



ADVOCARTSY

# Nicky Nodjoumi: Let's Talk

A Solo Exhibition

December 6, 2023 - January 13, 2024



Launched in 2015 in Los Angeles, ADVOCARTSY acts as an incubator for emerging and established Iranian artists in diaspora, with a mission to transcend borders and connect artists of Iranian origin to arts institutions, museums and collectors in the United States and worldwide. In 2021, ADVOCARTSY relocated its exhibition space from Downtown Los Angeles to West Hollywood.





ADVOCARTSY is proud to present *Let's Talk*, a solo exhibition showcasing 12 iconic works on canvas by seminal Iranian modern artist Nicky Nodjoui, addressing the relationship between politics and power. Revolutionary in both spirit and practice, Nodjoui's paintings have driven social and political discourse across continents for five decades.

This is Nodjoui's first solo exhibition in Los Angeles and at ADVOCARTSY, held in conjunction with the Los Angeles Limited Theatrical Release of *A Revolution on Canvas*— a hybrid political thriller and verité portrait documentary, by Sara Nodjoui and Till Schauder, that dives into the mystery surrounding the disappearance of more than 100 “treasonous” paintings by her father.

Nicky Nodjoui was born in Kermanshah, Iran in 1942. After earning a Bachelor's degree in Art from Tehran University of Fine Arts, Nodjoui relocated to the United States in the late 1960s, where he received his Master's degree in Fine Arts from The City College of New York in 1974. Returning to Tehran to join the faculty of his alma mater, Nodjoui continued the journey of political engagement that has been foundational to his work across decades. He began designing political posters inspired by the revolutionary spirit sweeping the country, only to be exiled once more in the aftermath of the 1979 revolution.

Nodjoui's political engagement has continued to the present day. His nuanced figurative paintings engage in political discourse with a light, satirical touch, layering his personal heritage and lived experiences in Iran and the United States into scenes that resonate beyond specific contexts or geographical boundaries. Nodjoui's works are conceived as theatrical stages where compositions of figures both serious and ridiculous, in the words of Phong Bui, “house meanings without irony, narratives without stories, humor without morality, above all creating a space that heightens the awareness of old and new history.” Serious in subject matter and witty in execution, these rich and diverse characters enliven Nodjoui's narratives and allude to collective experiences underpinned by sociopolitical struggles, articulating the full spectrum of feelings from aggression to victimhood.

Nicky Nodjoui's works are in several prominent institutional collections worldwide, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the British Museum in London, Guggenheim Museum in Abu Dhabi, the DePaul Art Museum in Chicago, and the National Museum of Cuba. The artist lives and works in Brooklyn.



Since the beginning of his career as an artist in 1970s Tehran and New York, Nicky Nodjoui has been a witness to the abuses of power and the resistance to those abuses. His early paintings are experimental and eclectic, successfully synthesizing New York School art tendencies, contemporary Iranian politics and Persian manuscript and wall painting traditions.

Going against current trends, Nodjoui chose figuration instead of abstraction. Regarding his western sources, Nodjoui drew inspiration from Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Francis Bacon and, more surprisingly, the early 20<sup>th</sup> century photographer of movement Edward Muybridge. This early hybrid style would leave traces in his mature works, as would his lifelong concern for human rights.

After a long period of gestation and formal experimentation, Nodjoui re-emerged like a clap of thunder on the New York art scene in 2013. His ascent began with his curatorial collaboration with Shirin Neshat on the retrospective of Iranian political satirist Ardeshir Mohasses' work at Asia Society Museum in New York in 2008. This was followed by his participation in *Iran Modern*, the first major survey of post-war Iranian art presented at Asia Society in 2013 and, in the same year, a solo show at the Taymour Grahne Gallery, both in New York city. His overtly political paintings were singled out for praise by the New York Times' leading art critic Holland Cotter as "bruise-dark.. emergency art. The sound of alarms still surrounds it"- perhaps the most eloquent and sensitive assessment of his works yet penned. (New York Times, October 17, 2013)

Nodjoui's signature style as it developed since that era, is evidenced by the selection of large-scale masterfully painted works in this show, which covers the decade from 2012-2023. Both figural and political, subversive and surrealistic, the mature work now utilizes a cosmopolitan yet personal visual language drawn from myriad sources.

