



Features

“I am possessed by a demon that makes me want to create art”: Soheila Sokhanvari

16th November 2017 Megha Sharma art, artist, Soheila sokhanvari

Soheila Sokhanvari imbued the autocracy of Iran in herself, when she became the ruler of her own life.

Iranian-born, self-reflective Sokhanvari moved to Cambridge, England at a young age to be a research scientist. But intelligence without ambition can prove to be a flightless bird.

“If your job makes you want to get up in the morning, you are at the right place,” says Sokhanvari. With this in mind and a strong desire, she shifted her path from being a scientist to an artist in her mid-thirties. Her story of overcoming barriers of “family resistance” and the art teacher suggesting her to go back to being a scientist, is an inspiration for uprisers. At a time when job satisfaction is a major concern in most nations, an ideology like this must encourage the youth as well as the middle-aged. “Maybe if I hadn’t managed to get in the top art schools, I wouldn’t have had the confidence and strength to keep going forward,” says Sokhanvari. The artist has completed her degree in MFA from Goldsmith College, London.

A sense of thoughtfulness accompanied the artist’s voice as an overtone; her unique methods of working implied the attribute clearly. Coming from an autocratic country, Sokhanvari is interested in talking about “collective trauma” and “collective amnesia” through her artworks. She uses symbolism, metaphors and Magic Realism to “criticise a political situation without being pinned down.”

Collective trauma is a state of mind shared by a group of people, sometimes an entire society, due to an unfavourable event that has happened. Sokhanvari explains: “Collective trauma can result in collective amnesia. When an event happens and it causes collective trauma, the government sometimes removes all the history of the event from the records- leading to collective amnesia.” She also mentioned the Tiananmen Square incident in China that most of the youth is unaware of.

To present the multiple layers of politics and history, she amalgamates them with her unique ways of creating and presenting an artwork. Sokhanvari uses only natural elements while drawing and painting. The use of crude oil, among others, has a major significance.

“In 1908, the British discovered crude oil in Iran. The parent company arranged for a contract in which majority of the oil was taken by the British. Iran was a third-world country at that time and the government was trying to improve the life of inhabitants. Till 1950, Britain basically took majority of the oil. In 1951, the then Prime Minister of Iran took Britain to court and nationalised Iranian oil. When I paint with crude oil, I’m actually painting with the history of Iran,” Sokhanvari says. She paints on calf vellum, which is also called a Parchment.

The artist developed the love for drawing on passports in 2005. She had received her first expired passport from a friend then. It was a Nazi passport. She soon started recreating stamps that issued the passport in the first place. The text inside the stamp was replaced by text that came from American advertising. “Advertising has a lot of political dimensions,” she says.



Passport stamp recreated by Sokhanvari [Photo and Artwork: Soheila Sokhanvari]

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Megha Sharma

Soheila Sokhanvari imbued the autocracy of Iran in herself, when she became the ruler of her own life. Iranian-born, self-reflective



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American advertisement from 1950s used in the stamp [Photo: Soheila Sokhanvari]

The back of the British passport states that it belongs to the majesty. Sokhanvari feels that the bigger idea is that even after an individual's ID has expired, it does not belong to them. It belongs to the government throughout.

Amidst talks about using crude oil and drawing on passports, the artist also shared how important titles are to her artworks, exhibitions and herself. One special title in her career has been "Boogie Wonderland", which was her solo exhibition in 2015. While watching the political revolt of Iranians unfold on Television in her boarding school, she heard someone playing the song *Boogie Wonderland* by *Earth, Wind and Fire*. It was loud. Sokhanvari, since that moment, has connected the song with the revolt. The solo show was held at Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, in which she presented her unique oeuvre.

"I use egg tempera while painting," says the artist. "It's a medieval technique of grinding pigments and mixing them with egg yolk."

Although beautiful, the journey for Sokhanvari has also been difficult. From moving to England to shifting professions, every day has brought its own challenges. She says: "It [shifting professions] was a difficult decision. I had a mortgage and responsibilities. To change a career at a certain stage in your life is difficult. I was in my thirties when I decided to change my career. That is often considered a bit late." There wasn't enough support from her family regarding this. She also mentioned concerns of her partner that were mostly financial. However, she could not lead her life as a flightless bird and took a leap of faith.

"We get one life. I do not want to have regrets on my deathbed," she says. The artist has proved to be a mixture of wonderment and reality, much like her own work of Magic Realism.

On asking if she is now happy and doing something that makes her want to get up in the morning, she replies: "Art has its moments of euphoria and despair, but I'm genuinely happy because I am possessed by a demon that makes me want to create art."

Her upcoming show is in Dubai Art Fair with Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery in March 2018.

[Featured Image and Artwork: Soheila Sokhanvari]

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