

## ARTS

# Iranian works in the spotlight

Roshi Rahnama's AdvocArtsy aims to give Middle Eastern artists more exposure with pop-up shows.

BY DEBORAH VANKIN

Roshi Rahnama, a former attorney who grew up in Tehran and immigrated to California with her family in 1979, is an art collector and member of the Art of the Middle East Contemporary Council for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. She knows scores of talented artists, particularly from Iran. And from her dealings with galleries and LACMA, she's plugged into the fine art world.

But she saw a disconnect, she says, between the two milieus. She thought there should be a way to connect artists, galleries and collectors and bring awareness to artists of Middle Eastern descent. It's something Rahnama's been thinking about for more than five years.

This year, she did something about it. She started the L.A.-based organization AdvocArtsy to provide exposure for underrepresented artists through a series of pop-up exhibitions.

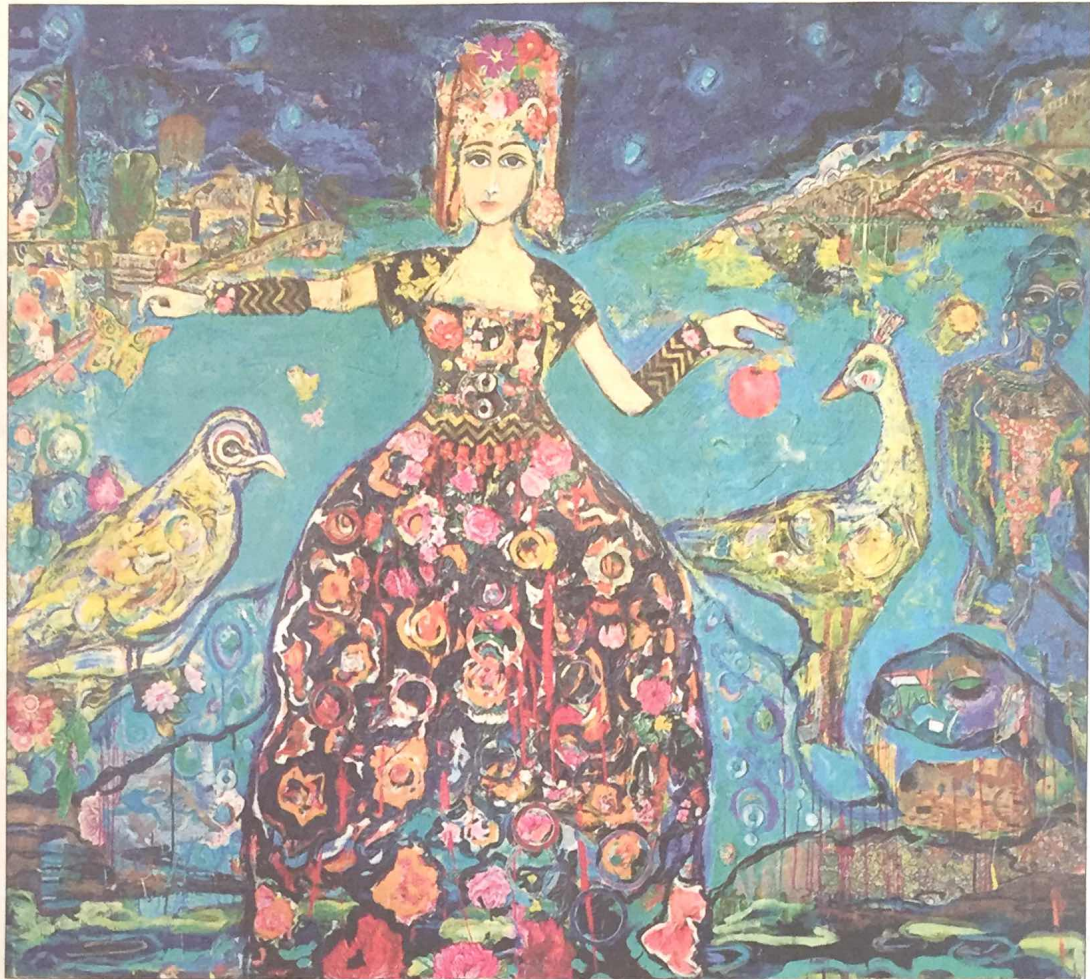
Earlier this month, AdvocArtsy debuted its inaugural pop-up installation, "Art Brief: Iranian Contemporary Los Angeles," a show that featured 12 local Iranian and Iranian American contemporary artists. The exhibition of painting, sculpture and photography, co-curated by Rahnama and art critic Peter Frank, consisted of artists from a variety of backgrounds.

"But if there's one idea that binds the work, it's identity," Rahnama says. "That just emerged, naturally." AdvocArtsy plans another group exhibition in May, "Arts Brief 2," co-curated by Rahnama and Frank.