On one level, the works are rooted in the present, presenting dreamlike sequences of doom, ambivalence, irony and eroticism which evoke comparison with the 18<sup>th</sup> century Spanish master Francisco Goya's 1799 masterwork, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*. Nodjoui's coded visual language complicates the viewer's reading of his work as if both their execution and our perception take place under the watchful eye of the censor. The artist also uses humor to undercut the seriousness of his themes and constantly challenges the dominance and authority of his male figures with sarcasm. With Nodjoui, the clown is never far from the surface and the circus band plays on. Stylistically, the artist both challenges and plays with his viewers. The division of the painting surface, the dislocated body parts, multiple viewpoints and the use of transparency are all deliberate strategies used to disorient the audience.

In some scenes, black-clad, masked male figures and coldly erotic female nudes enact mysterious ceremonies not unlike scenes from Stanley Kubrick's 1999 film *Eyes Wide Shut*. In others, struggles for power and dominance are visualized by phantasmagoric scenes of corporate and religious figures fighting mano a mano, marching, struggling unsuccessfully to contain blazing fires or enacting mysterious rituals around symbolic dreamlike objects from Nodjoumi's subconscious such as chairs or a giant shoe.

On another level, the title *We The Witnesses*, bears a powerful message resonant with ancient Iranian cultural and religious traditions and evokes the artist's earlier interest in the figure of Mani as artist, martyr and symbol of dissent. The concept of *Shahid*-witnessing- is rooted in Shiite religious practices and in the yearly commemoration of the 7<sup>th</sup> c Battle of Kerbela, the major site of Shiite martyrdom. The sense that we are all, if not martyrs, then witnesses to their suffering and bravery is a compelling one in face of the events in Iran in 2022.

However, the present is never far from the artist's mind and two works from 2023 evoke the Zan, Zendegi, Azadi movement: in the first, a nude woman boldly challenges the long-robed clerics as they turn their backs on her. The second painting of a hooded man and overturned chair evokes universal imagery of torture yet also the very specific tragic current circumstances of the numerous political prisoners in Iran.

To conclude, Nodjoumi has always been an activist and a rebel. In this series, he appropriates Shiite terminology central to the Islamic regime in Iran and transforms its meaning completely into a battle cry against all forms of oppression. The power of his works lies in their ability to transcend the local and achieve a universal significance.

Layla S. Diba



Layla S. Diba is an independent art advisor, scholar and curator specializing in the art of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Iran. Herself of Iranian-American heritage, she has devoted her career to increasing understanding between Iranians and Americans through the arts.

She held the post of Director and Chief Curator of the Negarestan Museum of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Iranian Art in Tehran from its inception in 1975 until 1978. Under her leadership, the holdings of the museum increased from a few hundred items to more than three thousand artworks. After moving to the United States in 1979, she became the Brooklyn Museum of Art's Curator of Islamic Art from 1990-2000. During her tenure, she organized the highly successful exhibition, *Royal Persian Paintings: The Qajar Epoch (1785-1925)*, the first major international presentation on 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Persian art and culture.

Subsequently, she continued her advisory and scholarly activities with other major American Institutions and foundations, including the Encyclopedia Iranica Foundation, the Farhang Foundation, the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi Museum the Board of Trustees of the National Museum of Asian Art, Charles Lang Freer and Arthur M. Sackler Galleries and the National Endowment for the Humanities. She also mentors many young scholars who turn to her as a resource for documenting 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Iranian art history.

In 2013-14 she co-curated the groundbreaking exhibition *Iran Modern* at Asia Society Museum in New York and coedited the accompanying publication. Her publications on Iranian 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century art include three monographs and over fifty scholarly articles. She is also a popular media personality and expert on Iranian art and culture, participating in programs such as a BBC Persian and Iran International historical series, and the 2021 Roqo podcast on 20<sup>th</sup> century Iranian History.

Dr. Diba currently sits on the Board of The Soudavar Memorial Foundation as well as on the Visiting Committee of the Islamic Art Department of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In 2023 she has been the recipient of the Ellis Island Award and honored as a Woman of Influence by the Iranian American Women's Foundation.

Current projects include the publication of *The Invention of the Modern Iranian Landscape: Mohammad Ghaffari Kamal al Molk's Paintings of Mazandaran* and *Art in Peril: The Case of the Negarestan Museum and its Collections of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Iranian Art*.



