



Andisheh Avini's *Spider Skull*, decorated with traditional Iranian marquetry

# Iranian contemporary art in global arena **A Golden Age?**

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Recent years have witnessed a dramatic boom in the Iranian contemporary art scene, attracting a great audience and an astonishing amount of interest worldwide. In many ways, the current rise of the Iranian contemporary art follows the 1990s golden age of Iranian cinema. Although in line with the boom in the Asian and Middle Eastern contemporary art worlds, the developments in Iranian modern art deserve a more careful and special attention due to the extraordinary and complex nature of these developments.

The contemporary Iranian art, which emerged in the mid-1950s and 1960s through the works of artists such as Fereydoun Ave and Hossein Zenderoudi, was a response

to the cultural and political realities and paradoxes of the Iranian social and political life of the time. The works of many artists in this era originated from the Saqqakhaneh school of spiritual popular art or, in some cases, were a critical reflection of the state of arts and culture in the Iranian society. Examples of that include Parviz Tanavoli's works using the various figurative forms of the word *beecheh*, the Persian word for nothingness. Facilitated by an increasing number of workshops, exhibitions and shows worldwide, this new field of arts expanded rapidly, culminating in the opening of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Arts in 1977. By the late-1970s, and fuelled by the rich economy's petrodollars, Iran already came to hold one of the largest collections of western



*Miss Hybrid* by Shirin Aliabadi

The Magic of Persia Contemporary Art Prize for emerging Iranian artists is a unique initiative aimed at prolonging the current boom in the contemporary art field by promoting emergence of new artists

contemporary art in the world, with an increasing number of European artists exhibiting and visiting Iran while domestic artists started to exhibit internationally. To this day, the Museum still holds the largest collection of contemporary western art outside Europe and the USA, including major works by Dali, Picasso, and Monet, among others.

The revolution and the subsequent years of war with Iraq exposed the newly founded contemporary Iranian art scene to new challenges. On the one hand, the dramatic political events of these years brought to a halt the earlier developments and trends in Iranian contemporary art and, on the other hand, the sudden cultural and artistic vacuum resulting from this period of political upheavals, created a fertile ground for the emergence of new forms of art and expression both amongst the earlier generation as well as a newly emerging generation of 'post-revolution' artists.

By the mid-1990s new forms of art were emerging by Iranian artists inside and outside Iran, illustrating refreshing styles, techniques and approaches, often dealing with issues of cultural change, questions of identity, and other social reality. One of the outcomes of this era was the emergence of a golden age in Iranian cinema, with Iranian films receiving unprecedented international attention and admiration

### Impact of reforms

Facilitated by the reformist era of the late-1990s, other forms of visual arts also experienced major developments, witnessing a revival of the 1960s generation of contemporary artists as well as new calibre of young, innovative, post-revolution generation of artists. The latter generation were posed to represent the paradoxes and ideals of their lives and those of their society, using new and dramatic forms of art, resulting in the fastest growing generation of young artists in the Middle East, if not across the world.

Since the early 2006, Iranian contemporary art has not only been exhibited widely around the globe, but it has also been selling spectacularly at various international auctions, defining a unique category for itself as separately distinguished from Asian and Middle Eastern contemporary art.

At the Christie's 2007 sale of International Modern and Contemporary Art in Dubai, works by Farhad Moshiri sold for more than US \$600,000, setting a new record for sales of contemporary Iranian art. This set off a trend during which the autumn auction of *Magic of Persia* (MOP), a London-based charity, raised more than US \$1 million from the sale of such contemporary art, with Christie's 2008 auction recording record prices for the works of contemporary Iranian artists. Parviz Tanavoli's *Wall* sold for a staggering \$2.84 million, setting a new auction record for Middle Eastern artists.

### Diversity of disciplines and styles

The richness and uniqueness of contemporary Iranian art originates in several important elements. Since its emergence in the 1960s, contemporary art in Iran has passed through several key phases of Iranian socio-political trajectory, all of which have not only refined and enriched artistic perceptions but also resulted in unique and innovative styles of presentation. In addition, Iranian contemporary art carries with it the rich cultural, ethnical, and religious diversities of the Iranian social structure, with the art often reflecting artist's unique background or his struggle with



*Faghat Eshgh (Only Love), by Farhad Moshiri*

defining such identity. Moreover, Iranian contemporary art showcases works by two distinct 'pre-' and 'post-revolutionary' generations of artists, adding yet a more unique and incredible dimension to the modern art of Iran. Iranian contemporary art has, therefore, come to replace the golden age of Iranian cinema, even with some world-renowned Iranian film-makers, such as Abbas Kiarostami, increasingly moving towards production of other forms of visual arts such as installations and photography, which have been warmly received internationally.

### Keeping the momentum

Equally important in this area are efforts in maintaining this boom, in order to extend the rise of this golden age in Iranian contemporary art, and to make way for emergence and international recognition of new artists. That has been the inspiration behind the creation of the first ever Contemporary Art Prize for emerging Iranian artists. Launched by the London-based Magic of Persia and due to be awarded in autumn 2009, the Prize (MOP CAP) is a

unique initiative aimed at prolonging the boom in the Iranian contemporary art field by promoting emergence of new artists.

Submissions for the Prize are by nominations from inside and outside Iran, while a panel of judges from amongst the most distinguished personalities in the world of contemporary arts will select the final winner from among a shortlist of fifty works. The jury members include names such as Rose Issa, Abbas Kiarostami, Julia Payton-Jones and Parviz Tanavoli. The winner will be awarded a solo exhibition of their work at one of London's most respectable art galleries.

Initiatives such as these will play an essential role in maintaining and supporting the incredible achievements and developments in the world of Iranian contemporary art worldwide.

*For more information on the Magic of Persia Contemporary Art Prize (MOP CAP), please visit [www.mopcap.com](http://www.mopcap.com), or contact [info@magicofpersia.com](mailto:info@magicofpersia.com)*



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