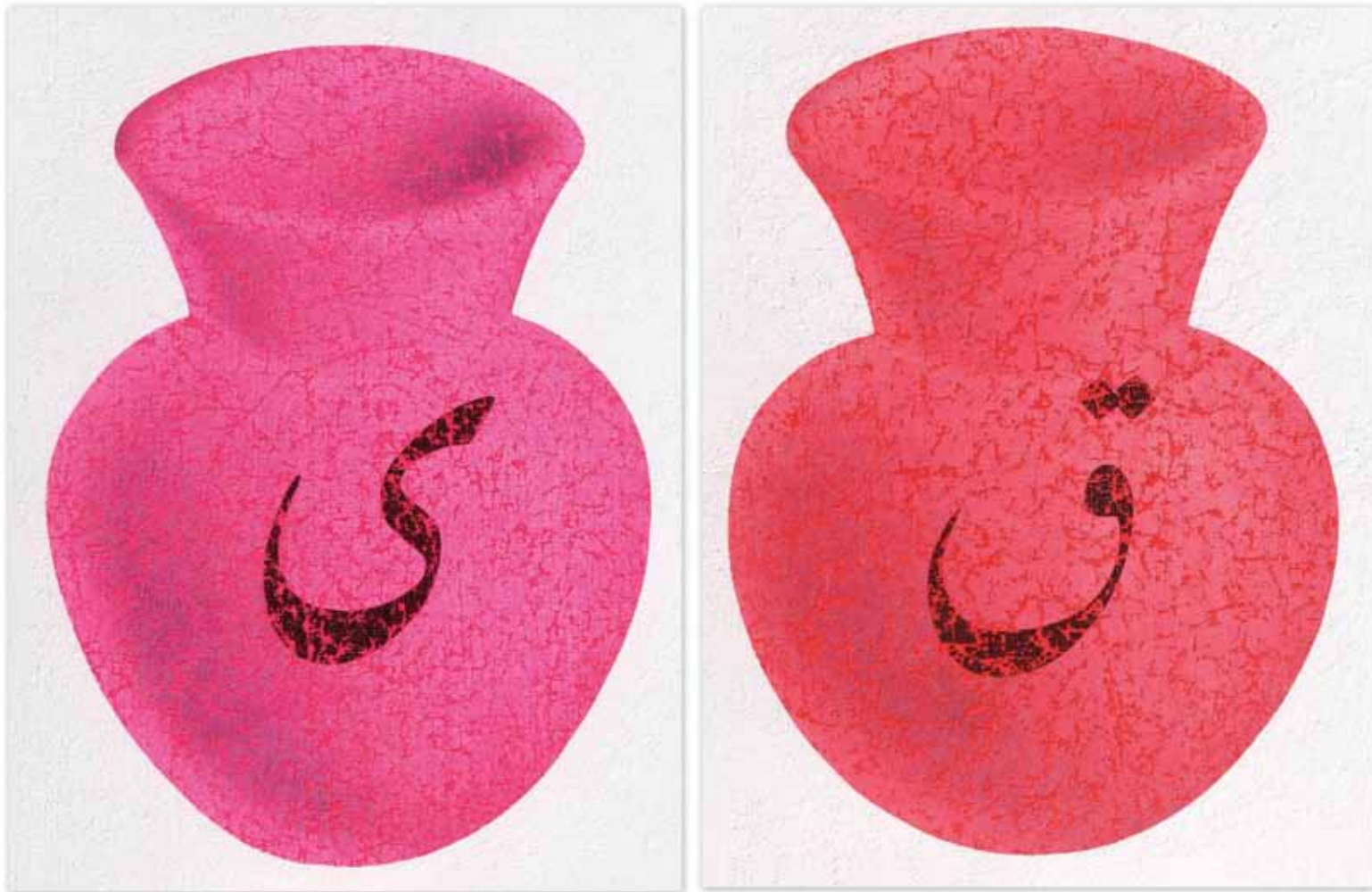
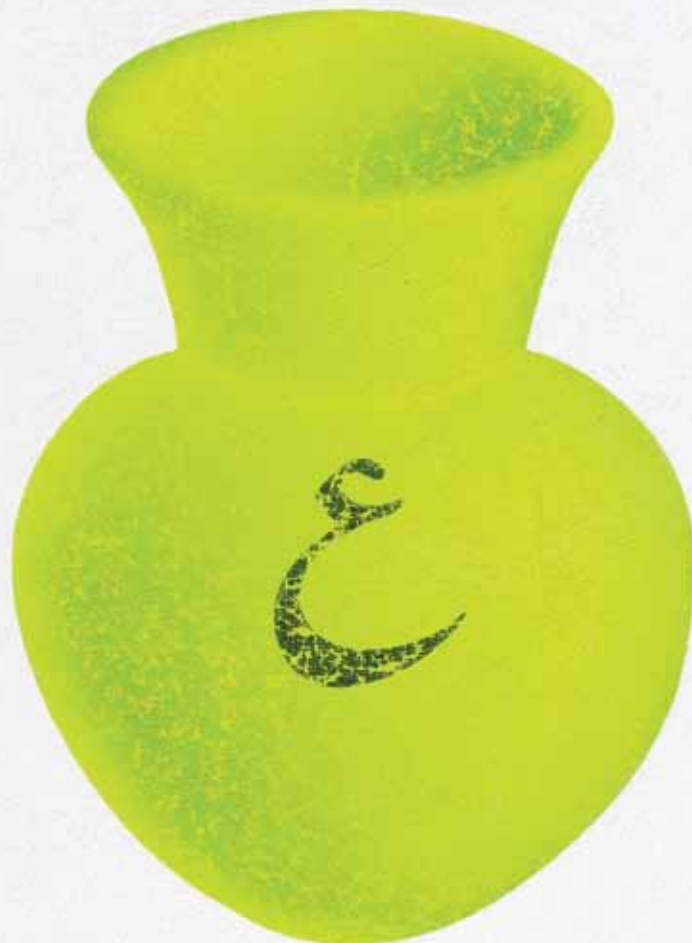
