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PREV

ROKNI HAERIZADEH

*'What's the point of
being an artist
unless you want
to change
something?'*

plus
CAIRO ART: A YEAR ON





Artist brothers Rokni and Ramin Haerizadeh arch conspirator Hesam Rahmani's three-way Dubai's Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde show this March saw the artists transplant their shared living room into the gallery space, replete with thunderous imagery, worrying walls, prized art and cheap tat. Rokni Haerizadeh invites Harper's Bazaar Art to his very nice, lovely home to tell us more...

WHERE WE'RE CALLING FROM

Tangerine dream? At home with Ramin (left) and Rokni Haerizadeh, Dubai, March 2012.



[Above] 'Shimmy to Nouredin Zarin-Kelk' (2012) (Courtesy Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde) [right] 'Hello, ladies!' Rokni, Hesam Rahmanian and Ramin relaxing poolside, Dubai, March 2012.



There's a soft, slightly ominous, trill of music when you press the doorbell of Rokni and Ramin Haerizadeh's villa in Dubai. It's a fitting entry to this strange menagerie of a house, where cats roll out languidly from behind canvases, a sepulchral ram's skull perches on the shoulders of a statue of Venus, and blue vines – handpainted by Rokni – bloom across the white floors to the foot of a table laden with red fruits.

In March, the artists transpose the abundant atmosphere of their house into Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde in Dubai. Preparing with a month of installation, they completely changed the white interior and layout of the gallery, moving in their art collection and furniture that they live with, as well as the sculptures and ever-evolving multimedia wall paintings that they've been collaborating on over the past year.

It's a new departure, in a long-series of such departures for the brothers. In 2009, they were advised not to return to Iran as works shown in the Charles Saatchi 'Unveiled: New Art From The Middle East' exhibition in London had drawn ire of authorities back home. Since then both artists' work has evolved dramatically.

Ramin has moved from manipulated and contorted photography to a performative style of collage, in which he incorporates images of his own body wrapped in a black Iranian chador, to create cinematic canvases that explore how history has been hijacked since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Steadily, he's beginning to experiment with further possibilities of this well-honed visual style and is currently working on an animation.

Rokni gained recognition as a painter of large, chaotic narrative works that are dense with imagery from great Persian poets and elements of pop culture, produced in a kinetic style fused together with strings of texts, stretching across the canvas.

He's increasingly working in collage, starting with the 'Fictionville' series in 2009, in which he altered images from the television and internet sourced during the street protests in Iran that summer. For Sharjah Biennial 10, Rokni created an animation, using thousands of these individually hand-painted stills. He will take this 'moving painting', titled 'What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?', to Art Basel this June, when his work is exhibited there for the first time later this year in the Art Statements section of the fair with Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde.

As he's moved away from showing paintings – and Tehran's insular art scene – Rokni's work has concentrated less on the absurdities of life in Iran. His focus has turned towards unpicking a greater absurdity, a crazed, popular culture of a mass media, at the crossroads of violence and high-end luxury that we all – artworld included – cheerily meet.



HBA: You started working on 'Fictionville' in 2009, shortly after finding out that you and Ramin couldn't return to Iran, reworking elements of news footage into fantastical and nightmarish scenes using gesso, watercolour and ink. What were the roots of that series?

ROKNI HAERIZADEH: Ramin and I were stuck in a hotel in Dubai, and I kept collecting images from the TV and the internet as the protests developed. From the start, I totally disagreed with the movement that was going on in Iran during those protests because it just felt like a carnival and a release of everyone's frustrated energy. To make sense of this, I started work on a canvas, 'The Rebirth of the Dead Hero', and in that painting I erased the distinction between who were protestors and who were security. When the two sides were mixed together, it reminded me of how violence

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'Anxiety for Every Ephemeralities' (2012) (Courtesy Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde)

looks in some of Goya's works. There was a sense of all this violence happening that didn't go anywhere. With that kind of attitude, I started to mimic this element of the protests through 'Fictionville', and the pictures all try to bring out the theatre in the images I collected from the media.

