

SARAI Gallery: A Hub for Emerging Iranian Artists



“Grabbling,” Abbas Nasle Shamloo, 2021 (Courtesy: SARAI Gallery)

DUBAI (AGSIW) -- While Isfahan and Bandar Abbas are considered the centers of folk arts and crafts in Iran, and Tehran is seen as the heart of contemporary Iranian art, creative spaces abound in smaller cities in Iran, too. SARAI Gallery, a contemporary art gallery based in Mahshahr that represents up-and-coming Iranian artists, places an emphasis on creative production outside of major Iranian cities. Founded in 2018 by art enthusiast and businessperson Hassan Saradipour, SARAI Gallery promotes the work of Iranian artists internationally through projects such as the Khor Art Initiative, Karavan Projects, and showings at international art fairs, including The Armory Show in New York City September 8-10.

The history of Iranian art spans millennia, with objects dating back to 8,000 B.C. from early civilizations near Mesopotamia. Today, Iranian art encompasses traditional crafts, such as carpet-weaving, miniature painting, and calligraphy, and also contemporary methods ranging from photography and mixed-media installations to geometric abstraction and film. Contemporary Iranian artists – including Shirin Neshat; Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian; Dubai-based trio Ramin Haerizadeh, Rokni Haerizadeh, and Hesam Rahmani; and SARAI Gallery’s Dariush Hussein – often draw on this rich history of craft and method to tell stories that reflect modern-day realities.

AGSIW spoke to Hassan Saradipour to learn more about SARAI Gallery, its focus on emerging artists from across Iran, and the rapidly growing attention the gallery has gained at international art fairs from Seoul and Abu Dhabi to Brussels and New York.

AGSIW: Tell me about yourself and how SARAI Gallery came to be.

Hassan: When I was a teenager in school, I started painting. I was a good painter but not very professional, as I was too young for that. When I was 15, I decided to just focus on school and the university entrance exam, but I still thought I might eventually become a painter. I later started my own business. When I was 32 or 33, I tried to return to painting, but I felt that it was a little late to just start again. I decided instead to run a gallery and support young artists.

That was a very big challenge for me. I wanted to have my own gallery, but I had to do something different. I grew up in the south of Iran on the border of Khuzestan province, between Iran and Iraq. I thought that if I ran my art space in Tehran, nothing would be different. There are many galleries there, and they are doing very well; it would just be another gallery with paintings on the wall. I decided to open a space in my city, Mahshahr – a small city in the south of Iran. It’s well known for its petrochemical company, but no one knows this city for its art like people know Tehran for its art scene. Many told me that it was not a good decision because I would have to do a lot just to find artists and build the collector base. But I finally decided: No, I want to do this, and I want to show others that if you have a good plan, you can do something new, and

others can learn from you.

AGSIW: SARAI Gallery has attended numerous international art fairs since it opened just a few years ago. What was the first one like?

Hassan: Eight months after opening our gallery, we were accepted into Art Dubai. It was the first time an Iranian gallery from outside Tehran was accepted into Art Dubai. We had a great show there with artist Moslem Khezri – who is originally from Kerman, a city in the south of Iran – and his paintings almost sold out. Some of his paintings went to very good collectors, some to a collection in Dubai. After that, our application to participate in the Armory Show in New York City was accepted. We were one of the youngest galleries to be accepted into the Armory Show, again showing Khezri. That year, we won the prize for best show in the “Presents” section. We sold out there as well. So far, we’re just five years old, and we’ve shown at 10 or 11 local and international art fairs. I like the art fairs because, in a very short time, many people visit the gallery booth, you receive many questions, and very important people, such as curators, reporters, collectors, and art lovers, attend in the span of four or five days. On the other hand, if we wanted to have an independent show in New York, for example, it might take several years to gain exposure and set it up – and maybe one reporter would come and write a piece. So, I think high-quality art fairs help the most.

