

This artist will make you think differently about Iranian womanhood

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Courtesy of the artist and Kristin Hjellegjerde gallery

Soheila Sokhanravi talks to Niloufar Haidari about her Barbican show, Rebel Rebel – a study of Iranian womanhood, and the misconceptions that have always surrounded it

[Soheila Sokhanvari: Rebel Rebel12](#)

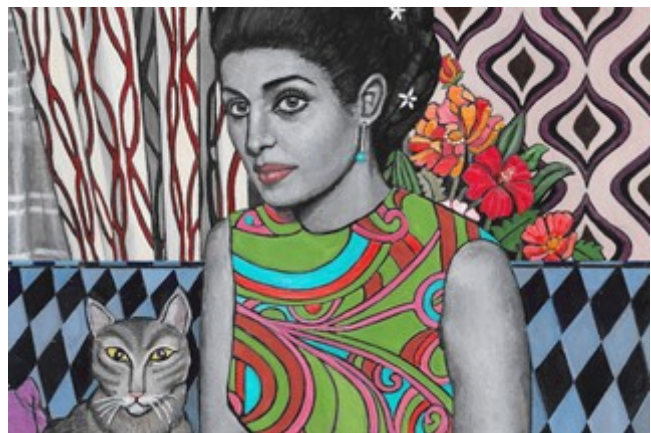
With one hand in the pocket of her tartan dress, Iranian actress Faranak Mirghahari is frowning with perfectly arched eyebrows and aiming a pistol at someone just out of frame. The pattern of her dress clashes with the red geometric design artist Soheila Sokhanravi has chosen as a background for the miniature portrait.



Mirghahari, who shoots her way through the patriarchy in *The Last Hurdle* (1962), was a contrast to the passive, sexualised roles common for women in Filmfarsi (pre-revolutionary Iranian cinema). The actress is one of 28 women who feature in *Rebel Rebel*, an exhibition by Sokhanravi that pays tribute to the extraordinary courage of the women who pursued their careers in a “culture enamoured with Western style, but not its freedoms”.



Filmfarsi was arguably the cultural arm of the Shah’s White Revolution, a programme of aggressive modernisation forced onto a society that had little readiness or desire for it. This is evident in the struggles faced by the women in *Rebel Rebel*, who often spoke out against the culture they found themselves in. We meet Jaleh Sam, an actress who left Iran in 1976, disillusioned by the sexism of the film world, and the genre’s sex symbol Forouzan, who spoke out about the degrading work conditions for women in a 1972 interview: “I am sick, sore, and exhausted. I am tired of standing in front of the camera listening to the director telling me ‘be a little sexier, a little more lustful, bring your skirt higher, be a little more inciting and provocative.’” Following the revolution, she had all of her assets seized, and would go on to die in obscurity in Iran in



2016.

The female body has historically functioned as a battleground for ideological, philosophical and religious debates and agendas, and reading the blurbs that accompany these intricate, patterned miniatures, what is abundantly clear is that Iranian women have never been free. Whether that is the forced sexualisation and objectification they faced during the US-backed Pahlavi regime, which forbade women from covering their hair, or the mandatory hijab that followed when the people's revolution of 1979 was hijacked by hard-line religious fundamentalists, the women of Iran have for decades been denied personal choice.



Conversations around women's rights in Iran are usually extremely reductive, with pre-revolution Iran often viewed through rose-tinted glasses as a place of total freedom and equality, entirely populated by glamorous women in miniskirts and bikinis. This was obviously not the case, and your exhibition highlights the superficiality of these images, as well as the frustration felt by these women who were often exasperated by the two-dimensional, sexualized roles they were being offered. Often they were frequently not even paid for their work. Was challenging this historic revisionism something that was important to you?

Soheila Sokhanravi: Iranians have a tendency to remember their country as the land of Xanadu. Iran has always been divided between the conservative values of the mullahs and the modernisation forces of the Shah[s]. These women were pulled between these two forces, and had to negotiate the hurdles that they came across – there was still so much patriarchy and misogyny. They had to do intellectual somersaults to deal with the dichotomy of the society, and negotiate the very fine line between these two opposing worlds. For example, on one hand, the actresses had to compete with Hollywood and Bollywood films with Western ideals and values that were [being shown] in Iran, and then on the other hand their own families, communities and audiences, were pulling them back. The Shah's modernisation was too alienating for some of these women and the conservative families they came from. It wasn't easy for women, particularly those who were in the public eye being judged.

What I was trying to highlight in my exhibition was how much tenacity these women had to show in order to reach the platform of stardom, and how much they lost when the revolution happened – they lost even the small rights that were given to them by the Shah. That was a story that I felt very drawn to as a female artist – I can't envisage what it must have been like for them to lose their ability to make their art as and when they wished. I wanted Iranian people to remember them, because a lot of them have been forgotten and are actually unknown by Iranians. I wanted to bring them back to a new generation, and more globally to a bigger audience.



Tobeh (Portrait of Zari Khoshkam), 2020 © Soheila Sokhanvari Courtesy of the artist and Kristin Hjellegjerde gallery

There is very little public record of most of these women – their stories were not deemed interesting or important enough to be recorded at the time, and after the 1979 revolution many of them were forced out of work and forgotten completely. How did you choose who to feature?