As these works have developed, and looked at the other recent uprisings around the world, the moral position has become less clear...

I started to see a rhythm in the images from the media coverage that I was collecting. It didn't matter whether it was protests in Iran, Egypt or London, it was all the same theatre, whether it was photographs of political big-guys speaking in public, or a guard beating somebody up, or of people fighting back. From both sides, you just see violence, and it all started to look like a system to me. Then each month some





'Mon Petit Magritte à Moi' (2012) (Courtesy Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde) [right] Hesam, Ramin and Rokni enjoy a fruity evening in.



[above] 'I Will Wait Here For My Man Tonight, It's Easy When You're Big In Hong Kong' (2012) (Courtesy Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde)

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phenomena comes along - Whitney Houston dies, the Royal Wedding takes place; the disaster ends for a while. The system has wiped it clean.

'Fictionville' progressed into an animation work, 'What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?' which you'll show in Art Basel this year. How did that develop?

Collecting all the images for 'Fictionville' was a sort of research, about trying to find the theatre and system that is shared amongst them. Once I started to pervert the images that I'd do you just see violence, and it all started to look like a system to me.

'Fictionville' progressed into an animation work, 'What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?' which you'll show in Art Basel this year. How did that develop?

Collecting all the images for 'Fictionville' was a sort of research. Once I started to pervert the images that I'd collected, so as to create 'Fictionville', I then wanted to put them back into that system. So it's like a dream to now see those scenes moving. Everybody saw the news bulletins and now they can see a subverted version of them, still drawn from the pop culture that we're all living in.

You're working a lot in collage now. Did the Iranian master Bahman Mohasses, who you met shortly before he died in Rome in 2010 and who worked in collage from the late 1980s, push you to focus on this medium?

Similar to Mohasses, it's a process of finding images within images, and elements that can be shaped into a body or face. But whereas he finely cut out images from magazines, I like the aesthetic and look created by tearing them apart. Mohasses didn't call his works 'collage' either, he called them assemblage, which I agree with.

Why is that distinction important for you? I've found that when you put your artwork into countries that are outside of your own, your art is reduced to anthropology. You become an ambassador of your culture. People either feel sorry for you - 'Oh, poor guy' - or they approach you like a tourist or journalist and the work is there to satisfy some idea they already had in their minds. The art object is flattened into a paragraph in a magazine, and tagged simply as, 'They come from Iran.' In that way, the artworld has become about pretty pictures. Curators come and tag me as an exotic artist, or write about me as if I'm an impressionist like Monet and am going into the streets in Tehran and depicting a scene as if it is like that in reality. The spectrum of ideas, and living and being that drives your work is forgotten. There's a very simplistic, binary perspective of East and West behind this, which has become fashionable. In my work, I want to show that culture and art is instead an accumulation of images and ideas - an assemblage. We as people are built that way as well.

For Art Berlin Contemporary you moved your entire studio into a booth in fair. Was that about a similar idea?

Everyone looked at us very strangely when we opened the crates in Berlin, because it seemed like junk. But once we'd laid everything out, the booth was packed with people, and they were touching and interacting with the work, picking up Ramin's collages and really looking at them. For us it was very satisfying. I couldn't compromise these works by presenting them in a minimalist box. Ramin and I were children of the Revolution and the Iran-Iraq war, and we can't deny coming from that chaos by having, like, one artwork on a white wall, thinking hard about whether to hang it one inch up or one inch down. An empty gallery gets on my nerves. The atmosphere and image of it makes me scared because I know that behind that, there's so many things happened and connections. I can't bear those kinds of white boxes, as soon as you put me in a box like that, I want to break out of it.

You have a show in Dubai in March, 'I Put It There, You Name It', with Ramin and your friend and collaborator, the artist Hesam Rahmani. Can you outline how this will work?

We are going to recreate the atmosphere of our house in the gallery. When you enter this house it has a certain feeling, but that doesn't come from the individual art on the walls, it's only together – the assemblage of the room – that they make something, from the fruits we put on the table to the art that we live with. People come here and get fascinated by ashtrays or simple things that we bought from duty free, so if a person gets their satisfaction from this very ordinary object, does that make it art? Should we put it in a gallery? Is the Louise Bourgeois piece on the wall art, or is it the assemblage of the whole wall?