AGSIW: What are some of the initiatives led by the gallery to support these emerging artists? What is the aim of these projects?

Hassan: The Khor Art Initiative, for instance, is an annual, nationwide art competition that we have been running since 2020. For the initiative, several jury members, who are predominantly curators, museum administrators, and individuals with extensive knowledge of art, select around 30 shortlisted artists and then a handful of finalists. The artists have to be emerging artists from the Middle East – we have some established artists, maybe two or three – but most of them are emerging artists. At the minimum, they are required to be painters at the international level. It’s very important for us that artists have a mission with their art. It’s also important for us that they understand the history of Middle Eastern art and the art world so they can continue as painters looking to the future. Because we have easier access to Iranian artists, we have more Iranian artists than others.

Usually, we don’t focus on the commercial side of the gallery, even though we are a commercial gallery; we just make sure that we can continue to run the gallery and not have to shut it down because of financial issues. Because I have my own business, it’s not about being able to make money from the art – that’s very difficult. It’s also important for me to work with other Middle Eastern and South Asian artists. In London, we had a show with Zaam Arif, an emerging Pakistani artist, that was very successful. Just a few galleries outside of Iran focus on Middle

Eastern art, so in our viewing space in Los Angeles, we focus on Middle Eastern artists – not just one or two artists who live in New York or London, but artists who live in Iran. We want to build a connection between Iran and the Middle East with the other side of the world. That’s our mission.

AGSIW: What is the significance of the city of Mahshahr, where the gallery is based?

Hassan: My family was originally in Khorramshahr, but it was destroyed in the Iran-Iraq War, so they moved to Mahshahr. I was born just two years after the war, and my father was working in the oil industry. I have a lot of friends there who tried to learn about art. Before we started, most of our local collectors didn’t know anything about art and collecting. But we tried to build our collectors in this small city, and now people know a lot about art and collecting. It was a joy for me to see people who didn’t have any connection with the art world going to galleries and following artists, their work, and the art scene in Iran. After that, many galleries started to open in the small cities, not just in Tehran. They thought, “If SARAI Gallery can, we can, too.”

Artists outside Tehran feel that they are very far from what’s happening in the art scene of Iran. But our gallery helps local artists and others better see what’s happening. For example, Shiva Noroozi is from Kish Island in the south of Iran. Usually, it’s very difficult for artists outside Tehran to have a show in galleries. But we had a show with Noroozi at the UNTITLED Art fair in Miami and at Art Brussels, which is really significant. Now, her work is owned by international collectors in very good collections in the United States, Europe, and the Middle East.

AGSIW: What are some of the topics or themes these regional artists examine? Are the recent social conflicts becoming more present in the work you see?

Hassan: Oh, they’re all completely different. It’s very important for us that they have something to talk about in their work rather than just following trends. For example, at Expo Chicago, Khezri’s work looked at airports and migration – the moment of saying goodbye to your friends and family. After this moment, many things in one’s life will change by emigrating. The type of migrant in Iran is different from the type of migrant going from Dubai to London, who can go back to their country at any time. In Iran, if you leave, you can’t come back very easily – as you are at high risk. It was very emotional because migration is a big issue in Iran and the Middle East right now. Noroozi’s work in Art Brussels was looking at the Iranian woman, her hopes and dreams, and what she can’t have in real life, and putting that onto canvas or cardboard with paint.

In the Middle East, social life is very important. You cannot separate these issues from the art that an artist makes or brings to the canvas. They paint what they feel. I think artists in the Middle East and Iran feed their daily lives into their work. All our artists feel this way.

AGSIW: How familiar are different audiences at these art fairs with Iranian art?

Hassan: The type of questions that we hear in South Korea are different from the ones we hear in the United States or Europe. They might only know that Tehran is the capital of Iran and not much else about it. South Korea is an emerging art market, so I think that’s good. Elsewhere, it’s completely different. In Dubai or Abu Dhabi, for example, it’s just like home. Many people know the artists, the gallery, the story behind the paintings. When I have a show in the United Arab Emirates, I feel like I have a show in Iran.

