

ART REVIEW

Modernism Blooming in Iran

Shows at Asia Society and N.Y.U. Grey Art Gallery



Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

'Iran Modern': Photos from Asia Society's new exhibition of Iranian artwork.

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Published: September 5, 2013

Most accounts of modern art say, basically, one thing: the West creates while the world waits, like a grateful beggar, for a nourishing handout. This is false history. Modernism has always been a global adventure happening for different reasons, in different ways, on different schedules, everywhere.

That America and Europe are still barely awake to this reality makes an exhibition like "Iran Modern," which opens on Friday at Asia Society, invaluable educationally. That the show is also terrifically good-looking, threaded through with human drama and composed of work that is both cosmopolitan and, over all, like no other art, doesn't hurt.

True, the exhibition isn't necessarily what it might have been in an ideal world. Longstanding United States sanctions against Iran have prevented the borrowing of almost any art from within the country itself, a situation that left the curators — Fereshteh Daftari and Layla S. Diba, both independent scholars, and Michelle Yun of Asia Society — to cull material from holdings in America, Europe and the Middle East.

No worries. They've come up with mostly top-flight things by 26 artists, including a few items, long unseen, from the Museum of Modern Art, and several from the major Middle Eastern holdings of the New York University Grey Art Gallery, where a concurrent smaller show, "Modern Iranian Art: Selections From the Abby Weed Grey Collection at N.Y.U.," opens on Tuesday.

The result at Asia Society is, as the curators state up front, a sampler arranged by theme, not a full chronological survey. Even with limitations, though, it's the largest museum display of its kind ever mounted outside of Iran and a sharp, stimulating way to crack open the fall art season.

A bit of back story comes in handy. It's useful to know that during the 20th century, several nations — Britain, Germany, Russia, the United States — big-footed their way in and out of Iran, eliciting decidedly mixed feelings toward Western culture and inspiring Iranian artists to shape a modernism of their own. At the same time, the country was politically volatile, swinging from democracy to monarchy to theocracy, with the atmosphere for art changing accordingly.

During the long, secularizing reign of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, from 1941 to 1979 — the years covered by the show — Western input was, officially, welcome. The school of fine arts at Tehran University once had Europeans on its faculty.

During the Iranian oil boom of the 1960s, galleries popped up. Some artists studied abroad, taking back what they learned. Others stayed home, looking hard at the art that was there, past and present, elite and popular.

The more imaginative of these artists sifted through what they found both inside and outside the country. By keeping this and discarding that, they forged a new, culturally specific art that was innovative within an Iranian context and actively resistant to the notion that Western modernism represented a universal standard.

The Asia Society show, which fills the museum, opens on the second floor with beautiful examples of a particular strain of work introduced in the early 1960s by three young artists: Faramarz Pilaram (1937-82), Parviz Tanavoli and Charles Hossein Zenderoudi. They gave their efforts a label, Saqqakhaneh, which is the name for a type of Muslim shrine in the form of a public drinking fountain, or well, to commemorate the deaths of Shiite martyrs who were deprived of water by their enemies in the Battle of Karbala in A.D. 680.

A distinctive visual culture had long since grown up around these revered places that dot Iranian cities. The Saqqakhaneh artists incorporated elements from it — charms, seals and inscriptions — into their art, along with near-abstract geometric shapes suggesting figures and buildings familiar from Persian manuscript painting.

What resulted has sometimes been referred to as Spiritual Pop Art, and Mr. Zenderoudi kicked it off. A large linocut print he made around 1958 was a trial run: it depicts the Karbala battle in a rough style reminiscent of Western Expressionism and Iranian folk narrative painting. Then, around 1960, in an exquisite silver and gold painting of a severed hand — a Shiite symbol — embedded in clouds of calligraphy, he achieved the balance he was after.

The piece was based on vernacular religious imagery but kept its identity as a near-abstract modern painting. A few years later, he would turn his full attention to calligraphy, that most revered form of Islamic art. And, in extremely irregular and irreverent ways, he made it his chief medium.

Mr. Pilaram was doing something similar in painting. By 1962, in a series of pictures called "Mosques of Isfahan," he was combining cursive writing with architectural shapes that looked anatomical. And Mr. Tanavoli, not long back from study in Italy, was comparably experimental in sculpture, creating found-art depictions of heroic figures from Persian epics and casting single calligraphic letters in bronze. Some of the epic figures combined shrine imagery and phallic shapes, a risky move. The calligraphic sculptures were collectively titled "Heech," meaning "Nothing."

Clearly, nostalgia for Iranian tradition was not the primary engine driving Saqqakhaneh art. Nor was emulation of Western art. Instead, a sophisticated, local modernism — local, without being locked into local — was forming. Seen today, it is notable less for a sense of brash innovation than for its air of close concentration, as if the artists were far too focused on shaping what was in front of them to glance nervously over their shoulders for outside cues.

