



BROTHERS FROM ANOTHER PLANET

Ramin and Rokni Haerizadeh are among Iran's most celebrated artists—in every nation but their own. CHRISTOPHER BAGLEY reports.

One winter morning in 2004, when Rokni Haerizadeh was a graduate student at art school in Tehran, he went for a walk on campus and came across a disturbing sight. Haerizadeh, then 26, had already been marked as a troublemaker at the school due to his uncommon talent, his spiky hair, and his penchant for questioning his teachers—a combination not welcome at a university where female figure models were fully covered in hijabs. The artist had just spent months working on a gigantic outdoor mural inspired by subversive 15th-century miniaturist Mohammad Siyah Ghalam. Haerizadeh had completed the piece without incident, but on this morning he turned a corner to see a blank wall where his mural had been.

Overnight the authorities had erased the whole thing, covering it with a thick coat of white paint.

It's hard to imagine a more literal example of artistic censorship, even in Iran, where the ruling mullahs aren't known for their subtlety. Today the religious establishment is doing its best to whitewash the artworks of Rokni and his older brother, Ramin, but its efforts are backfiring. The two men are creating some of the most complex and provocative art in the Middle East, much of it blisteringly critical of the Iranian regime. Rokni's large-scale oil paintings and Ramin's photo-based collages are increasingly prized by such major collectors as Charles Saatchi and François Pinault and museum heavyweights like Suzanne Cotter, curator of

the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi Project, who has signed up the brothers for an ambitious exhibition at next spring's Sharjah Biennial. "Here are two artists—brothers—each producing work that combines remarkable visual seduction with a rare ability to comment on the present day in all of its complexity," says Cotter. "They are not only very gifted artists, but I think time will show them also to be very important artists."

As their art gains favor worldwide, Rokni and Ramin are preoccupied with such banal but urgent concerns as trying to find a place to live and work legally. Until 2009 they'd managed to stay in their native Tehran. But that spring, after a trip to Paris for their first show at Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, they got a call from a friend



From left: Rokni Haerizadeh's *Who Lost Their Loveboys to the Heterosexual Dollar*, 2010; Ramin's *Today's Woman*, 2008.

warning them not to return home. Since they'd participated in a high-profile group show at Saatchi's London gallery a few months earlier, they had been targeted by the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance; their work had also just been seized during a raid at the home of a prominent Tehran collector. Aware that they faced imprisonment or worse, the brothers applied for temporary residency in the United Arab Emirates, where they now remain, in a kind of geographic and existential limbo.

"For me, Dubai feels like a safe place," says Ramin at the pair's cavernous studio in Dubai's warehouse district, where they spend their days making art as the sound system blasts Stravinsky and Patti Smith. "At least nobody interrupts you while you're working. In Iran they can come inside your studio anytime."

Ever since they were children, the brothers have done everything as a duo, and they still work, live, eat, and chain-smoke together. Yet no one would have trouble telling the two apart. Ramin, 35, is jocular, stout, hairy, and always ready with a good Lady Gaga joke. Rokni is quiet and contemplative, more likely to quote Francis Bacon or an obscure Sufi poet.

The work of both men combines elements of historical high-mindedness and of-the-moment satire, albeit in very different ways. Ramin's best-known series, "Men of Allah," inspired by plays from Persia's Qajar period, depicts swirling configurations of bearded men in heavy makeup and patterned robes; the faces, contorted in screams, are reconstructions of Ramin's own, and the exposed body parts are scanned images of his arms and elbows. In other collages, the Shah's wife, Farah Pahlavi—"always looking like Audrey Hepburn; you know, just from another planet"—appears as an empty-eyed fashion plate or a 70-year-old Cinderella. Ramin likens his role to that of the traditional Persian *talkhak*, a kind of court jester who had the right to speak the awful truth, even to the king. "In Iran everybody's holy," Ramin says, invoking Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*. "Ahmadinejad is holy, the

Prophet is holy, the Shah, the ex-Queen. You can't say anything about anybody. The first thing our community has to do is bring down all the icons, get them down on earth so we can see what they're really about."

