



EMBRACING KISMET

BITA FAYYAZI

She looks at a singular subject and then becomes consumed by it – multiplying it, stretching its conceptual boundaries and mirroring it to human behaviour until it's laid bare for audiences to interpret. **Myrna Ayad** meets Iranian-born Bita Fayyazi, who tackles order, disorder and the multiple dynamics within.

B

ita Fayyazi tilts her head and a strand from her thick mop of curly black hair falls across her forehead, tangling itself between her lashes.

"The cockroaches took me places," she smiles, referring to *Cockroaches*, a series which was first exhibited at the Sixth Ceramics Biennial at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (TMOCA) in 1998, through the *Ekbatana* show at the Nikolaj Contemporary Art Centre in Copenhagen in 2000, at the *Iranian Contemporary Art* exhibition at the Barbican in London in 2001, and finally, at the National Gallery of Armenia in Yerevan in 2004. Her initial *Cockroaches* series comprised a society of 700 meticulously handmade, hand-glazed ceramic roaches which procreated to 1500 for *Ekbatana* and 2000 for *Iranian Contemporary Art*. "It's about multiplicity, not reproduction, *multiplicity*," she stresses, "variety in mass." Just like regular societies, I propose. "With every show, they bred like real cockroaches," she agrees, "it was like life itself." The cockroaches may have taken her places, but Fayyazi went after them first, ironically through the somewhat instinctive human desire to kill these beasts in what she describes as a "very, very simple story" and one that is nothing short of a fateful coincidence.

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Opening spread: (Detail) *Babies*. 2010. Installation with fibreglass and metal sheet. 150 x 100 cm.

Facing page: *Kismet*. 2005. A mixed media installation at the 2005 Venice Biennale. Gold-plated fibreglass and Plexiglas. Variable dimensions.





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UGLY PRETTY THINGS

Her basement neighbours took a year-long trip and asked Fayyazi to keep an eye on their flat – a weekly routine which involved disposing of the “mounds” of deceased or live roaches, a ritual which became “almost like a hobby, something robotic”. My face cringes and Fayyazi laughs. “It was yucky at first,” she admits, “it wasn’t fear, just a feeling of unpleasantness and eventually, it became benign.” A sense of cohabitation manifested itself: Fayyazi realised that she shared a space with another species; a species she could hear and smell once her neighbours returned, halting her routine. Creatures of habit as humans are, Fayyazi responded to this withdrawal by sketching, then creating models of the roaches.

The grimace on my face is where the interpretation of *Cockroaches* begins: are we conditioned to fear roaches and express disgust at the sight or mention of them? Therein lies art’s initial objective: to make an impact, however positive or negative that may be. Next on art’s list is a narrative, and again, however simple or complex that may be, it’s ours as the audience and we take the artist’s cue as a starting point. Except that, with Fayyazi’s *Cockroaches* and all her subsequent bodies of work, there is no initial narrative. “Everything begins with a subject; there is no story at the beginning, the story comes later as I’m in the process of creating,” she explains; “The story then grows and weaves itself into the work.”

Using cockroaches as just a “very ordinary, banal” subject may help justify her choice, but I was still intrigued. Why choose sewer-dwelling bugs,

arguably one of the insect kingdom’s ugliest species and one that has the ability to engender terror at first glance? We wouldn’t swell with rage or panic at the sight of, say, a ladybird. “Yes, they’re dirty, but that is their nature and yes, they’re ugly, but I didn’t see them as such, I saw them as a subject,” she explains, “I found them humorous – they live with you, coexist with you, but they’re totally not ‘with’ you.” Spontaneity is at the heart of Fayyazi’s ethos, and with *Cockroaches* and successive bodies of work, the focal point is the parallel drawn with human society, which in turn helps account for the multiplicity she “obsesses over” – as well as for the “tension between order and disorder”. Her statement brings to mind a quote by Polonius from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*: *Though this be madness, yet there is method in it.*

