

## The identity of tradition: the works of Sadegh Tirafkan



**Human Tapestry 10** 60\* 90CM - Edition of 6

It is perhaps a somewhat clichéd statement to introduce the work of the internationally recognised Iranian artist Sadegh Tirafkan, by stating that he is very much a product of his circumstances, both on an international and an individual level, but this is clearly what informs his art. For Sadegh is the epitome of an Iranian artist whose innovative and utterly contemporary works are profoundly influenced by the legacy of his Iranian roots. Aware of the immense cultural tradition of his ancestors, which he sees as being rapidly subsumed by the powerful duality of Western globalisation and

Islamic dogmatism, Sadegh through his art sets out to challenge this threat to the continuity of his heritage.

Born in 1965 in Iraq to Iranian parents, his family were forced to return to Iran by Saddam Hussein in 1971, and he, like his compatriots went on shortly thereafter to witness the overthrow of the Pahlavi Regime in the Revolution of 1979. Like vast numbers of young men in Iran at the time, he volunteered at the age of fourteen as a Basiji or paramilitary conscript, to fight against the Iraqis during the bloody eight year Iran-Iraq war. Although

Sadegh chooses not to speak about his experiences, they undoubtedly had a profound effect on his perception of the world thereafter.

Following his involvement in the war, and after finishing his schooling, in 1984 Sadegh decided to study photography at Tehran Fine Art University, thus pursuing his passion for cinematography, theatre and fine art. This in itself was an experience which brought him once again into conflict, although this time with, to his mind, the archaic views of his tutors for whom photography was merely a literal medium for landscape representation or for journalistic documentation, not one of creativity. Indeed today, when asked about his practice, Sadegh maintains that he is not a 'photographer' a practice which he perceives to have overly simplistic connotations. For Sadegh the art of his lens based work, comprising photography, collage and video as well as his installation pieces, was and is a conceptual process, which he uses to articulate his commentary on the complexities of contemporary Iranian society. With works in the collections of several museums including the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, British Museum, Brooklyn Museum and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, his commentary on Iranian society is proving popular.

Two main themes run throughout the artist's work – those of masculinity and of identity - and like the carpets designs which have come to feature so heavily in Sadegh's more recent projects, it's impossible to unravel the warp of masculinity and the weft of identity, which are knotted so inextricably into his practice, each layered with historicising overtones.

From an artistic perspective, Sadegh has chosen to convey the theme of manhood and specifically Iranian manhood, by the inclusion in many of his photographs and videos of his leitmotif often bare torsoed, self portrait. Sometimes he appears as a lone figure (Iranian Man 2000), and at other times in association with other male characters (Sacrifice 2003), but in each case he is consciously challenging the taboo subject of the male nude in Islamic art.

In his earlier works, Sadegh draws heavily on empirical references to Iran's pre-Islamic past, for instance photographing himself against the

backdrop of the architectural ruins of Persepolis (in two different series) and at Choga Zanbil or in works featuring the biblical figure of the King of Babel, Hammurabi in two filmic inspired series dating from 2001 and 2002.

But through a development in his work in 2000 onwards from these location shoots, Sadegh retreated into his studio, where he began focus on a more cognitive reinterpretation of well known literary, customary and religious antecedents ingrained in the Iranian psyche. These antecedents however are not 'happily ever after ending' stories. Undoubtedly due in part to his participation in the war, Sadegh regularly focuses on their narrative of bloody combat. Not unsurprisingly, the artist looks for his inspiration to the 11th Century, male dominated epic of Ferdowsi's Shahnameh, wherein the legendary prowess of its main protagonist Rostam is played out in his heroic deeds. Through the juxtaposition of his own blood spattered torso against typical Safavid Shahnameh illustrations in his *Whispers of the East* (2006/2007-), Sadegh gives the viewer an instant shot of contemporised orientalisising masculinity.

Similarly influential on Sadegh's work and of equal importance in the macho stakes, are the much earlier practices of the pre-Islamic zurkhaneh or 'house of strength' in which, to this day, Iranian men perform wrestling and bodybuilding exercises, thereby emulating their testosterone loaded ancestral heroes, the pahlavan. These he features in his eponymous studio shot *Zoorkhaneh* series of 2003/04-, in which the body beautiful shouts loud from the images.

Complimenting the male as hero in the legends of the Shahnameh, and the zurkhaneh, Sadegh also draws his inspiration from the Shi'a traditional practices, stemming from the veneration of the martyred Imam Hussein, still in currency today, and in which he participated during his time at war. Most notably the practice comprises the powerful self-flagulating rituals of Ashoura performed during the month of Moharram together with performance of the popular religious Taaziye passion plays in which male actors adopt all the parts.

In accordance with the development of his practice, Sadegh began by shooting Ashura rituals in the



**Multitude5** 60\*90 cm - Edition of 6

street in 1989 and completed his series in 2004 in the studio. He was to return to the theme again in his recent *Endless* (2009) images, depicting men in combat framed by daggers against a background of wrestlers from the zurkhaneh.

