



FIG. 1 *Rebel (Portrait of Zinat Moadab)*, by Soheila Sokhanvari, 2021. Egg tempera on parchment, 18.2 by 12.8 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Kristin Hjellegjerde, London).



FIG. 2 *Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season (Portrait of Forough Farrokhzad)*, by Soheila Sokhanvari, 2022. Egg tempera on calf vellum, 15.4 by 12.9 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Kristin Hjellegjerde, London).



FIG. 3 *The Love Addict (Portrait of Googoosh)*, by Soheila Sokhanvari, 2019. Egg tempera on calf vellum, 40 by 28 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Kristin Hjellegjerde, London).



FIG. 4 *Only the Sound Remains (Portrait of Ramesh)*, by Soheila Sokhanvari, 2021. Egg tempera on calf vellum, 17.3 by 12.8 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Kristin Hjellegjerde, London).



FIG. 5 *The Star*, by Soheila Sokhanvari, 2022. Perspex two-way mirrors, wood, metal, plastic and electronics, 300 by 300 by 300 cm. (Photograph Lia Toby, Getty Images).



FIG. 6 Installation view of *Soheila Sokhanvari: Rebel Rebel* at the Barbican Art Gallery, London, 2022. (Photograph Lia Toby, Getty Images).



FIG. 7 Installation view of *Soheila Sokhanvari: Rebel Rebel* at the Barbican Art Gallery, London, 2022, showing *Monolith*. Wood, metal, perspex mirrors and glitter. (Photograph Lia Toby, Getty Images).

## Soheila Sokhanvari

by Roger Malbert  
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Who could have predicted, during years of preparation for the exhibition by the British-Iranian artist Soheila Sokhanvari (b.1964) in the Curve at the Barbican Art Gallery, London (7th October 2022–26th February 2023), that it would resonate so powerfully, and so terribly, with current events in Iran? The resistance and deadly repression of women protesting against the mandatory hijab law coincided so exactly with the timing of the show that two women cut their hair in a gesture of solidarity during the opening, and the following day Sokhanvari was a guest on the Today programme on BBC Radio 4. Indeed the artist's patient, loving excavation and celebration of Iranian female stars of stage, page and screen in the pre-1979 era could aptly have been entitled 'Woman, Life, Freedom', had that slogan been in circulation before the uprisings. As it was, her chosen title, *Rebel Rebel*, after the 1974 David Bowie song, reflects her cross-cultural allegiances and mischievous humour – she cites in the catalogue particularly the lyrics 'Hot tramp I love you so'.<sup>1</sup>

The majority of the twenty-eight charismatic women portrayed in *Rebel Rebel* disappeared from public view after the Islamic revolution brought Ayatollah Khomeini to power in 1979. Thereafter a harsh regime of prohibition descended on the country, forbidding women from singing and dancing and enforcing strict dress codes whereby women were required to cover their hair. Sokhanvari was already in the United Kingdom at the time, having arrived in 1978 as a teenager. She has lived here, in exile, ever since, working for eighteen years as a researcher in cytogenetics at hospitals in London and Cambridge before making a radical break to pursue her ambition of becoming an artist. She studied MFA Fine Art at Goldsmiths, and for the past ten years has worked quietly in her studio at Wysing Art Centre, Cambridgeshire. The seclusion suits her temperament and is essential for her practice, which requires long hours of meticulous labour.

Sokhanvari has developed a distinctive, hybrid visual language, inspired as much by Tudor portraits and Giotto's frescos as by Persian miniatures. Each small painting in egg tempera takes up to twelve weeks to complete; she grinds her own pigments and applies five layers of the paint with fine squirrel-hair brushes to achieve the right density of colour, laying out the intricate patterns of her backgrounds with tiny stencils. Her primary sources are monochrome photographs, often publicity shots artfully composed in the style of the period, showing celebrated actors FIG.1, singers, dancers and writers FIG.2 at the height of their careers. She renders their faces and bodies in grisaille, thereby emphasising their remoteness in time, as if memorialising them in stone – with a dash of red lipstick here and there.

Colour is otherwise reserved for the costumes and surroundings. These are painted in exquisite detail: ornate dresses and Art Deco wallpaper and textiles, occasionally erupting into psychedelic exuberance FIG.3 or floral motifs that recall the work of William Morris. Sokhanvari's father was a fashion designer and model, instilling in her an appreciation of fine fabrics and well-crafted objects. Her subjects are regally attired and often seated on grand, throne-like chairs; she pays homage to such feminine icons by embellishing their portraits with radiant plumage in the form of abstract patterns that expand around them like a halo or an aura. Occasionally a cat stares out from this swirling blaze of decorative abundance FIG.4, reminding one of Louis Wain's hallucinatory felines.

There is profound melancholy in Sokhanvari's meditations on the banished heroines of a lost era of popular entertainment. Tragedy is written into many of these glamorous careers, which were brutally interrupted. Silence, exile and dispossession are the predominant themes. Accompanying the portraits are biographical notes that provide essential context.<sup>2</sup> A few artists escaped the country for Paris or Los Angeles; some went into hiding; others were arrested and interrogated in Iran's notorious Evin prison, where they were forced to sign letters of repentance; many died in poverty and obscurity. In her current exhibition, Sokhanvari has brought some of the performances into the gallery space, projecting film onto a giant mirrored Perspex star suspended from the ceiling FIG.5, and including two sculptures that contain holograms of tiny dancing figures – poignant evocations of a lost world of sensuality and enjoyment.

