

An abstract painting featuring a dense composition of vibrant colors including red, green, blue, yellow, and purple. The background is a light, textured wash of white and cream. The foreground is dominated by dark, expressive brushstrokes and splatters, creating a sense of movement and energy. The overall style is reminiscent of gestural abstraction or expressionism.

FIERY

An abstract painting featuring a dense composition of vibrant colors including reds, oranges, yellows, greens, and purples. The background is a light, textured cream color. The painting includes various brushstrokes, splatters, and layered textures, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall style is expressive and contemporary.

ASCENT

SHAHRIAR AHMADI

PROFILE

Blurring the lines between painting and drawing and figuration and abstraction is at the core of Iranian-born Shahriar Ahmadi's creative work. **Myrna Ayad** meets him at his studio in a quiet, leafy suburb on the outer edges of Tehran.



The drive to Karaj, west of Tehran, was long and dusty and lined with trucks carrying livestock. The Alborz Mountains in the distance were capped in snow. We turned into an unassuming lane and into a leafy neighbourhood dotted with tall green trees. A sense of stillness was ever-present and the air seemed thinner, cleaner even. Peeling stickers, rusted gates and faded paint characterised the modest houses. There was no one in sight and then suddenly, a thin figure appeared, smiling. Shahriar Ahmadi walked us into his studio where huge unfinished canvases from his *Miraj* series lay against walls amidst brushes, pots and acrylic paints. "People need to watch out when I'm working," he grinned, "I'm really messy." The canvases featured a solitary figure which, at first glance, appeared to be surrounded by a frenzied blur of colour, in places dark and haunting, while in others, light and somehow 'liberated'. An instant parallel could be drawn between the thin figure who greeted us in the empty neighbourhood and the lone subject in the canvas: both are Ahmadi.

Opening spread: (Detail)
Darvazehy Behshit 2 (Heaven's Gate #2) from the *Rumi in my Chalice* series. 2008. Acrylic and pencil on canvas. 180 x 250 cm. Private collection, Dubai. Image courtesy Isabelle van den Eynde Gallery, Dubai.

Facing page: Untitled, from the *Miraj* series. 2010. Acrylic and pencil on canvas. 220 x 140 cm. Courtesy Etemad Gallery, Dubai.

"Who doesn't love Rumi? His poetry is the only thing I never get tired of and I consider his work very contemporary."



از دشمنان برگزیده شکار است در دستان
خون و دلاوری همیشگی شکار کمانم



Above: *Hayate Doostan (Life of Friends)* from the *Rumi in my Chalice* series. 2008. Acrylic and pencil on canvas. Triptych. 120 x 100 cm each. Private collection, Dubai. Image courtesy Isabelle van den Eynde Gallery, Dubai.

POETRY IN MOTION

It occurred to me that this was the first time I see figures in his works. In 2008, Ahmadi held *Rumi in my Chalice*, his first exhibition outside Iran at Dubai's Isabelle van den Eynde Gallery (formerly B21 Gallery). The series, like some others, is inspired by the 13th-century Sufi poet, and one that sees Ahmadi treat the canvas as his chalice. Into them, he pours out his own reflections on Rumi's themes of love, friendship and spirituality. "Who doesn't love Rumi?" asks Ahmadi, "his poetry is the only thing I never get tired of and I consider his work very contemporary." *Heaven's Gate #2* from the *Rumi in my Chalice* series nods to Cy Twombly's works – unregimented scribbles in bursts of colour sprawled across the canvas; in other works, the scribbles clump up in one area in a medley of

colour and thick composition. The Twombly inspiration stems from Ahmadi's MFA thesis in painting at the University of Tehran, Faculty of Arts in 2005 – "an expression of drawing in Post Modernism especially in Twombly".

Like the American Abstract Expressionist, Ahmadi obscures the boundaries between painting and drawing so that it becomes almost impossible to see where one begins and the other ends. The pieces insinuate a mystery, veering between what is hidden and what is visible. And then suddenly, a chalice becomes evident, as does delicate Farsi script – verses from Rumi's poetry appear at the base of *Heaven's Gate #2* and in his 2008 *Life of Friends* triptych; the latter work, he says, "is one of my favourites". And again like Twombly, Ahmadi's pieces take on a romantic symbolism, especially through their develop-



ment from the classics. The infusion of calligraphy traces back to Ahmadi's roots in his hometown of Kermanshah, close to the Iraqi border and where calligraphy was the most prominent art form. Ahmadi, the third of six siblings, and whose uncles were recognised calligraphers, initially dabbled with script to create portraits.

Another characteristic of his painterly technique is the white layering he creates, which consumes the canvas and almost misleads one into assuming that it is blank, whereas in reality it is anything but. "I like voids; you almost feel compelled to stare at them," he explains; "I

create a form, destroy it, then create another form over it and cover part of it and suddenly, some things appear." The process is intentional, but the accidents it generates are not, and this method is precisely one which Ahmadi welcomes for its "free-flowing movement". It allows him the opportunity to work on numerous pieces within a series; the series being approached as a single artwork which is then broken up into several pieces. "In my entire life, it feels like I'm working on one piece," he says; "I haven't reached the ultimate answer, so I keep going, believing I will never arrive at one."

