

Drop veils, dynamite Fuseli, Bristol's Mayer, Transylvanian folk

Soheila Sokhanvari: Rebel Rebel

7 October–26 February

(*Barbican Centre, Silk St, London EC2*) Iranian artist Soheila Sokhanvari recuperates the histories of 27 feminist icons from pre-revolutionary Iran at the Curve gallery. Painted in egg tempera on calf vellum, her detailed images requisition the aristocratic courtly form of the Persian miniature for a rebellious narrative. Like the Bowie reference of the show's title, the gender insurrectionary activities of women musicians, writers, poets, actors and film-makers show in their glamorous appearance. 'They were not only pioneers in their creative fields,' insists Sokhanvari. 'They were fashion pioneers followed for their style. Goo-goosh was the most famous film star of Iran and a fashion icon.'

In 1936 when Reza Shah ordered the removal of the veil from women's faces and hair and the adoption of Western clothes, many non-elite Iranians were unfamiliar with Western fashion. Women's memoirs from across the modernising Middle East (the Shah's actions followed similar top-down reforms in Turkey) reveal the emotional impact on those who had to learn themselves as *uncovered* beings in public. (Although some women welcomed

the unveiling, the speed of the change and lack of choice in Iran, as elsewhere, was challenging.) On the fashion front, we know little about the design obstacles faced by seamstresses and tailors mandated to manufacture the new sartorial lexicon.

Sokhanvari's father had learned tailoring during national service in World War II, and started a fashion business in Shiraz to create the new clothing. He was rarely able to source Western fashion magazines, so films from Hollywood served as moving-image guides from which he deduced garment construction. He succeeded: in an early version of ASOS (as seen on screen), Sokhanvari's mother modelled his new looks in the cinema foyer, ready to be besieged by eager new customers.

After the revolution, many of the films in which Iranian women had starred were destroyed. Just as her father had had to extract design data from movies, so his daughter was forced to patch together the vision for her paintings from the remnants and scraps of 'poor quality vhs recordings uploaded on YouTube'. The resultant collision of blurry video and the precision of her paint strokes produces an almost

hallucinatory display of intense richness. Hung against a hand-painted mural evocative of Islamic abstract patterning, with a soundscape from Marios Aristopoulos of songs by pre-revolutionary Iranian singers, it combines with Sokhanvari's interest in 'creating a visually captivating image' to immerse the viewer in the world of her exilic nostalgia.

For those who imagine the revolution as a rupture from previously liberal attitudes, the opprobrium faced by many of the women whom Sokhanvari memorialised tells another story. In mandating Western-style unveiled clothing, the Pahlavi regime mobilised Iranians' bodies to promote an altered national image to itself and to observers. However, as with other regional modernisation processes, it was on the understanding that the commodities of Western modernity were to be adopted without embracing their associated moral behaviour. Many of Sokhanvari's feminist pioneers paid a heavy price for transgressing conservative gender norms. *Professor Reina Lewis is co-editor of 'Fashioning the Modern Middle East: Gender, Body, and Nation' (Bloomsbury)*

Clockwise from top left: 'Without You (Portrait of Jaleh Sam)', 2020; 'The Love Addict (Portrait of Goo-goosh)', 2019; 'Rhapsody of Innocence (Portrait of Monir Vakili)', 2022; 'She Walks in Beauty (Portrait of Shohreh Aghdashloo)', 2022. All egg tempera

