



Soheila Sokhanvari interview

# Soheila Sokhanvari: the former scientist using 'alchemy' to bring together Iranian and Western culture

The Shiraz-born artist tells us how she became an artist after a bad cycling accident and why what is happening in Iran is "no longer a protest, it's a revolution"

Louisa Buck  
6 January 2023

Share



"I wanted to drown people in Iranian culture, not just give them a flavour": Soheila Sokhanvari photographed at the Barbican © Lia Tolby/Getty Images

Soheila Sokhanvari was born in Shiraz but left Iran at the age of 14, moving to the UK to go to school a year before the Iranian Revolution. She is known for making multidisciplinary work that weaves open-ended narratives using magical realism, oblique metaphor and wry humour to address political histories and the pervasive influence of Western culture in the Middle East. Portraiture is an enduring concern, ranging from a series of expired passports adorned with vintage advertising slogans to paintings made from family photographs, including one of her father, Ali-Mohammed Sokhanvari, dressed as the 1950s film star James Dean.

For her latest show, *Rebel Rebel*, in The Curve gallery at London's Barbican Centre, Sokhanvari has created a site-specific installation with mirrored sculptures, film projections, amplified sound and three holograms of dancing female figures. Central to the show is a series of 28 Persian miniatures depicting female poets and performers from pre-revolutionary Iran who are surrounded by patterned wall paintings.

### The Art Newspaper: What was the thinking behind the multifarious immersive installation for your exhibition *Rebel Rebel*?

**Soheila Sokhanvari:** The Curve is both a very interesting and a very difficult space to work with. I realised that I needed to make the macro work with the micro and to come up with a tool to draw attention to my tiny voice on this 6m-high, 90m-long wall. I wanted to make a devotional space, a temple, which also offered a focal point for these tiny works, and I thought of these geometric wall patterns which are used in mosques and in devotional spaces in Iran. I wanted to drown people in Iranian culture, not just give them a flavour of it, but to immerse them completely. And I wanted to have these women sing. The Iranian government has banned women from singing and dancing and I wanted to give this platform back to them.

### Your paintings present a series of Iranian women singers, dancers, poets and actors who are all depicted wearing pre-revolutionary Western clothes. How and why did you chose these women?

I chose very selectively, because every story that I wanted to tell was a very powerful story of tenacity and the fight against patriarchy. I did a lot of reading and research from people who lived at that time because I was 14 years old when I left Iran for the UK. I wanted to start with women who were pioneers in their field, and I also had to find their story powerful and interesting.



*Hey, Baby I'm a Star* (Portrait of Fuzani) (2019), one of Sokhanvari's colourful egg tempera portraits © Kristin Hjellegjerde gallery

### These works are made using egg tempera painted onto calf vellum with a squirrel-hair brush. Why did you choose a technique that's usually associated with Persian miniatures?

I trained as a scientist, but I feel like I'm an alchemist as well. These works are very much imbued with the concepts of magic. My technique is very zen and it's not sexy at all. It's a very slow technique and each tiny painting takes me six to 12 weeks to do. My entire day is spent painting and drawing—I have a monk-like existence. Even the monolith as you enter the [exhibition] space has been handmade by me: it has 27,000 pieces of mirror that have been laid down and hand glittered. Everything is handmade, even the cushions on the floor at the end; the entire exhibition has been a labour of love. I'm a real lover of the ideologies and philosophies of William Morris and in this time of digital experiences I think the handmade experience is very important, it gives artists back their power.

### Pattern plays a prominent role in this exhibition, from the Islamic-style wall paintings to the mirrored stars on the monolith sculpture and the intensely detailed 70s-style patterns on the clothes and furnishings of the women in your paintings. But sometimes these women can also seem almost pinned down and subsumed by all the Western-style patterning that's surrounding them.

That's exactly what I was trying to do. Pattern has its own subconscious political language and has been historically associated with storytelling in all of our cultures. These women are set in both Persian as well as Western patterning because I wanted to show that they were trying to traverse these two cultures, just like I am a collage of both. They were trying to be Westernised but still having to maintain traditional Iranian culture.