This impression comes through in the section of the show titled “Abstraction and Modernism.” A series of small reliefs shaped from sand and dirt by Marcos Grigorian (1925-2007) in the early 1960s preceded Western Earth Art by some years and seems to be about something very different — not about monumentality or geology, but about personal identity. Mr. Grigorian was born in Russia, studied in Europe and America, lived in Iran and died in Armenia. His art is about all, or none, of that. It’s about being rooted, through art, in earth.

Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian spent much of her career in New York City, where she was pals with Andy Warhol — she showed him around Tehran in 1976 — and it would be possible to mistake her shimmering cut-glass wall sculptures as a species of disco décor. They were inspired, however, by glass mosaics in an old mosque in Shiraz. And they’re warmed by intimate touches: A piece called “Heartbeat” has jagged lines that look like an EKG running across its reflective surface.

A lot of art here is more complicated than it appears to be. Abstraction is often more than abstract. Decorative patterning, considered a minor mode in the West, is major here, an insistent, expressive end in itself. A thematic section called “Calligraphy and Modernism” looks straightforward enough to lull you into thinking about clichéd comparisons to Western action painting.

But look harder. In Persian tradition, writing, not just a vehicle for words, has always been a carrier of social critique. And in work by Reza Mafi, a calligrapher turned painter, the presence of politics is explicit. In a tiny oil painting from 1978, when the revolution was exploding, we see red calligraphic lines licking upward like flames, and clenched fists hovering in the dark behind them.

A big gallery on the third floor is filled almost entirely with political material. It has been said that Iran’s modern artists have assumed the dissident role once assigned to poets.

To what extent that’s true, I don’t know, but there’s plenty of protest art here, in an at-the-barriers self-portrait by Ahmad Aali; in Ardeshir Mohassess’s topical cartoons; and in Nicky Nodjoumi’s 1976 paintings of execution and torture, unmistakable responses to human rights abuses under the shah’s regime.

Siah Armajani is in this mix, too, and for good reason. An activist and moralist by temperament, he moved from Iran to the United States in 1960 to study art and stayed to produce his celebrated series of architectural sculptures based on utopian themes. Models for three such projects are on view, but more stirring are two things he made before leaving his homeland. One, dated 1958, consists of a cloth shirt that belonged to his poetry-loving father, which the artist has covered — caressed — with written verse. A second, “Prayer,” is essentially a large text drawing composed of edge-to-edge inscriptions, but with the writing applied in patchwork segments, as if the logic of language had become unmoored.

There’s a similar Armajani drawing in the [Grey Art Gallery](#) exhibition, organized by the gallery’s director, Lynn Gumpert. The collection it comes from, donated to N.Y.U. in 1974, amounts to the largest ensemble of Iranian modern art in any public institution outside of Iran. It was last seen in depth in the Grey’s eye-opening [“Between Word and Image: Modern Iranian Visual Culture.”](#) in 2002.

Some of what was on view then is back now. But the real value of the current show is the chance it gives to see a few artists who aren’t at Asia Society.

Kamran Diba is one. Best known as architect of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, built in 1977, he has here, from a decade earlier, an oil painting of a diving figure, almost life-size and bright red, its meaning unclear. It was done in collaboration with a younger

artist-architect, Bijan Dowlatshahi, who is represented by two works, both exceptional.

The earlier, from 1970, is a kind of stitched painting, inspired by childhood memories of his mother's weaving. Composed of wispy strands of muslin thread, it would have made Agnes Martin weep. The other piece, abstract but also Joseph Cornell-like, suggests a shadow-box theater consisting of threads, mysterious words and numbers, and brown velvet curtains about to part.

To reveal what drama? That there is a drama — many kinds — in modern Iranian art has now been demonstrated beyond doubt: the historical drama of a pre-20th-century past that remains to be explored, of a mid-20th-century present that is still barely understood, and of a future that is being radically altered by politics.

You can also pick up here on the tired drama of Western modernism's insistence on erasing or diminishing anything it can't claim to have created. And finally, as a positive, there's the drama of encountering a new modernism. It's one of many across the globe, and it is one that stands complex and generous — as part of a global picture, but also on its own.

"Iran Modern" runs through Jan. 5 at Asia Society Museum, 725 Park Avenue, at 70th Street; (212) 288-6400, asiasociety.org/nyc. "Modern Iranian Art: Selections From the Abby Weed Grey Collection at N.Y.U." opens on Tuesday and runs through Dec. 7 at the Grey Art Gallery, New York University, 100 Washington Square East, Greenwich Village; (212) 998-6780, nyu.edu/greyart.