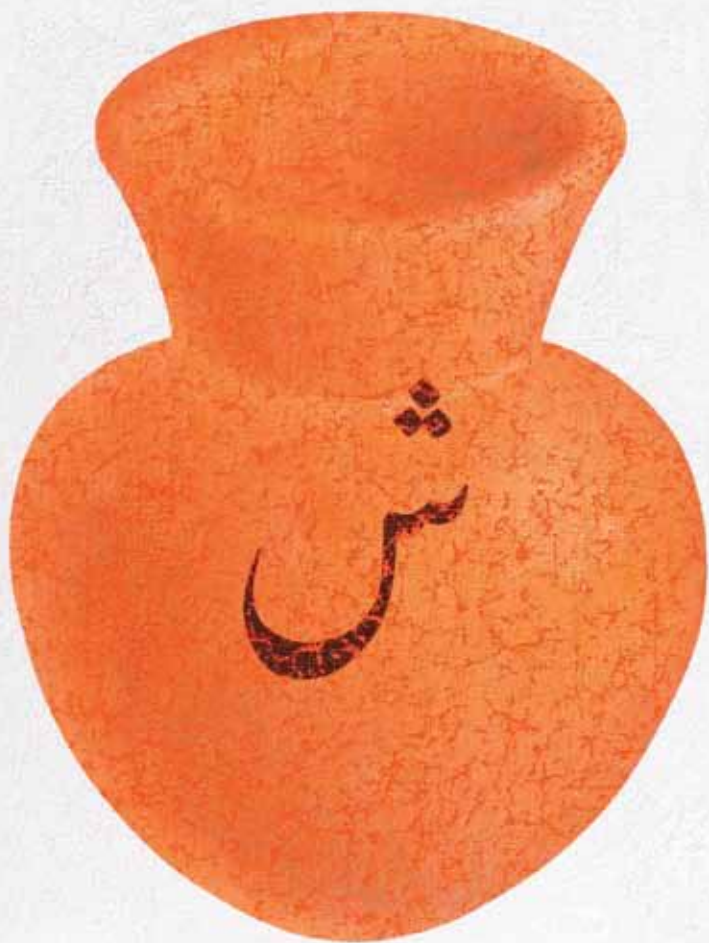


