



# Iranian Feminism Immortalized: Protests, Art, and Meaning Transformed

November 8, 2022

By Claire Ferguson

It is more pertinent now than ever to recognize the work of feminist artists in Iran. Meaning found in the works of contemporary women artists such as Shirin Neshat, Soheila Sokhanvari, and Arghavan Khosravi is most crucial to female experience in Iran.



Alexandros Michalidis (Shutterstock Images), Protesters show solidarity with Iranian women and protesters in Iran, Belgium, September 2022, photograph

*Jin Jijan Asadi* - (Women, Life, Freedom) is a slogan popularized during the Kurdish Women's Movement in the early 2000's. Ignited by the death of 22-year-old Zhina Mahsa Amini, the phrase has seen a revival within current protest movements in Iran. Mahsa Amini died while in police custody in Tehran after being arrested for improper hijab on 13 September.

The violence against Mahsa Amini has been met with ongoing protests and anger worldwide, with the United Nations calling for an official investigation of her death. While internet access is widely disrupted by the Iranian government, many women on social media have shared videos of them burning their hijabs or cutting their hair as a sign of opposition. The hashtag #MahsaAmini has been tweeted and shared with over 80 million times. Her death has ignited a strong movement against the restrictions on women's rights in Iran.



Getty Images, Naibe Samsari, an Iranian woman living in Turkey, cutting her hair in a protest following Amini's death, September 2022, photograph

Artists like Shirin Neshat, for example, have known their home country to be experiencing anti-regime movements for many decades. However, unlike previous protests in recent Iranian history, the most recent wave has been female-focused. The rejection of the compulsory veil is crucial to a wider democratic opposition to a restrictive government. The hijab is one of the key symbols in Neshat's first photo series, titled *Women of Allah* (1994-97).

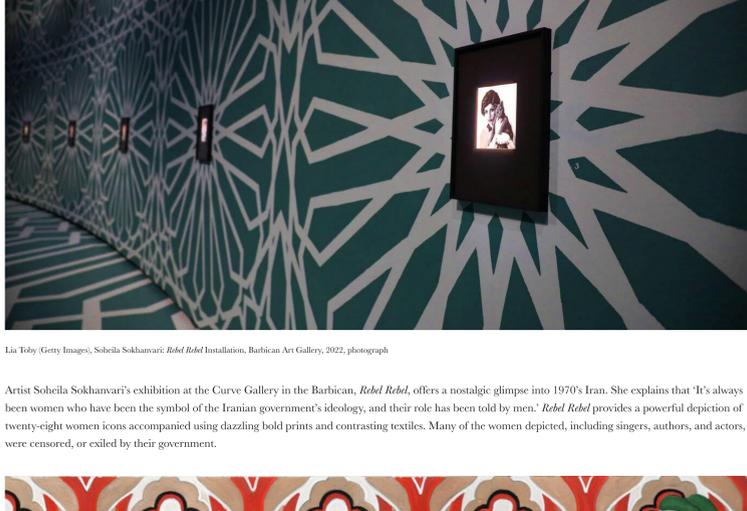
Neshat, as an Iranian living in the United States, was inspired to create *Women of Allah* as a response to the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The series contains fifty black and white photographs with calligraphic inscriptions. Written in Farsi, the poems by writers Forough Farrokhzad and Tahereh Saffar-Zadeh envelope backgrounds containing images of the female body. A woman's body, Neshat describes in an interview for *Feminist Studies* in 2004, to be a 'very problematic topic in Islamic culture as it suggests ideas of shame, sin, and sexuality.'



Shirin Neshat, *Rebellious Silence*, of 'Women of Allah' photo series, 1994, black and white RC print and ink

*Women of Allah* examines a changing landscape of Islamic culture amidst revolution. In one of the photos in the series, *Rebellious Silence*, (1994), the woman depicted holds a rifle upright in front of her face, dividing the scene in two. The poem, *Alliance with Wakefulness* by Saffar-zadeh, is written across the model's face. The poem, on the theme of martyrdom, establishes a paradox. The woman's calm expression appears hypocritical to Neshat's suggestion of violence.

In an interview last month with Harper's BAZAAR, Neshat describes the inspiration behind the series. 'I was fascinated by how Iranian women's bodies have served as a battlefield for authority, ideology, and politics.' Neshat sought to question the condition of women in post-revolutionary Iran. Interpreting the imagery in her work carries a new sense of urgency in light of recent events. Further analysis of feminist artwork may provide an initial introduction to a better understanding of women's experiences in Iran.