The personal is political<sup>1</sup>—a sentiment which is reflected in Nodjoumi’s work time and again. It is evident that Nodjoumi’s paintings are highly political, yet subtle hints to his personal life can be found in the commonly used motifs that he often incorporates within his compositions. Nodjoumi’s use of political figures, men in suits (representing generic politicians), and absurd, overlapping, and disjointed scenes echo the chaos of global politics of which we are all inextricably a part. Yet, when one knows more about the artist’s history, the canvas is heavy with sentimentality. Nodjoumi’s personal background is that of an activist. Early in Nodjoumi’s career, while studying at City College in New York from 1972-1974, he started attending rallies for several political groups, including the Confederation of Iranian Students and anti-Vietnam War protests.<sup>2</sup> During this time, he began designing and making silkscreen-printed political posters at the Confederation’s workshop, many of which criticized the Iranian monarch Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (r. 1941–1979) and announced news of political prisoners facing death or imprisonment. However, at the time, he did not view these posters as works of art so much as a means of spreading information about what was happening in Iran.

After graduation Nodjoumi had always planned to go back to Iran to teach at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Tehran University. However, news of his political activities in New York made it back to the shah’s secret police (known as SAVAK). Upon his return, he was contacted by the SAVAK and asked to come in for questioning. Every other day he was brought in for interrogation where he would sit alone for hours in an empty room containing only one other chair. This image of the single unoccupied chair stayed with Nodjoumi and has become a common motif for the artist, as seen in multiple works presented here. As a result of this interrogation, Nodjoumi was forbidden to ever teach in Iran, though he was granted permission to continue to exhibit artworks once a year.<sup>3</sup> Nodjoumi’s circumstances in Iran did not get any easier after the Islamic Revolution in 1979, when the monarch was replaced by the first Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1979-1989). Rather, two days after his 1980 exhibition opened at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, his

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1- This slogan, made famous by the second-wave feminist movement (1960s – 1980s), was coined by feminist activist Carol Hanisch in 1968. See Theresa Man Ling Lee, “Rethinking the Personal and the Political: Feminist Activism and Civic Engagement,” *Hypatia* 22, no. 79–163 :(2007) 4. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4640110>.

2- In a 2021 interview with independent scholar and collector Houman Sarshar, Nodjoumi explains that the Confederation of Iranian Students was “a political organization who were working to expose the suppression and censorship [under the shah] and to work for the freedom of political prisoners in Iran.” He left the Confederation in 1972. (17:37-18:25); see full interview with the artist here: <https://www.facebook.com/FarhangFoundation/videos/nicky-nodjoumi-in-conversation-with-houman-sarshar-farhang-connect/187311726571456/>

3- Ibid., 22:54-23:01.

show was canceled by the Islamic Republic after his works were criticized for being “anti-regime” and “anti-Khomeini.”<sup>4</sup> After this event, Nodjoumi decided to leave Iran for good and moved back to the United States where he continues to live and work today.

Nodjoumi’s use of political figures such as Donald Trump, alluded to in *Approaching Masked Carnival*, 2022, and Khomeini, depicted in *Play Me A Love Song*, 2012, not only point to a particular era in history, but also reflects the artist’s own personal strife. The lone chair in the former artwork is suspended in air, held up by ropes forming the outline of a diamond. The ropes connect the chair to the hands of a suited man, who seemingly has control over its fate. Meanwhile a shadowy Trump-like figure approaches behind the chair with a faceless cohort. The atmosphere around them suggests a storm is brewing, and a horse in the field behind them is caught mid-gallop, trying to flee the uneasy scene.

The chair is also present in *Tear Gas and Tea in the Afternoon*, 2012, where a female nude serves a cup of tea to an empty chair which stands before a ghostly military figure holding a baton in the air as if in mid-strike towards a protesting individual. Meanwhile a man in a suit lies below the traumatic scene, suggesting the political foundation from which this event has preceded.

*Let’s Talk*, 2020 depicts a confrontational scene between a group of men in suits and a larger-than-life rooster—perhaps a symbol of the artist himself. Nodjoumi has previously described his childhood drawing of a rooster as the moment he first recognized his potential of becoming an artist. Here, as in many of Nodjoumi’s compositions, the artist likens men in suits to the archetype of the jester or fool, which can be seen in the colorful geometric patterns incorporated into their clothing.<sup>5</sup> The men morph with an entanglement of nude female forms, evoking a feeling of corruption. Behind them stands a single small chair, a constant reminder of the influence these men (or their policies) have over an individual’s personal freedoms.