Lifting the lid on Farhad Moshiri

By Janet Rady



Farhad Moshiri. *ESHGHY*, 2006
400 x 130 cm



If Farhad Moshiri had persisted in pursuing his childhood dream, instead of featuring Iran's answer to Jeff Koons, this article might well have been about their answer to Frank Gehry, for Moshiri as far as he was concerned, was always going to become an architect. Born in Shiraz in 1963, he started his schooling in Tehran at the private, English speaking, International Community School before moving back to Shiraz to continue his education. And it was here that he started drawing.

However, like many of his compatriots at the time, (just prior to the Revolution) at the age of fifteen, he and his sister were sent to the States, where they joined their mother at Idyllwild outside LA. His father (an entrepreneur who owned a chain of movie theatres in Shiraz) meanwhile, stayed behind in Iran.

Prior to leaving, his teacher in Shiraz suggested that he apply to Cal Arts, the California Institute of the Arts. He duly did so and was accepted for an MFA in Fine Arts, although his heart was still in architecture. After three years at Cal Arts, he had had enough and decided



Farhad Moshiri. *Melted Stereo*, 2007
Goldleaf Glitter Acrylic Wood Plastic And Electronics
64 x 33 x 50 cm high

to go to SCI Arc, the trendy Southern California Institute of Architecture in Los Angeles. His father, however, persuaded him to stay on at Cal Arts and he graduated from there a year later in 1984.

But life as an artist for Moshiri was not always a bed of roses. At this point, he was trying desperately to find recognition as and was therefore, like many of his co-students, sending his portfolios to galleries in LA, without success. For a while, he even considered New York but finding the city too intense and 'hard core', despite his dislike of the 't shirts and slippers' approach to life in LA, he decided to stay put.

After five years of trying, he finally secured his first paintings show at the two year old Dorothy Goldeen Gallery in Los Angeles in 1989. Only selling one work, the exhibition was, by his own admission a 'complete flop' and the Gallery never worked with him again (and indeed no longer exists).

At the same time, Moshiri had been working on a number of other initiatives, doing design / fashion and sound synthesis projects. This was the time when MTV was just beginning and he was experimenting with video sound installations, producing work for himself and trying to get it shown in LA. But it was not a 'lucrative' endeavour and being completely broke, he started working in pizza parlours, even acting as a receptionist in lawyers' offices. He very quickly decided he had had enough and determined to go back to Iran. That was in 1991 and he was on a one-way ticket.

His return coincided with the time that Mohammad Khatami was the Minister of Culture in Iran (later to be President). It was also the time that Mohsen Makhmalbaf and Abbas Kiarostami were making their internationally acclaimed films. Inspired by their success, Moshiri decided to start making films himself (having studied film making at art school). And encouraged by the support that the Ministry of Islamic Guidance were then giving to artists, he submitted a number of experimental shorts for an official permit.

But the permits were never granted.

Determined not to give up however, Moshiri was commissioned by UNICEF to do ten one minute computer animations. However, this clearly was not where he saw his future and in perhaps in the first step towards his now famed career, he became furniture guildler for the renowned artist / interior designer, Fereydoun Ave. His swanky make-overs catered exactly to the tastes of the young dispirited Iranians who like Moshiri had decided to quit the West and return to their roots. These were no prodigal sons, however returning to bed for forgiveness. In contrast, with the wealth they had amassed usually from their fast paced life styles in US, these formerly dispossessed children of the Revolution desired desperately to re-establish their Iranian credentials and flaunt their new-found fortunes back home.

