

**Rokni Haerizadeh
in conversation with
Sohrab Mohebbi**

Sohrab: I feel like we shouldn't talk about Tehran. Do you think we can talk about Tehran today?

Rokni: No, I don't really think so.

S: We can't, right?

R: I mean, what's the point of talking about it? It makes us sound like delusional old men... It's been so long since the two of us have had a conversation in the first place. We've both spent so much time trying to break away from what we once were. What can those memories do for us now? What good are they other than being very personal? Maybe what we can talk about is the fact that we lived under a system where there was a constant process of destruction and construction...

S: Well, if we're going to speak about building things, one thing that's still very alive for me and somehow important is your house in Tehran back then. That house was a place for people to come together; some of them were artists, some of them were collectors, and others were just curious. We watched movies, played live music, drank, and looked at a lot of art. That place and that time had so many characteristics of a community.

R: I think we can talk about that. We wanted to create an alternative space where we could have relative freedom, where we could think and be productive. It's a bit like during the [Iran-Iraq] war, when there were these homes where you'd find a dervish and he would

gather his followers and they would all read poetry and drink and dance. When there were electricity cuts, it would all happen by candlelight. Those houses were part of an interior life that was so different from life outside.

S: Yeah, your house represented that kind of interior life. It was more than just a place to party.

R: Right, it gave you relative freedom as an artsy kid, in the way art can. It gave you the option to not be a player and to be a little different. We were working toward building something new, confronting and responding to society, being rebels, anarchists... It also allowed us to exist uniquely as a group. There was this inside joke between us. Imagine you're at a gathering, and all of a sudden you go up to someone and whisper in his ear, "You see that guy over there? He's not my brother. He's my lover." You know what I mean? You're experiencing a kind of love that's separate from sexuality and it allows you to reach everyone. Everybody matters. You think collectively. We worked toward that spirit in the house.

S: With success?

R: Well, mostly. The problem was that, in a way, it evolved into something new to us, too. At some point it became impossible to predict what would happen. When a group of young people get together, their minds are set on breaking rules. But then if we had dictated rules we would have been replicating the same patriarchal, hierarchical shit we were running away from. And that had always been my problem with our culture, that it was very heterosexual, patriarchal, and hierarchical. It produced these "masters" who were



immediately surrounded by their “groupies.” It was something that never appealed to me.

S: This love that you were talking about...

R: Yeah, I was saying that we didn't really manage to define privacy. Our group did some collective stuff and at a certain point it all started to fall apart. It looked to me as if it got too personal and that sabotaged the intellectual core of the community. All of a sudden it turned into this other thing you could no longer control.

S: I think other spaces must have had similar problems. The obvious example is Warhol's Factory....

R: The Tehran house felt almost like a hammam, the way people gather in a hammam and share secrets and intimacies. Or I guess the environment was a bit like the Warhol Factory, too. But then, I'm ambivalent about the use of the word *factory*. I liked it a lot when you said that you thought the word *produce* shouldn't be used in relation to artwork.

S: I don't know if it should or shouldn't, but we can definitely talk about that.

R: I think it's important to be sensitive when using the word. I like productive thinking because it can be helpful. David Lynch has a new song called “Strange and Unproductive Thinking.” This idea has become very interesting to me. When is thinking unproductive, what constitutes thinking, and what is its aim anyway?

S: Could you tell me more about the constitution of the group?

R: There were some kids who made short films. There were painters. Everyone was making and showing work. The idea was to create a special environment, like the dervish's house....

S: *Amoo Akbar* [Uncle Akbar].

R: Yeah, *Amoo Akbar* was a generic name for the kinds of people whose homes would become a gathering place.

S: You partly learned about art in those spaces, right? I mean, most art classes early on were also in artists' homes?

R: Yeah, there were underground art classes I went to as a kid at the homes of artists like Farideh Lashai, Parvaneh Etemadi, Ahmad Amin-Nazar, or Mohammadreza Atashzad. I learned art history from Rouin Pakbaz or went to classes on the philosophy of art by Ali Ramin and learned about writing from Shahryar Mandanipour and Safdar Taghizadeh. All of that education happened in people's homes.

