

## THE COLLAGE ARTIST

By: Negar Azimi

In the year 1978, the artist Fereydoon Ave was preparing for the first solo exhibition of his work in Europe just as the first signs of the Iranian Revolution made themselves apparent. Amid the hullabaloo that ensued - demonstrations and riots, strikes, martial law, and finally, the fall of a regime - the then-33 year-old strained to understand the changes in his midst. To do this, he turned not to political science or religious tracts, but rather, to a 10th century Persian epic known as the *Shahnameh*, or Book of Kings. Within the *Shahnameh's* 60,000-plus verses lay an account of Persian history rife with thrilling tales of rivalry, betrayal, love, and black magic. Among the text's parade of unforgettable archetypes - princes, princesses, and thieves - it was the figure of Rostam, the chivalrous Lancelot-like strong man, that most captured Ave's imagination. He mined the text, but kept gravitating back toward this Persian Hercules.

The son of Zal, a plucky warrior from the Khorasan region of Iran, and Rudaba, a stately princess from Kabul, Rostam is unequivocally the beating heart of the *Shahnameh*. The story of his coming to be is itself something of an epic: Rostam was said to have been a large infant whose mother very nearly died while giving birth. It was only with the help of a mythical winged creature known as the simorgh that Zal was tutored in the art of a cesarean, and was able to save the future hero (today, the Persian term for a cesarean remains a *rostamzad*). As a young boy, Rostam was distinguished by having slayed a mad white elephant belonging to a king named Manuchehr, and also managed to tame a famously unwieldy stallion, christened Rakhsh. Later in life, he embarked upon an arduous journey to save his own emperor, Kay Kavus, who had been abducted by demons from a region known as Mazandaran. For Ave, the adventures of Rostam - the ageless, fearless, forever hero - were not only unforgettable, but they also served as a portal into the present, where patriarchy endured and the figure of the mythical macho had become a permanent feature of the world around him.

In the midst of an Iranian revolution in progress, there were legion Rostams in the surrounds. The figure of Imam Ali, for example - the prophet's son-in-law and the very first convert to Islam - was

perpetually invoked as a model of goodness and bravery in the midst of adversity. There were the young revolutionaries working to upend the Shah's regime, too. And of course, the long-bearded leaders who promised to lead the country to some as yet undefined sacred salvation. Some years later, Ave pulled an image of a brawny wrestler - wrestling, along with weightlifting, is a national pastime in Iran - out of a sports magazine, and began to play with it. A first collage, entitled *Rostam in Late Summer*, was soon born. In the work, Rostam is featured with ripe summer fruit in and around the frame, along with flowers in full bloom. The ripeness vividly summons up the atmosphere of chivalry - of being ready for action at whatever cost - that was prevalent at the time of the revolution. "You would see 12 to 15 year old *pasdars* (paramilitary) on the streets with guns intimidating 40-50 year old men," Ave remembered. "It was surreal."

Decades later, Ave is still preoccupied with the mythical strong man. The image of the muscled wrestler endures, too. In a recent series entitled "Postcards From Iranistan" that will be on view in Los Angeles this fall, the canonical strong man appears over and over again, one figure superimposed over the next, arms overlapping, creating a delirious halo of flesh. In the background, a violent mushroom cloud looms - the source of its explosion unknown. Abstracted from its origin, the cloud is as suitable a placeholder as any in evoking the trials and tribulations of the contemporary warrior. As one gazes into the image's elliptical center, it is almost as if Rostam, the consummate macho, begins to dance. He is both defiant and playful, grounded and soon to fly, youthful and ageless - a pastiche of contradictions that sits at the center of Ave's four decade practice as an artist.

Fereydoon Ave was born in 1945 to parents of Zoroastrian origin, an ancient religion that, with the demise of the Sassanian Empire and the 7th century advent of Islam, was marginalized over time. From the beginning, Ave grew up in an atmosphere marked by matriarchy; his father passed away when he was only 1, and his grandfather several years later. Henceforth the women of the family - namely six charismatic aunts and a grandmother - raised him while his mother pursued her studies (she was among the first Iranian women to



Postcard Sculpture 13. Postcards from Iranistan, 2014. 3D print on card mounted on foam board. 80x100cm



Postcards from Iranestan XL 2014. Mixed media on Plexiglas and metallic paper inkjet print. 100x80cm

attend university). At home, Ave grew up with all manner of eclectic knickknackery - from Chinese porcelain to rare silks and tapestries to Indian artifacts - the physical traces of a father who had once traded goods between Tehran, Yazd, London, and Bombay. The Silk Road of lore literally seemed to run through his existence, a fact that takes on added resonance when one learns that members of his family began moving to India as far back as the 8th century from Yazd, a historic center of Zoroastrian culture.