Moshiri had touched a nerve and now sought to satisfy the needs of these fledgling neo-traditionalist consumerists. Thinking laterally and using his connections with friends in Shiraz, he began buying genuine, 20th Century, Qajar period pots to sell to clients in Tehran. With a cost of \$10 each, these were hardly going to make him rich, but for Moshiri it was not a question of investment, rather one of satisfying his quest for beauty. So far, so good and he continued quite happily with his small time trade until one day, an unfortunate incident happened and he decided to not to buy any more pots. Instead he drew one, which friends bought and displayed in a restaurant. One is tempted to say the rest is history!

Seeing this painting in the restaurant, Fereydoun Ave, who by this time had opened his project space at 13 Vanak, invited Moshiri to show there and thus was born his first series of Jar pictures. This was 1997 and much to his surprise, the exhibition was a huge success. His archaïcising jars had struck a nostalgic chord with their audience and for the first time ever, Moshiri felt that there was a powerful emotion between the viewers and his paintings. For the next two years, he worked hard on perfecting his jars. Never a painterly artist, he determined to pare their shapes down to



Farhad Moshiri. *The Vault*, 2004.
Life-size mixed materials



Farhad Moshiri. *Only Love*, 2007
230 x 170 x 7 cm

their purest possible form, thereby creating maximum impact. By substituting pure white for the original craquelure coloured backgrounds and introducing a third dimension, that of poetic calligraphy, onto the pots, he had turned his archaeological specimens into compellingly beautiful works of art.

Focusing his observations on the renewed growth of the nouveau riche in Iran and the apparent liberalisation of the Middle classes, and the increasing material excesses, courtesy of the oil revenues flowing in from neighbouring Dubai, Moshiri was to become fascinated not in who these nouveau riche were, but what they used. Self introspection and impassioned search for identity as evidenced in the work of a growing number of Iranian artists held no interest. After all it would have been too easy for him to fall into a politico- religious pigeon hole, never to clamber out again. Ever an optimist, life for Moshiri became synonymous with exploring and commenting, through his work, on the crass commodification of this upwardly mobile Iranian society.

Continuing his wry commentary, through found materials, on the discordance between old and new, authentic and inauthentic, including his by now infamous golden furniture installations *Super Love Golden Deluxe*, he began to attract the attention of international curators. Initially mistrusted and definitely misunderstood, this kitschy Iranian art was rapidly becoming incredibly popular. Rooms of the stuff were

being sent off to Sharjah (the 2003 Biennale), next Geneva, in the guise of 'Ethnic Marketing' curated by Tirdad Zolghadr, followed swiftly under the auspices of Rose Issa, to Berlin for the exhibition at the House of World Cultures in 2004. Leighton House meanwhile played host, again curated by Rose Issa, to Moshiri's first exhibition of jars in the United Kingdom.

Falling victim to the midas touch of his own success, Extraspacio gallery in Rome asked him if he would do drawings of his golden furniture installations. No he would not. Inspiration for Moshiri, however, struck in the form of the superficially decorative embroideries

Farhad Moshiri. *Stereo Surround Sofa in Rome*

Farhad Moshiri. *King Bed*, 2004
Life-size Mixed Materials



much beloved by Iranian baby boomers who were now themselves getting married and producing off-spring. Such ornamentation provided the perfect solution and cornucopia of subject matter for Moshiri's quest for a new visual language. Not content with just using found objects, the obvious progression for the artist was to 'start doing something with it'. The result, a witty and highly contemporary reinterpretation of this traditionally decorative art, was shown in Rome in 2004/05. Sumptuous gold embroidery and beadwork spelt out the name of god on velvet; gilded technological vignettes jostled for attention with glitzy domestic chandeliers traced out in beadwork. Whilst equally valid in its commentary on the superficiality of 20th Century Iranian culture, all this was a long way from his original earthy crockery.