S: And how did all of that inform your work?

R: All of it fed me and probably informed our house in Tehran in a way. At a certain point, in our collective space, we began to do collaborative work. We did a performance in Polur, for example.

S: Can you tell me a bit about that?

R: There was an environmental art festival taking place in Polur [a village about two hours north of Tehran]. The landscape there is extremely beautiful and natural. Artists had gathered to make environmental works. It was pretty silly. They would do things like pour gasoline in the spring and then set it on fire, and everyone would applaud. That was



“environmental art.” Or they would spray-paint some rocks by the river.... For the first three days we just sat and looked. It was me, Alireza Masoumi, Maryam Amini, and [my brother] Ramin. We played around. I had tied a tiny bell around my calf and pierced my nose and we all painted our faces. Soon we started collecting waste from the other artists, and eventually we collected the village’s trash, too, using these long pickup sticks. The locals joined us and started to collect trash with us. It was all very spontaneous.

S: Had you done anything collaborative before then?

R: There had been some other projects. Like around 2001, we used to go to this village in Saveh that had been evacuated because of a drought. One day we collected everything blue in the village and stacked it one corner. Remember those old blue pens we had at school that you would hit hard on the end and the cap would pop out? We collected those and just about everything turquoise, too, and piled them all in one room. We found pieces of fabric and tied them around the branches of a tree....

S: Why blue?

R: In [the sixth-century poem] “Haft Peykar” by Nezami there’s a prince, and he discovers seven domes, and each one represents a certain day and color. Sunday is yellow, Monday is green, Tuesday is red, and Wednesday is blue. In Iranian miniatures you see these colors over and over again. In a really banal kind of way, it happened to be Wednesday, so...

S: And this is still you, Ramin, and Alireza?

R: Yes, this is before working with Bitā [Fayyazi, the artist].

S: How did you get people interested? Were they interested?

R: In the case of Saveh, we got in our cars and blasted music so that people would listen to the music as they were looking at the things that we had done. Or another time we made these DNA sculptures, I think it was 2002, and drove them around the city in the back of a truck. That was a collaboration with Bitā. I don’t know where we got these ideas, but it was all pretty interesting.

S: Were you collaborating with Bitā on the Bam project? Can you tell us about that?

R: Bam was during the [painting] biennial, I think. When the earthquake happened [in the southeastern city of Bam in 2003], Shahab Fotouhi, Barbad Golshiri, Amir Mobed, Jinoos Taghizadeh, Atila Pesyani, and Anahita Rezvani asked if we—Bitā, me, Ramin, Alireza, and Narges Hashemi—had any ideas. They offered us this half-built warehouse on Iranshahr Street that had a projection room as if it had once been meant to become a cinema. It was all cement and the windows hadn’t even been installed yet. We covered the windows with paper and we made three houses out of paper. At the beginning of the performance, a white light would go on. We created a scene representing people busy working in a city. Alireza stuffed a balloon under his shirt and looked like a man with a potbelly counting his money. Narges was combing her hair. Maryam was braiding hers. I was a pedestrian walking by. Then the night would come and everyone went to sleep and a blue light would go on. Maryam had put wooden sticks on her arms and walked around pretending to be a tree. Then



a red light turned on and I put on horns and pretended to be a demon. Alireza had an old helmet and Ramin had put one of Bitā's crowns on top of it. He would put this on and the two of us would pretend to be the earthquake and destroy people's houses. The houses fell and the next day we would start all over again.

S: What other group works did you work on past this point?

R: *Iranian Garden* [for the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art] was the next collaborative work. I think that was 2004. The mistake we made in the case of this project was that we over-glorified the outcome. We deodorized it. The work was inherently chaotic because everyone involved was allowed to do whatever they wanted. Our only common theme was a forbidden garden. Everyone started to work with that idea individually. Alireza made urns. Maryam and I painted the floor. Ramin filmed the yard. Narges played a nymph character. But the end result was too rational, and when you try to rationalize chaos, fights are more likely to take place. Fights were mostly over copyright: whose idea it was, who did the work, etc. After that, Ramin and I realized that if we were working individually on something, anyone could freely change the form of it. And maybe that was fine.