Lia Toby (Getty Images), Soheila Sokhanvari: *Rebel Rebel* Installation, Barbican Art Gallery, 2022, photograph

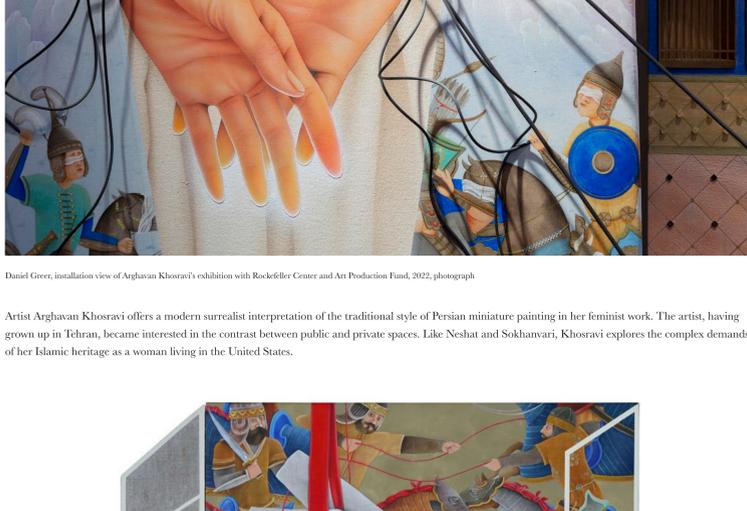
Artist Soheila Sokhanvari's exhibition at the Curve Gallery in the Barbican, *Rebel Rebel*, offers a nostalgic glimpse into 1970's Iran. She explains that 'It's always been women who have been the symbol of the Iranian government's ideology, and their role has been told by men.' *Rebel Rebel* provides a powerful depiction of twenty-eight women icons accompanied using dazzling bold prints and contrasting textiles. Many of the women depicted, including singers, authors, and actors, were censored, or exiled by their government.



Soheila Sokhanvari, *The Love Addict*, 2019, egg tempera on calf vellum

One of the works, *Love Addict*, (2019), depicts Persian pop star Googoosh, (Faeghieh Atashini). Googoosh's affinity for Western fashion and popularity as a cultural icon led to her being imprisoned and later exiled. Attendants of the exhibition hear music from Googoosh, (whose music has been banned in Iran), and other Iranian singers of the period while viewing these works.

Each portrait shows a woman almost entirely in black and white, surrounded by a largely saturated background of color. The artist communicates a message of hope for Iran, for a future with freedom for women to better express their creativity.



Daniela Geer, installation view of Arghavan Khosravi's exhibition with Rockefeller Center and Art Production Fund, 2022, photograph

Artist Arghavan Khosravi offers a modern surrealist interpretation of the traditional style of Persian miniature painting in her feminist work. The artist, having grown up in Tehran, became interested in the contrast between public and private spaces. Like Neshat and Sokhanvari, Khosravi explores the complex demands of her Islamic heritage as a woman living in the United States.



Arghavan Khosravi, *Cover Your Hair!*, 2018, acrylic on linen canvas on wood panel

Her paintings depict women experiencing both entrapment and freedom. Hair is used as a metaphor in many of her works. A presentation of her paintings began at the Rockefeller Center in New York this fall, just ten days before Mahsa Amini's death. *Cover Your Hair!*, a 2018 painting by the artist, weaves long red fabric through the canvas, enveloping a woman, suspending her in the foreground. Her hair and body are tied back by a large group of Persian soldiers on horseback. The scene is chilling: the woman remains expressionless - submissive.

The depiction of violence in this work carries an eerie resemblance to the death of Mahsa Amini. Women's hair continues to be used as a symbol of oppression and protest. This connection has not been lost by the artist. Accompanied by the hashtag #MahsaAmini, Khosravi a video of her painting on a canvas on Instagram this October with the caption: 'These days when I'm painting hair, I'm filled with anger and hope. More than ever.'

Notes:

Ariana Marsh, 'Iranian Women's Perseverance Is a Work of Art', *Harper's Bazaar*, 26 October, 2022, <https://www.harperbazaar.com/culture/politics/a41723802/shirin-neshat-essay-iranian-women-perseverance/>

Jacqui Palumbo, 'The Iranian Artist's Surreal Images of Women Acquire a New Urgency', *South Hampshire News*, 2 November, 2022, <https://ukdailynews/southhampshire/the-iranian-artists-surreal-images-of-women-acquire-a-new-urgency-49850.html>

Kinga Szurc, 'Iran: Death of 22-Year-Old Mahsa Amini', *MENA Monitor*, 3 October 2022, <https://warsawinstitute.org/iran-death-22-year-old-mahsa-amini/>

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'Soheila Sokhanvari: *Rebel Rebel* Exhibition Guide,' Barbican, accessed 4 November 2022. <https://sites.barbican.org.uk/soheila-sokhanvari-rebel-rebel/index.html>

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