“The situation in Iran means there is nothing I can do about it, so I try not to think about it.”



Above: Untitled, from the *Miraj* series. 2011. Acrylic and pencil on canvas. 180 x 130 cm. Courtesy Etemad Gallery, Dubai.

Facing page: (Detail) Untitled, from the *Miraj* series. 2010. Acrylic and pencil on canvas. Diptych. Total size: 220 x 280 cm. Courtesy Etemad Gallery, Dubai.

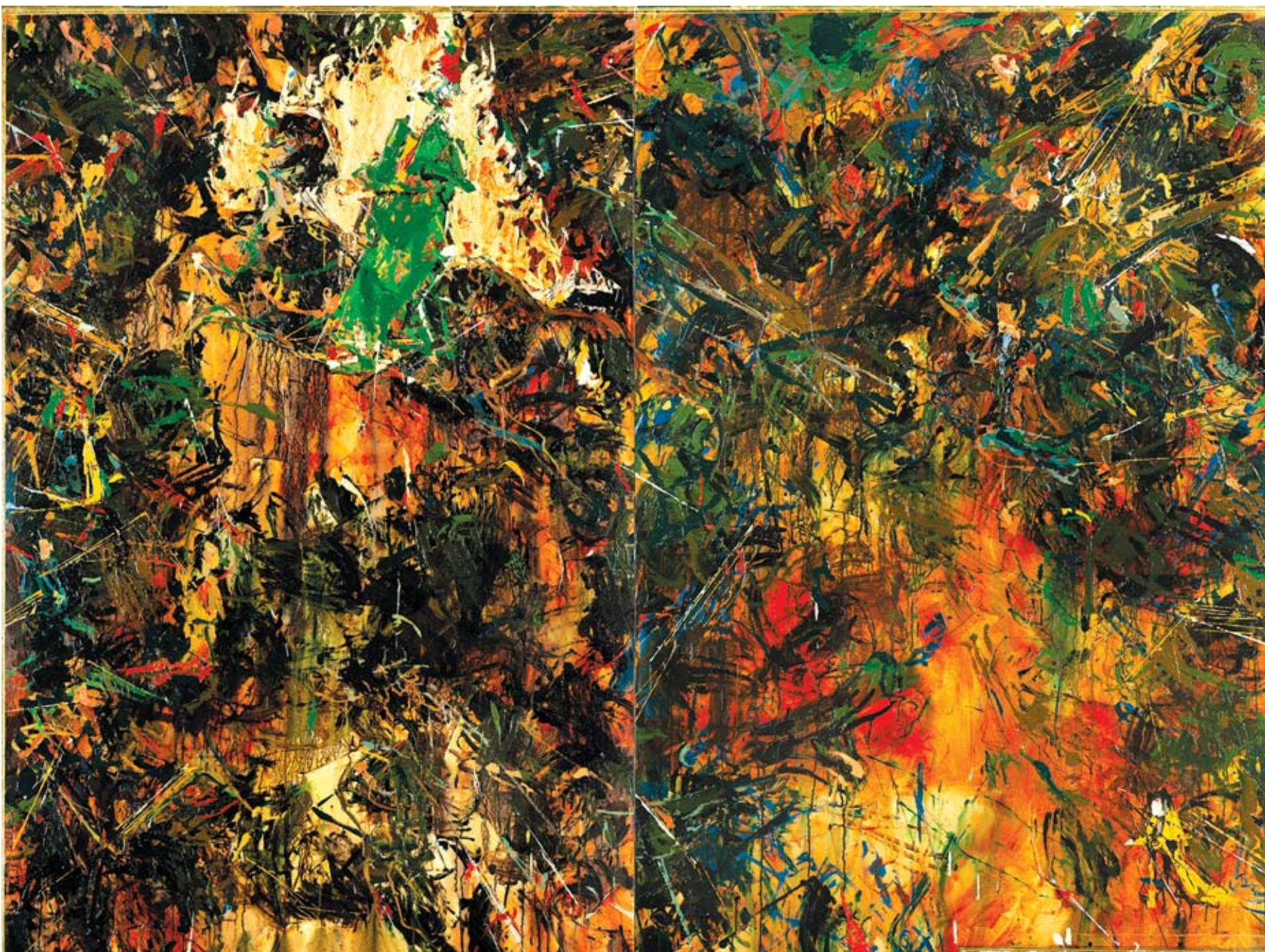
MYSTICAL MESSAGES

Ahmadi's artistic journey may have begun with calligraphy, but in the mid-1990s, took on an Impressionistic feel during his studies at the Boys' Academy of Fine Arts in Kermanshah. "I was taken by the classics," he says, "Michelangelo, Raphael, Botticelli and later, Miró and Klee." Interestingly, the first art form he was exposed to was revolutionary art through rampant propaganda on billboards and telegraph wires, or plastered and painted on the walls of buildings. Ahmadi was born in 1979, the year the Islamic Revolution swept Iran and the young boy grew up in the shadow of the later Iran-Iraq war, hints of which – "the chaos" – appear in his current body of work. However, the political climate is not something which concerns him in the least and doesn't feed into his *oeuvre*. Ahmadi prefers "not

to take life seriously", opting instead to simplify matters inasmuch as he can. "The situation in Iran means there is nothing I can do about it, so I try not to think about it," he says. This straightforward approach hasn't stopped him from censoring some of his works either.