We talked with Rahnama about the need for more exposure for Middle Eastern artists in this edited conversation:

**Do you feel Iranian artists are under-represented in the art world?**

There is an awareness throughout the art world of the significance of Iranian and Middle Eastern art. You see it in the activities and recent sales in Dubai — the showing of collectors at Christie's in Dubai a few years back was very indicative of interest in Iranian art — and all the art shows and gallery activities in Doha, Qatar, and all across the Middle East art market. Even in Los Angeles, LACMA has its Art of the Middle East Contemporary and interest in acquiring Iranian art for the main collection, and MOCA has acquired pieces by Iranian artists. But I do feel there's work to do to bring awareness to the community at large. There's art being created; there's interest to be generated. There's a vibrant community here, and I felt that by creating



FARIBA AMERI'S "River of Eden" was part of AdvocArtsy's first pop-up installation, "Art Brief: Iranian Contemporary Los Angeles."

more fluid connections we could generate a spark.

**There's an explosion of contemporary art coming out of Tehran right now. Why do you think it's happening?**

Iranian and Middle Eastern art is exploding in general, but especially in Tehran. In the past few years they've had the Tehran Auction that's been so successful and well attended. The amount of money that's poured into the art in Iran has just been astonishing, even for the organizers [of such events]. There's significant wealth in Iran. Certainly the financial well-being that's present there helps the patronage of the arts. And there's people from other countries who support Iranian art. Iranian art is not just exclusive to Iranians. Very savvy collectors are collecting established Iranian art and looking for the next best thing.

It's also a way for people to socially engage with the world, perhaps, and become an active participant in social and cultural ways that might not be available otherwise. So it's the combination of those two things, along with the vibrant artistic expression coming from the artists who are residing in Iran and outside Iran.

**Tell us more about the recent "Art Brief" exhibition.**

Our intention was to showcase a sample of what is happening in L.A., in the fine arts, in this community. It's not at all comprehensive; there are probably hundreds of Iranian artists actively working in Los Angeles, and this [was] a 12-artist show. But we did invite collaboration. Peter Frank and I thought it would be most appropriate and relevant based on the mission of AdvocArtsy to include more artists than just those repped by AdvocArtsy. So it's a wide range.

There was no theme; the show is very much focused on good art being generated by artists who just happen to be of Iranian origin. I have noticed from artists of Iranian background, though, that there is generally a theme of identity that runs through the work. Some of that is very evident, but for each artist in a very different way.

Kamran Sharif has taken on the most significant symbol of Iranian heritage, which is the Cyrus Cylinder, a symbol of freedom and religious tolerance. Rebecca Setareh's sculptures, bronze and rock works, are a much more personal expression of identity. Shilla Shakoori,

**'There's a vibrant community here, and I felt that by creating more fluid connections we could generate a spark.'**

— ROSHI RAHNAMA, founder of AdvocArtsy and "Art Brief" co-curator

one of our emerging artists, did an image of a woman with red ribbons through her dress with a floral explosion on the head; she's really influenced by the teachings of the Iranian poet Rumi. Hadi Salehi, a photographer, does text writing on images in Farsi. He's been living in the U.S. for many years but is very grounded in his Iranian heritage. It's not necessarily a message, but the concept of writing text over the images and bringing in the language elements. One of the most interesting dichotomies is with Homeira Aframian, who does figurative work based on nude models. She has a background in Persian miniatures and she's now come full circle with the figurative nude work that

she did in her past series. She's combined the two of them for this show, with aspects of Persian miniatures and figurative work in painting. It's very interesting.

**Was the show intended to be political at all?**

It was not intended to be political; if anything, it was [meant] to dismantle certain perceptions of what art you might see from Iranian artists. There has always been this concept of conflict or making political statements through art, which are very prevalent ideas in certain Iranian artworks as artists reflect what's around them. But there's so much more. There's statements of personal triumph, there's statements of beauty and statements of community that we tried to perpetuate through the show that is embedded within thousands of years of Iranian heritage. The label "Iranian" contains within it so much more than what is represented in the news or the media. The wide range of expression in the show vouches for that diversity.

**In the current political climate, do you worry about backlash against the show from uninformed people?**

It never really crossed

my mind. Maybe I operate from a naive standpoint, but I feel that art is universal and without boundary and is probably the most connective language amongst people. I can see that some people might have certain stereotypical reactions to the word "Iranian," but I don't operate from that platform personally and I'm grounded in the realm of creativity in this project. Even if I had thought about it, I wouldn't have allowed such a thought process to get in the way of bringing forth such an incredible array of works with the best of intentions for the community to learn, engage and grow from.

**Do you plan to stage "Art Brief" annually?**

We're still figuring it out. I'm in conversation with people about the next thing and putting a program together. I've initiated the license process to work with Iranian galleries and artists directly. There might be the possibility of future shows involving artists from Iran to be showcased in L.A. and other platforms in Iran.

For more information on AdvocArtsy, check [www.advocartsy.com](http://www.advocartsy.com), [deborah.vankin@latimes.com](mailto:deborah.vankin@latimes.com), or [Twitter: @debvankin](https://twitter.com/debvankin)