Although the small portraits glow brightly on the high walls of the Curve gallery FIG.6, it requires a different form of ingenuity to devise an environment that immerses the viewer. A tall column of mirrored glass is situated at the entrance FIG.7, composed of 27,000 diamond-shaped pieces painstakingly assembled by the artist in her home, refracting shards of light throughout the space. A green abstract pattern has been painted by hand on the walls and floor; distinctly different from manufactured wallpaper, it generates an atmosphere of generosity that complements the sensitive craftsmanship of the portraits. It recalls the ornamented interiors of Islamic architecture, the geometric designs and patterns of which are intended to create a space where God is present and the viewer's sense of self dissolves and merges with the divine. But this temple is dedicated to an earthly deity: to feminine talent and beauty, music, dance and a love of life.

'Exile is strangely compelling to think about and terrible to experience', wrote the Palestinian critic and philosopher Edward Said, 'its essential sadness can never be surmounted'.<sup>3</sup> Of course, many people live away from their land of birth, but to be unable to return, to be separated permanently from family and friends and watch from afar as one's compatriots are oppressed by a tyrannical regime, must surely induce a particular kind of sorrow, helplessness and despair. Sokhanvari has described her existence during the three years that she devoted to these portraits as monkish: a daily routine of solitary labour, her studio a quiet cell for contemplation. Her withdrawal from the world might have seemed to an outsider solipsistic and the project itself hermetic, isolated from the world around her, absorbed in a chimerical realm beyond recapture. But it has since taken on a new aspect, one that is actively engaged with an immediate, real-life struggle, at a distance but imaginatively connected. It is a declaration of solidarity. The singularity of her project has fused with the collective action of thousands of protestors on the streets of towns and cities across Iran. The shift from the individual to the collective is paralleled on a practical level in the exhibition, in the expansion from the intimate scale of the paintings to an immersive installation that was a collaborative effort involving many hands. The driving force was the Barbican's curator Eleanor Nairne, whose visionary zeal was evidently spurred by the sheer improbability of the proposal to display these twenty-eight miniature paintings on a wall six metres high and ninety metres long.

Sokhanvari has spoken at length in interviews about the lives of the brilliant women she celebrates, their individual struggles against patriarchy, the prejudices many of them encountered in their own families and the exploitation they suffered in the film and performance industries.<sup>4</sup> These are painful and familiar stories. It is possible that the exhibition could be misconstrued as an expression of nostalgia for a lost golden age, when women in Iran had the potential freedom to express themselves creatively, in contrast with today's reactionary rule of the mullahs. However, the Pahlavi regime that governed Iran until 1979, although progressive in important respects including cultural policies and the legal rights of women, was also extremely repressive. The Shah was a dictator and megalomaniac; in 1975 Amnesty International reported that 'The Shah of Iran retains his benevolent image despite the highest rate of death penalties in the world, no valid system of civilian courts and a history of torture which is beyond belief'.<sup>5</sup>

The revolution that overthrew the Shah was precipitated by a dreadful atrocity: on 19th August 1978 a cinema was set alight, killing at least 377 people. The perpetrators were Shiite militants, although at the time rumours were circulated that it was *agents provocateurs* from the secret police. Islamic fundamentalists hated cinema, regarding it as a vehicle of Western decadence, and there had been previous attacks on movie theatres. This violent ideological conflict stands in the background to Sokhanvari's gentle evocation of the magic of the screen. Through the subtle use of beauty, dance and music she makes a strong political statement; it is about much more than show business.

*This is the first in a series of profiles of contemporary Iranian female artists.*

### About the author

### Roger Malbert

is a curator and writer. Until 2018 he was Head of Hayward Gallery Touring at the Southbank Centre, London. His book *Drawing in the Present Tense*, co-authored with Claire Gilman, is forthcoming with Thames & Hudson.

### Footnotes

- 1 See E. Nairne: 'From "Breakfast at Tiffany's" to opiated adjacency: Soheila Sokhanvari in conversation with Eleanor Nairne' in E. Nairne and H. Floe, eds. exh. cat. *Soheila Sokhanvari: Rebel Rebel*, London (Barbican) 2022, pp.15–25, at p.17.
- 2 See 'Soheila Sokhanvari: "Rebel Rebel" exhibition guide', Barbican, available at [sites.barbican.org.uk/soheila-sokhanvari-rebel-rebel](https://www.barbican.org.uk/soheila-sokhanvari-rebel-rebel), accessed 8th February 2023.
- 3 E. Said: *Reflections On Exile: And Other Literary And Cultural Essays*, London 2012, p.180.
- 4 See Nairne, *op. cit.* (note 1); and L. Buck: 'Soheila Sokhanvari: the former scientist using "alchemy" to bring together Iranian and Western culture', *The Art Newspaper* (6th January 2023), available at [www.theartnewspaper.com/2023/01/06/soheila-sokhanvari-the-former-scientist-using-alchemy-to-bring-together-iranian-and-western-culture](https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2023/01/06/soheila-sokhanvari-the-former-scientist-using-alchemy-to-bring-together-iranian-and-western-culture), accessed 8th February 2023.
- 5 'Amnesty International Annual Report 1974–1975', Amnesty International (1st January 1975), available at [www.amnesty.org/en/documents/poi10/001/1975](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/poi10/001/1975), accessed 8th February 2023.

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