Miraj isn't the first of Ahmadi's series to include figures; one of its predecessors was *Archaic Techniques of Lovemaking*, a body of work which, while clearly evocative of the physical relationship between a man and a woman, still leaves a lot to the imagination through Ahmadi's abstract techniques. One such example is the triptych, *Rind of Thing*, from 2010, which seeks to go beyond the physical to attain the spiritual power of a union between two. Works from *Archaic Techniques of Lovemaking*, which he is currently continuing, may appear explicit

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or obvious in their message, but are sanctified in their meaning. Ahmadi tells me he is working on a five-metre painting, “about an affair between a man and a woman and they are seen kissing” but he has taken inspiration from a verse from *Soorat Al-Baqara* in the Qur’an which discusses a couple’s union. Reverting to spiritual and religious texts is part and parcel of his *modus operandi* – from Rumi and Sufism to Islam and the Qur’an, Ahmadi also references great Persian poets, Buddhism, the Old Testament and classical Persian miniatures, the latter in particular providing insight into *Miraj* and the inclusion of apparent figures.

PRIVATE HELL

“I look at Figurative pieces in a very abstract motion and vice versa, so I’m merging the move in my composition,” he explains. Our ensuing discussion proves that there is more to it than that. Ahmadi’s latest series takes its name from a journey, *Miraj*, which the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) took on the mythological steed, *buraq*, to the heavens where he spoke with fellow prophets and was then taken by the angel Gabriel to meet God. “This moment is one of a lot of significance in the Prophet’s life,” adds

Ahmadi, “it’s when he encountered heaven and God.” The Prophet’s journey is not only physical but also spiritual and Ahmadi’s *Miraj* tackles the latter. He builds on the Prophet’s ascension as a metaphor for enlightenment, while weaving his own personal experience into it. In Ahmadi’s version, the “angels of death” which hover around him – the lone horseman – threaten his ‘elevation’; the series portrays an almost blow-by-blow account of the rider’s rise through – and above – the chaotic cacophony of colours, figures and abstract gestures, all of which are allegories for bad energy, jealousy and treachery, but which particularly symbolise Ahmadi’s “circle of friends who betrayed me”.

An untitled diptych from the series lays bare an infernal scene; daubs of reds and oranges appear like flames licking the canvas, the black blotches are charred areas, but in the top left, the lone horseman appears and around him, light. He is making his way through the anguish. To further the figure’s divine identity, Ahmadi has made him faceless in conjunction with the Islamic belief that the Prophet is not to be depicted; his cloak is green and his turban red – colours that are associated with Islamic holy figures. “It’s more like hell on earth, but it’s actually the sky,” adds Ahmadi. Looking at the

Below: Untitled from the *Archaic Techniques of Lovemaking* series. 2009. Acrylic on canvas. Triptych. Total size: 260 x 585 cm. Courtesy AB Gallery, Luzern .

Facing page: (Detail) Untitled, from the *Miraj* series. 2011. Acrylic and pencil on canvas. 140 x 320 cm. Courtesy Etemad Gallery, Dubai.






“I’ve taken a very Eastern philosophy towards this situation. I have forgiven and will strive to do good to other people.”

work, I am reminded of French philosopher and writer Jean-Paul Sartre and his assertion, ‘Hell is other people’. This is Ahmadi’s hell, a place in which he is alone and isolated, brought on by feelings of betrayal from his nearest and dearest. “I’ve taken a very Eastern philosophy towards this situation,” he explains. “I have forgiven and will strive to do good to other people.”

His latest exhibition in Dubai’s Etemad Gallery last May was carefully curated to communicate a process – one which began in 2009 and ended only recently. The central piece is the inferno; the fiery pit in the middle and through which one has to pass before being purified. There is a nod to Dante’s *Divine Comedy* here. And like all dark tunnels, there is light at its end. But surely, painting such a tormenting – and then

enlightening – experience is a release, a purge of negative energy, an awakening, a new chapter? “Of course there is relief,” Ahmadi agrees; “Petty jealousy and betrayal will always be present but they don’t become overriding issues; they become omnipresent.” After the flames, we see the same lone horseman, still riding above the bedlam, but amidst asexual angels dispersed across a layered white canvas. Even here, viewers aren’t aware of the angels’ intentions. “It’s a riddle I’ve created,” says Ahmadi, “and I prefer for the audience to wonder and for this to be an open interpretation.” 

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