

# In conversation: *Modernism in Iran: 1958-1978*

**Colin Browne & Pantea Haghighi**

*Pantea Haghighi and Colin Browne met on June 20, 2018 to discuss Modernism in Iran: 1958-1978, which ran from January 26 to May 5, 2018 at Griffin Art Projects in North Vancouver, BC.*

**Colin Browne:** I'm speaking with Pantea Haghighi, owner and curator of Republic Gallery in Vancouver, BC, about an exhibition she organized recently entitled *Modernism in Iran: 1958-1978*. Would you be willing to describe it for us, along with your intentions?

**Pantea Haghighi:** Sure. The exhibition featured works by Mohammad Ehsai, Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, Mansour Ghandriz, Farideh Lashai, Sirak Melkonian, Bahman Mohasses, Faramarz Pilaram, Behjat Sadr, Parviz Tanavoli, Mohsen Vaziri-Moghaddam, and Charles Zenderoudi. These artists played an important role in establishing Modernism in Iran during the cultural renaissance that occurred between 1958 and 1978. In Iran, their work is referred to as Late Modernism.

I decided to divide the gallery in half. On one side I placed the work of those artists who were exploring their national artistic identity, returning to old Persian motifs in order to identify with Modernism. On the other side, I placed the work of artists who were heavily influenced by Western art. When you entered the room, you were immediately aware of the two different expressions of Iranian Modernism.

**CB:** I want to ask about the show, but let's first talk about what might be called Early Modernism in Iran.

**PH:** Early Modernism dates from around 1940, when the School of Fine Arts at the University of Tehran opened. That was a pivotal moment. Before then, artists were trained in other artists' studios by a master. Suddenly, there was a new system that included instructors from outside Iran, from Europe. Around 1942,

galleries began opening—commercial galleries, public places where people could view artworks at their leisure. The exhibition at Griffin Art Projects includes work from as early as 1958; by that time Late Modernism was firmly established.

In 1953, a coup sent the Shah, Mohammad Reza Shah, into exile due to public discontent with his rule and the increasing economic divide in the country. He wasn't out of Iran for longer than a year, and he returned to great fanfare. The campaign that brought him back concentrated on bringing people together, uniting the country under the visual arts and under the mandate of old Persia. Whether you disliked his policies, or the Shah himself as a ruler, you could identify with the glory and magnificence of the old Persian empire.

During the period of what might be called mid-Modernism, just before 1958, ancient monuments and texts, calligraphy, and Islamic iconography were heavily promoted. Persian history was actively taught in schools and it entered the sculpture and painting studios at the University of Tehran. At the same time, most of the artists who attended the University were sent to Europe to study fine art. It was a mandate established by the Queen as a way to communicate between Iran and the West through the visual arts. They were learning about the West, but also promoting Iranian culture in Europe. Some artists chose to return to the old Persian iconography as a way of engaging with Modernism. Others chose to look at Western motifs and began to identify with Western artists in order to define their Modernism.

**CB:** Do you think this Modernist period would have existed without a government push, without the effort to celebrate Persian culture?

**PH:** The government's push for a renaissance of the contemporary arts was a response to the coup and to political resistance. It created a stage for artists to make and show work, for critics to write about it, and for audiences to view it—all of which was extremely important. Thanks to the funding for the visual arts, artists were able to take up residencies in Rome, Paris, and Milan.

**CB:** Did foreign money come in to support the Westernization of Iranian culture? Do you know?

**PH:** Oil money did. So, you can call that “foreign money,” right? [laughs] From my research, it was mainly the Queen, Farah Diba, who promoted the visual arts in Iran, especially painting and sculpture. She was a collector and she took care of acquisitions for the Museum of Contemporary Art in Iran.

**CB:** You've called this a revival or a renaissance, but what was it reviving?

**PH:** For the first time since the 1940s the art world was being revived. Everything came together in 1958 to create a venue, a stage on which art could be produced, understood, seen, purchased, and written about.

