

Iranian artist Soheila Sokhanvari presents a site-specific installation at Barbican Art Gallery

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The First Art Newspaper on the Net

Established in 1996

Wednesday, October 26, 2022

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Rhapsody of Innocence (Portrait of Monir Vakili), 2022. © Soheila Sokhanvari. Courtesy of the artist and Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery.

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LONDON. [Barbican Art Gallery](#) is currently presenting [Rebel Rebel](#), a site-specific installation for The Curve and the first major UK commission by Iranian artist Soheila Sokhanvari. The exhibition began on October 7th, and will continue through to February 26, 2023.

The exhibition features a series of 27 exquisite portraits of feminist icons from pre-revolutionary Iran, painted in egg tempera onto calf vellum with a squirrel-hair brush. Each of Sokhanvari's miniatures is hung against a hand-painted mural based on Islamic geometries decorating the 90-metre gallery is a labour of love, as she transforms The Curve into a devotional space in which these rarely told feminist histories can be contemplated.

The exhibition title, [Rebel Rebel](#), borrows from David Bowie's 1974 cult pop song and pays tribute to the significant courage of these 27 female icons, who pursued their careers in a culture enamoured with Western style but not its

freedoms. These women include Roohangiz Saminejad, the first unveiled actress to appear in a Persian language film; the controversial modernist poet Forough Farrokhzad; and the leading intellectual and writer Simin Dāneshvar. The title also serves as a lament to the fate of these women, after the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the subsequent establishment of a conservative Islamic theocracy, left them with a stark choice: to renounce any role in public life, or be forced into exile.

Flowing through the exhibition is a new soundtrack, composed by Marios Aristopoulos, which weaves together songs by celebrated Iranian singers from the mid-20th century, including Ramesh and Googoosh – a poignant gesture given that it remains illegal for a woman’s voice to be broadcast in Iran. Rebel Rebel culminates in extravagant sculptural forms, made of mirror and featuring internal projections drawn from classic Iranian cinema. The exhibition will be accompanied by a publication featuring an interview with Barbican curator Eleanor Nairne, alongside a new text by Dr Jordan Amirkhani.

Soheila Sokhanvari said: “The Curve has always been a magical space for me, where artists are given the freedom to tell stories in an immersive way. When I was invited for this commission, I knew immediately how I wanted to respond: with a body of work that would transport visitors to the pulse of life in pre-revolutionary Iran and to the women at the heart of that culture. I hope that visitors will revel in the opportunity to learn about the lives of these formidable women, who gave up everything to pursue their creativity.”

Sokhanvari’s previous work has addressed the pervasive influence of Western culture in the Middle East. Portraiture has been an enduring concern, from a series of expired passports adorned with handmade stamps drawn from vintage advertising slogans – “Just for men – won’t let you down” and “reveal your inner goddess” – to paintings of her father Ali Mohammed dressed as the Hollywood actor James Dean. Humour is always just beneath the surface, as a subversive means to consider the violent legacies of Western politics in Iran.

Eleanor Nairne, Curator, Barbican said: “I am delighted that we have commissioned Soheila Sokhanvari to make this ambitious project for our free programme in The Curve. Soheila’s dazzling reimaging of the space, in which visitors can commune with these extraordinary creatives from pre-revolutionary Iran, will no doubt be a revelation for many.”

Soheila Sokhanvari was born in Shiraz, Iran, and currently lives and works in Cambridge, where she is a studio artist at Wysing Arts Centre. Sokhanvari has exhibited internationally, with recent projects including participation in The NGV Triennial, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne (2020-2021); Addicted to Love, a solo exhibition at Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, London (2019); Salam Salam, an installation commissioned by the Magic of Persia Foundation (2018); LDWN, an installation at Victoria Station, which was a collaboration between the Tate Collective and City Hall (2018); Heart of Glass, a solo exhibition at the New Art Gallery Walsall (2017); Paradise Lost, a solo exhibition at Jerwood Project Space (2017); and Homeland at the Kunsthalle Osnabrück in Germany. In 2018 she won the Derek Hill Foundation Scholarship at the British School at Rome. Her work now features in major permanent collections, including the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the National Gallery of Victoria and the Saatchi Gallery Collection. Sokhanvari gained her postgraduate diploma in fine art from Chelsea College of Art and Design and her MFA from Goldsmiths College. She has been represented by Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery since 2012.

Founder:
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(1941 - 2019)

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