Soheila Sokhanravi: They were either associated with the political history of Iran, or were pioneers in their field. Forough Farokhzad was [a pioneer of] poetry. Roohangiz Saminejad was the first woman to appear in a film [in 1933]. Some, like Googoosh and Ramesh, are the biggest stars of their time, and I chose them because I had so many memories of them from when I was a child in Iran. I had to end the exhibition with the portrait of somebody who lots of Iranians were unaware of, and that was the portrait of Nosrat Partovi who starred in *The Deer*. She was the female lead, and [the portrait tells] the story of the Cinema Rex fire [*During a 1978 screening of the film, the cinema was locked from the outside and set on fire, killing at least 377 people. It is thought to have been a catalyst for the downfall of the Pahlavi regime, and there is still disagreement as to whether the fire was started by hard-line Islamists or the Shah's secret police*]. Every woman told a story that covered a part of Iranian culture, and the history that I was trying to tell.

‘It’s a stereotype made by the Western media that Iranian women are oppressed victims who are punching the air with their fists and chanting death to America... I think they need to be recognised for what they really are: brave, sassy, intelligent, rebellious women’ – Soheila Sokhanravi

My impression before your exhibition – and common sentiment – is that all of the women who worked in the entertainment industry were exiled or fled Iran post-revolution. And while that was the case for some, others stayed and fought to keep their legacies alive – Pouri Banaaei refused to sign the ‘letter of repentance’, saying she had nothing to be ashamed of, and Haydeh Changizian, the former prima ballerina of Iran, lives between Lisbon and Tehran, where she is working to create a museum of dance. In my own life, the women in my family have always been the ones making the household decisions, which is at odds with the prevalent image of Iranian women as passive, oppressed figures cloaked in black. Do you think this strength and defiance are intrinsic to Iranian womanhood?

Soheila Sokhanravi: It’s a stereotype made by the Western media that Iranian women are oppressed victims who are punching the air with their fists and chanting death to America. There’s always been this other alternative image of women, and their power, that has been ignored. I wanted to give an alternative image of Iranian women because I think they need to be recognised for what they really are: brave, sassy, intelligent, rebellious women.

I think women on the whole are defiant as a gender – we are resilient and tenacious, because of ideas of patriarchy that we’re still fighting. Iranian women have historically been very strong and powerful; they have always been fighting for their rights. Every one

of these women had a rebellious nature that made them succeed – without that nature you cannot achieve as much as they have in their lives. These women are the mothers and grandmothers of the women participating in the demonstrations right now in the streets of Iran – there is this thread that goes through the generations, because Iranian women don't take no for an answer. I'm very proud of them, because I think they have proven to the world how brave they are.

I was struck by how much of a threat art was regarded as by both the Pahlavi regimes and the Islamic regime, both of whom banned and censored works for fear of dissent or criticism. Art has always been of great importance in Iranian culture, from the Persian Empire all the way through to modern Iran. Even now, with their hands creatively tied by censorship, Iranian cinema is widely regarded as some of the best in the world.

Soheila Sokhanravi: Censorship, metaphors, and symbolism have always been in Persian culture. We have this thing called tarof – the idea of never being able to speak truth to power is in our language. Look at the poetry of Hafiz, you have to read the text, and then you have to figure out what it actually means – there's a lot of reading between the lines. I don't believe that power or suppression comes from the top down; I think that censorship comes from the family upwards. We are brought up from childhood to be careful of what we say, it's ingrained in our culture and in our language, and I feel like this has been used by many of the ruling powers in Iran – not just the Pahlavi regime, and not just the Islamic Republic.



The Love Addict (Portrait of Googoosh), 2019 © Soheila Sokhanvari Courtesy of the artist and Kristin Hjellegjerde gallery

A lot of the reviews I read of the show while preparing for this interview seem to have missed the point, which is that these women, although undeniably glamorous, were not free and liberated, and were trying to navigate a culture that may have loved them but didn't necessarily respect them.

Soheila Sokhanravi: These women were all pioneers in their fields, so to achieve what they did was a mammoth task – within a generation, to go from a society in which men would turn their back to you if you were walking in the street, to [one in which] women

were wearing miniskirts and orgasming on camera [Fereshteh Jenabi in 1976's *Resurrection of Love*]. I think that was really shocking for the majority of people, it was too soon to be subjected to these kinds of freedoms.

If you look at images of women who went to protest against the Shah, many of them donned headscarves as a protest against what happened to their grandmothers – they were saying we reject your modernity and your Western values. And then when they were forced to wear obligatory hijab [after the revolution] they resisted that too. It's an example of the complex values that Iranian people have, and I was trying to address the complexities of the culture, and get people to think about it.

‘I would often be criticised for my work being too ‘pretty’. But beauty allows you to carry ugly and bitter messages, messages of hope and sadness’

You started working on the show in 2019, and obviously had no idea its release would end up coinciding with the biggest women's rights movement in Iran since the revolution. What are your feelings on the show in context of what is going on in Iran?

Soheila Sokhanravi: The protests in Iran have brought my show into a more political focus. It's funny – up until then I was concerned about people not understanding what the work is about, because I would often be criticised for my work being too ‘pretty’. But beauty allows you to carry ugly and bitter messages, messages of hope and sadness. It was in light of the protests that people really understood what my work is about: it's not about patterns and colours, it's about the women. It's a very important story that needs to have beauty to carry the message across.

It's a sad scenario for me because at the same time people are dying in Iran. It breaks my heart to see my sisters and my brothers being injured and killed. It's appalling and it completely tears my heart apart, but at the same time, I wanted to give hope for what women can achieve if they are given a little bit of support. I'm not trying to say ‘look how good we had it in the past’, I'm trying to say look what these women achieved in their time, despite not getting the support. Imagine how much more we can achieve if [we have] support – maybe then women could have freedom in totality.

Rebel Rebel is running at London's Barbican Centre until February 26

