you have a painting on the wall, you have a distance from it, but if you are walking on it, you are part of it. It is not a pattern that is flat, it is a place with a kind of psychedelic pattern which makes you unbalanced. The same applies to the patterns on the floor as your tactile sense tends to react and you are invited to rethink the matter.

AAN: You are artists and need to make a living, so how do you go about selling your work as most pieces are very large installations? Do you break-up the installations?

Rokni Haerizadeh: We have not had such success yet! However, we sell pieces through our individual practice, such as paintings and drawings. Then, we spend everything we earn on our collection of other artists. Most of the time, the artists we collect are at the margin of the market and consequently, you need to have a certain knowledge to know and appreciate their work.

• Part 2 of their exhibition *Night of another Spring is at In Situ, Fabienne Leclerc, 14, Boulevard de la Chapelle, 75018 Paris, and is on view from 17 November*



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