



Out of a turbulent political climate come vibrant Iranian artists with a global vision. Gareth Harris meets a collector and her adviser. Portrait by Brijesh Patel.

A glistening, crystal-daubed canvas towers over art patron Maryam Homayoun-Eisler. The blingtastic backdrop by Iranian superstar artist Farhad Moshiri, entitled *Love Letter* (2008), crowns the living room of Homayoun-Eisler's London home where she chats intently with Iranian art expert Fariba Farshad. Another Moshiri masterpiece dominates the dining room, while a mirror mosaic by the Tehran-based Monir Farmanfarmaian dazzles in the office. "Most of my Iranian art collection, which includes over 200 pieces, hangs in

my Hampshire home. There's also a triptych from Abbas Kiarostami's *Snow White* series in my New York apartment, along with works by Reza Derakhshani and Negar Ahkami," says Homayoun-Eisler. "I've always wanted a Kiarostami. Fariba found me this piece about six months ago." Filling the gaps in the collection comes naturally to Farshad, who joined London-based cultural consultancy Candlestar as director in 2004. The pair first met four years ago when Homayoun-Eisler became disillusioned with other aspects of the

Above: Fariba Farshad, left, and Maryam Homayoun-Eisler. On table: Bita Fayyazi's *Bronze Baby*. Wall: Samira Alikhanzadeh works.

contemporary art market. Having left Iran for Paris in 1978 at the age of 10, with stints in the US and UK as a financial analyst at Credit Suisse First Boston and as marketing director for L'Oréal and Estée Lauder, she felt a need to reconnect with her roots. Cue Tehran-born Farshad, who has been instrumental in raising the profile of Iranian contemporary art in London with a plethora of exhibitions. "Fariba introduced me to some key artists at her Mall Galleries show in April 2008 [*Whispered Secrets, Murmuring Dreams*],

including Darioush Gharazad, a graffiti artist. I bought three of his works on the spot at a few thousand pounds each,” says Homayoun-Eisler, who loaned them to touring exhibition *Iran Inside Out* (currently at the Farjam Collection/Hafiz Foundation in Dubai). And last year’s *The Masques of Shahrazad* exhibition of Iranian women artists mounted by Farshad was also an essential touchstone.

“Other artists brought to my attention include Tahereh Samadi Tari, with her ephemeral monochromatic images, and Shahriar Ahmadi, the ‘Cy Twombly of Iran’. These are young, emerging talents rather than established artists,” says Homayoun-Eisler. “Fariba keeps my finger on the pulse.” Indeed, Farshad works with a network of artists and galleries in Iran, where many established artists are also avid collectors of new work, bringing her into contact with emerging practitioners.

So what sort of collection has the duo moulded? “Among the more established artists, I have five or six pieces by Moshiri and sculptures by Parviz Tanavoli,” comments Homayoun-Eisler. “Among the younger generation, I have seven or eight pieces by Samira Alikhanzadeh – one of my favourite female artists today.”

A new-found passion is Tehran-born Mehdi Farhadian. “It’s like flipping through my mother’s photo albums,” says Homayoun-Eisler, referring to the artist’s poignant images of 1970s Iran. “I don’t know much about his work, that’s a gap



Above: the hazy painting style of young Tehran-born artist Tahereh Samadi Tari.

in my knowledge,” muses Farshad, and the pair laugh as the protégé, for an instant, mentors the adviser.

But there’s also a more serious side to the friendship. The pair are very vocal about their fears for the Iranian art scene following the re-election of far-right president Mahmoud Ahmadi-Nejad. Homayoun-Eisler, who co-chairs the new Tate Middle East North Africa Acquisitions Committee and is helping The British Museum build up its contemporary Middle Eastern holdings, is adamant that “art should be about vision and not division”. She is especially angry that Tehran Contemporary Art Museum’s “Bacons, Rothkos and

Pollocks” are not on display. Farshad, meanwhile, comes in from the market angle: “What we are trying to do at Candlestar is expand artists’ horizons by placing their work in a recognised international context. We seek to place Iranian artists on exactly the same footing in the market as artists from other parts of the world.”

So what is the current state of the market? “2006 to 2008 witnessed a so-called ‘buying frenzy’ in the Iranian art market,” says Farshad. The art industry in Tehran took off as prices jumped 20-fold. Parviz Tanavoli’s sculpture *The Wall (Oh, Persepolis)* sold in April 2008 for \$2.84m [\$2.24m over its estimate] at a Christie’s auction in Dubai, the highest figure ever

reached for a contemporary Iranian art piece. The market chilled post-crash and Christie’s fifth Dubai sale in October 2008 saw a drop in prices. At Sotheby’s last London sale of Iranian and Arab contemporary art in October, Farhad Moshiri’s painting *Cowboy and Indian*, 2007, went for £397,250 (est £150,000-£200,000) while, at the other end of the scale, Samira Alikhanzadeh’s acrylic and mirror piece, *Untitled*, 2009, fetched just £3,750 (est £4,000-£6,000).

When Homayoun-Eisler recently discovered young star Sahand Hesamiyan, she quickly phoned Farshad. Was the entrepreneur fazed? “There’s a clarity about the choices that we make, about what works and what doesn’t,” answers Farshad. And on that note Homayoun-Eisler’s parting shot is illuminating: “How can you call this contemporary Iranian art movement a ‘discovery’ when it is, in fact, a recovery of artistic ideas? You’re talking about a nation with 3,000 years of rich culture,” she says, smiling and resolute. ♦

IRAN AROUND

Candlestar, 020-8741 6025; www.candlestar.co.uk. **Christie’s Dubai**, +9714-425 5647; www.christies.com: International Modern and Contemporary Art, April 27. **Farjam Collection/Hafiz Foundation**, DIFC Gate Village 4, Dubai (+971-4323 0303; www.farjamcollection.com). **Mall Galleries**, The Mall, London SW1 (020-7930 6844; www.mallgalleries.org.uk). **Sotheby’s London**, 020-7293 5000; www.sothebys.com: Arab and Iranian Contemporary Art, October 20.