

Foreword

By Negar Azimi

In my house, I have a painting of a large lemon hanging on the wall. Floating around the lemon, which is more or less ovular, is doodly pencil work that approximates a half-drawn and yet semi-elaborate frame. Under the lemon, dwarfed by its fruity girth, is the head and torso of a man. The man wears a bemedaled uniform of unknown distinction and sports a considerable black moustache that extends outward in horizontal lines from each side of his face. He may or may not be the nineteenth-century Persian ruler Nasser al-Din Shah, a man who may or may not have had eighty-four wives. The work, a tongue-in-cheek twist on a traditional still life, is by Rokni Haerizadeh. I believe it is the first piece of art I ever bought.

In 2004, I lived in Tehran for one year, where I was mostly getting to know the place my parents called home and spending my days visiting the city's dustier photo studios, collecting old photographs. A friend, Sohrab Mohebbi, told me about the Haerizadeh brothers, Rokni and Ramin, a pair of considerable talent and popularity who, it was said, lived in a cave-like house of unlikely wonders where artists and writers would congregate at all hours of the day and night. Sohrab and I visited the two, and from that moment, my remaining days in Tehran were filled with sights, encounters, and conversations that will stay with me always. The brothers' delirious home—part Visconti, part *1001 Nights*—felt far away from the depressing din of Tehran traffic, or the narrowness of life in a city that sometimes feels cut off from the rest of the world. I have followed the brothers' work since then.

The book at hand presents one long-term series Rokni—the younger of the two—has been working on since 2009, called “Fictionville.” Over the years, works in the series have taken on multiple shapes and forms, from paintings to drawings to animations of unforgettable idiosyncrasy. Rokni's is the work of an artist possessed not only of great formal skill, but of a relentless self-questioning that might even be experienced as frenzied inconsistency. He breathes life into forms and then kills them, rendering his canvas or paper a site of small births and deaths, a vividly dynamic place in which the workings of memory and the subconscious do battle.

In editing this volume, I reached out to three individuals who have known Rokni's work at different times: the critic Media Farzin, who was an art student in Tehran at the time Rokni was; Sohrab Mohebbi, also an old Tehran friend who has since gone on to become an associate curator at REDCAT in Los Angeles; and Tina Kukielski, who included Rokni's most recent drawings and animations in the 2013 Carnegie International. Each one of them brings to light distinct aspects of Rokni's work and ethos.

Also included in the book is a small introduction to the classic 1968 play *Shahr-e Qesseh*, or *City of Tales*, by Bijan Mofid,



which we have presented both in English and its original Farsi. For Rokni, along with countless young people in Iran, the play's words, first circulated on record, then cassette and video tape and later uploaded to YouTube, represent a familiar, if not beloved, anthem. *Shahr-e Qesseh's* script is a tribute to the remarkable games we play with language, as well as to theater's ability to summon up the beauty and insanity of any society. As it happens, Mofid's play featured animals—an ensemble of memorable misfits; its place as a spiritual ancestor to the “Fictionville” series is endlessly interesting.

