

LIGHT
IN THE
ROUGH

HESAM RAHMANIAN





Through playful and expressionistic portrayals, Iranian artist Hesam Rahmanian creates images evocative of the world around him, focusing on the arbitrary forces which affect the human condition. **Rebecca Anne Proctor** meets the artist in Dubai to discuss his visual metaphors, political satire and the values inherent in his startling works.



In the ancient Sanskrit poem, the *Mahabharata*, the fates of two bloodlines, the Kauravas and the Pandavas, are decided upon by a game of dice. As the fable goes, the devious prince of Ghandhar – Shakuni – invites the prince of the Pandavas – Yudhisthira – to a game of dice on behalf of the Kauravas. Renowned as an expert dice player, Shakuni quickly defeats Yudhisthira, who immediately loses everything he owns – his wife, brothers, palaces, lands, herds and even the clothes on his back. The moral of the story illustrates how the destiny of human beings often lies in the hands of chance.

In the same spirit, the characters within Hesam Rahmanian's lurid and gestural canvases contend with the counter-forces of manipulation, greed and dishonesty. Depicted through fluid and expressive brushstrokes laden with spontaneous energy, his subjects strive to guard the values of love, loyalty, respect and trust against an often cruel outside world. Like the aforementioned scene in the *Mahabharata*, Rahmanian's *oeuvre* similarly depicts a game where there is always a winner and a loser. But his subjects yearn to portray another side to the ill-favoured match; while Rahmanian renders the pre-determined winners, it is often the loser that is given a voice in his canvases. This is echoed, for example, in his acrylic on paper work, *Captured Swan!*, in which a man in military garb carries a swan in one arm as if the animal were his prisoner; the swan looks in the opposite direction with its face down in an evident yearning to be freed. "I think as an artist you have to provoke and you have to bring some awareness," Rahmanian tells me.

Opening spread: (Detail) *Eqsh (Love)*. 2012. Acrylic and neon on canvas. 107 x 127 cm.

Above, left: (Detail) *Sky is Blue and Grass is Green*. 2011. Acrylic on canvas. 150 x 200 cm.

Right: (Detail) *Long Hard Road Out of Hell*. 2011. Acrylic on canvas. 150 x 194 cm.

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This page, above: (Detail) *The Saviour*. 2012. Acrylic on canvas. 70 x 50 cm.

Below: (Detail) *Ya Hussain*. 2011. Acrylic and neon on canvas. 107 x 127 cm.

Facing page: (Detail) *Captured Sweat!* 2011. Acrylic on paper. 57 x 75 cm.

Animals found in Rahmanian's canvases often take on a witty, violent and at other times, serene character. They too, like people, are rendered to relay a message about the arbitrary forces which affect an individual's daily life. "Animals always represent humans to me," he says. "They are there to depict the human condition. Animals fight to survive; fight for territories and fight for their mates. But they fight less than humans do for the goal of killing or violating others. Humans are thus wilder animals after all." Rahmanian's animals appear innocent and charming amidst the often sombre background of the artist's canvases usually wrought with heavy paint built up in abstraction until the characters emerge and make the scene. "In life, animals are often physically stronger than humans, as is the case with horses and lions, for example. Yet humans are able to create means for mass destruction which makes them more powerful," he explains. "It is for this reason that animals in my work are portrayed as weaker. Even if they are replaced with a human, the story would still be the same!"

GREAT PURSUITS

Rahmanian left the USA, where he was born, for Tehran, and apprenticed under master calligrapher Mohammed Ehsai in 1991. In 1999 he obtained a Diploma in Fine Art from the School of Visual Arts in Tehran, where he trained under the artist Ahmad Amin Nazar. It was during this time that Rahmanian was exposed to the work of Francis Bacon and David Hockney, both of whom he names among artists who have influenced him. Keen to discover the world, he chose to travel to India and, after several months, returned to Iran and subsequently relocated to the USA. He went on to study Applied Art and Design at Sierra College, followed by a degree in Graphic Design from Sacramento State University in California. While his artistic background was steeped in the genres of painting and drawing, it was while in California that Rahmanian explored the discipline of graphic design and soon gained wide recognition for his work in this field. One of his most notable works during this period was a poster of Obama and McCain depicted as kings from a deck of playing cards during the 2008 US Presidential Elections. The work is now included in *Design for Obama: Posters for Change*, published by Taschen.

In 2009 Rahmanian moved to Dubai and joined his childhood friends and noted Iranian artists Rokni and Ramin Haerizadeh – whom he considers his mentors – in a studio space. It was in Dubai that he began to revert back to his visual art, focusing predominantly on painting while also dabbling in neon and installation work. During these first few years in the emirate, he tackled hard questions relating to political control and governmental policy. In *Hit Me With Your War Tune*, Rahmanian's 2010 solo show at Traffic in Dubai,

his work revealed satirical renderings of contemporary Iranian society. "Politics is everywhere in Iranian life," he explains. "It invades everything from TV to social gatherings, and has become the nation's form of pop culture." The most powerful expression of this is found in his 2010 work, *Solitaire*, which features a computer-generated series of playing cards depicting portraits of figures from the Iranian regime. The Queen of Hearts is portrayed as Zahra Rahnavard, the wife of the 2009 Iranian presidential candidate, Mir-Hossein Mousavi, who stood by her husband during the elections. In a satirical rendition, Rahmanian depicts her with a flyswatter. None of the artist's work during this period can be attributed to a superficial realm; Rahmanian's playful depictions of Iranian icons are accompanied by renderings of bullfights, boxing and bloodsports, all of which are metaphors for broader social issues and innate human concerns.

