

Of Bombs and Barks

By Media Farzin

I remember visiting the Haerizadehs' humongous blue-tiled studio in Tehran over a decade ago. There always seemed to be a hum of activity around the two brothers, Rokni and Ramin: They painted, took pictures, made offbeat installations. They were extremely funny and well-read, and they worked harder than most people I knew. Rokni painted the landscape of cars, streets, parties, and the unspoken rituals that made up our world at the time, honing in on the hypocrisies of public and private spectacle alike. His canvases were massive, with no shadows or gradations. They bubbled with references I could barely identify, from ancient Eastern history to contemporary art. Their importance became clear only later, when I recognized the particular combination of repressed desire and dark cynicism that defined that moment. But his colors and lines pulsed with life, as if standing apart from their subject matter, looking on with bemused humor.



Who Sank All Night in Submarine Light,
2010

Returning to Rokni's work after a decade, I still find it difficult to separate his work from his social world. And yet, the work's evolution lies very much in its understanding of social relations and events: As it became smaller in scale, its critical bite grew sharper, moving beyond the specific contradictions of Iranian society to address the crimes of social institutions in general. While the expressive and emotional potential of art continued to serve as Rokni's focus, his new work was marked by a worldview so expanded that it managed to pull us all into its elaborate psychodramas.

Haerizadeh's most recent project, the series "Fictionville," 2009–, seems intent on unsettling the viewer; its intertwining of the familiar and the bizarre feels calculated to provoke amusement as much as outrage. The medium here is collage: Layers of paint and ink subvert and transform the printed image, turning human figures into human-animal hybrids. The background of each image is a news photograph or a still of news footage, which is then prepared, painted with large washes of color and drawn over with fine pen-and-ink lines that give

the image its new contours. The interventions are often very subtle: a snoutlike nose exaggerated here, a hoof peeking out there, heads with hints of donkey ears or horns. Other times, the picture underneath has been completely painted over: Armies of cats stand off against mice, rows of beasts perform military salutes, and checkerboard floors decorate lurid public arenas.



Fictionville,
2009

The images are, true to “Fictionville”’s name, vividly unreal; they depict a fantastic bestiary of battling characters and pulsating, anthropomorphized scenery. But the scenes they depict are nonetheless familiar. The bodies rehearse the classical language of contemporary news-media spectacles: the tropes of trenchant nationalism, military triumphalism, defiant rebellion, cowering victimhood, not to mention natural and man-made disasters. Violence—specifically human violence—is their common link. In their own way, they target the falseness and hypocrisy of acts committed in the name of the institutions that govern the private and social sphere, such as the heteronormativity of social models put forward by the state, the church (or the mosque), the school, or the family. If the images are uncanny, it’s because we recognize familiar prejudices in strange bodies: Performed by fleshy and corpulent demons and beasts, human actions take on a startling expressiveness.

Despite the immediacy of its humor and the intensity of its critique, “Fictionville”’s status as art is not so easy to pin down. Are the works intended as social commentary, as politically motivated interventions in news media? “I’m all for violence,” Haerizadeh has remarked. “The violence of nature, for example—a female, primal violence, like a thunderbolt. But human violence that can be produced with the push of a button, the violence of an unjust law, how do you respond to that?” Violence demands a like response, he seems to imply, but here, one that is expressed by the aggressive and intense deformations of Haerizadeh’s representations of power. Despite its critical edge, the work is defined by its aesthetic goals: its insistent experimentation with what he describes as “personal mythologies” that are nonetheless grounded in concrete social and political archetypes. The core of Haerizadeh’s project can be located somewhere in this interweaving of politics and aesthetics. The use of animal imagery, for example, has a respectable political pedigree. *Fictionville* is the title of a popular Iranian play by Bijan Mofid first staged at the Shiraz-Persepolis Festival of the Arts in 1968. Known

among Iranians as *Shahr-e Qesseh* (also translated as *City of Tales*), Mofid’s production was one of the most successful, if not electric, manifestations of a new Iranian theater, dispensing with classical tropes in favor of a more accessible and socially relevant model. The director drew on historical traditions of Iranian street performance to create a children’s musical that humorously smuggled in strident (if somewhat overdetermined) political critique. Like George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, Mofid’s parable of human malice and collective failure had a clear moral lesson to impart, and found the playwright drawing on a venerable tradition of using animals to speak truth to power that stretches as far back as the eighth-century *Kelileh and Demneh*, itself a translation of the ancient Sanskrit *Panchatantra*. In the visual arts, Francisco Goya’s etchings could be Haerizadeh’s eighteenth-century model, particularly in the use of an informal style to convey social critique amid politically unstable times. “The author’s . . . intention is to banish harmful beliefs commonly held, and with this work of *caprichos* to perpetuate the solid testimony of truth,” Goya wrote, championing the idea of the artist as a subjective witness to human folly, whose power resides less in representing truth than in conveying its emotional horror through the frenzied expressiveness of his lines.