S: And there was "*Sang-e Bakht*" (Lucky Charm)?

R: For that exhibition we turned the Golestan Gallery into a supermarket. Ms. Golestan left the gallery to attend her son's wedding and just gave us the key.

S: What year was that?

R: This was before Polur, maybe 2003. We made something like four thousand clay sculptures



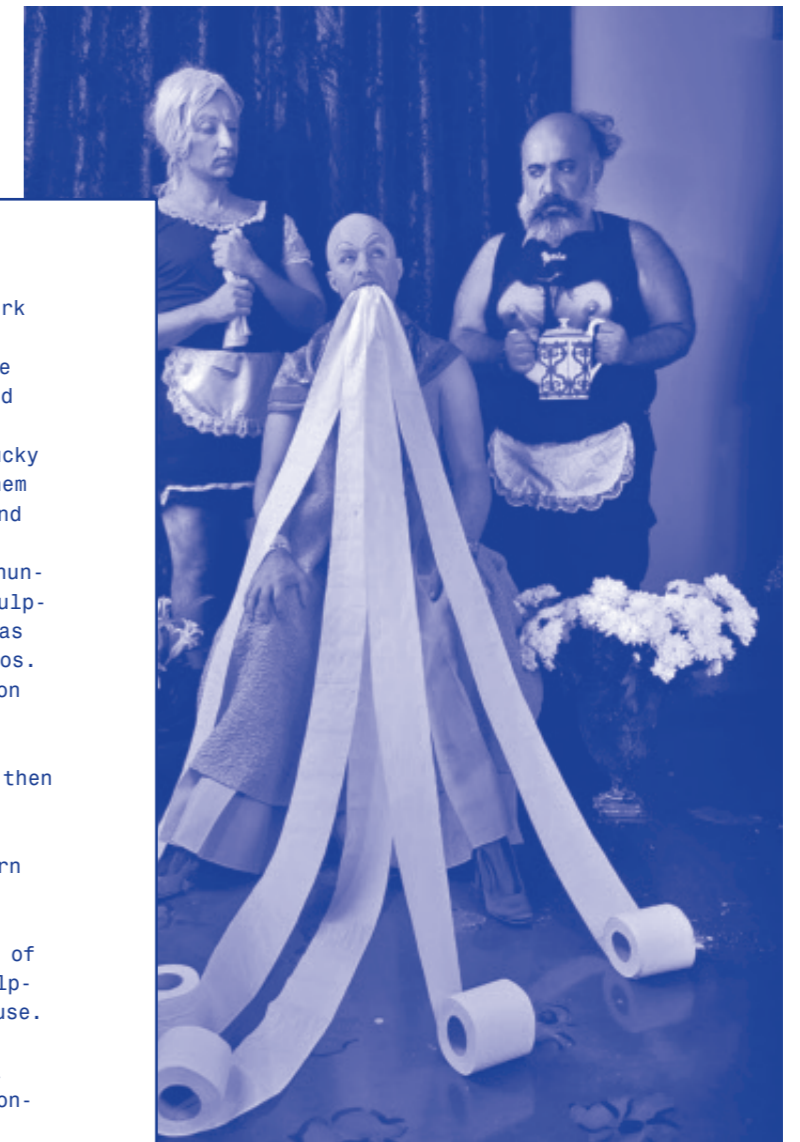
of birds, and Lida Ghodsi, who used to work at Bitā's studio, glazed them in her own style. They filled up the gallery. We made shelves and put the birds on them and sold them as if we were running a small supermarket. We would tell people they were "lucky charms," and that was how we convinced them to buy the birds. Someone would come in and bid, they would point to a shelf and say, "Those three," and Bitā would say, "Five hundred," and then we would give them the sculptures right then and there. The pricing was totally random and negotiable. It was chaos. I remember [Abbas] Kiarostami stopped by on the last day and bought a few things...

S: Ha, the gallery as a supermarket. And then there was Kelardasht...

R: That's right. At Kelardasht [a northern Iranian city], a friend's house was to be demolished to build a new, bigger house. The plan was to go out there with a group of people, mainly artists, and make some sculptures from the debris of the destroyed house. I think a lot about the elephant that you and I made. We hadn't gone there to make a sculpture, but something happened very spontaneously.

