



# COLLECTED MEMORIES

New Trends in Iranian Painting

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## Foreword

### Contemporary Painting in Iran

Among the characteristics defining the condition of painting in Iran today, the first and foremost is it is contemporary, and the second is the large number of painters shaping the visual arts scene in Iran alongside one other, sometimes influenced by one another and sometimes totally unconnected. The same two characteristics have made visual arts in general, and painting in particular, appealing and dynamic in Iran today and expanded its social presence and cultural influence. The growing number of art galleries, viewers and art buyers indicates such expansion. The art movement in Iran has expanded geographically as well. True that Tehran, the capital city, is still recognized by far as the most important center for exhibiting artworks and attracting artists compared with other cities of the country, but the number of artists born and artistically raised in cities other than Tehran increases everyday. This geographical expansion has not only helped to enrich the images as a result of Iran's diverse natural and human geography, it has also initiated a kind of unprecedented cultural exchange in the country.

The increased number of artists and the expanded geographical range of art production are rooted in the development of the higher education system as well as the growth in the number of female students in universities – both outcomes of the changes that took place in Iran following the 1979 revolution. There are a number of contradictory factors and elements responsible for this quantitative upsurge in Iran's visual arts scene that for the most part, could be analyzed through sociological statistics but the interesting details had better be discussed some other time. What is more difficult to explain is the sudden transformation of modern art into contemporary art in Iran. It might be difficult to understand this sudden transformation without knowing a little about the history of modern painting in this country.

Modern painting in Iran was born almost half a century ago. Fereydoun Rahnama, who was familiar with modern painting in Europe due to his studies in France, wrote about Sohrab Sepehri's paintings that were first exhibited in 1958: "This style of painting is apparently beginning to shape in our country." ("Tonal Values of Sohrab Sepehri's Paintings", *Naqsh-o-Negar* Monthly, 1960, 43.)

And that was a fact. In the 1960s, modernism had already appeared in Iranian literature for some time and was influencing other social and especially artistic realms as well. There were only a handful of painters and

sculptors in those years who had chosen an entirely different style compared with how visual arts had evolved in Iran until then. That avant-garde generation of artists, that did not grow significantly larger in number until many years later, brought dramatic changes to Iran's visual arts scene the importance of which is just being realized half a century later. Kazemi, Sepehri, Pezeshknia, Vaziri, Grigorian, Arabshahi, Assar, Tanavoli, Zendehtroudi, Mohasses, Melkonian, Saeidi, and Matindaftari are among the painters to whom Iran's visual arts scene owes its major changes.

If this change – that undoubtedly marked the birth of modern visual arts in Iran – reached heights in the very beginning that are rarely observed in the works of second generation painters who followed the style of the pioneers, it is because the pioneers constantly tried to introduce Iran's culture and art into their art productions that in turn, were undoubtedly influenced by modern art of the world. Nevertheless, with the exception of a few initial works of these painters – such as Kazemi or Melkonian – that should be regarded as the works of the period of transition towards modern painting, and perhaps a handful of Pezeshknia's paintings, very few artworks are actually contemporary.

The question is not about the power, the beauty, or the artistic boldness of this first generation's works. These works were so momentous and their message so powerful that it continues to resonate clearly with the soul of Iran's visual arts. The question is about how these works reflect the surrounding environment, in the general and broad sense of the word. From the relief carvings on objects of the pre-Islam period to carpet motifs, from the juxtaposition of detailed and minimal spaces as a characteristic of Iranian architecture to the cycles of Sufi rankings in which the whole and particular are equal in terms of value and the perpetual transition from one to the other transcends the soul, and from the epic poems of Ferdowsi to the romantic poetry of Nezami, the rich art culture of Iran has inspired these artists and influenced their works in ways one cannot overlook. What was said about history and culture is also true about Iran's geography and anthropology and their influence on the painting of these pioneers of this land's visual arts. Nevertheless, even though these artists drew on Iranian culture and art, the absence of the contemporary element is evident in their works. We must seek the cause of that absence in this period's dominant interpretation of modernity and tradition as its opposite, and in the lack of artistic experimentation as a daily routine experience.

Recognition of modernity as a universal concept that surpasses individual identities and specific times and places and draws on a particular perspective on oneself, others, and the surrounding world led the pioneers of modern painting to revisit tradition; a call that as we said, was answered well but was unable to draw their attention to a time and place that is now and here or in other words, contemporary. In that sense, as much as modernity was an episode that had occurred at a more or less specific point in time and a relatively specific historical-cultural moment, the perception was that it could recur in other places and history-cultures. The important point was that modernity had helped a subject emerge that was allowed to impose its perception on the surrounding world and was therefore a universal technique to review history, tradition and culture. This technique also allowed the Iranian individual to suddenly become a member of the modern world by learning and employing it, thus, causing a sensation that led him to forget, to a great extent, his here and now. One must admit that the mere thought that using one or a few universal techniques would allow us to join the modern world, critique old methods and perceptions, and fully preserve the legacies of the past as identity elements

was exciting enough to make forgetfulness appealing and desirable. The culmination of this sensation and the starting point of a sense of skepticism towards it came about in 1979 when a revolution transformed Iran's politics and society and consequently its cultural landscape.

In a sense, the 1979 revolution marked the end of a recess in Iran's intellectual history that had lasted for half a century. True that the need to recover this land from its devastated state after the first world war, the need to protect and defend her borders in a world whose merciless side surfaced with the second world war, the inevitability of technical and scientific progress in the competitive post-war world, and to top it off, the aforementioned sensation that doubled thanks to the sudden prosperity, were all factors that contributed towards the intellectual recession. But the important point is that once the 1979 revolution and the developments that followed overturned every belief, faith and conviction left behind from the past, intellect could no longer wander in the ideas and concepts of the past.

