

Let's face it

He's got his face everywhere this year, but *Chris Lord* finds out why **Ramin Haerizadeh** is a bit wound up

I've seen Ramin Haerizadeh's face before. Many, many times before. He makes art that places his own face centre-stage, in a self-deprecating, jolly and undeniably bearded sort of way. Since his last show at B21 almost a year ago, a huge amount has happened to the Iranian artist. Shows across Istanbul, success at Dubai's auction houses, entering the British Museum's private collection and getting picked up by Charles Saatchi for his steadily growing collection of Iranian and Middle Eastern artists, to be exhibited in London in 2009.

As this latest show of his works opens, we see the same face scattered across the canvases. But now Ramin's jovial or languid or puckered face (depending on what period you're looking at) has soured on these new collaged canvases. His face folds in as if shouting inwardly – he looks a bit like a Greek Orthodox preacher. The quietly humming darkness that permeated his early prints is no more – the young Iranian now works in brash, bold colours to form complex collages of snipped up pre-revolution magazines, printouts from weblogs and heavy smears of pink and purple paint.

'I start with one collage, and just get carried away with it,' he explains when we meet at the gallery on the eve of his new show. 'I buy the daily newspapers and magazines, and I start with those snippets as a background, then I paint some and add more snippets. I keep chopping and changing until I get what I want and never really know how each piece will end.' Among the cut-outs that



Haerizadeh has pasted into these new works are triumphant shots of Iranian athletes. Elsewhere, we see the singer GooGoosh dressed like a cowboy, while other works look to be adverts for hand cream. One even shows a woman dancing semi-suggestively, surrounded by woollen love hearts, in front of the pre-revolution royal flag of Iran. 'I look for images that have an absurd humour to them,' Haerizadeh explains. 'Some of the snippets are from the old sports magazines and images from before the revolution that I've found in second-hand bookshops.'

He says his interest lies in that essential, absurd tension between concepts of patriotism and grandeur when stuck alongside the fundamentally mundane. 'We have these magazines called the yellow book in Iran. On the cover there might be the leader of the Islamic Republic on the front, this strong looking figure. Then you open it up and it's just loads of tiny adverts for things like hand cream and shampoo. That dichotomy of absurdity is what I look for. I want to have fun with all this seriousness.'

Selections from *Men Of Allah* and *Theatre Troupe*, two older series by

the artist, complement the new works at the gallery. In one example, we see a photograph of Haerizadeh's sweaty visage manipulated onto hairy thighs (scans of his elbow, apparently) that rub languidly against other men with equally sweaty faces. Some of them get pretty graphic, particularly the bizarre, gartered thighs.

Theatre Troupe, on the other hand, explores theatre from the Qajar period in Persian history, when men would play the parts of women. Haerizadeh re-enacts a popular theatrical scene of a marriage as an example of how strange this might have looked, wrapping his puckered face in a flowery chador (pictured, above).

When we ask how he went from these dark, moody and at times daft works into brash collage, he explains that it's a concept that he's been following throughout his work. He tells us about a series he was working on titled *Bad Hijab*, in which he imagined a city of bearded men coming 'out of the closet', as he puts it, and walking out into the streets to find themselves. He explains that this idea has fascinated him for a long time. 'In restrictive societies like in Iran, they always have to keep

things a secret and pretend that these men are straight people. They begin to form their very own unique community, and that's something that interests me.' He continues, 'In those troupes you are trained to lie, to live parallel lives and that links with these closeted men for me. There's an interior and an exterior, and depending on how obscene or extreme you are, then your interior can become vast.' These latest collages, a pop assault on the senses, might be the billboards of that city, he tells us.

You are trained to lie and live parallel lives

But how then to explain this newly angry face, so different from the serene depictions of Haerizadeh in his earlier works? It would seem that success has come at a price. 'As you become more and more successful in our country, people become more envious of you and it starts to affect your mood. You become more frustrated and angry.' Is this what's happened to him? 'Especially after Saatchi,' Haerizadeh agrees. 'It's been getting worse. Collectors should be happy that your works are getting more successful, but they get angrier.' The artist sighs, as if resigned. 'We'll have to see what happens in the next year.'

B21 Gallery (04 340 3965). Until January 22

