

Writing Art

Trends in Contemporary Iranian Art Since the Saqqakhaneh



Parviz Tanavoli



Sadegh Tabrizi



Reza Abedini



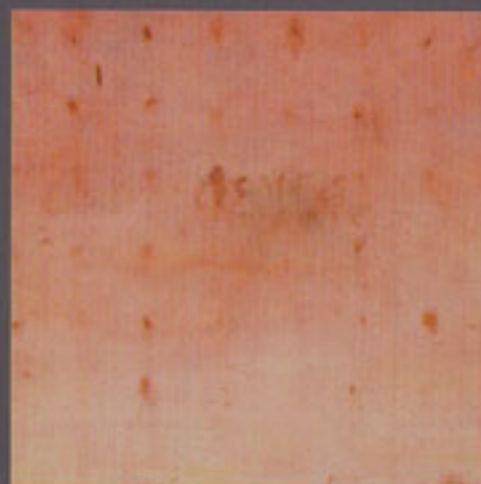
Shideh Tami



Shahriar Ahmadi



Barbad Golshiri



Azadeh Razaghdoust



Houra Yaghoobi

Janine Rubeiz Gallery, Beirut

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Writing Art: Trends in Contemporary Iranian Art Since the Saqqakhaneh

During the late 1950's and early 1960's, the first serious presence of Persian calligraphy in modern Iranian art took place in the works of the Saqqakhaneh artists. Inspired by popular votive art and as a response to the desire for reflecting a specific national heritage in the art of their country, these artists began a new movement of Iranicizing modern Iranian art, which up to that point mainly consisted of creating scenery of Iranian life using outdated styles of western art. To achieve their goal, they incorporated national, folkloric and religious elements such as calligraphy into their work. This approach to calligraphy in modern Iranian art took place after a lengthy period of decline and lack of innovation in this field.

The Saqqakhaneh art movement developed as the Iranian response to modern Western art and was the result of a constant struggle between tradition and modernism in the art of Iran. The use of calligraphy in these works, contrary to the purpose which it had served up to that point, was not for its connotative use, for the texts which these artists used, even if legible, served no such purpose. Their writings were telling of the unimportance of the used words. In reality, the main potential of modern art placed such emphasis on formalism that it engaged in a complete cleansing of the narrative or descriptive aspects of the words. Calligraphic elements, like hundreds of other traditional elements, were used solely as objects with unusual forms and high visual potential.

Thus, calligraphy, like the other decorative elements being employed, was separated from its indigenous background and placed into a new environment in a completely extraneous field. Charles-Hossein Zenderoudi, Parviz Tanavoli, Faramarz Pilaram, Massoud Arabshahi, Sadegh Tabrizi, Mansour Ghandriz, Nasser Oveissi and Zhazeh Tabatabaei were among the most important artists of the Saqqakhaneh School. The success of this movement during that era resulted in its immediate international recognition and to this day, imitation.

In recent years, works inspired by calligraphy have been created by artists whom unlike their predecessors of the Saqqakhaneh, have been acting on a superficial level to meet the demands of the current market for works with an exotic Middle Eastern feel. Calligraphy in the guise of one of the most obvious of these elements has been a major tributary of this demand and has created the means for a sudden and rootless art movement whose only common characteristic is the inclusion of Iranian writing in any manner. This false trend necessitates the need to examine more closely movements in contemporary Iranian art in which text and writing are used.

Since the Saqqakhaneh, artistic movements originating in the West have permeated the Iranian art scene and it is only natural that artists of this region work alongside these movements or styles using their own language. This exhibition presents the works of six such artists along with two of the Saqqakhaneh's founding members, Parviz Tanavoli and Sadegh Tabrizi.

Throughout his career spanning over 50 years, Parviz Tanavoli, a sculptor, collector and scholar, has engaged in all aspects of the

Iranian fine and applied arts. Drawn to the calligraphic shape of the word heech because of its similarity to the human form, Tanavoli also acknowledges its literary and mystical connotations. The heech becomes "something" despite its literal meaning of nothing. Sadegh Tabrizi has created Persian miniature by using inscriptions in the form of broken nasta'liq to fill the negative space of the paintings. He later did away with the figurative aspects and created abstract forms from calligraphy based motifs on parchment. Writing is used primarily to convey meaning and its narrative quality is among its most common and easily incorporated uses in artwork. Words and phrases are incorporated not only for their visual appearance, but also for their connotative implications. This recent reappearing trend is clearly visible in the literary-based abstract paintings of Shahriar Ahmadi, the expressionistic canvases of Azadeh Razaghdoust and the "Who's My Generation?" series of Houra Yaghoubi.

Time stops in its tracks in the paintings of Shahriar Ahmadi. Having always painted in eras searching for meaning and content in the ancient literature and history of Iran, Ahmadi, a trained calligrapher, infuses his abstract compositions with fragments of poetry in the form of loose scribbles pushed to the edges and beneath the forms. Ahmadi's paintings are filled with riddles and mystery. They take viewers to a faraway land and time known to people solely through legend and myth. They are filled with tales and accounts which if in a book, would take days to read. But on his canvas, they immediately inform viewers of their secrets.

The color red has infallibly drawn Azadeh Razaghdoust to the rose and the heart and a series titled *Les Fleurs du mal* named after the collection of poetry by Charles Baudelaire. The expressivity of the color red is the first thing one notices in her works; bold strokes and controlled swipes of the artist's hands convey blood, love, and passion evoking a visceral reaction. Azadeh wounds her canvases with a weeping rose, a beating heart or a uterine form, filling her surfaces with accidents, impulses and physical reactions creating one of two outcomes; unrecognizable violence or pleasant ornamentation, final testaments to love's and life's suffering and inevitable end. With these thoughts Azadeh wounds her tragic canvases further, scratching the words of Baudelaire and Blake – "*Les Fleurs du mal*" and "Oh Rose, thou art sick!"

