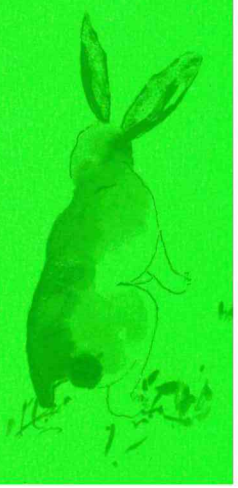
canvas

ART AND CULTURE FROM THE MIDDLE EAST AND ARAB WORLD

THE POWER 50

2013



AED 45 | QR 65 | BD/OR 7 | SR 90 | LBP 32,000 | US$25 | £15.00 | €16

Published out of the Dubai Technology and Media Free Zone Authority.

ISSN 1814-7062

ARTIST IN WONDERLAND

The late Farideh Lashai's expressive and emblematic works are the subject of three exhibitions this spring. **Roger Mandle** previews the Iranian artist's shows and her broad range of style and content.

Though Farideh Lashai and New York dealer Leila Heller had been working together for some years now, 4 April will see the late artist's debut solo at Heller's eponymous gallery (LHG). The day before will see another first solo by Lashai at Edward Tyler Nahem Fine Art, also in the Big Apple. And less than a month before that and in collaboration with LHG, a large-scale video work, *Between the Motion/And the Act/Falls the Shadow*, will be presented at Art Dubai through the fair's *Projects* section. In addition, LHG will exhibit work by Lashai through its booth. Three consecutive exhibitions presenting the complex emotional and symbolic works of one of Iran's leading Contemporary artists is impressive, to say the least, but is also appropriate recognition of the impact of Lashai's work.

Conversations regarding this triple showcase began months ago. While LHG had presented works by Lashai through its participation at art fairs around the world, the staging of a solo show had been a longstanding conversation, hiccoughed by the artist's suffering from cancer, from which she succumbed on 24 February. The relationship with Nahem, on the other hand, began when he first acquired works by Lashai in 2010. "From the moment I set eyes on Farideh's work, I was beset with a sense of stumbling upon a mythical and unfamiliar landscape," says Nahem. "Not unlike cracking the spine of a Tolkien story, here was a hitherto unknown world into which I could escape and explore." He became a friend and then a dealer, showing her works through his gallery's participation at ARCO and Zona Maco art fairs. "The way he appreciated and supported my work, especially as someone who does not have obvious bonds to Iran or the Middle East, really affected me," said Lashai weeks before her passing. "It showed a scope of sensitivity for apprehending something utterly different than oneself, which convinced me that, along with Leila (Heller), he would be an amazing translator for my work in the USA." *Between the Motion/And the Act/Falls the Shadow* (acquired by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art) had been shown at the Saatchi Gallery during Frieze Week last year. For its presentation at Art Dubai, an inter-screen space between the two projections will be turned into a virtual café "for the audience to participate in a collective historical experience of the 'café-cabaret' life," explained Lashai. The two 15-minute linked compilations of epigrammatic film shots seek to revive the popular and lowbrow culture that was symbolic of Iranian nightlife of the 1950s–70s. The piece sees the artist imply that male chauvinism has not disappeared in today's Iran.

BIG APPLE IMPACT

Both New York shows will present Lashai's video/painting works. Edward Tyler Nahem will exhibit *El-Amal*, in which the artist appropriates footage from Charlie Chaplin's celebrated 1940 comedy-drama *The Great Dictator*. Chaplin's character balances a huge ball and then sends it bouncing into the air, where it continuously hits the enlarged face of famous Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum, who peers down at the performer while she sings her legendary song, *El-Amal*. Lashai's disgust with despotism,

Facing page: Above: *El-Amal*. 2011. Projected animation on painting with sound. 200 x 200 cm. Below: (Detail, video still) *Catching the Moon*. 2010-12. Sound and projected animation in a water-well of stainless steel. 4:30 minutes. 64 cm x 70 cm.

All images courtesy Leila Heller Gallery, New York.

