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Iranian artists inspired by adversity

Despite restrictions in Iran, a new crop of artists creates works that blend ancient and modern history and ideas, winning acclaim at home and abroad.

By Borzou Daragahi, Los Angeles Times

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Reporting from Tehran —

His pieces have been displayed at the British Museum in London and the World Bank headquarters in Washington, been fawned over at exhibits in Venice, Amsterdam and New York, and fetched tens of thousands of dollars in auctions held by Sotheby's and Christie's.

But artist Khosrow Hassanzadeh says he was never more delighted than when a barely literate carpenter arrived at his dingy former studio to make some repairs and stood, mouth agape, staring at one of his works. It was a garish, gigantic diorama of a famous Iranian professional wrestler, decorated with cheap trinkets, fake flowers and esoteric memorabilia comprehensible only to locals in the south Tehran neighborhood.

"I do art for my neighbor," says Hassanzadeh, whose perpetual smile softens a face of severe angles as eye-catching as his larger-than-life works, which incorporate the Islamic Republic's bombastic propaganda with street-level Iranian kitsch and the playful sensibilities of Andy Warhol.

Hassanzadeh, 46, is among the most successful of a new crop of artists in Iran who seamlessly meld East and West, even as they breezily blend Iran's traditions, both hokey and classical, religious and secular, and its recent history, especially the traumas of the 1980s Iran-Iraq war, into the idioms of high art.

Although they've made a modest splash on the international circuit, they choose to remain in their homeland to feed off its ancient inspirations despite the challenges, including a new rule that requires artists to send photos of their works to the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance for clearance before sending them abroad. This work is being noticed; for instance, a show of new work by 30 Iranian artists recently opened at Los Angeles' Morono Kiang gallery and is running simultaneously with a show of the artists' work at Tehran's Aaran Gallery.

Unlike previous generations of contemporary artists, they don't hail from a specific Western-oriented elite.

They brush off the limitations, the censors, the glares of people who see their work as subversive.



"If you look at our history, at the poets, Rumi, Ferdowsi, Hafez, they were artists too," says Sadegh Tirafkan, 45, a photographer and videographer. "They were never given a chance to write about whatever they wanted. They had a lot of difficulties. Iranians just deal with that."

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Hassanzadeh was a teenager when the revolution started. He dropped out of school and became a Basiji militiaman, joined the notorious neighborhood committees that searched for morality crimes, and when the war started against Iraq, he headed to the front.

But even his Basiji mentors quickly realized where his talents lay. Instead of carrying a gun, he was asked to paint giant primary-color portraits and posters around the country of the martyrs, the tens of thousands of young men and boys who lost their lives at the front, their sacrifices immortalized on the streets of Iran's cities.

After adjusting to normal life back home, he enrolled in art school. When he first walked into a classroom for formal art training, he was stunned to see male and female students mixed. And they were equally astonished by him. "The other students were shocked that a guy who looked like me had walked in," he said. "They thought I came to raid the place."

His rebellious instincts emerged immediately. The techniques and themes of his days as a martyr painter crept back into his work. His teachers told him to "draw small" so he could sell his works. He refused. He wanted to draw giant portraits that made people laugh out loud with delight. He eventually abandoned his studies, barely lasting a year at art school.

He's been described as a pop artist. He calls it "people's art." He finds inspiration in public events such as the Ashura ceremonies commemorating the 7th century martyrdom of the Imam Hussein or the colorful lights strung up around the city to commemorate the anniversary of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's 1979 return from exile. From Imam Hussein to the pop diva Googoosh, he took the basic elements of his south Tehran district and made them internationally known.

"I make the worthless valuable," he said. "I send the most worthless things to the museums."

Though the Islamic Republic creates hardships for artists, the revolution that forged it opened art up to people like him. "Based on my background," he said, "I should have been a bazaar merchant or a drug dealer."

Critics have placed him among a group of Middle Eastern artists who've made it abroad by deconstructing the dichotomies between the East and West. "They argue that terms like 'Islamic,' 'Middle East' or even 'Iran' are loaded with religious and political subtexts and that the use of such terms in exhibition concepts draws away attention from the artistic value of their work," critic Mirjam Shatanawi wrote in Dutch journal in 2006. "Ironically, it is precisely Hassanzadeh's raw commentary on Iranian society that prompted most curators to include his work in their exhibitions."

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Not only was Golnaz Fathi recognized as one of the greatest calligraphers of her generation, she also was prized as a rare woman who had advanced so far in the ancient craft.

She had studied six or seven years at a calligraphic institute, practicing the same scripts over and over for hours a day. She worked with one of the greatest professors of calligraphy in Iran, who taught her inner peace and pure love for art. But Fathi found herself thinking unorthodox thoughts.

This was in the years after the Iran-Iraq war, when a country recovering from the trauma of a years-long conflict began questioning all of its presuppositions. Fathi began toying with the idea of

incorporating elements of painting into her work. And that was the start, the beginning of the break.

"I'm trying to break all these barriers. At the moment of painting, I don't think about any of these rules," the 39-year-old says. "I know the structure. My hand is trained as a calligraphist. But at that moment of creation, I don't think about anything. It's the battle between the ink and my brush. I make my letters dance to the candlelight."

The Tehran gallery scene — located mostly in the capital's northern expanse — is surprisingly lively, despite risks and restrictions for gallery owners, including occasional harassment and the possibility of being blacklisted for showing works that are sexually or politically risqué. Exhibitions are often magnets for intellectuals as well as art lovers and artists. Fathi loves visiting the medieval city of Esfahan and once did an entire series inspired by its blue-tiled mosques and palaces.

"The whole city is a piece of art," she says. "You have the palace of the king and the bazaar and two mosques with the beautiful topaz dome. Imagine at that time the king was living in the most public place. In the morning the people who work at the bazaar would come and work. The king comes to the balcony and he can see what is going on in the city."

Iranian artists say the challenges they face are inspirations as well as impediments.

"Even the things that hurt me, even the things I don't have, this hunger, make me work," Fathi says. "What can I do? What choice do I have? I voice this emotion through my work. Daily life is my teacher."

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The Iran-Iraq war shaped multimedia artist Sadegh Tirafkan's life as well as his work. He signed up to fight when he was 14, and spent three years on the front.

"I lost all my friends during that time," he says. "They were 15 or 16 years old. A friend of mine died and I buried him. At midnight I have dreams about that."

His early pieces reflected the conflict's sadness and despair. Many resembled photographs of funeral processions — commentaries on the Iranian obsessions with death and martyrdom as well as tributes to fallen comrades. They included portraits of himself, shrouded in fabrics decorated with symbols of Shiite Islam and ancient Iranian history, and videos of young men dressed in white walking like ghosts through bleak landscapes.

"People ask me, 'Why are your works sometimes so lonely, so depressed?' " he says. "It's because I was born here. I grew up here. I wasn't born in Switzerland. Here, life is not easy."

But in recent years, his work has undergone a transformation. His pieces include massive collages of Iranian faces, crowded together in mosaic-like patterns as part of his "Human Tapestry" series. They captured the vibrant civil society taking hold in Iran that captivated the world during the 2009 anti-government protests, which probably will serve as a source of inspiration for artists in the years to come.

"They're about the new generation," Tirafkan says. "Something changed in my life, and I wanted to have more contact with people. And get involved with them and know them more."

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