Perhaps we are not privy to the orderliness of cockroaches as much as we are to ants and bees, but a quick search on Wikipedia confirms that roaches “can exhibit emergent behaviour”, bringing them the ability to make group decisions. So, *La Cucarachas* are pretty organised. They may huddle and scuttle together – research shows that they make decisions based on how dark an area is and how many other cockroaches there are before they venture into it – but competition exists in their culture. Fayyazi’s series are as much about the actual subject in question as they are a reflection of mankind’s own ugliness or beauty, victors or victims, the negligent or responsible. How we perceive the varied subjects in Fayyazi’s work is our decision but these are her propositions and provocations on which we can reflect.

Facing page:
Left: *Crows (Art of Demolition)*.
1998. Installation with fibreglass,
metal wire, acrylic paint and wooden
fruit crates. Variable dimensions.

Right: *Cockroaches*. 1998.
Installation of 700 cockroaches
made with ceramic and alloyed
metal wires. Each cockroach 15 x
7 x 2 cm.



Above: *The Grind*. 2010. Mixed media installation with fibreglass, metal sheet, threads, found objects, fabric, artificial hair, miniature coloured light bulbs, crystal chandelier pendants, galvanised metal chimneys and drain pipes. 200 x 300 cm.

Facing page: *Performance 13SS/2010*. 2010. A dress covered in needles and different coloured thread and a headdress made with galvanised metal chimneys and artificial hair. Variable dimensions.





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PANDORA'S BOX

Fayyazi doesn't like limits, nor does she like singularity – this is evidenced in her preliminary approach to a subject and the ensuing self-confessed obsession she has with numbers. “I'm an experimental person. Instinct makes me cross to the 'other side', and even if there's fear initially, it's fear of the unknown,” she says. And so she experiments, pushing herself into boundless territory and in the process challenging conceptions of the 'establishment' through works which emulate human behaviour. Numerous interpretations evolve, allowing the work a greater psychological density through its multiple layers. When it's complete, she admits “it's outside my control”.

Yet such artistic rigour and vigour came late to Fayyazi, the eldest of three siblings who attended boarding school in the UK, which explains the English accent laced with Farsi. When she returned to a post-Islamic Revolution Iran, she worked as a correspondent for a foreign company. The tremendous homesickness she had experienced during her seven years in the UK eclipsed the major changes the new regime had imposed. “The difference was me,” she says of her time spent readjusting to 'home', “I was happy to be back but later began to feel unhappy.” In an auspicious twist of fate, a friend invited Fayyazi to a ceramics class and the proverbial Pandora's Box exploded. “It was instant, I realised this is it, this is for me!” she exclaims. “It touched me, I was shaping something with my own hands, there was a sense of individuality, I could express myself!” Her enthusiasm led her to pursue sessions with a master ceramicist and despite being “slow and sloppy”, she came to understand that it wasn't important how perfectly that pot was made, but rather, “what you're creating out of that pot and what it's saying to you”.

From the onset of her artistic career, Fayyazi

favoured collaboration with other artists, regardless of whose idea it was first. “Ideas can be collaborative after all,” she affirms. Her first series, *Road Kill* (1997), was inspired by long drives around Iran with her husband and their artist friend Mostafa Dashti. One too many dead animals on these road trips stirred Fayyazi. “It's a life, it's a living thing and it's disorder too,” she explains, “I feel something for anything that breathes, even plants.” Fayyazi and Dashti created 200 slain terracotta dogs and filmed their burial in two plots where a high-rise and a hospital now stand. A metaphor for unaccounted deaths? An allegory for mass graves? “There are too many connotations to my work,” she admits.