There's obviously a reference to Marcel Duchamp in this...

Yes, but there was a sense of humour about Duchamp's found objects that I think has been forgotten. Now his ideas are dictated to people as being the basis of contemporary art. It's like how people watch Samuel Beckett's 'Waiting For Godot' and don't laugh at the jokes. There is a serious, dark humour to both Beckett and Duchamp – so how can't you laugh? The exhibition is questioning that attitude; we want to allow the audience to find their own individual way of looking, by searching and deciding what, for them, is the art in this show.

Are you still working on canvas?

I have to paint, and still do for my own surroundings and the people that love and want to use them. But I've lost faith in showing my paintings. Painting is a culture and you have to



'Ghognious for Bahman Mohasses' (2012) (right) 'Run Forest, Run!' (2012) (Courtesy Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde) (below) Ramin does his 'man-stuck-in-a-bin-bag' party piece again.



know that culture and the history behind it. The form has its own language. How many people actually study that language anymore?

There's a craft understanding of painting that has been lost?

Maybe if you are straightforward and frank in what you do – if you're 'old fashioned' – it's almost more anarchic these days. Like when David Hockney wrote on the poster for his last exhibition at the Royal Academy, 'All the works

were made by the artist himself, personally.' Craftsmanship is important right now. I'm not against having someone else physically produce works for an artist, but when it's become the norm and fashionable, the breath of the artist is lost. The work becomes the tools to say something else, and is used to say some moral idea, like a socio-political Russian painting. When conceptual art first happened, the claim was that it was anarchic, and against money, power and economy. But now the art we're seeing is very uniform, it's become a slave to fashion, luxury and economy. It's lost its relevance, and produced to fill museums. The artist has become an illustrator for curators' ideas, and the way they think.

Do you think an artist can have a moral position?

The artist should be powerful and not a slave to an art system and its ideas. Of course an artist can have a position on things - it's a responsibility, otherwise what's the point of being an artist if you don't want to change something? But it needs to come out as a howl. ■ WWW.IVDE.NET