Muhammad al-Amin Mosque Destroyed in Israeli Bombing



The Muhammad al-Amin Mosque in ruins after the Israeli airstrike on Gaza.

GAZA CITY (Dispatches) -- The Muhammad al-Amin Mosque, a prominent religious site located in Gaza’s Khan Younis city, has been destroyed in an Israeli airstrike.

Local sources confirmed that Israeli warplanes carried out the

attack, targeting the mosque.

In a Facebook posting, Muslim Care Malaysia Society said the Muhammad al-Amin mosque was built in 2013 with funding collected from the public.

“Our hearts are shattered to see the magnificent mosque that was

funded by the people of Malaysia destroyed as a result of a bomb attack by Israel.

“In late 2013, Muslim Care Malaysia created history when it successfully built a spacious and beautiful mosque for the Palestinian people.

“Unfortunately, despite all the efforts and contributions of Malaysians, today, Oct. 7, the Muhammad al-Amin mosque was completely levelled and can no longer be used,” the posting said.

The society added that more aid and support will be channeled to support the struggle of Palestinians.

“Despite the destruction, the jihadist spirit of Muslims will never fade,” it said.

“As strong as the spirit of our brothers in Palestine, so is the strength of our hearts that we will all continue to be united.”

Italian, German, Brazilian Festivals to Screen Iranian Films

TEHRAN – Iranian documentary “Wood” will be screened at the Reggio Film Festival in Italy.

The 3-minute short film is directed by Iranian filmmaker Morteza Payeh Shenasi.

The Reggio Film Festival dedicated to short films will be held on November 6-12.

Meanwhile, Iranian short film “The Thirteenth Year”, directed by Samad Alizadeh, will compete at the Interfilm Berlin International Short Film Festival in Germany.

The story revolves around Helia, a teenage girl who is celebrating her 13th birthday, but her family starts to impose restrictions on her cycling.

A production of 2023, it has been produced by the renowned Iranian actor Navid Muhammadzadeh. The screenplay has been written by Alizadeh together with Bahram and Bahman Ark. Samaneh Nourivand plays the main role in the film.

Alizadeh has won the Best Screenplay award at the Tehran International Film Festival and the Best Short Film award at the Zanzibar International Film Festival for his first short film “Nahid” (2020). The film also got a Special Mention at the Freiburg International Film Festival. “The Thirteenth Year” is his second short film.



Samad Alizadeh and his cast and crew are seen in a scene of “The thirteenth year”.

Founded in 1982, INTERFILM, now in its 39th edition, is the oldest and largest short film festival in Berlin. The festival, which qualifies for the Academy Awards, has long been renowned beyond German and European borders.

The 2023 edition of the event will be held on November 14-19 in Berlin.

“Aziz”, directed by Majid Tavakoli, will be screened at the competition section of the 47th São Paulo International Film Festival in Brazil.

Azadeh Samadi, Rouzbeh Hesari, Bahman Sadegh Hasani, Reza Abbasi, Shirin Mohseni, Aqiq Blouri, and Fatemeh Muhammadi are the cast

members of the film.

During the autumn of 2022 in Iran, a family in a small town is suffering from livelihood problems. Aziz, an 80-year-old mother of the family, with progressive dementia, needs to be cared for by her children more and more. Anoush, the younger son who is about to get married, loves and takes care of his mother more than others. Aziz lost her husband years ago and now she’s expressing her love to someone..., reads the synopsis of the film.

The 47th São Paulo International Film Festival will be held from October 19 to November 1.

Picture of the Day



The Roosta Abad exhibition, introducing Iranian villagers and their products, was held at Imam Khomeini Mosalla Mosque in Tehran on October 9, 2023.