Despite the historic emphasis of Sadegh's work, he is not a man fixated in fetishising a long lost romantic past. He is only too conscious of the issues facing Iranian's today albeit within a historic perspective. From 2006, he has been focusing on population and its unbalanced distribution around the world. As Sadegh notes "Within twenty years, the world's population will reach 7 billion. Denser and younger in developing countries, population is the Achilles' heel of these regimes which considers this group's increasing needs and demands as a problematic issue." He goes on to say however "I don't only look at the topic from a political aspect but also and most importantly from an artist's eye – an eye which originates from a thousand year old culture, rich with history and civilization."

Building on his empathy with traditional Islamic craft, Sadegh chooses to deploy the quintessential Persian carpet as the carrier of his message. "The carpet is emblematic of Persian culture. It is a symbol of culture, seasonality, richness, diversity and continuity- in time and in history. As such I have been obsessed by the parallelism and marriage between this symbolic, intricately loomed object and the people to which it belongs."

In *Whispers of the East* he superimposes figure of contemporary Iranian youths onto static rugs. But in parallel with the developments in his earlier works, and by using new technology, Sadegh began to reverse the role of person and carpet, experimenting with kaleidoscopic images of human carpets in his *Multitude* images (2009) until it reached its logical conclusion in his latest, *Rashad Rana* reminiscent, series *Human Tapestries* 2010. Here, in a superb elliptical play on his carpeted images, he frames the collages with samples of actual tapestry. Such deconstruction of the image should only lead to the

conclusion that Sadegh is drawing analogies with the metaphorical destruction of tradition and historical values with the fragmentation of society today. Woven however into this sadness is a more positive note “My goal is to demonstrate that all people regardless of gender, culture and religion are indeed looking for inner peace and sanctity.”

Setting the context of Modern and Contemporary Iranian Art

In order to understand the reasons for Sadegh's choice of subject matter, it is important to explore the context from which his work developed.

From an historical point of view, the rise of Modern art in Iran (that is the break from the more traditional Persian arts) stems from the Constitutional Revolution in 1906. However, it is not until the 1940's, when the Faculty of Fine Arts in the University of Tehran was formed and run by the French architect André Godard, that Iranian art developed its own recognisable identity. Artists were beginning to travel regularly, and to study in European institutions, consequently embracing the new ideologies of Post War Europe, but nevertheless struggling to develop a distinctly Iranian identity in their art.

This however was to change in the 1960's, when an informal school developed in the 1960's which became known as Saqqa-khaneh or neo-traditionalist, spiritual pop movement. For the first time, Iranian artists began to reinterpret and deconstruct their own traditional art but in a completely innovative manner. Saqqa-khaneh meaning water fountain, refers to public fountains offering drinking water constructed in honour of Shi'i martyrs denied water at the decisive battle of Kerbala in AD 680 and alludes to the powerful traditions of Shi'a Islam. Proponents of the movement, include Charles Hossein Zenderoudi, Parviz Tanavoli and Faramarz Pilaram, each of whom experimented with different ways to integrate into their art popular symbols of Shi'i culture, such as elements of ancient pre-Islamic motifs, votive religious, talismanic and magical symbols, calligraphy and 1920/th Century Qajar 'coffee house' scenes. Relying not just on painting to express their creations, the artists turned

to sculptural forms previously unknown in Iranian art as the result of official religious intolerance to idolatry. Often cast in bronze, the best known of these are the series of iconic 'heech' or existentialist nothingness sculptures, formed out of the Farsi letters for this word, created by Parviz Tanavoli and which he continues to produce to this day.

Significantly, however, although photography was a well established medium at this period (having been introduced into Iran during the Qajar period), no photographers emerged directly during the period in which the Saqqa-khaneh school flourished. Indeed, whilst there are numerous photographers working in Iran today, Sadegh can be seen as an innovator in his use of photography referencing the subject matter of the Saqqa-khaneh tradition.

Although the Saqqa-khaneh school as a distinct style was short lived, its influence continues to live on. For example, artists such as Massoud Arabshahi and later on Khosrow Hassanzadeh and Morteza Darehbaghi include votif images in their work. As mentioned above, Parviz Tanavoli continues to produce his heech series, Charles Hossein Zenderoudi and still references talismanic symbols in his paintings.

Similarly, looking at both the literary and visual traditions, there are a number of Iranian artists who depict scenes of masculinity and Iranian identity with a contemporary twist such as Fereydoun Ave who portrays Rostam and Sohrab based on the image of the Iranian Olympic Gold wrestler Abbas Jadidi, or Siamak Filzadeh who crosses Rostam with Hollywood stars, it is perhaps Sadegh who through his pioneering use of conceptual imagery to convey his powerful message of the importance and fragile nature of Persian identity, is one of the most interesting and innovative of the post Saqqa-khaneh Iranian artists of today.