That's partly why we call the performances we work on these days "processes" and we don't exhibit them. Sometimes they look more like animations because we document the different steps involved and they reflect a sort of animated sequence when lined up. Like when we worked on Jean Genet's *The Maids*...

S: Can you talk about that? I know that this is interesting to both of us. [The artist] Bahman Mohassess had translated the play to Farsi at some point.





R: We were invited to do something by a French magazine, and it was at the time the Louvre was opening its Islamic wing, which was financed by the Saudis, so there was this discussion in France about how French culture was under threat with all these other cultures ascendant. We wanted to think about that strange proposition, and Genet's play came to mind, with its ideas about the master and the servant and power. Hesam Rahmanian played Madame and Ramin and I dressed up as the maids, Claire and Solange. The way gender became fluid also seemed interesting to us ... an added transgression in a story about transgression. I think the magazine was probably weirded out by us dressing up as women and using the haute couture clothing they gave us for the shoot in the way we did. Anyway, we filmed it all.

S: What happened with the project?

R: We're continuing it in different ways. For example, we've been recording the voices of various maids in Dubai reading Genet's text out loud—Filipinos, Sri Lankans, et cetera. Eventually we'd like to make a book out of it all.

S: Do you think that Mohasses has influenced your work? I mean, do you see a connection? I was thinking some time ago about the blank, featureless faces that are recurrent in his work. I was reminded of them when I saw your new animation work, or even the works you made using the pictures from the Arab Spring, the faces....

R: Animals. Yes, Mohasses is inside me. I grew up with him. It was interesting, when he saw Ramin's and my work before he died he said that he liked the fact that we were from very different generations but were also somehow similar. It was fascinating to him.

S: How did you first get introduced to his work?

R: My uncle's library. My grandfather and my uncle were both architects; they studied at the Architectural Association in London. There were a few books in that library that really affected me: David Hockney, Bahman Mohasses, Sohrab Sepehri, Ardeshir Mohasses's *Tabrikat* [Congratulations], and Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*. Those were the books I later stole when my uncle left Iran. I still have the same copies and keep them close. At that time I was getting my training from Mohammad Reza Atashzad—I had worked with him from the age of seven. He was an architect who had trained with these Esfahani watercolorists called the *Maktab-e Esfahan*, who specialized in the sort of works you might sell to tourists. You can imagine the style—it was very beautiful and would capture romantic flower arrangements or the quality of light falling on water.... I was affected by him, so in those days I might paint a couple of sparrows sitting on a tree branch. That was where I was! Then one day I opened the Bahman Mohasses book and there were these men who looked like demons. I wondered how somebody could make paintings like that. How could anyone see the world like that? I understood David Hockney because the figures that he made were more legibly human. But it was amazing to me how I could possibly think of one thing in my head and then draw a triangle instead.

S: So you got to know his work at a really young age.

R: Yes, and totally by accident. If you look at my sketchbook from back then, you can tell that at some point the work starts to look either like Sohrab Sepehry or Bahman Mohasses. You also start to see humans with animal heads.



S: There were always animals, both in your paintings and your recent works.

R: Yes, I see myself as an animal. My first sexual awakening wasn't through watching porn but through watching animals mate. We had a house in Astara and there were no barn fences or barbed wire around, so the neighbor's cow would come to our house, our dog would go to theirs, et cetera. I would hide and watch the animals. Even today, when Ramin and Hesam and I visit a new city we always visit the museums and the zoos. In Pittsburgh, for example, we recently visited polar bears and deer....

S: Was this interest of yours in animals what drew you to [the 1968 play] *Shahr-e Qesseh* (City of Tales)?

R: Yes, *Shahr-e Qesseh* was fascinating to me because it had animals in it. More than anything it was grotesque and demon-like, especially the character of the camel whose eyes were in his neck. That was a big deal to me.

S: I feel like we've talked a lot, but we didn't talk about painting at all.

R: I do think those collaborative works are very important. I would love to be able to talk about things people haven't seen yet. And besides, I have a problem with the fixed idea of being an "Iranian painter in exile," because all of these words now have a different meaning to me. I've changed places. My practice is more nomadic.