Nodjoumi’s works are poetically critical of those who hold power—a criticism which is not necessarily specific to a certain country or region. Rather, he delves into the core of oppressive systems in general, ultimately examining the greed, corruption, and violence associated with authoritarian rule. When asked if an artist should be political, Nodjoumi states: “Everything we do involves politics. You can’t get away from it, especially if you are an artist. You are committed to reflect what’s [happening] in society.”<sup>6</sup>

Stephanie Rouinfar

Stephanie Rouinfar is the Curatorial Assistant in the Art of the Middle East department at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), where she has assisted with ten exhibitions, notably *In the Fields of Empty Days: The Intersection of Past and Present in Iranian Art* (2018) and *Women Defining Women in Contemporary Art of the Middle East and Beyond* (2023). In 2021, she was awarded the LACMA-ASU Master’s Fellowship in Art History, and is currently completing her final year of the M.A. program.

4- Ibid., 32:29-33:07.

5- Yoo Jin Sang, “Nicky Nodjoumi: Painting and Politics,” Barakat Contemporary, 2019.

6- Ibid., 12:25-12:54.

**Let's Talk**





Internal Inspection

Oil on canvas | 85 × 130 in | 2014



Let's Talk

Oil on canvas | 65 × 85 in | 2020





Approaching Masked Carnival

Oil on canvas | 85 × 65 in | 2022



Tale of the Lost Dream

Oil on canvas | 85 × 65 in | 2022



Tear Gas and Tea in the Afternoon

Oil on canvas | 72 × 50 in | 2012



Play Me A Love Song

Oil on canvas | 72 × 52 in | 2012



Multiple Faces

Oil on canvas | 70 × 50 in | 2016



We the Witness

Oil on canvas | 95 × 60 in | 2021



Woman Life Freedom

Oil on canvas | 20 × 16 in | 2023



Think About It

Oil on canvas | 20 × 16 in | 2023





Hit the Road

Oil on canvas | 20 × 16 in | 2023



Behind the Scene

Oil on canvas | 20 × 16 in | 2023

# Curriculum Vitae

## Education

- 1974 | City College of New York, MFA
- 1967 | Tehran University of Fine Arts, BFA

## Solo Exhibitions

- 2023 | 1995, Sahar K.Bolouki Gallery, Toronto ON
- 2022 | 1981, Helena Anrather, New York
- 2022 | Tails of the Lost Dreams, Taymour Grahne Projects, London, UK
- 2021 | We the Witnesses, Helena Anrather, New York
- 2020 | Singing a New Song, Taymour Grahne Projects, London, UK
- 2020 | The New York Times Drawings (1996 - 1998), Taymour Grahne Projects, London, UK
- 2019 | Nicky Nodjoumi: New York Times Sketchbooks (1996-1999), Helena Anrather, New York
- 2018 | Please Sit Down, Barak Contemporary, Seoul, South Korea
- 2018 | Fractures, Third Line Gallery, Dubai, UAE
- 2016 | You and Me, Taymour Grahne Gallery, New York
- 2014 | The Accident, The Cleveland Institute of Art, Cleveland, OH
- 2013 | Chasing the Butterfly and Other Recent Paintings, Taymour Grahne Gallery, New York
- 2010 | Educating the Horse, Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, Dubai, UAE
- 2009 | Invitation to Change Your Metaphor, Priska C. Juschka Fine Art, New York
- 2009 | The Formulaic Nature of Appearances, Priska C. Juschka Fine Art, New York
- 2006 | Triumph of Tradition, Mike Weiss Gallery, New York
- 2005 | Interactive Game, Thom Andriola/New Gallery, Houston, TX
- 2005 | Homa Gallery, Tehran, Iran
- 2004 | Private Agenda, Mike Weiss Gallery, New York
- 2004 | Aria Gallery, Tehran, Iran
- 2003 | Paintings, Stefan Stux Gallery, New York
- 2001 | Paintings, Stefan Stux Gallery, Project Room, New York
- 1999 | Pierogi 2000, Brooklyn, NY
- 1997 | Studio 24, New York
- 1993 | Artists Space, New York

- 1985 | Pictogram Gallery, New York
- 1984 | Leila Taghinia Milani Gallery, New York
- 1983 | The Alternative Museum, New York
- 1980 | Retrospective, Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, Tehran, Iran
- 1978 | Shahr Gallery, New York
- 1976 | Roko Gallery, New York
- 1976 | Seyhoun Gallery, Tehran, Iran
- 1968 | 1968 Tehran University, Tehran, Iran