Yet “Fictionville” differs from its literary and artistic precedents in one especially important way: It refrains from offering up a clear moral lesson. The beasts of “Fictionville” are never quite victims or victors, their society neither utopian nor dystopian. The violence picks no sides, and is all the more vivid for it: Gaping red mouths adorn vaguely uniformed bodies; entanglements of raised fists and kicking limbs merge; all-encompassing swirls of smoky black, blood red, and flaming orange surround undulating battlegrounds. The cumulative effect is to distance the viewer from the scene’s immediate motivations or geopolitical coordinates; often the only indication of actual location is a fragment of a caption, the language of markings on police shields, or the telltale signage of storefronts. Violence speaks the same language, these images suggest, whether in Tehran or London or Moscow, whether spoken by victim or by perpetrator. A provocative juxtaposition to “Fictionville” could be Thomas Hirshhorn’s 2012 video *Touching Reality*, in which a disembodied hand scrolls through a slide show of gruesome images, zooming in on mangled bodies and zipping past horrific disasters with what seems to be disturbing equanimity. “Fictionville” places a similar emphasis on the equalizing effect of news cycles, and the difficulty, as Susan Sontag would have put it, of regarding the pain of others. The moral dilemma here is how to negotiate our numbed acquiescence to the rise and fall of news cycles and their sound-bite politics, rather than how we may judge the victims or victors.

Can we conclude, then, that “Fictionville”’s is primarily a critical gesture? The work’s bitter representation of the world, and its intense—if morally ambiguous—condemnation of the state of events is hard to deny. In framing the language of social violence through drawings and paintings, Haerizadeh also makes a case for the power of deformation, manipulation, and artistic license. “Fictionville” reaches out to the viewer through the senses: It is a work about seeing and feeling, rather than a practiced argument for or against a moral position. The work is neither pure media critique nor mere aesthetic experiment: Its handcrafted quality is what anchors the act of witnessing in the body, ties the eye to the hand, and recognizes that views are always grounded within a subject position. Painting initiates a dialogue by delivering a subjective declaration from one body addressed to another. The surreal imagery, the washes of color that

blur the printed image, and the fine pen-and-ink lines that give texture to bodies and landscape all speak of the artist's sensory grasp of the world. By taking up a clearly biased interpretive voice, the artist's critique is offered as an opening gambit for a dialogue about a truth that may lie beyond facts.



Cyrus Cylinder Coming Back Home,
2011

The expressive freedom of painting and drawing also allows Haerizadeh to stay resolutely in the minor key: no more massive canvases, heroic displays of technique, or master narratives. The politics of “Fictionville” identify with the minor, revealing a deep skepticism and condemnation of the institutions of patriarchal authority. In *Cyrus Cylinder Coming Back Home* (2011), the famed ancient Persian clay cylinder takes the form of a bright-pink hot dog nestled in a bun, carried and admired by officials with the faces of pigs, donkeys, bulls, and foxes. Only one of the images of this particular subgroup shows humans: two men with handlebar mustaches and handcuffed hands, their torsos displaced by their large heads, photographed against a police car. Humor subverts the drawing, revealing public rituals to be empty fetishes at best, a cover-up for social repression at worst. The humor and the blurring of species and gender lines emphasize the marginal, antiauthoritarian position: The artist even describes his approach as “doodling,” a de-skilled and intuitive process that claims no mastery of what may emerge, and is defined by its distracted and mediated nature.

Minor is, incidentally, how Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari describe the writings of Franz Kafka, the way his stories elide social repression through what the pair term “becoming animal.” To be minor is to be resolutely opposed to the major, established order of things. The minor perpetually seeks an escape from the “inhuman-ness” of “the ‘diabolical powers’ that rejoice from the fact that they will arrive soon.” The “diabolical powers” could be fascism, Stalinism, or capitalism—any force as capable of invisibly embedding itself within the human psyche as it is of visibly reorganizing society. To “become animal” is to paint with a body whose subjectivity is in perpetual transition, its borders (and institutions) undefined, porous and open. “To become a beetle, to become a dog, to become an ape . . . rather than lowering one’s head and remaining a bureaucrat, inspector, judge, or judged.” When the animal speaks, the story is transported beyond the confines of human limitations; fiction creates an alternative possibility within what appeared to be completely colonized space. The minor

deformation of what is taken to be major opens up a route of escape, whether for the subculture that subverts what is mainstream by taking the language of authority and carving out its own speech from within, or for the artist who paints a new image that erases the original yet remains imbricated within its parts.

Haerizadeh’s savage scenes, then, are not merely metaphors of a social world turned bestial and violent—they carry a perpetual movement within them, a bodily language of line and color that destabilizes meaning and identity and pivots on the subjective potential of painting and drawing. As the animals of “Fictionville” hover between human and beastly, between real and imagined, the images strike a balance between political critique and aesthetic experiment. The fictional city has carved out its own language within the jargon of news media: one that is disturbing in its uncanny truth, yet full of new representational possibilities. “Fictionville” insists that there are new ways to regard the world’s crimes and follies. By blurring the features of perpetrators and victims alike, “Fictionville” refuses to take sides, moving beyond judgment to what might simply be endurance—persistence in finding new ways to think and feel through the numbing cycles of violence. These are images that don’t give up, holding out for a model of critical judgment and committed speech that is, above all, embodied and alive.