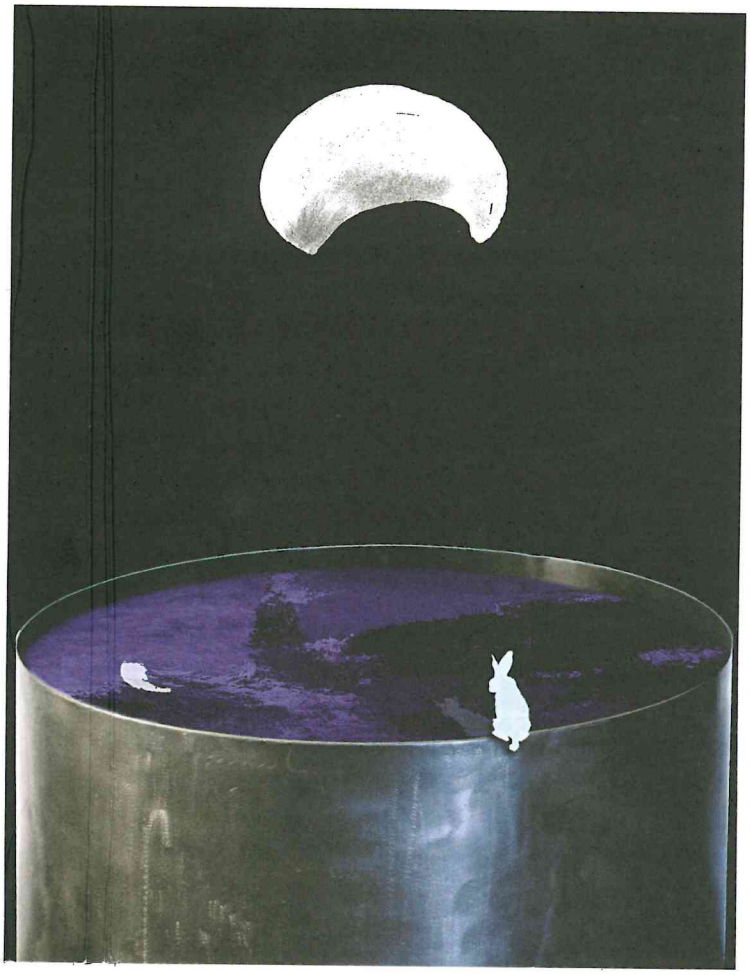


even in her humorous rendition of comical dictators is evident. "Both exhibitions [in New York] and my work in the past few years are about the 'staging' of an act; about sites that reveal an embryonic role for certain events," explained Lashai. "In my case, they have been pregnant with the shattering terror of war and violence. Their beauty is sinking with the gravity of obscene historical violence. The stillness of the static scenes is reminiscent of a peaceful memory, until light revives the violence embedded in the fabric of each site."

Another gallery at Edward Tyler Nahem will present *Le Déjeneur Sur l'Herbe*, named after the scandalous 1863 painting by Manet, which depicts a nude woman, a female bather and two fully dressed men having a picnic. Lashai's video replaces the sitters in Manet's painting with a contemporary Iranian trio accompanied by the underlay of Iranian texts and other images. In creating a sardonic twist on the well-known painting's subject matter, Lashai's work immerses one in a pose that takes the viewer across centuries and boundaries in a seamless transformation of young Iranians into the sitters; the conservatism that each work met during its own day is obvious.

The exhibition, *Rabbit in Wonderland Part II*, at LHG tells the brief history of modern Iran through the lens of Alice in Wonderland. "It includes a few historical scenes that were significant in shaping the Iranian condition," explained Lashai. Sound and animations projected on painted landscape backgrounds

Lashai created an *oeuvre* that has been called phantasmagorical and ethereal.



hark to the lost world of Lewis Carroll overlaid with overtones of Iranian mysticism, political intrigue and danger. Rabbits – gently hopping around Lashai's video/paintings – appear to be unaware of the fates that will befall them, and yet are seemingly undefeatable beings. In another animated painting ensemble, Lashai has created the rabbit hole using the map of Iran to introduce the rabbit and the viewer, through the efforts of the Cheshire cat, into the Wonderland of Iran. In another animated painting, Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, revered for seeking to nationalise the country's oil industry, encounters the rabbit. Finally, in a most overtly ominous work, ravens dare the rabbit and the viewer to join them in a feast. "When you look at the history of Middle Eastern art, Farideh is one of the few women who have played a role in shaping its trajectory," says Heller.

Indeed, Lashai's work over her 40-year career has migrated from paintings to a more experimental merging of painting, sound and animation, dominated by a sardonically poetic interpretation of the loss and memory of Iran's cultural heritage. Romance, nostalgia and fear combine in the effects which Lashai created in an *oeuvre* that has been called phantasmagorical and ethereal. The trio of major exhibitions of Lashai's work is particularly timely, especially as its intended meaning strikes such a relevant chord.

Farideh Lashai's shows run from 3 April–3 May at Edward Tyler Nahem Fine Art and from 4–27 April at Leila Heller Gallery. For more information visit www.leilahellergallery.com and www.edwardtylernahemfineart.com