

WITH SIX EYES

*A journey into the world of Ramin Haerizadeh, Rokni Haerizadeh, and Hesam Rahmanian through their installation *The Birthday Party* has Leah Triplett Harrington delving into the idiosyncrasies of the artists' public and private lives*



The work of two Iranian brothers and their Iranian-American childhood friend, Ramin Haerizadeh, Rokni Haerizadeh, and Hesam Rahmanian: *The Birthday Party* is an immersive, carnivalesque site-specific mixed-media installation. Comprising paintings, sculptures, photographs, and video, *The Birthday Party* enlivens a modestly sized gallery in the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, with colour, collage, and sound. Like Harold Pinter's absurdist play from which the installation takes its title, *The Birthday Party* is frenetic and jubilant, but haunting nonetheless.

The Birthday Party is the group's first exhibition within a major US museum though they have exhibited together in I won't wait for grey hairs and worldly cares to soften my views at New York's Callicoon Fine Arts last spring. Despite living, working, and creating their hybridised works together, they resist collectivisation. Instead, says the ICA's Assistant Curator Ruth Erickson, the artists see themselves "like one organism with six eyes."

Since 2009, Rahmanian and the Haerizadeh brothers have lived together in Dubai. As children in 1980s Iran, the trio shared smuggled VHS tapes of Western television and music. Today, all three artists share an interest in globalised cultures. Ramin Haerizadeh's work blends private family photos with public news images while Rokni Haerizadeh's background in Persian literature and painting charges his work with narrative drama. Similarly, Hesam Rahmanian's studies of calligraphy imbue his collages and painterly drawings with a grace of

form. Their collective work is united through a concentration on the interplay between the cultural and the personal.

"The artists' life and work is imbued with deep generosity," says Erickson, who organised *The Birthday Party* with Curatorial Assistant Jeffrey De Blois. "We were delighted to invite the artists into our home, just as the artists have eagerly invited us and so many others into their home in Dubai."

The artists have structured *The Birthday Party* as a sort of domestic place; watercolours and drawings are haphazardly hung along one wall as a child might display them, while a Queen Elizabeth II coffee table book, galvanized by paint and collage, invites viewers to browse its pages. The works presented here aren't labeled with wall texts. Instead, attendants are stationed in the gallery, conversing with visitors about the artworks as a collector might with guests in their living room. The artists haven't so much presented artworks here as they have invited viewers to experience them.

Paint, oscillating between scaly blue-green triangles, footprints, and abstracted forms, swathes the space. Created during an August performance in Dubai, the flooring recalls Islamic decorations as well as fantastical ornaments of a child's party. The flooring seems improvised yet meticulously planned, its patterns chaotically systemised through rhythms of colour and shape. Displays of children's toys are arranged among relics of high art, like the framed, signed instructions for Allan Kaprow performances, including *Taking a Shoe for A Walk*. Such ordered spontaneity is paralleled by two sculptures, made from everyday materials accumulated into forms that blend human and animal features. A walker contains mannequin's legs, sheathed with fabrics, plastics, and other common materials accrued to create an eccentric humanoid assemblage. Nearby, a more animalistic form is amassed through papers, plastic cups, and props.

Drawing viewers into the space is a large, hive-like sculpture made from rolled images of surveillance footage printed from the web, with a copier-printer placed beneath. Hung from the gallery's ceiling, the sculpture sways as people move throughout the space, and is balanced by a smaller, golden bronze sculpture, elegantly strung up in a nearby corner. The sculptures aren't the work of the Haerizadehs or Rahmanian, however; the former is *Printer No. 1* by Hassan Sharif, and the latter is Louise Bourgeois's *Janus Fleuri*. These are just a few among several artworks in the show either by friends of the artists or from the ICA's collection.

Curation is very much part of the artists' practice. For *The Birthday Party*, they became "creatures" costumed in women's prayer robes and lettuce heads to select artworks.

"So, the selection is not necessarily based on any relations such as history, aesthetics, geography or any sort of chronological order," explain the artists. Collection here is instead non-hierarchical and works to subtly undermine established notions of power.

Within the bright tones, sonorous melodies and playful shapes are uneasy artifacts of bodies created, defined, and destroyed through the mechanisms of globalisation, surveillance, and power. With their work merging artifacts of Western and Eastern cultures alike, the artists see *The Birthday Party* as defying categorisation as an environment, curated space, or installation. "We are striving to draw a line between them all," say the artists. "If there are more angles added to this polygon, our world will be much more vast and we'll be much happier." ■

The *Birthday Party* runs at The ICA In Boston until 27 March icaboston.org

Above and facing page: Installation views of *The Birthday Party* at the ICA in Boston.



PAUL AND CATHERINE BUTTEN