Rokni's art, for its part, shows a clear debt to European painting; many of the works are large kinetic narratives about contemporary Iranian rituals—weddings, holidays, festivals—that also reference everything from classical Persian lore to Raymond Carver's fiction. Several new canvases are done in the shape of a traditional Islamic arch, serving as keyholes through which a viewer can witness all manner of unholy happenings. In one, a group of mullahs, naked under their robes, becomes a raunchy circus troupe. "The mentalities of these men are very simple,

like from the Middle Ages," Rokni says. "They are not complicated at all. But now the situation of the world makes them important somehow."

For their Sharjah project, the pair are working on pieces that further explore the meaning of sacrilege, including Rokni's watercolor sketches on real Iranian banknotes that distort Ayatollah Khomeini's face. "Poor Suzanne," remarks Ramin, noting that the curator will inevitably face censorship pressures from Emirati officials. Cotter says she'll deal with that when it comes, but

she doesn't foresee the brothers being silenced easily, and feels certain they're not engaging in provocation for its own sake. "There's a sense of compulsion they have," she says, "an absolute necessity to express these things."

In Dubai their current burst of productivity doesn't leave much time or energy for goofing around. At night they go back to their apartment in one of the city's countless generic high-rises—an haute-kitsch loft they've tricked out with an AstroTurf floor, zebraskin-patterned walls, and Iranian and European contemporary art. The two spend most evenings at home watching Fassbinder or Pasolini films. Sometimes a few friends will join them, though both men remain steadfastly single. "There are al-

ready so many people around making children," jokes Rokni.

People who meet the artists after seeing their inflammatory work are often struck by their gentle and easygoing natures, which offset any whiff of self-righteousness. While I'm with them in Dubai, they propose a spontaneous day trip to Abu Dhabi, so we hop in their silver SUV and take the 12-lane highway out of town. Our first stop is the colossal new Sheikh Zayed Mosque, a glossy marble complex boasting 57 domes, the world's largest carpet, and what has to be the most colorful 49-foot-tall chandelier anywhere. "Very Jeff Koons!" Ramin declares. Later we go to an art exhibition that features a few extraordinary Cy Twombly paintings; the brothers are in awe as they stare at the works, speechless.

"I think the main problem of humanity is religion," Rokni said earlier. "The kind of mentality that wants to define everything as good or bad, angel or devil." Also critical of Tehran's cliques of self-satisfied intellectuals, he believes Iran's much hyped Green Movement was a bust, and is distressed to see his countrymen accept their fate with a kind of torpid passivity, often accompanied by excessive nostalgia or bitterness or both. Asked for specifics, he offers an example from his family. "My mom went to boarding school in England, and grew up traveling around Europe." Now, he says, she's a housewife who dutifully puts on her head scarf when she leaves the house, and if she ever dares criticize the people in power, she does it meekly, in case someone is watching.

It seems as though someone is always watching in this part of the world—even in the United Arab Emirates, said to be the most permissive country in the region. Last year, just a week after Ramin and Rokni arrived in Dubai, a man who worked for the storage company of their longtime local art dealer, Isabelle van den Eynde, found the images she'd printed for the catalog for Ramin's "Men of Allah." Horrified by lipsticked men touching one another, the worker called the police. Ramin was threatened with arrest and deportation, and the dealer was summoned before a cultural standards panel. The case was ultimately dismissed after van den Eynde appealed to a high-ranking minister and promised to destroy the offending images. Undoubtedly she was well aware that there are plenty more where those came from. ♦

SEVERAL NEW CANVASES ARE DONE IN THE SHAPE OF A TRADITIONAL ISLAMIC ARCH, SERVING AS KEYHOLES THROUGH WHICH A VIEWER CAN WITNESS ALL MANNER OF UNHOLY HAPPENINGS.