At the age of 8, Ave went off to boarding school in England, and at 18, to the US, to study desert agriculture at Arizona State University. During his sophomore year, he received a scholarship to take a ship around the world for a traveling study program that he likens to a "grand tour in the middle ages." To this day, Ave credits that experience with having permanently altered his visual universe. After having studied film at New York University some years later (where Jonas Mekas and Martin Scorsese among others were faculty members), Ave returned to an Iran in the midst of a cultural blossoming. The year was 1970 and a generation of Iranian artists was in the throes of articulating a novel modernity that was both local and global at once. In the plastic arts, this energy manifest itself in many ways, not least through a movement sometimes referred to as *Sakkakhaneh*, or "spiritual pop art" in shorthand. Graphic design, too, was booming, as was film.

The Shah's third wife, Farah Diba, amplified this energy by investing grandly in the country's arts infrastructure - launching cultural centers, theaters, and museums thanks in large part to the skyrocketing price of oil at the time. Ave's very first job upon his return was to serve as a designer for the Iran-America Society Cultural Center, a venue that hosted all manner of exhibitions and talks. There, he worked closely with an American artist named Douglas Johnson, who served as the center's art director. Johnson's own work, which evoked Rauschenbergian collage, ended up influencing Ave significantly. During his time at the center, Ave curated a fateful exhibition of works by the Iranian caricaturist Ardeshir Mohassses, and even today, remembers organizing a talk by a visiting artist of Armenian-Iranian descent named Tony Shafrazi. Shafrazi, for his part, later went on to renown as an artist and a gallery owner in New York. In 1971, mandatory military service meant that Ave was assigned to the forward-thinking National Iranian Radio and Television (NITV) that, at the time, served as a sort of parallel ministry of culture, packed as it was with young people. There, it was decided that he would be of most use as a designer, and so he did work for *Karqah-e Namayesh*, a sort of actors' studio and workshop under NITV's umbrella that would go on to train many of Iran's leading actors and theater directors. He also worked for the newly erected City Theater, an iconic cylinder-shaped building situated in the middle of Tehran. Eventually, he served as the chief designer for the theater, where performances

ranging from a version of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* to Bijan Mofid's unforgettable *Shahr-e Ghese* would take place. The latter, a parable starring animals that spared no one in its inspired skewering of Iranian society, continues to be one of the most beloved theater pieces of the last century.

Ave also came to mix with a group that was steering the Shiraz Festival of the Arts, an avant-garde theater festival launched by the Queen in 1967. Held each year at the end of the summer, the festival took place in the desert over a span of eleven years and featured musicians, actors and miscellaneous performers from around the world (Shiraz's internationalism made other festivals look petty and provincial in comparison). The festival's core group of organizers included the artist Bijan Saffari, the theater director Arby Ovanessian, the filmmaker Farrokh Ghafari, and the set designer Farideh Gohari. Ave designed a number of iconic posters for the festival, and in the early 1970's, hosted Bob Wilson, the renown American experimental theater director, as he scouted locations for what would later become his legendary, seven-day, seven-night performance *KA MOUNTAIN AND GUARDenia TERRACE*. While the Shiraz Festival's history was vexed and occasionally marked by controversy, the historian William Shawcross as "too avant-garde" for an essentially traditional country, its legacies continue to be felt to this day. For Ave and so many others who were implicated in its workings, the festival was an inspired workshop of ideas.

At the same time, a vibrant gallery scene was also coming to be. From 1972 until the time of the revolution, Ave worked as the artistic director of the Zand Gallery, a pioneering space launched by Homa Zand which hosted exhibitions by the likes of Iranian modernists Leili Matin-Daftari, Manoucher Yektai, or Ghasem Hajizadeh, alongside stars of the international cultural scene, like Andy Warhol, David Hockney, or Claes Oldenburg. There was more: an international film festival cultivated what would come to be an Iranian New Wave, a Tehran Biennial featured the best in visual arts, dynamic independent artist-run collectives went about their work, as did a handful of progressive arts, architecture, and literary magazines, like *Khooroos-e Janqi* or *Tamasha*. Every Friday, Ave held an open house at his home in Vanak Square which brought together artists, writers, and diverse others. The Iranian cultural scene in the 1970's was unabashedly vibrant.

In conversation, Ave often refers to himself as a collagist. When I first met him a few years ago, I was working on a book, and he likened my process of interviewing dozens of people who had lived through the 1970's - the ostensible subject of the book - to assembling a collage of diverse and often contradictory perspectives. Collage is, in many ways, the essence of his own practice, as his art assumed motley forms. *"I love fragments, putting together things to make others. Fragmentation also gives you space, and in that space you can breathe,*