In Islamic architecture, pattern is also meant to be there for the purpose of creating a delirium in the viewer because apparently in the presence of utmost beauty you become delirious. So I wanted to create this kind of feminist delirium so that you can actually contemplate a sense of yourself at the same time as you contemplate these women. But I'm also very inspired by the way Stanley Kubrick uses pattern as a metaphor in his storytelling, for example, in *The Shining*, in the honeycomb patterning in the lobby of the hotel, or the phallic and uterus shapes on the carpet in Room 237. My monolith sculpture comes from him as well, as his way of storytelling through shape and pattern. Because I'm a collage of two cultures, my brain works as two threads that work together. I can't help bringing these two languages together.



Sokhanvari's installation in The Curve gallery at the Barbican © Lia Tolby/Getty Images

### You left Iran when you were 14 but much of your family has remained there.

I left Iran the year before the revolution. If parents could afford it, they sent their children abroad, so they had a chance of a better education and a better paid job on their return. When my father decided to send my older brother abroad, I said to him, "why can't I go?" And because my father was a feminist, he agreed, and I went to England with my brother, while and my younger sister and brother stayed in Iran. We went to separate schools, and so overnight I lost my family, my sisters, my friends, my neighbours, my schoolmates, my culture, my language—everything. But actually, it gave me the power to survive and be stronger, and it was easier for me than my parents, sister and brother who went through the Iran-Iraq war. For them it was very tough.

### Both your parents sound like exceptional people.

My father was extraordinary because he was one of 11 kids and all his brothers and sisters were extremely conservative. They would not allow their wives to wear short dresses or dresses without sleeves. My father was a tailor and a dressmaker, and my mother was a literature lecturer. She was a very liberated career woman who was earning her own money and making her own way in life. She wore miniskirts and did whatever she wanted. She went out with her friends at night, she travelled the world on her own and my father would allow her to do all this stuff by herself. He loved her sassiness. This was completely unheard of in Iran. My father used to always say that if women were allowed to run the world, then the world would be a much better place. I was brought up on books and fashion, it was a family of creatives and academics and from early on I was placed in this culture of visual storytelling. As well as being a tailor, my father was also an amateur painter and he encouraged me to make art. He taught me how to draw and how to make egg tempera: I'd grind his pigments for him.

### You trained as a biochemist, specialising in cytogenetics and the study of chromosomes, and only turned to making art much later on.

My mother decided everything for us and she would not allow me to become an artist. I ended up becoming a research scientist to please my mother. I've always wanted to be an artist, but I got married at 24 and couldn't give up my mortgage to do art studies. But in 1997 I had a bad cycling accident and while I was in hospital I said to myself that if I ever get my health back I am definitely going to become an artist. I had to take a leap of faith. So in 2001 I gave up my job at Cambridge University and began my art studies.

### This show was scheduled to open in 2019, before the pandemic and also before the death of Mahsa Amini last September. How do you feel about your show in the context of what is currently taking place in Iran?

Even though I chose it two years before, it turns out that *Rebel Rebel* was a very timely title. At the time I felt these women were very much the rebels—you can tell from their stories they were all very rebellious women. But what is now happening in Iran is no longer a protest, it's a revolution. Before, every protest usually had a leader and they were able to either arrest them, assassinate them or imprison them. Now there is no particular leader but instead many women who are in front of this revolution and this is what gives it such power. I'm caught in this emotional turmoil: I can look at the positive things and think to myself that for the first time in my life, I actually have some hope that this regime will end. But at the same time people are getting killed every day, so it's very bitter. Then after so many years of working on this subject matter I'm also proud that everything has come together and I'm showing my work in such a major exhibition. So it's both a hopeful time and a sad moment for me.

### Biography

**Born:** Shiraz, Iran  
**Lives and works:** Cambridge  
**Education:** 2011 MFA Fine Art, Goldsmiths, University of London; 2006 PGDip Fine Art, Chelsea College of Art and Design, London; 2005 BA Fine Art & Art History, Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge  
**Key shows:** 2020 NGV Triennial, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; 2017 The New Art Gallery, Walsall; Jerwood Space, London; 2015-16 Jerwood Drawing Prize, touring UK from Jerwood Space, London  
**Represented by:** Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, London, Berlin and Nevinghavn, Norway

• *Soheila Sokhanvari: Rebel Rebel*, Barbican Centre, London, until 26 February

Soheila Sokhanvari Exhibitions Iran Middle Eastern & North African art

The Barbican Artist interview

Share

### Information

### Follow us