

“Boogie Wonderland”
WITH

SOHEILA SOKHANVARI

PRIVATE VIEW 15th of October 2015
6:30 - 9:00PM

16th of October – 14th of November 2015

Occasionally, there are those strange moments in history during which what we see and what we hear are out of synch. Events unfold before our eyes and yet what we know to be true and what is being written in the history books are two different narratives, as opposite as night and day. This experience can create a strange sense of altered reality, a feeling that our senses are out of synch, a weird un-syncopated rhythm that causes us to re-examine historical events over and over, long after their initial catalysts have died down. Such is the case of Iranian-born artist Soheila Sokhanvari's oeuvre, showcased through new works in the solo show *Boogie Wonderland* (16 October – 14 November 2015) at Kristin Hjellegjerde.

With a joyful colour palette reminiscent of Frida Kahlo or Gauguin, Sokhanvari subscribes to the school of magical realism that enhanced reality in which the banal and everyday take on new life and meaning by being imbued with an elevated focus. It also belies the complex political undertones of her work, allowing her to take a step back and examine events from her native country through the lens of distance and time. She investigates the concept of collective trauma as an experience that can be told through the narratives of individuals, using mainly family photographs as her source material, alongside found imagery from pop culture and news recordings. Her work is also recognizable for its obsessive use of patterning and decoration, inspired by the idea of 'anaesthetised aesthetics', an expression used by philosopher Susan Buck-Morss to capture the way in which control over aesthetics can be used to control society.

Her key area of focus is Iranian pre-revolution of 1979, a time, she says, that “led a nation to stand up collectively, when my own memory, as a child, is diminished.” Taking up the Aristotelian view that inequality is the cause of all turbulence, Sokhanvari follows the idea that revolution is like a pressure cooker – a collective movement against internal pressure ready to burst forth back to a natural equilibrium if crippled for too long by artificial impediments. Sokhanvari examines this political and social fallout through archived photographs, often black and white, sometimes analogue colour and Polaroid. “The attempts to capture this era gets mixed reactions, as some saw pre-Revolutionary Iran as

fascist, while other saw it as free," explains the artist. "It is, however, an era where almost all of my memory comes from photographs and so I feel I can stand as a silent willing observer." By painting from photographs she is able to criticise the structures of society by coolly and uncompromisingly depicting every detail of her subjects and their surroundings. In doing so, she reveals the distance and emptiness between them, between the story and the reality. She also uses the notion of black and white and colour to reflect the way in which our own memories falter – "I believe our own memories are a mixture of both," she says, "as there are times that memory is unfaithful to reality – we may not remember a particular colour or detail – and so memory becomes a construct of fantasy and reality where they can both fight for the same space."

These are then painted in egg tempera on velum, creating a curvilinear art between art history and the practice of mediaeval illuminated manuscripts. During their original era, it was believed that each colour held a unique magic quality – and so each painting spoke a complex language of symbolism and association to the viewer. While these detailed readings of Medieval paintings may now be lost to us, as the exact associations and meanings of each colour and pigment are not part of the public consciousness, Sokhanvari harnesses this phenomenon to create a similar effect with her own paintings, drawing on the minute details and colours she both finds and recreates in her source photographs to paint a new language. The use of calf vellum adds a further layer, representing the sacrificial animal of all monotheistic religions. Here, it stands as the symbol of the sacrifice of the individual.

In the case of the exhibition's title, Sokhanvari draws on a very specific memory – that of being at boarding school and watching the Revolution unfold on television while in the UK shortly after returning from a Christmas break in Iran. "As I watched the Revolution in Iran unfold on the news, *Boogie Wonderland*, by Earth, Wind & Fire was playing on the record player. It completely drowned out the sound from the TV, the disco music lending a bizarre soundtrack to the violent imagery I was watching on TV," she recalls. "The people's revolt literally became a 'dance', and the lyrics became strangely appropriate."

In *Boogie Wonderland*, her paintings present us with a revision of nostalgia, a looking back at the way things were in order to empower a new generation of self-awareness and realisation. "Nostalgia in my work, far from bolstering the status quo," says Sokhanvari, "allows us to see what is wrong with the world." Meanwhile, her self-portrait series of drawings, paintings and sculpture examines her absence from these family photographs during her long exile from Iran. "In an attempt to regain and reclaim my presence in family events I have extracted the negative spaces between people and objects in a photograph as my own self-portrait," she says. "I depict these shapes and title them as the date of the photograph taken." In this light, the sculptures that have

resulted from these shapes in turn hark to the tradition of the portrait bust in art history.

These paintings and self-portraits are joined by a series of crude oil drawings created out of a 500ml vat of Iranian crude oil brought by the artist from Tehran to Heathrow in her hold luggage. "These drawings stand as a witness to this performance and hint at the narrative of the global airline security post 9/11," she says. In a sense, Sokhanvari shows us how all events; all revolutions, people, governments and political systems are interlaced. From the fallout of the Iranian Revolution to that of today's terrorist attacks and ensuing racial, religious and cultural tensions, we can look back at their source footage over and over again, she says, but we may never know the truth. After all, it's all the details.

*"Midnight creeps so slowly into hearts
Of men who need more than they get
Daylight deals a bad hand
To a woman that has laid too many bets
The mirror stares you in the face and says
Baby Uh Uh it don't work "*

- Boogie Wonderland, Earth, Wind & Fire

**'Boogie Wonderland' runs from 16th of October – 14th of November
2015 at Kristin Hjellegjerde**

Information for journalists:

About Soheila Sokhanvari

Soheila Sokhanvari is an Iranian-born artist whose multidisciplinary work weaves layers of political histories with bizarre, mysterious and often humorous narratives that she leaves open to viewers to complete. Sokhanvari received a postgraduate diploma in Fine Art from Chelsea College of Art and Design in 2006 and an MFA Fine Art from Goldsmiths College in 2011. She has exhibited in Europe, America and the Middle East. Recent exhibitions include participation in the 2015 Armory Show, New York, *Hey, I'm Mr. Poetic* at the Wysing Arts Centre, Cambridge, where she has been the artist-in-residence since 2013; *The Tectonic*, Dubai (2013), Editions by Edge of Arabia, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia (2014); *The Future Can Wait* and Channel 4 *New Sensations*, Saatchi Gallery, London (2013) and *Open Heart Surgery* by The Moving Museum in 2013. She will also be exhibiting in *Champagne Life* at Saatchi Gallery, London (November 2015 to March 2016) and is shortlisted for the Jerwood Drawing Prize 2015. Her work has received much attention, having been shortlisted for *The Future Can Wait* (2013), The Catlin Art Prize (2012) and exTRAct, as one of only seven artists selected from across Europe (2011).

About Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery

Kristin Hjellegjerde opened her gallery in south west London in June 2012 following her move from New York. Named one of the top 500 most influential galleries in the world by *Blouin* (2015), as well as independent gallery of the year by the *Londonist* (2014), Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery showcases cutting-edge contemporary art from emerging and established international artists, with the central concern being to create an intimate space in which artists can present a coherent body of work within a focused environment. Drawing on her own international background, Kristin Hjellegjerde seeks to discover and develop new talents by creating a platform through which they can be introduced to local and international audiences and by allowing for artistic exchange. Kristin Hjellegjerde also acts as an art advisor for both emerging private and corporate collectors. For more information, visit www.kristinhjellegjerde.com.

For further information and high-resolution images, please contact Kristin Hjellegjerde on [*khjellegjerde@mac.com*](mailto:khjellegjerde@mac.com).