The Griffin Art Projects exhibition stops at 1978, just before the revolution. The Iraq-Iran war started two or three years later. Art production at that point was curtailed. Parts of the School of Fine Arts at the University of Tehran were closed. The sculpture department was closed because under the Islamic Republic, there were restrictions on what could and could not be produced visually. In order to create new definitions—and a new school with new rules—things had to shut down. Virtually everything stopped after the revolution. It took many years for art production and dialogue to re-emerge, for audiences to pay attention again, and for the artists to have the means to produce their work.

**CB:** Was there a period earlier in the 20th century when artists went back and forth to the West?

**PH:** The early 20th century saw a revival of photography in Iran. The beginning of photography, the daguerreotype, occurred around 1870. There was at the time a huge dialogue between Iran and the West. Western photographers were photographing ancient monuments and the court of Qajar. Around the same time, the medium of photography began to replace traditional court painting. The Shah of Qajar was so interested in photography that he wanted his portraits, and the portraits of important people in the court, to be photographed instead of painted.

There are many archives of photographs from that period, but there was no audience for art at that time. I refer to a “renaissance” because it’s one thing to produce art, but it’s another for that art to be seen and received by an audience. Before the 1940s, artists made their work in the studios of masters. If there were exhibitions they would be very small, taking place in these studios. Such exhibitions limited who could view and write about the work. There is no art criticism from that time, just historic writings. I refer to the later period as a “renaissance” not simply because of the work that was being produced but because of the dialogue that was created.

**CB:** Let's talk a little bit about the exhibition.

**PH:** All of the artists in the exhibition were trained at the University of Tehran and selected by the Queen to attend various art institutions and residencies in Europe. So, each artist was trained in Europe and in Iran. The differences in how they represent Modernism stem from the two influences. It's not their education necessarily; it's what they chose to receive from their education.

Behjat Sadr, one of the women artists in the show, was a pioneer of abstract expressionism at the University of Tehran. Once she went to Paris—I think it was the mid- or late fifties—she never came back to Iran. She taught abstract expressionism and lived in Paris until she passed away about eight years ago. So, she was also a French artist. She was trained in the traditional discourse of the University of Tehran and simultaneously learned about abstraction in Paris, choosing to teach and practice abstract forms.

Parviz Tanavoli, who I included on the traditional side of the gallery with artists who explore tradition in order to identify with Modernism, spent a lot of his time in Rome. Artists like Faramarz Pilaram—we see his two green paintings on the right-hand side—use calligraphy as decoration. We can't read it. The forms become abstracted and are thus renewed. Although you can't read the text, you can still identify visually with the text. Sometimes, the iconography of calligraphy was chosen because modern forms were so alien to the eye. Calligraphy, in this case, brought Modernism closer to home.

Then, we have artists like Mohammad Ehsai who uses calligraphy as the subject of his paintings. You still can't read it, but there is a word, for instance, in the red painting. He's translating the painting into words, using calligraphy. Artists like Sirak Melkonian and Farideh Lashai are using purely abstract forms in a depictive way—in the case of Melkonian's work, generating landscapes.

**CB:** Did these artists regard themselves as Modernists? How would they have defined Modernism for themselves?

**PH:** They would have defined themselves as Modernists. Breaking from or reinterpreting tradition was their first impulse. Compared to their predecessors, these artists were avant-garde in the way they created these visual entities; they moved away from tradition very quickly. They identified with Modernism, they studied Modern artists in Europe, and they were aware of what was being produced internationally during that period. They had instructors from Europe teaching Modernism in Iran, and yet everyone in this exhibition relates to or expresses Modernism in a different way.

**CB:** We sometimes relate Modernism only to Europe or North America, but, in fact, it was a much more global movement.

**PH:** Exactly. One of the intentions of this show was to display what Modernism looked like elsewhere. It's interesting to see how tradition is used—to modernize a traditional form. An artist like Monir Farmanfarmaian uses motifs taken from the dome of a mosque, traditionally a mosaic form, and transforms it by using mirrors to make a relief sculpture. It's a very clear renewal of Persian art. You can tell where they are from, too, which is interesting in some ways. One of the reasons why I thought it was important to put the show together was to demonstrate what non-European, non-North American Modernism looked like.