Fayyazi ventured towards a new intellectual sphere, one which included reading about art, visiting exhibitions and mingling with artists. She may have been a novice, but she was confident and determined, so when the jury at the Sixth Ceramics Biennial rejected *Cockroaches* because their antennae and legs are made out of aluminium and therefore not entirely ceramic, she refuted their reasoning and convinced them otherwise. The 700 cockroaches which invaded TMOCA went on to win the Biennial's Jury Prize. In the same year, she was invited to take part in the *Art of Demolition*, an ephemeral project involving a group of artists creating artworks in a house about to be demolished. Fayyazi was flattered – it indicated acceptance into the sphere of artists. She chose to her fibreglass stack crows on fruit crates in the house's yard. Initially inspired by Edgar Allan Poe's poem *The Raven*, Fayyazi saw in the crows the same humour and misperception she had seen in the roaches.

MEAN MACHINE

Fayyazi walked into a bookstore at Copenhagen Airport en route to Tehran after the *Ekbatana* show and casually flipped open a photogra-

Facing page: *Road Kill*. 1997. 200 prostrate terracotta dogs. Variable dimensions.



Left: *PlayGround*. 2008. Mixed media installation at Espace Louis Vuitton in Paris. Plastic toys, an original 1984 Citroën Deux Cheveux car and a bigger than life-size sculpture of a camel made from Styrofoam, fiberglass, cloth and fabrics. Variable dimensions.

All images courtesy the artist.

“The only solution I have is to give love.”

phy book on the Bosnian Genocide only to be stunned by an image of a baby being prepared for its burial and which had an apparent bullet in its chest. “That image haunted me, it broke my heart,” she says. Yet that sentiment didn’t trickle into her *My Little Intellectual* series of fibreglass babies. ‘Little’ and ‘intellectual’ are an intentional play on words, the oxymoron prompts the initial understanding of the work – the babies have infantile bodies but their facial expression conveys an adult gaze. “I made them intellectual because I’m worried about the future – it’s not a good future that I had imagined,” she explains; “They’re not babies, they’re *my* babies, they’re metaphors

on life.” *My Little Intellectual* transformed into *Kismet*, shown at the 2005 Venice Biennale. Meaning ‘fate’, the work featured suspended golden babies swirling in midair in their attempted disassociation from the reality they perceive. Infants as they may be, they grasp the chaos that the world below offers. In 2007, *Kismet* was acquired by Benetton and is on permanent display at the retailer’s communication research centre, Fabrica. *Kismet* was later echoed by *The Grind* (2010) – “a metaphor for modernity, a mean machine, a factory”.

In 2008 Fayyazi created *PlayGround* (acquired by Simon de Pury) as part of the *Orients sans*

Frontières exhibition at Paris’s Espace Louis Vuitton – a tribute to Andre Citroën’s collaboration with Louis Vuitton in 1931, which had involved 43 French scientists, archaeologists, naturalists, painters and photographers, who retraced the Silk Road. The exhibition curator, Hervé Mikaeloff, invited 10 artists from countries of the Silk Road to suggest a Contemporary take on the 1931 journey. Fayyazi used an original 1984 Citroën, to which she affixed children’s toys that seemingly appear to be thrown out – a reflection of the youth’s status quo – “life, creation and destruction” – what was and what is.

But of all of Fayyazi’s works, perhaps the most poignant, hard-hitting is *Performance 1388/2010* – a physical manifestation of order and disorder – first shown in Tehran and then at Espace Louis Vuitton. From being a silent witness, Fayyazi be-

comes an active member through her performance as a mythological, crucified mother, once strong, proud and glamorous, she stands agonising with pain, giving birth to forceps, guns, handcuffs and scalpels – emblems of what contemporary society breeds. The bearing mother punishes herself “for all the wrong she’s done, she’s given life to something that’s going to destroy her and earth,” says Fayyazi; “We’ve done this to ourselves.” In *Performance 1388/2010*, Fayyazi poses a problem. What, I ask, is the solution? The same curl falls across her forehead. “The only solution I have is to give love,” she smiles. “But will that be enough?” I ask myself. 📍

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