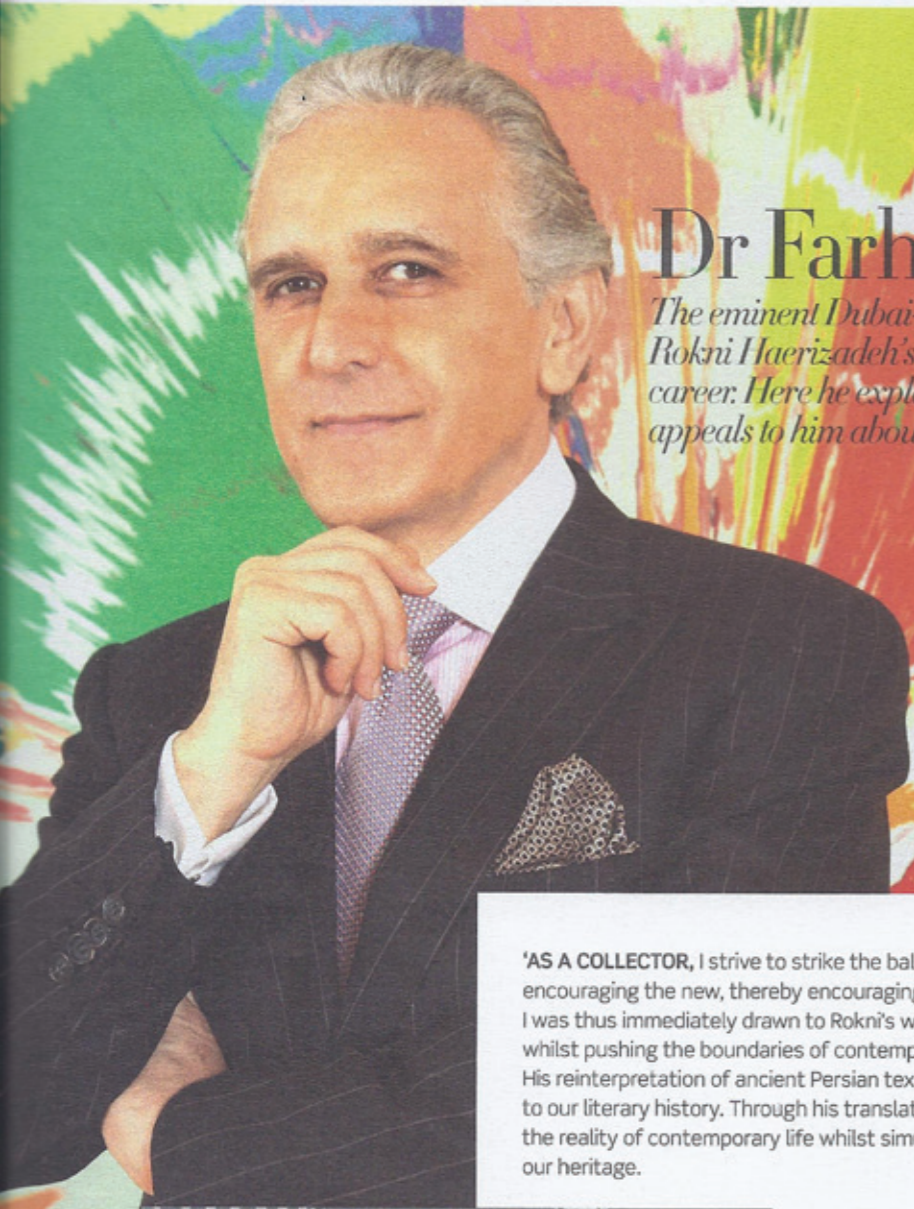


'What's the point of being an artist if you don't want to change something? But it needs to come out as a howl'



[above] Disputes are usually solved quickly and with minimum fuss at Haerizadeh HQ. [below] 'Ignore Braque! Do Your Job' (2012) (Courtesy Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde)





Dr Farhad FARJAM

The eminent Dubai-based collector has been collecting Rokni Haerizadeh's since the earliest years of the artist's career. Here he explains to Harper's Bazaar Art what appeals to him about Haerizadeh's work.

'AS A COLLECTOR, I strive to strike the balance between preserving the old and encouraging the new, thereby encouraging a dialogue between our past and present. I was thus immediately drawn to Rokni's work. His ability to immerse himself in the past whilst pushing the boundaries of contemporary artistic practice is truly fascinating. His reinterpretation of ancient Persian texts and fables has brought a new relevance to our literary history. Through his translation of text to image he manages to articulate the reality of contemporary life whilst simultaneously celebrating the richness of our heritage.