**CB:** And you've done us a great favour. But one would've thought, here in Vancouver, that a show like this might have happened already. There are well-known Iranian artists living here.

**PH:** With so many artists who have played a major role, I was surprised to find out that this was the first in our city. I'm afraid it might also be the first in our country as well, as far as an historic exhibition is concerned. Most of the artists featured in the exhibition are still practicing, and most of them live outside Iran. Of course, they go back and forth. It was also gratifying for me that the show has been so well received. I'm delighted that Griffin Art Projects was interested in this subject and gave us the opportunity to do the exhibition.

**CB:** What did you discover when you started putting this exhibition together? You might have had some preconceptions...

**PH:** Well, I quickly discovered that there's a need for a bigger and more thorough exhibition. I'm just scratching the surface. Today we are seeing contemporary works by a younger generation of artists in Iran whose work represents a second renaissance. The amount of art production, the number of gallery viewings, and the number of commercial galleries in Tehran is amazing. You can go to eighty openings on a Friday night in that city. We have seen a lot of exhibitions by contemporary artists outside Iran and I've come to see that there is a clear relationship between Modernism and contemporary Iranian art. It was nice to discover that. Sometimes we're more familiar with the contemporary, but we don't have the history, especially in the West. So, our exhibition should be seen as an introduction.

**CB:** There were seventeen works in the exhibition. How did you choose them?

**PH:** Griffin Art Projects has a very interesting mandate. They concentrate on private collections. We drew from two major collections, one in Los Angeles and one in Vancouver, and also from the collections of the artists. I tried to have more than one piece by each artist in order to give a better view of each artist's practice, but in some cases we were only able to have one.

We have three women artists: Monir Farmanfarmaian, Farideh Lashai, and Behjat Sadr. Three women artists in Modernism is pretty good. They were all masters, and they did very well in academia and also in selling their work. It was also important to make sure we included artists who maybe at the time were not stars, but who later on, or after their passing, became very important. There were artists in the show who belonged to collectives, and some who worked independently. We've tried to fill the gallery, but there is also a lot of white space around each work, which I prefer, because then you can have a moment to rest your eyes before looking at a new piece.

**CB:** I thought it was lovely to have that white space. Has there been an exhibition like this in Tehran or in other Iranian cities? Are these artists known and revered today?

**PH:** Recently, there have been more exhibitions, yes. There have been shows at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tehran that have concentrated on the Modernist era. Certain artists, like Parviz Tanavoli, have had huge retrospectives there, and Monir Farmanfarmaian as well. MoMA in New York has quite a nice collection of Iranian artists from this period. There was going to be a show in Germany, but unfortunately, for political reasons it didn't happen. The talks took place anyway, in empty galleries with white walls, which was really interesting; the show was cancelled at the last minute and the talks had already been planned. But I'd say most of the exhibitions that we have seen outside Iran have concentrated on younger contemporary artists.