*Which means you can invent, you can improvise, imagine, be poetic. It's those spaces that interest me."* he said recently. It might, in turn, make perfect sense that he gravitated toward the *Shahnameh*, a text that is itself cobbled together from multiple sources and times from Pahlavi era historical accounts or Zoroastrian tales drawn from the holy book of the Avesta to a work from the Sassanian era known as the *Khoday Nameh*. In other words, the *Shahnameh's* influences extend across multiple geographies and multiple sources both oral and written. In choosing to excavate and meditate upon one of the most collaged texts of all, he stumbled upon - not unlike the cabinet of worldly curiosities in his childhood home - a dynamic vision of history. It is also the collage's quality of contradiction that lies at the heart of Ave's *Rostam* series. The macho man with the halo of arms appears to be dancing, mutating into the seven-armed deity Shiva of Indian mythology. Here, death and rebirth are collapsed, as are creation and destruction, the macho and the feminine. For every yin, there is a yang, and just as thousands of women were central to the revolutionary effort in the late 1970's, so too were the women in Ave's family in raising him. Herein are the dualities and contradictions that characterize broad swathes of Iranian society. Suddenly, the figure of Rostam assumes even more meaning.

It is perhaps interesting to note that the series' title *Postcards From Iranistan* is a reference drawn from one of the Shah's final speeches in which he intoned that Iran should not become a *stan* like its ostensibly less developed, perhaps more religiously obscurant neighbors. Within this evocation lies a lesson and a warning. His works, in turn, appear in three dimensions, produced as an amalgam of aluminum, plexi cutouts, and digital printing. Full of depth and life, the printed images almost become sculptures. At a certain angle, one might see one's own reflection on their surfaces-effectively implicating viewers within its bounds. By rendering three-dimensional a paradigmatic, even stereotypical image of maleness, Ave has literally lent complexity and depth to a stale cliché. He has breathed new life into it.

Also present within the *Iranistan* series is a selection of the Rostam images printed on postcards. Ave has for many years been taken by postcards - collecting them, doodling on and around them, sending them by the hundreds. One of his earliest artworks, if not the first, involved him using colored crayons to trace lines around the edges of a postcard he moved around the surface of a paper. The resulting lines represented ghostly remembrances of a past presence, a journey once taken. Postcards, too, are vehicles that span places and times and in that way, they are inherently collagist. Having assembled them here like tiles and given them names of various cities and regions in Iran, Ave seems to have evoked the tiles that once marked the entrances of ancient Iranian cities. In stacking them as he has, he also summons up the postcard works of the contemporary artistic

duo Gilbert and George. Again, the collagist at work brings together multiple and incongruous things.

Today, Ave's practice extends across the territories of artist, designer, and collector. Outside of his own artwork, perhaps no one else has done as much for young Iranian artists in the past two decades as he has. A few years after the revolution that left him pondering the *Shahnameh*, Ave, acutely aware of the dearth of spaces to show and talk about art, opened up a storefront space at 13 Vanak Street. The space hosted first and fateful exhibitions by nearly a dozen artists, among them people like Farhad Moshiri and Shirin Aliabadi, both of whom went on to have illustrious careers. A second space followed, this time in his family's retired swimming pool, and so too did dozens of groundbreaking exhibitions.

A peripatetic cosmopolitan, Ave continues to work between Paris, Tehran, and Greece. As an artist, he is in the midst of producing a set of artist books born of his drawings and collages as well as a series borne of his large collection of textiles, or *lahaf*, entitled *Shah Abbas and his Pageboy*. As a curator, he is at work on an exhibition entitled *"Fearless,"* to be shown during the next iteration of Art Dubai, which assembles what he considers the next wave of Iranian artists - he prefers this to the age-inflected term "generation" - and in part highlights their fearlessness in negotiating the occasional strictures of the Islamic Republic. Another planned show, entitled *"Cy Twombly and the Line Arabesque"* draws from his own collection of works by Twombly - the late and great American artist was a friend, mentor, and collaborator for many years - alongside works on paper by Iranian artists ranging from Amin Nazar and Koorosh Shisheqaran to Ardeshir Mohassses and Rokni Haerizadeh.

*"I don't consider them separate at all,"* he recently said about the diverse hats he wears. In fact, each piece seems to blend into the other, rendering traditional taxonomies - artist, curator, and so on - more or less irrelevant. Pivoting between past and present, East and West, art and objecthood, Ave's work belies facile definitions, making for a *gesamtwerk* without precedent.

#### ABOUT THE WRITER

Negar Azimi is a writer and Senior Editor of Bidoun. She is a recipient of the Arts Writers Award from the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts and was a 2014-2015 fellow at the Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers at the New York Public Library. She organizes occasional events in and around the arts with Pati Herfing.



Postcard Sculpture 1. Postcards from Iranestan, 2014. 3D print on card mounted on foam board. 65x50cm.  
 Postcard Sculpture 2. Postcards from Iranestan, 2014. 3D print on card mounted on foam board. 65x50cm.  
 Postcard Sculpture 6. Postcards from Iranestan, 2014. 3D print on card mounted on foam board. 65x50cm.  
 Postcard Sculpture 7. Postcards from Iranestan, 2014. 3D print on card mounted on foam board. 65x50cm.