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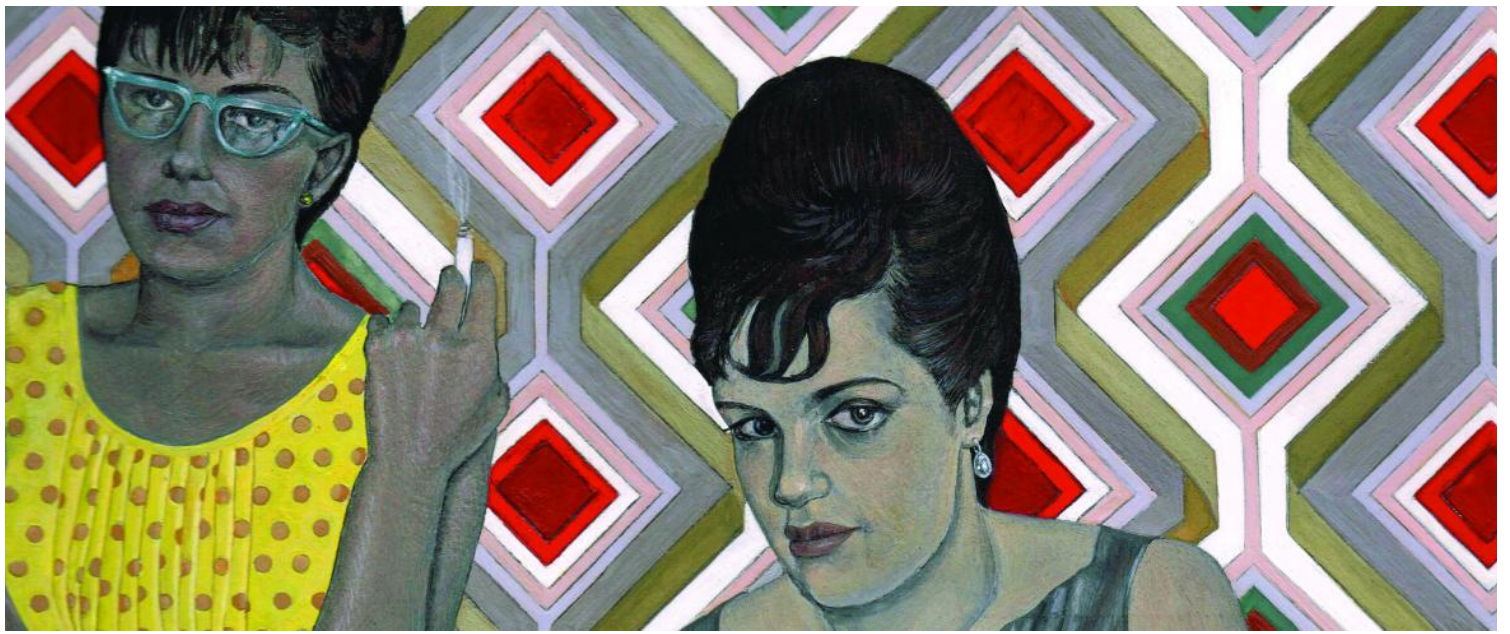
Soheila Sokhanvari



BY SARA MAKARI-AGHDAM

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The New Art Gallery, Walsall, UK



'Heart of Glass', Soheila Sokhanvari's solo exhibition at The New Art Gallery Walsall, is not the first time the Iranian-born artist has named a show after a 1979 pop hit. Her 2015 exhibition at London's Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery was titled 'Boogie Wonderland', after Earth, Wind & Fire's disco anthem. 1979 is also the year of the revolution that instated the Islamic Republic of Iran, radically changing the lives of people across the country. 'Heart of Glass' proves an apt metaphor for the shattering experiences of that year and the loss, exile and absences they brought, evoked through Sokhanvari's crude-oil drawings and egg-tempera paintings based on old family photographs.

Sokhanvari mixes egg tempera in her studio using high-grade pigments. (The artist describes this technique, which dates back to ancient Egypt, as 'against the Duchampian idea of painting as readymade' in its refusal of manufactured products.) The effect, across the 19 paintings included in this presentation, is of a 1970s Technicolor dream. *Batman Ali* (2016), for instance, shows the titular superhero clothed in a net cape, standing behind a smiling woman in a luminous orchard. (As in traditional Persian miniatures, Sokhanvari's

gardens represent a state of eternal paradise.)

Hanging next to *Batman Ali* is another egg-tempera painting, its title taken from a line of the poem *Tavalodi Digar* (Another Birth, 1964) by the Iranian feminist poet, film director and iconoclast Forough Farrokhzad. It reads: 'I will plant my hands, they will sprout, I know, I know, I know, and the swallows will lay eggs in the hollow of my inky fingers.' Sokhanvari has painted the words in English against another garden setting redolent of Persian miniature pictures, which historically featured alongside epic poetry. Following the events of 1979, Farrokhzad's poetry was banned in Iran for more than a decade.

The fuzzy hues of crude oil and gold in the 24 drawings that comprise Sokhanvari's 'Paradise Lost' series continue to dreamily transport the viewer to the artist's childhood. Recreations of family photos, many depict Sokhanvari as a young girl, their blurred edges mimicking the haziness of memory. Oil was discovered in Iran in 1908 by a British speculator who had struck a concession agreement with the Shah of Persia in 1901. The Anglo-Persian Oil Company (now BP) was founded in 1909 and, by 1941, was 50 percent owned by the British government. In 1951, Iran's prime minister, Mohammad Mossadeq – who is still considered a hero amongst Iranians – acted to nationalise the country's oil; however, by 1953, the British managed, with the help of the CIA, to fashion a *coup d'état* that put the industry back into business with the West. Sokhanvari's use of materials references a turbulent history of capital and geopolitics that continues to play out to this day.

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Alongside drawings and paintings, 'Heart of Glass' also

includes abstract sculptures and a projection of the cinema star Forouzan, who rose to fame in the 1960s through pre-revolutionary films Fārsi (Persian films). Forouzan, like the poet Farrokhzad, was banned from performing after 1979, yet in the projection, we see her dancing in an evocative mini dress, as if aware she is performing for us still.

Main image: Soheila Sokhanvari, Two Serious Ladies, 2015, egg tempera on vellum, 23 x 29 cm

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