

SUSSAN DEYHIM: PERFORMANCE ARTIST AND ACTIVIST

By: Renee Fox



Sin #5, 2013. C Print Ed. of 2. 53x97cm. Courtesy of the artist & Shulamit Gallery.

Sussan Deyhim, the internationally acclaimed Iranian born composer, vocalist and performance artist has been at the forefront of progressive artistic mediums for over three decades. She began working as an artist in Iran in her teens, starting as a ballet dancer in Tehran and then in Brussels. In 1980, she moved to New York City and joined the city's creative scene in dance and experimental theater, performance art, electronic music, conceptual media/sound installations and scoring for film. It is the synergy among these diverse artistic modes of expression that most interests her at this point in her work. Although Sussan is deeply romantic about the Middle Eastern cultural marvels, as a progressive female artist she finds it quite challenging to deal with the predominantly traditional and shortsighted views onto global cultural sensibility and questions of authenticity, and matters of artistic loyalty to cultural origination. This leads into an existential references, a highly imaginative fantasy based on reflections about and on exoticism/mysticism/political activism and nostalgic compassion. To have lived in an entirely heterogeneous and complex cultural environment for over three decades has presented her work with the enormous opportunity to excavate subtler layers, deeper, more personal creative universe, cleansed of much of the imposed rules of any given homogeneous cultural environment or tradition, be it in or of the East or the West. Having identified and successfully integrated core elements of her culture of origin with many others acquired and sublimated along the way, Sussan Deyhim's synthesis of artistic cultures, her creative polyphony of the arts reaffirms that in our era creativity has proven to be a land and a landscape sustained on its own merit.

When identifying and successfully integrating core elements of her Iranian culture with many others the multicultural artist her work proves that freedom of artistic expression is not only the most crucial way for artists to create works with no boundaries imposed but also an important step into creating none referential yet deep, honest, personal, authentic and cutting edge art forms that embrace a more intricate combination of old and new, ancient and futuristic influences.

Iranian women have struggled to establish their human rights and social

status since the beginning of the 19th century. This fight came to fruition in the Pahlavi era when women began to occupy some prominent roles in society. Unfortunately, since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, women's rights and their artistic and intellectual freedom have been severely curtailed, indeed violated. Deyhim's mixed media performative installation project "Dawn of the Cold Season" seeks to shed light on the importance of progressive Iranian contemporary arts through the vision of two of Iran's most avant-garde female artists, Forough Farrokhzad and herself. The project presents a contemporary uncensored, poetic, feminist dialogue between two Iranian conceptual artists, each a fascinating voice for her own generation. The installation is inspired by the works of Iran's 1950s literary heroin, filmmaker, feminist & cultural icon, Forough Fartokhzad. This performative installation takes a thematic exploration of some of Foroughs most potent poems. Sussan has created a series of non-linear poetic tableaux inspired by the poems of Forough. The audience travels through a visual, sonic and theatrical journey into the heart of Farrokhzad's prophetic vision where her most intimate, soulful and provocative moments leap of the page and onto the stage. Her message is as poetically and politically relevant today for the women of Iran and the world as it was fifty years ago when she died tragically at the age of thirty-two. "For me, the most inspiring aspect of this project is the opportunity to introduce the great work and sensibility of an Iranian female icon to the international community. Many Iranian intellectuals consider Forugh a cultural godmother of modernist literature in Iran, but she died so young that I also think of her as our cultural daughter. A rebel with a cause. Farough spoke with awe-inspiring rawness and maturity. She was an existentialist, feminist provocateur. She was Iran's Simone de Beauvoir, Frida Kahlo, Maya Deren and Patty Smith all rolled into one. Her work has given me the inspiration to continue my own artistic journey during my 30 years in exile from Iran" she explains.

Forough Farrokhzad, was one of the most influential modernists poets of the Iranian Persian language. At the age of 17, she decided that the current use



of language was not adequate to express the viewpoint of her generation thus starting her first book of poetry at age 17 and incredibly, had a couple of the erotic poems in the book published in the newspapers. This angered the Iranian public who perceived the poetry as the work of a common prostitute. Despite this ongoing controversy, Farough continued to grow as an artist. Over time, her poetry became more experimental with language, and communicated powerful ideas of humanity and sociopolitical issues of the era. "Dawn of the Cold Season" refers directly to Farough's use of language, specifically her collection of poems "Let us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season" 1974, one of the most discussed books of original writing by an Iranian literary woman. The poem is the poet's brave admission that she has passed on from the vibrancy, beauty and joy of youth and is inescapably moving steadily toward older age. Deyhim's video installation and prints are the artist's empathetic expression of the poem. In the video, Sussan's silky sultry voice slowly recites the poem in an intimate volume in English as she passes in front of a mirror, then behind distorted sheets of Mylar; the effect being a slow and severely uncomfortable distortion of a beautiful woman into a non-human form. The deeply saturated prints in the exhibition from this series, created during Deyhim's time at the Rauschenberg Residency are a selection of carefully chosen, powerful still images from the video.

Deyhim's series "I Will Greet the Sun Again" is another interpretation of Farrokhzad's poem by the same name. In this series, a woman's head and shoulders is seen from above in a bright blue sky with fluffy white clouds. The figure, foreshortened from above, is in ecstatic motion, twirling, with rippling ends of white clothing trailing outward. The images are beautiful and optimistic visions of Farrokhzad's poem where the author has arrived at a hopeful acceptance and journeyed beyond her pain and hopelessness of the earlier work (Dawn of the Cold Season) when she is first recognizing the horrifying consequences of age. In the poem, Farrokhzad is even hopeful she will love again. Deyhim draws upon Farrokhzad's work because she is deeply inspired by the poet's life, which much like Deyhim's, was lived as her art: true to herself and her ideas. Both Iranian women, Farrokhzad and Deyhim have been confronted with sexism, ageism and traditional cultural values, all of which they each bravely spoke out against in their life and work. Deyhim acknowledges Farrokhzad's era as an even more difficult time to deal with the same issues, during the 50s and 60s in Iran, when women's roles were more strictly limited to traditional gender roles. Farrokhzad had a short life of only 32 years to create a historically significant body of work chronicling her experience as a free-thinking Iranian woman. Through the process of creating work for "Dawn of the Cold Season" Deyhim has gotten to know the poetess intimately and she humbly presents her work and performance as a honorable recognition of a dear friend.

About the Writer

Renee Fox is a Curator and Co-Director of Shulamit Gallery in Venice, California.

We would like to thank Shulamit gallery in Los Angeles for their support in providing us the material needed for this article.