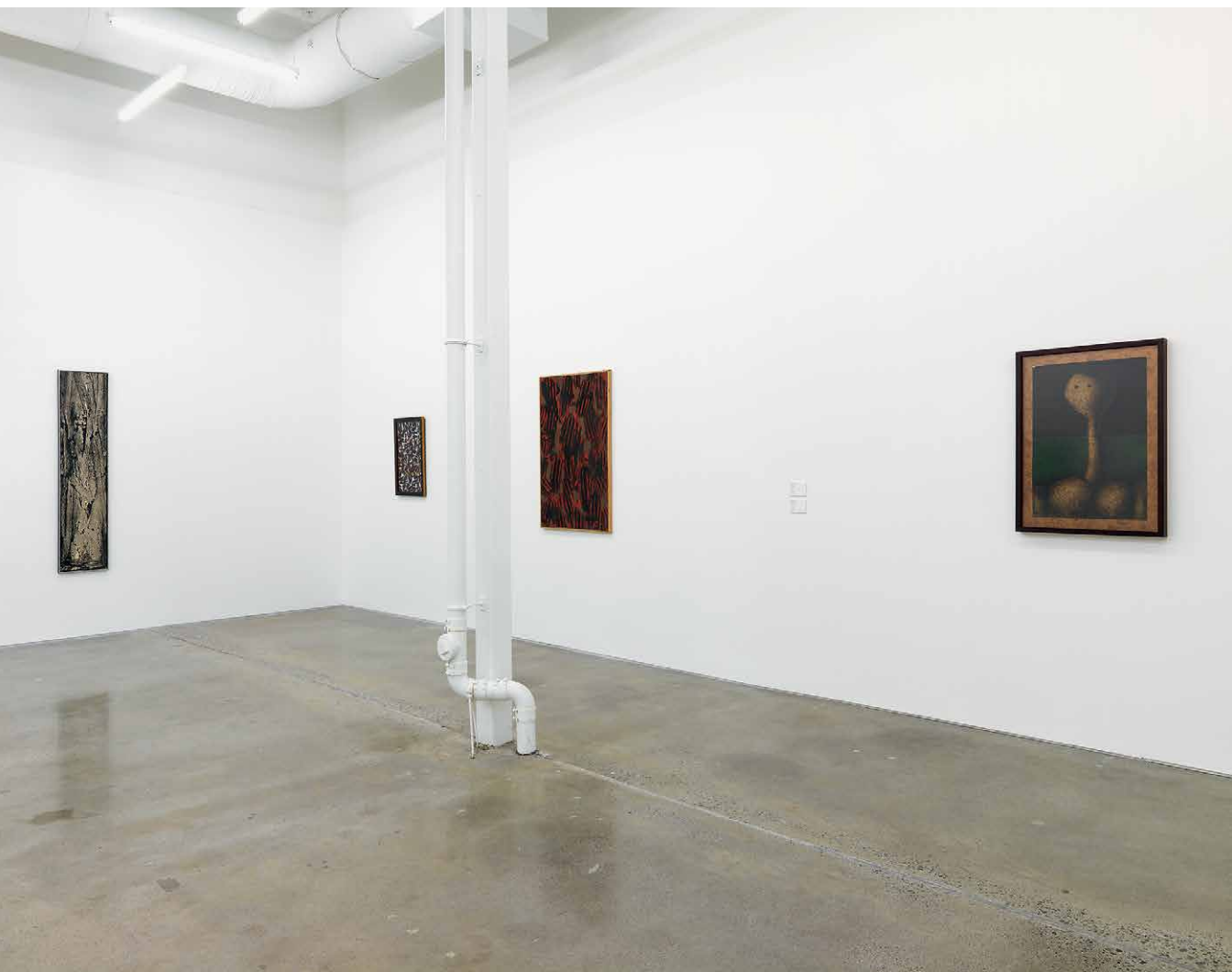
**CB:** The news from Iran often makes people think it's highly restrictive in terms of art and culture.

**PH:** There are mandates to follow in terms of what can be produced in both written and visual form, but I would make the point that the most important Iranian films have come out after the revolution. There are restrictions, but

somehow it seems like the artists have found ways of getting around them. There's definitely no lack of interest in acquiring and viewing work, or writing very critical pieces on visual arts within Iran.