However compelling in its artistic novelty and its perfect answer to his quest for simplicity of form, embroidery nevertheless had one big draw-back – one work would take an awfully long time to make. The artist determined to find a solution. After returning to painterly experimentation, without finding any immediate inspiration, Moshiri quite by chance, had a 'eureka moment'. Giving credit where credit is due, this he acknowledges was all thanks to his partner, the artist, Shirin Aliabadi, who had started to work with cake frosting. Moshiri had found his new paintbrush. He took her idea and ran with it. Here for him was the opportunity to create his 3-D furniture pieces in 2-D.



Farhad Moshiri. *You Are the Flower of Flowers*, 2007
Oil on canvas, 80 x 80 cm

Synonymous with the outrageously baroque excesses of Iranian Middle class weddings, little peaks of acrylic cake frostings littered his canvases in serried torrents of abstraction. His second Rome show *Threshold of Hap* was born in 2006.

By 2006, Dubai had started to call. Not quite ready to air his blatant irony and increasing neo-pop aesthetic, his first shows there comprised yet more jars and painterly calligraphic compositions. As ever, though Moshiri was observing the local culture, continuously looking for the 'key on which to hang his work'. Noticing the transformation of a once staunchly tribal society into



Farhad Moshiri. *Floating Bowl*, 2006
Oil on canvas, 150 x 191 cm

Farhad Moshiri. *Selfportrait*
Embroidery





Farhad Moshiri. *Golden Love Super Deluxe*, New York
Life-size Mixed Materials

From Left to Right:
Farhad Moshiri. *Love Is*
 Oil on Canvas
 Image courtesy of the Artist

Farhad Moshiri. *My Loving Heart Only For You*
 Oil on Canvas
 Image courtesy of the Artist

Farhad Moshiri. *Rogue*, 2004
 Extraspaio Gallery Rome
 Image courtesy of the Artist

Bottom Right Corner:
Farhad Moshiri. *Armchair and Round Table with Stereos*, 2004
 Life-size Mixed Materials
 Image courtesy of the Artist



a fragmented global metropolis at an alarming rate, he sought a means by which to portray this glittering fragility. He had already decided to bury his jars and had started instead to disassemble large chandeliers in Tehran. It did not take long for him to take the step into incorporating the crystal elements (later combined with Swarovski crystals) in his new body of work.

Two years later in 2008, an artist who once could not find a gallery to give him an exhibition had become the first Contemporary Iranian to sell at auction for \$1 million. His crystal Eshq piece had struck a chord with the multitude of Iranians in Dubai hungry to demonstrate publically a passion (ironically Eshq means love in Farsi) for their erstwhile homeland.

Now fully on the contemporary art scene map, Moshiri found himself in such demand, he couldn't keep up with requests for his work, which he continues to produce out of his base in Tehran. Compromise was not in his vocabulary, and despite this drive to deliver, he is quick to point out that he would never let his standards slip and many a work was and continues to be consigned to his 'artistic graveyard' before it ever saw the light of day. Each show is planned with precision and work produced specifically for the location – after all as Moshiri points out, codes of interpretation can be very different depending on the preconceptions of the audience (for example his furry friends London's Frieze Art Fair in 2009 were deliberately non-political, playing instead

to the deeply subconscious sensibilities of a nursery reared Western audience). Whilst he cannot predict the reaction his works will engender, he is always pleasantly surprised when he gets a positive response. For Moshiri, however, the important factor is making art is constantly being at the forefront of expression and constantly pushing the limits.

Often compared, as noted above, to his American neo-pop counterpart, Jeff Koons, he takes a stoic approach – after all he states, whilst being intensely proud of his Iranian identity, 'it's better than being likened to an Iranian fundamentalist or terrorist.' If his work is linked to an already familiar reference point, he proclaims it can't do him any harm. Indeed there is every sign that it is having exactly the opposite effect on this internationally popular Iranian artist as continuing shows in Europe, the United States, and Dubai attest.

