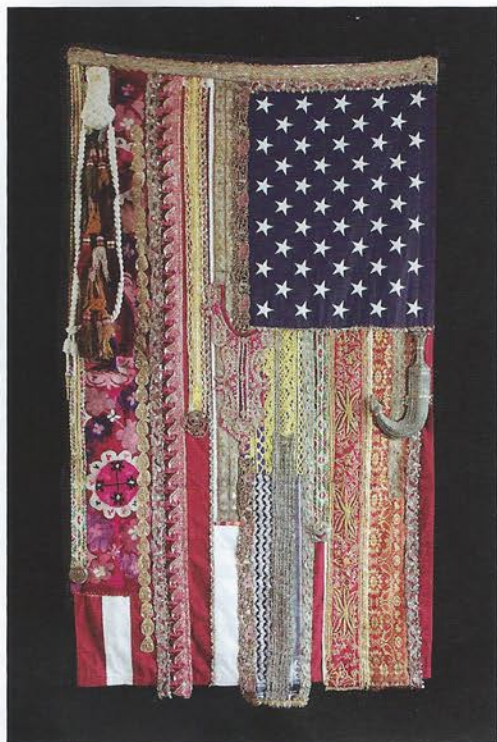


Elephant in the Dark



A black-and-white cardboard figure of Gandhi, adorned with a bright orange flower garland, sits on a gaudy silver stage surrounded by archetypal Gandhian paraphernalia: a *charkha* (spinning wheel), *dhoti* (traditional Indian garment for men) and a pair of round spectacles. The mise-en-scène of this installation, replete with symbolic objects and kitsch characterization, is classic Khosrow Hassanzadeh, whose work often features satirical portrayals of Iranian wrestlers, pop stars and the artist himself. Situated at the entrance of the Devi Art Foundation, Hassanzadeh's piece served as an effective introduction to "Elephant in the Dark," India's first major survey exhibition of Iranian contemporary art. Broadly categorized into three sections—"Departure from Form," "Reflection of a Complex Society" and "The Politicized Scenery"—the exhibition showcased an array of works by 52 artists based in Iran and abroad.

The first section looked at ways in which traditional art forms have been informed or transformed by contemporary concepts. Golnaz Fathi, known for her calligraphy-based work, presented a delicate pen marking in which two black, striated areas on a canvas are demarcated with a white void. *Untitled* (2011) marks a moment in Fathi's own artistic progression from calligraphic formalism to abstraction. Nazgol Ansarinia's inclusion in this section was also apt with *Untitled III* (2009), an ink drawing on tracing paper that depicts modern-day figures going about their everyday life, alongside traditional designs of floral

motifs and Persian patterns. Placed in a corner of the exhibition floor, this piece would have been better served if it were given more viewing space. From a distance one can fully appreciate this work's resemblance to a Persian carpet, adding another layer of understanding toward Ansarinia's practice and concepts.

Similarly, both Sara Rahbar's *Flag #20* (2008) and Leila Pazooki's *This Is Not Green!* (2009) were displayed in a compact room, along with five other installations from the "Politicized Scenery" section. The clustered arrangement perhaps led viewers to a reductive reading of the works; however, individually, *Flag #20* and *This Is Not Green!* are both impressive, multilayered works. Rahbar's flag, made from fragments of fabric pieced together to resemble both Iranian and American flags, explores the construction of nationhood and the politics of regional conflict, as well as the artist's own hybrid identity as an Iranian-born American. Pazooki's tongue-in-cheek installation, which spells out the artwork's title in Farsi using green neon lights, questions how certain meanings or ideologies are associated with symbols, such as with Iranian activists who appropriated the color green for the pro-democracy reformist movement during election protests in 2009.

One of the most engaging works of the show was Mahmoud Bakhshi's audio-visual installation entitled *Bahman Cinema* (2010), displayed in the "Reflection of a Complex Society" section. The installation consists of a looped video featuring a war-torn city at night, with a car zooming through its streets. The speed-filled visuals of the urban landscape, accompanied by the repeated refrain of a haunting song (which sounds as much like a lament as a victory chant), seems to depict a place caught between multiple moments in time. The present-day city is trying to accelerate into the future—a desire seemingly represented by the fast-moving car—yet is still rooted in the past, as expressed by the sound of a nostalgic, primal-sounding song.

As one of India's first major showings of Iranian contemporary art, "Elephant in the Dark" gave some measure of insight into the works of contemporary artists from the country and its diaspora. Overall, the show's curation could have been more selective, focusing on enunciating the nuances and depth of the wide-ranging artists from Iran. Nonetheless, several individual works shone through, effectively highlighting some of the most engaging visual languages, formal concerns and thematic issues being explored by Iranian artists of today.

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