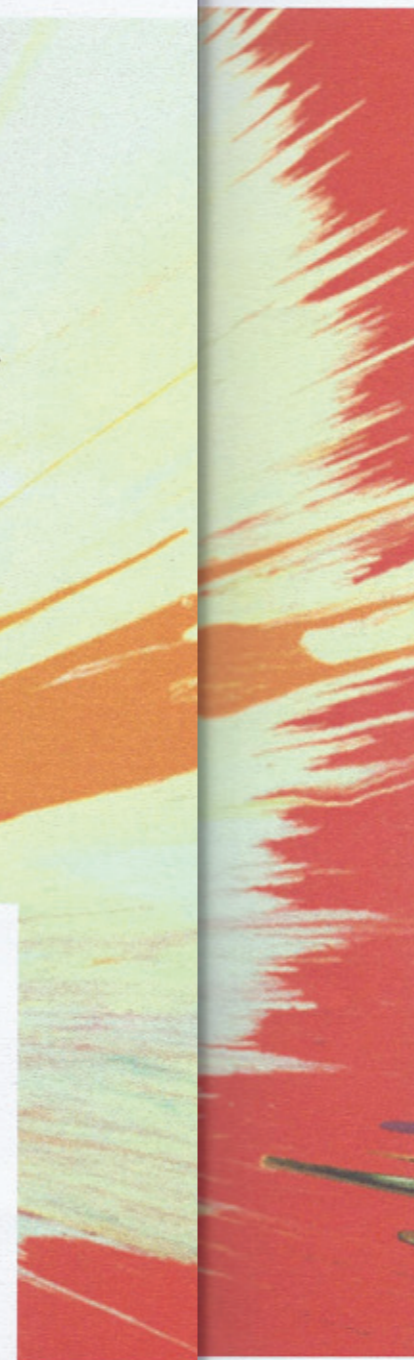


ANNIVERSARY OF ISLAMIC REPUBLIC REVOLUTION, 2008

For viewers, the energy of Rokni's paintings and the depths of his imagination never fail to astonish. His approach to art is borne out in all aspects of his life; his studio and living space are testimony to his belief that art is not something to be put on the wall and admired, but is in fact the essence of living. His recent move into installation work and his collaborations with artists such as Bita Fayyazi illustrate his refusal to be confined by media, style or practice in pursuit of his art.

On an international level, Rokni has played a critical role in drawing attention to contemporary Middle Eastern art. Although his work explores contemporary Iranian culture and has provided a much needed multi-dimensional insight into life in Tehran, the question of how traditional customs fit with modern urban life is universal. Rokni's work encourages us all to consider the complexity of modern living, and it is for that reason that his work has been celebrated by museums across the globe.

Nevertheless, it is clear that we have only seen the tip of the iceberg with Rokni's art. He is still very young and from his more recent selections of work it is obvious that he is like a volcano waiting to erupt. I am very much looking forward to seeing his work feature in all the important collections of the world and not only the very major ones, as is the case today.' ■



Sir Norman ROSENTHAL

Sir Norman Rosenthal was the Exhibitions Secretary of London's Royal Academy until last year; responsible for some of the institutions greatest exhibitions, including 'Sensation'. Here, he sends Arsalan Mohammad some thoughts from London on Rokni Haerizadeh

FIRSTLY I LOVE THE FACT THAT HIS FIRST NAME, Rokni, rhymes with Hockney! Of course at one level this might seem a facetious remark, but it also contains within it a beautiful chance truth. Because both artists are natural and original painters and draughtsmen, possessors of a very rare talent, even if they hail from different generations and cultures. For both painters are genuinely free spirits always striving for visual and moral truths. Art is of course always something that plays itself out by rules laid down both by society and by cultural traditions. But within those 'rules' real artists in all societies - even in Ancient Egypt - have invariably found ways of depicting truths as they see it, in a beautiful and free manner and in this way moving the culture forward and making that culture just that bit more modern and of its time. David Hockney was born into a society which in its day was in many ways was less than free and one could argue that his depictions - his picture making - did much to change British society for the better.

My first memories of seeing Rokni Haerizadeh's work goes back maybe now eight or ten years, when I became aware of his large and most evocative panorama paintings of picnics by the river or relaxed parties taking place in interior salon-like spaces, somewhere, it appeared, in Tehran. They were painted with vivid and characteristic colour, that both recalled for me the worlds and rhythms of Persian miniatures and also had absorbed the more expansive Western traditions of modern painting with subtle recollections of everything from Matisse to German Expressionism and from there to the worlds of American and British pop art. Yet they were decidedly individual in their tone. In the meantime, I have, alas not often enough, seen more paintings, as well as series of remarkable gouaches, now that the artist is - like so many artists in history - an exile from the land that he loves. It is a land that as I understand it from those from Iran that I have met and from stories that I have heard, even today of course, truly possessed of a beautiful and deep culture, that deeply sets great store by hospitality and relaxed happiness - which perhaps now to some extent has to be manifested more privately than one might wish.

Rokni is an artist-painter whose work more and more is a cry for a return to the beauties of more open freedom within that deep culture that will never be lost and, one is glad to say, seems more than able to manifest itself, even now, visually across the world heroically - in both film and art. Rokni's painting is consistently remarkable, and has much to contribute internationally to dialogues about art and life.' ■