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## PRETTY COOL

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# BRIDGING B O R D E R S

As we move into a period of mass migration, these are the artists and institutions using their medium to promote greater cultural understanding

Words by Laura Beaney



Shulamit Nazarian with Iranian-American artist Pouya Afshar's piece, *Generals*

One of the great societal problems of today is that we are often left feeling untouched and desensitised by the problems of others. It's apparent everywhere – from our approach to the Syrian refugee crisis to our acceptance of climate change. It's the time of round-the-clock news reportage, live surveillance, increased access to transport and constant communication, yet when we're confronted with a crisis of humanity, what can we do to help? Despite our interconnectedness, there's little sense that we're part of a global community. Rather than becoming empowered and armed for action, the influx of information we receive can leave us feeling overwhelmed and distanced from the problem. But what influence does art have over our perception of others? That's the question that artists and institutions in the East and West are increasingly trying to address.

Art, unlike spoken language, is universal. It has the ability to convey complex ideas and reach individuals across generations, geographical borders, and between different social hierarchies. Engaging with art is an emotional experience: it stimulates the senses, and by observing it we can empathise with the 'feelings' of the artist or their subject and experience the world-view of another. And it's with this viewpoint that many in the art world are using their medium to bridge two worlds and generate greater cultural understanding. "Art is a universal language that seeks truth where grammar may attempt to conceal," explains Shilla Shakoori, a contemporary Iranian artist and illustrator who currently lives between Los Angeles and Chicago. "It's the pursuit of this truth that I find exciting. What we commonly refer to as 'Iranian culture' is actually a collection of sentiments and reinforced heritage that are also practiced among many human groups throughout the world," she continues. "I find these similarities amazing windows of opportunity to explore our great commonalities with everything living around us."

Shilla, whose artistic output explores the synthesis between native and adopted cultures is one of the many artists who believes her work can uncover cultural truisms, which is of particular importance today, as we are faced with a period of mass migration. "Within our market-driven American culture, where efficiency has supplanted deep understanding, we have created shortcuts to understanding each other that have led to greater alienation from one another," she says. "We have these divides within many categories of beings: urban versus suburban, southern versus northern, black versus white, men versus women. I make an effort to have my artistic creations informed of the existence of these divides, while acknowledging the greater commonalities that bond us together."

And like many from the Middle Eastern diaspora, Shilla has made a home for herself in California. The state is, in fact, home to the largest number of Arabs in the US, while Southern California is home to the greatest

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Contemporary Iranian artist Shilla Shakoori



*It's A Journey* by Shilla Shakoori

concentration of Iranians in the world, outside of Iran. Within these communities, there is much diversity. The Iranian community is, for example, made up of several sects of Islam as well as Jews, Christians, and Baha'is, while the communities from the Arab world include a strong concentration of Lebanese, Syrians and Egyptians, as well as Palestinians and Jordanians – encompassing a mixture of faiths that span from Islam to Christianity and smaller sects like the Druze. As a result of the ever-shifting social and political dynamic of the Middle East and the historical conflict between nations, tensions can often come to a head in everyday social situations, and even rear themselves in the liberal Californian arts scene, as reflected in a 2014 *Los Angeles Times* article headlined: "Some 'walk right out' of LA gallery with Israeli, Iranian artists." But art is known to break the rules, and has the power to identify new and unprecedented ways of tackling contemporary issues. The gallerist behind the exhibition being reported was Iranian-born Shulamit Nazarian, who sat on the board of the Santa Monica Museum of Art, belongs to the Art of the Middle East Contemporary at

the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and through her NGO, the Shulamit Nazarian Foundation, and eponymous gallery, is championing art's capacity to strengthen communities and cement intercultural bridges. Shulamit shares a commonality with many of the Iranian diaspora that populate LA: she left because of the revolution at the age of 15, and hasn't been back since. When she established her first gallery in 2012, she started by showcasing Middle Eastern art by the likes of artists such as Amir H. Fallah, who works with the immigrant community in LA to create portraits that investigate the feeling of being an outsider, and Elham Rokni, whose video installations and drawings investigate memory and emotion through the lens of extreme daily situations and her personal history as an immigrant. Of its ethos, her foundation states: "Artists have the ability to tap into a deeper part of ourselves and expose truths that can help us become better neighbours, better citizens and better people." Another gallerist who uses her platform to share the diverse messages of her culture is Roshni Rahnama, who works with contemporary Iranian artists including



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My aim is to create a visual link between the present day and challenge the political ‘exclusion of memories’ from Palestine’s past.