Based on a verse of poetry by the great Iranian epic poet, Ferdowsi, Houra Yaghoubi questions the position of women in society by using their imagery from two historically significant eras. In the first image of the series titled "Who's My Generation?" a cutout of a Safavid woman holds a banner to a group of chador clad figures. On the banner is the verse: *Bedoo goft har kass keh banou toei; beh iran o chin poshto bazoo toei*. Linking the present day Iranian woman by a thread to her predecessors, the verse implies that regardless of the era and the female's position in society, her role as a pillar of strength for her country is unquestionable.

Over the past decade, movements which originated in the United States and Europe such as Conceptual Art have been permeating

the works of the younger generation of Iranian artists who are moving away from non-linguistic forms of art to more theoretically based works in which language is in no way used as form and only merits from its legibility serving a linguistic purpose. One such artist, Barbad Golshiri, creates "The Portrait of the Artist as the Winner." He has worked both as an artist and a socio-political critic of art. His medium varies from video, installation, photography, documented performance to bande dessinée and visual poetry. Most of his works are language-based and contend with Art and literature's plane of feasible; the (im)possibility of quitting the possible field of expression; the aporia of expressing not to express, the aporia of unwriting and the aporia of (re)visiting a Tabula Rasa. Golshiri has also been portrayed as a provocative critic of the current socio-political situation of Iran, the hegemony of the new art market of the region and the living doxas.

The exigencies of advertising and commercialism in the 20th century delivered graphic design to Iran shortly after it was born in the West. The need to communicate and present ideas and messages visually has necessitated the use and presence of Persian type which demanded a return to the ancient heritage of calligraphy. In an inherently technological art, Persian typography has provided the means for the confrontation of two facets constantly at odds in Iranian art; past heritage and modern technology and no other has captured this combination in his work more effectively than Reza Abedini. The deep Iranian identity of his works on the one hand and their success in the field of graphic design in the world on the other, are telling of the simultaneous and practical collaboration of these two pillars in his works.

With no formal art training, the poet and painter Shideh Tami is always concentrating on her "self" in her self portraits on canvas, soda cans and chairs. In her latest works, Tami turns to her poetry in her one-of-a-kind book art creations known as artist's books. A centuries-old art form, artist's books, where the book is intended as a work of art in itself, are a 20th century creation. In the form of a book published in small editions or in this case, single copies, they can be created in a variety of forms, including scrolls, fold-outs or loose items contained in a box as well as bound printed sheet. Tami's pages are filled with her poetry in her own hand scribbled over self portraits.

Calligraphy and the written word are very much a part of the Middle East's ancient visual culture and aside from the examples of its uses presented in this exhibition there are other ways in which writing has been incorporated into Iranian art. It is hoped that this exhibition will present viewers with an introduction to this growing trend.



Azadeh Razaghdoost

Born 1979, Tehran, Iran

Member of the Iranian Society of Painters
Member of Badaneh Group

Education:

BA in Painting, University of Art, Tehran, 2002
Painting Diploma, Tehran Academy of Fine Arts, 1997

Select Solo Exhibitions:

2008: Assar Gallery, Tehran, Iran
2006: Golestan Gallery, Tehran, Iran
2002: Atbin Gallery, Tehran, Iran

Group Exhibitions:

2009: Iran, Silk Road Gallery, Tehran, Iran
2009: Iran on Paper, Private Collection of Fereydoun Ave, Aaran Gallery, Tehran, Iran
2009: Across Borders (2), Radical Gallery, Zug, Switzerland
2008: Writing Art, Dar Al Funoon Gallery, Kuwait
2008: Across Borders (1), Radical Gallery, Zug, Switzerland
2007: Song of Bulbuls of Oil Rich Regions, Esfahan Museum of Contemporary Art, Esfahan, Iran
2007: Tehran Gallery, Tehran, Iran
2007: Assar Gallery, Tehran, Iran
2007: The Iranian Society of Painters' Group Show, Saad Abad Museum Complex, Tehran, Iran
2006: Self Portrait, the Iranian Society of Painters, Tehran, Iran

- 2006: The Iranian Society of Painters' Group Show, Iranian Artists' Forum, Tehran, Iran
- 2006: 50 Contemporary Artists, Mah Gallery, Tehran, Iran
- 2006: Selected Artists of the New Generation, Homa Gallery, Tehran, Iran
- 2005: 100 Artworks, 100 Artists, Golestan Gallery, Tehran, Iran
- 2005: The Members of Badaneh Group's painting exhibition, Dey Gallery, Tehran, Iran
- 2005: The Iranian Society of Painters, Aban Gallery, Tehran, Iran
- 2005: 1st Karaj Drawing Annual, Karaj, Iran
- 2004: Niavaran Cultural-Historical Complex, Tehran, Iran
- 2004: The Members of Badaneh Group's painting exhibition, Barg Gallery, Tehran, Iran
- 2004: The 3rd International Muslim World Contemporary Paintings Biennial, Saba Art and Culture Centre, Tehran, Iran
- 2003: 1st Festival of Art Students, University of Art, Tehran, Iran
- 2002-03: University of Art Professors and Students' Group Exhibition, Barg Gallery, Tehran, Iran
- 2002: The Iranian Contemporary Drawing Annual, Atashzad Gallery, Tehran, Iran
- 2002: The Iranian Contemporary Drawing Annual, Barg Gallery, Tehran, Iran



I Told You I Was Sick,
Epitaph series, 2009
Oil & pencil on canvas
150 x 100 cm