S: You're primarily known as a painter but you've shown two animations at the Carnegie International. Is this a shift in your practice?

R: I think of the animations as a form of painting and the works on paper as drawings. In some ways I've lost my faith in painting. The most important aspect of painting to me is its performative aspect, where you work with lifeless things. Painting to me is when the body starts to interact with a number of lifeless objects. That presence of the body is very important in the work. I don't care if it's on canvas or assumes some other form.

S: What about time and duration? How does that figure in? Time has a different relationship to painting than it does to animation, and I know this is something that interests you....

R: Maybe I don't really think of what I do as animation in the sense that one frame doesn't necessarily follow the next. I lay out images on a big table and redraw each frame individually rather than retrace it. So in one frame the rabbit might have floppy ears and in the next he doesn't have ears at all. It's anti-Walt Disney in that way, if that makes sense. I'm not arranging certain discrete elements in order to create movement—say, a cartoonish young woman arranging flowers in the forest and then sitting down to eat from her picnic basket—but I'm creating a pulse ... and it takes a really long time to do so.

S: What do you mean by "a pulse"?

R: In a painting, an image appears immediately, right before your eyes. I was trying to break away from that tradition, to embrace the fact that the surface of a painting begins to tear in time. My moving images are like drawing with the added element of time; they trace your experience in real time, almost like a body. The individual dots shifting are



Mahi (Fish), Bahman Mohasses, 1972. Courtesy of Ramin and Rokni Haerizadeh



Minotaur seated, Bahman Mohasses, 1976. Courtesy of Ramin and Rokni Haerizadeh



like a pulse—they leave with you the experience of a living, breathing thing. The Futurists and the Cubists addressed the issue of time in a different way, or, say, Hokusai, Persian miniature—all that stuff dealt with a specific kind of perspective and temporality. It reminds me of [Slavoj] Žižek, who somewhere writes about lining up all of Rothko's work and experiencing it as a series of lights coming on and off. Imagine that, you would feel the presence of the artist... and your pulse becomes one with the pulse of the work.

S: And you would feel the artist's body?

R: Yeah, you'd feel the artist's body. [Lucio] Fontana and [Jackson] Pollock made the importance of the body and the performativity of painting apparent, but then what you experienced at the end was still this flat canvas. Like the painters in the '80s who had to deal with late Picasso, I feel like a new generation has to try—and I'm not saying I've done it—to do something new. To begin to rethink the relationship of the painter to painting.

S: Where does that leave us? How are you reconsidering all of this in your work?

R: I guess I don't care about the end result. I don't believe in any of that anymore. I've really lost faith in making a fetish object. The system pushes you in that direction, especially if you're capable of producing a lot, and I've always been a productive person—I mean, I can draw very, very quickly. You're treated like a derby horse. You're also pushed to do the exact same thing over and over, to be a "classical" artist. I don't mean classical like a still-life artist, but classical in the sense that many painters are pushed to repeat a formula rather than create new forms and ways of being. You think to

Praise, Rokni Haerizadeh, 1994–95, ink and gouache on paper

yourself, "Oh my God, I have to make the same thing for the rest of my life. That wasn't what I signed up for!"

S: But I feel like you needed to experience all of that to get to this point. For the past few years, I've wanted to ask you about how you position yourself within the art market. I mean, from afar, it looked like the race was on and you were sometimes in the fast lane.

R: Yeah, at some point I hit rock bottom, and that's when I had to start all over. When you look at my work now, it might disappoint you. When they put one of my works up in an art fair or a group exhibition, it looks really bad. It makes me feel ill, because it's probably weak and ugly compared to someone who does more traditional painting. There need to be about fifteen of my paintings for my work to begin to be understood, and this is so often impossible, given the obvious constraints. So maybe it's better if I refuse to go with the flow. I understand when some people criticize me as the worst painter they've ever seen. It makes me happy. This sense of failure helps me see more clearly. I don't paint in order to make something that someone could hang on a wall; painting is just how I think about the world.

Translated from Farsi by Gelare Khoshgozaran