*Hazem Harb*

*The Place Is Mine #1 by Hazem Harb*



Palestinian artist Hazem Harb, courtesy of Tabari Artspace

Shadi Yousefian, Pouya Afshar, Sepideh Salehi, Shahram Karimi and Dana Nehdaran. “Art is the unifying language that brings people together in a non-verbal manner and thus connects communities beyond boundaries,” she says. “In my opinion, there is no time better than the present to bring communities together through art, and we are thrilled to bridge gaps by bringing attention to great works by Iranian contemporary artists and the dialogue embedded in their work.” Roshie is the founder of the LA-based Advocartsy, a project she started in 2015 to elevate engagement with and awareness of contemporary Iranian art. Her latest public activation is a multi-artist show entitled *Art Brief IV*, which has moved outside of LA for the first time, to San Francisco. The aim for the exhibition is to offer a unique point of access and convergence, providing a concentrated opportunity to introduce several artists of Iranian heritage to the community at one time. “The work of the 22 artists in this exhibition seeks to explore the diverse ways in which artists of Iranian background in diaspora create and define ‘Iranian

Contemporary Art’,” says Roshie. “It speaks to the various artistic reactions and reflections: to the realities of identity formation in diaspora, the pain and joy of exile, the call of nostalgia, and the fragmentation of the self.” Institutions like the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) have also been instrumental in forging positive partnerships with the Middle East. In October 2018, Saudi Arabia’s new museum The King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture opened with the ‘Damascus Room’ – an 18th century room on loan from LACMA, with Dr. Linda Komaroff, curator of Islamic art and head of Middle Eastern art at the institution in attendance. At the moment LACMA is the only major museum in the US that actively collects and exhibits Middle Eastern art, and it has also made headway with the initiation of LACMA Art of the Middle East (AME). The AME department is actively acquiring works from reputable Middle Eastern artists and is building a library of contemporary art books that is set to become a key resource for researchers and historians on the Middle East.

In parallel, the Gulf has been working hard to establish itself as a centre for culture, with auction houses like Christie’s and Sotheby’s and the opening of international institutions like the Louvre and Guggenheim. And the regional galleries are playing a pivotal role too, acting as a platform for Middle Eastern artists to reach an international audience. Tabari Artspace specialises in modern and contemporary Middle Eastern art, but their



Works by Sepideh Salehi, courtesy of Advocartsy

mission has always been to nurture the rising talent of the region and offer its artists an opportunity for international exposure, through participation in art fairs and the relationships they cultivate with significant private collections and museums. One of its represented artists, Hazem Harb, who comes from Palestine and is based between the UAE and Italy, was recently selected to exhibit his works at LACMA. An avid collector of memorabilia that dates back to the years before and during the British rule, Hazem sources film posters, coins, letters, and pre-Nakba maps with the aim of reaffirming the collective memories of his country. In his most recent works, Hazem overlaps these materials with enlarged black-and-white photographs, detailing previously unseen fragments from Palestinian history, and reframes these historical elements in a contemporary context using jarring coloured acrylic panels to isolate a particular segment of the image. “My aim is to create a visual link between the present day and challenge the political ‘exclusion of memories’ from Palestine’s past,” he says. “As an artist, I want to open up a new cultural dialogue between new people, surrounding the memory and identity of my people. By having my works displayed internationally, I hope I can achieve this.” As the artist highlights, it’s this type of discussion that shows art’s capability to expand our understanding of the world, and those from unknown cultures. Art not only educates, but also has the ability to make us more tolerant to the differences of others.

Left to right: Artist Shadi Yousefian with gallerist Roshie Rahnama