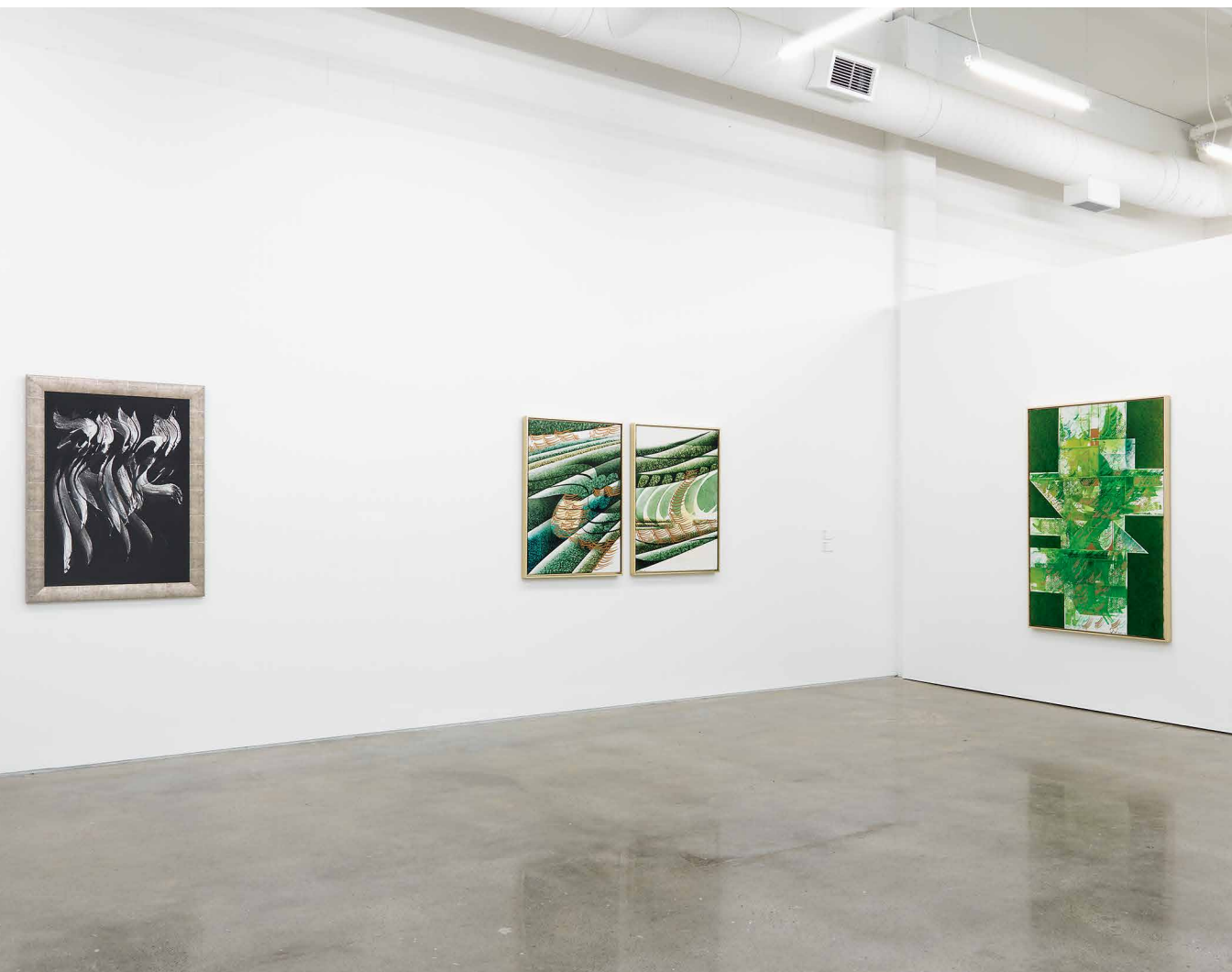
**CB:** It was a breath of fresh air to see this extraordinary work in the gallery.

**PH:** It's very interesting to find out that a world so unlike ours, where discussions seem to be very different from ours, is really not all that different. Visual art is capable of speaking to us now the same way that it spoke to Iranians several decades ago, or to the artists themselves. It was important to see and to contextualize these works in order to understand what was happening then. Once you understand the context of the work, they're not only Iranian artists, they're Modernists.



All images courtesy of Griffin Art Projects  
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Mansour Ghandriz, *Untitled*, 1960, oil on canvas, 38.7 x 25 inches  
Courtesy of Houman M. Sarshar







Mohammad Ehsaei, *Eshgh*, 1978-present, oil on canvas, 42.5 x 42.5 inches  
Courtesy of the artist



Parviz Tanavoli, *Here no one opens any gates*, 1970, Bronze, 23.2 x 23 x 3.1 inches  
Courtesy of the artist



Sirak Melkonian, *Untitled*, 1977, oil on canvas, 39 x 27 inches  
Courtesy of the artist and the Ab-Anbar Gallery