## Group Exhibitions

- 2022 | Is it morning for you yet? 58th Carnegie International curated by Sohrab Mohebbi, Pittsburgh, PA
- 2019 | Landfall Press : Five Decades of Printmaking, Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, WI
- 2018 | In the Field Of Empty Days, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA
- 2018 | You Tell Me, Foley Gallery, New York
- 2017 | Beyond the Ban, Susan Eley Fine Art, New York
- 2016 | A Verdant Summer, Taymour Grahne Gallery, New York
- 2016 | Dallas Art Fair, Taymour Grahne Gallery, Dallas, TX
- 2015 | EXPO Chicago, Taymour Grahne Gallery, Chicago, IL
- 2015 | Bazm and Razm: Feast and Fight in Persian Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
- 2015 | Untitled Miami, Taymour Grahne Gallery, New York
- 2014 | Abu Dhabi Art, Taymour Grahne Gallery, Abu Dhabi, UAE
- 2014 | Pierogi XX : Twentieth Anniversary Exhibition, Pierogi Gallery, Brooklyn, NY
- 2013 | Iran Modern, Asia Society, New York
- 2013 | Nowrouz 1392, Artspace, London, UK
- 2012 | IMAGE/CLOT, Curated by Dan Mills, Zolla/Liberman Gallery, Inc., Chicago, IL
- 2013 | The Young Collectors Exhibition, Leila Heller Gallery, New York
- 2011 | The Mask and the Mirror, Curated by Shirin Neshat, Leila Heller Gallery, New York
- 2011 | Tale Spinning, Curated by Dan Mills, Bates College Museum of Art, Lewiston, ME
- 2010 | One Thousand and One Nights: The Narrative Tradition in Contemporary Middle Eastern Art, Curated by Nancy Einreinhofer, William Paterson University, Wayne, NJ
- 2009 | Iran Inside Out, Curated by Sam Bardouil and Till Fellrath, Chelsea Art Museum, New York, NY; DePaul University Museum, Chicago, IL
- 2009 | Epic Painting, Samek Art Gallery, Bucknell University, Lewisburg, PA
- 2009 | Chelsea Visits Havana, 10th Havana Biennial, Museo del Bellas Artes, Havana, Cuba
- 2008 | Conference of the Birds, organized by Berardi & Sagharchi Projects Ltd. and Leila Heller Gallery, Flawless, London, UK
- 2004 | Tango, Mike Weiss Gallery, New York
- 2003 | Momus Gallery, New York
- 2003 | 637 Running Feet: Black on White Drawings by 14 Artists, Queens Museum of Art, Queens, NY

2002 Dubrow International, Curated by Norman Dubrow, Kravets Wehby Gallery, New York  
 2002 East Village Now & Then: 20 Year Anniversary, Studio 18 Gallery, New York  
 2002 New York in Texas, New Gallery, Houston, TX  
 2002 20th Anniversary Celebration: Stefan Stux Gallery, New Gallery, Houston, TX  
 2002 Bucheon Gallery, San Francisco, CA  
 2001 Tribeca Open Artists Studio Tour, New York  
 2000 Maison Française, Columbia University, New York  
 2000 Pierogi 2000, Brooklyn, NY  
 1999 Center for Iranian Modern Arts, New York  
 1999 Rosenwald-Wolf Gallery, University of the Arts, Philadelphia, PA  
 1998 The Lobby Gallery at Deutsche Bank, New York  
 1998 Kunstlerhaus, Vienna, Austria  
 1998 Weatherspoon Art Museum, Greensboro, NC  
 1998 Bard College, Red Hook, NY  
 1998 Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY  
 1993 Burns Fine Art Ltd., New York  
 1990 Metropolitan Design Center, New York  
 1988 Mussavi Gallery, New York  
 1987 Annual Juried Exhibition, Queens Museum of Art, Queens, NY  
 1985 Pictogram Gallery, New York  
 1984 Pacific Asia Museum, Pasadena, CA  
 1982 Annual Juried Exhibition, Queens Museum of Art, Queens, NY  
 1979 Revolutionary Poster & Cartoons Exhibition, Tehran University, Tehran, Iran  
 2977 Kerman Museum, Kerman Basel, Switzerland  
 1976 Forum Gallery, New York  
 1975 Parson-Truman Gallery, New York  
 1974 City College Gallery, City College, New York  
 1967 Gandriz Gallery, Tehran, Iran

### **Public Collections**

British Museum, London, UK  
 DePaul Art Museum, DePaul University, Chicago, IL  
 Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, Abu Dhabi, UAE  
 Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA  
 National Museum of Cuba, Havana, Cuba  
 Spencer Museum of Art, Lawrence, KS  
 Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, Tehran, Iran  
 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York  
 The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO  
 The Smithsonian, New York



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