SATIRE AND SARCASM

The dice returned in 2011, when Rahmanian was announced as one of eight finalists for the Magic of Persia Contemporary Art Prize. The work produced comprised 5000 green dice to represent the campaign colour of Mousavi, Ahmadinejad's opponent in the last elections. The dice illustrate the face of Ahmadinejad in an uncanny and playful representation. While these witty and sometimes sarcastic works encourage social discourse through their arresting visual imagery, Rahmanian's tone began to change as he witnessed the Arab Spring develop. He felt that the impact of such revolutions was ultimately more promising than what came out of Iran during the 2009 elections.

It was during this time that Nick Hackworth, the Director of London's Paradise Row, attended Rahmanian's show at Traffic and soon after offered him a solo show at his gallery. Several months later, *Till the End of Dawn* opened at Paradise

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PROFILE

This page: *Solitaire*, 2009–10. Wooden box containing two sets of Solitaire cards, 18.5 x 14.5 x 9.5 cm.

Facing page: *Ahmadinejad (Yellow)*, 2011. Dice in wooden box, 125 x 105 cm.

All images courtesy the artist.

Row showcasing a body of work with evident influences from the recent Middle Eastern uprisings. The blatant mockery previously found in the artist's *oeuvre* was replaced by something even more vivid and real. "The sarcasm went away," Rahmanian explains. The works in his Paradise Row show "depict more serious and dramatic topics. I was inspired by all of the uprisings. I couldn't necessarily differentiate [on the canvas] which was Libya or which was Egypt. I got rid of a city's landmarks to portray the violence that was happening in the Middle East," he says. For example, in the work *Long Hard Road Out of Hell*, the sarcasm has been replaced with violence portrayed in its cruellest form. The colours are more dramatic and paint poignant depictions of executions while a bridge leads to nowhere as if to say that there is no means to escape and no hope in sight. In another work, *So Little Time, So Many Traitors to Denounce*, the artist replaces Tehran's famous Azadi Square with a pair of military boots amidst a tower of burning car tyres in a fervent attempt to illustrate the violence in the region. The boots represent military dictatorship; one boot has been knocked on its side – a metaphor for the demise of military power.

In *How Lucky We Are, Angel at Our Table, God in Our Car*, his 2011 group show at Vienna's Galerie Krinzinger, Rahmanian displayed *It's So Bright That I Go Blind*, a triptych depicting Ahmadinejad and the first and second supreme leaders of Iran, Khomeini and Khamenei encircled by a neon aureole. The electric halo emanating from each figure alludes to their self-proclaimed holiness, which the artist states is "saintliness as real as the fake electric neon halo that surrounds them." The piece carries a similar satirical tone to the artist's political works on canvas, creating a witty portrayal of a stark symbol of his homeland's grim reality.



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KEEPING THE FAITH

The mood changes once more, yet remains playful, in *I Put It There You Name It*, Rahmanian's most recent group show staged with the Haerizadeh brothers at Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde in Dubai. Here, the trio converted interconnected gallery rooms into stage sets and placed everyday personal objects such as furniture and other functional objects next to artworks they had collected over the years by Louise Bourgeois, Hockney and Bahman Mohasses. Rahmanian's artwork appeared within the mix of relics and accumulated objects stationed to recreate a space in the manner of the artists' home. Many of his works featured the recurring and recent symbolism of the umbrella which, for him, relates to ideas of trust and loyalty – values that for social circumstances had become necessary to explore through his art.

There is a newfound light in Rahmanian's



most recent work. Vibrant colours and more delineated lines reveal a softer subject matter seen in *The Saviour*, for example, where a person holds an umbrella amidst a bright orange skyline with a white swan dangling beautifully from his hand. *Only One Can Cross The Road* depicts a woman in a yellow dress walking across the street carrying a bright green umbrella. The violence has lessened and the subjects no longer seem to be in a constant state of battle. "It's all about trust," says Rahmanian. "Even my political work – and it's about what happens when the trust is broken." In *Eqsh (Love)*, a 2012 neon and acrylic work, Rahmanian plays with the Farsi word for love. "I wanted to create something warm and welcoming," he says. "Eshq has often been used by Iranian artists and I wanted to revisit it with a playful tone. The only difference is that I slightly changed the spelling to read as *Eqsh* instead of the original *Eshq*." In the piece,

a woman holds an umbrella so that it hides her face while behind her is the word *Eqsh* written in traditional Persian calligraphy and outlined in neon. "I like the illusion that the neon creates; the light which it emanates adds perspective to my subjects," says the artist. The red script and radiating light create a warm and romantic glow and shine onto the woman's umbrella as if prompting her to lift it from her face and come into the light. "The language is the same, but the form changes," says Rahmanian of the developments in his *oeuvre*. Love, like violence and trust, can be given an artistic form. By acknowledging the presence of such conflicting human values, the artist intellectualises, questions and reconciles them through poignant, probing and, at times, even heartening portrayals. 📍

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