Now, past had turned into present and fantasy into reality and what lay ahead was not what was expected. Despite all its richness and diverse origins, Iranian culture, on its own, was no longer seen as a retreat one could count on to provide elements and a universal technique towards building a future that would surpass the present. The question was no longer about protecting legacies of the past but about their critical evaluation and theoretical analysis. The 50-year intellectual recess was over.

Yet, the main point was that intellect was called upon not because of the vibrancy of intellect itself, but because of what lay ahead; what was ongoing here and now. In other words, in order to be able to perform, intellect had no choice but to become contemporary. Iranian painting encountered the same necessity and the fact is that it was both more prolific than other realms in meeting those needs and more successful than others in answering it. Now, every symbol, sign, image, figure, edifice and visual tool had to be employed to reflect what the new generation – the third generation of Iranian painters – saw to represent its historical, geographical and cultural identity.

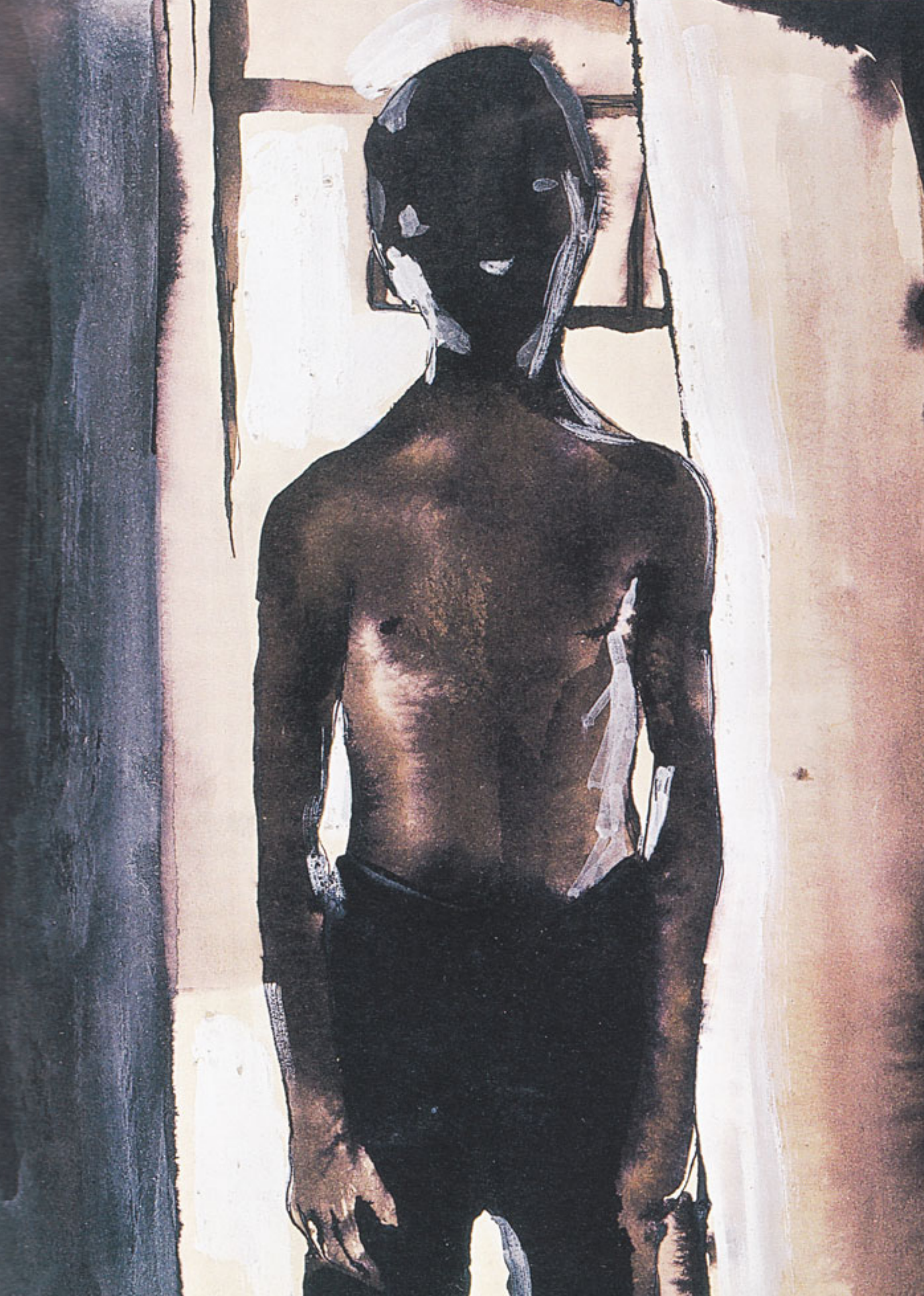
More realistic than conceptual and more often figurative than abstract, these paintings share a common characteristic that is nothing but their belonging to the present times. Times that are inevitably modern, but modern not in the sense of belonging to a specific period of Western history, or not modern in the sense of abandoning traditional or past methods. Rather, modern as a certain way of thinking in time. Thinking through events and not by forgetting or confronting them in search for absoluteness. As a result, past, as an undeniable constituent of memory, is not called upon anesthetically. In fact, be it far or near, it is rewritten with the experience of now. This way time and space are liberated from dominance of eternity and compulsion of history. Yet, we would be wrong to link the emergence of contemporary painting in Iran only to its own inner dynamism, evaluate this phenomenon only as a continuation of this country's historical changes of the past quarter century and overlook the influence of global culture on it. The fact is that Iran's culture has been increasingly engaged in dialogue with other cultures of the world for the past 150 years and in spite of a range of problems brought about by such elements as language, geographical distance, conflicting developments and colonial confrontations, Iran's elites have constantly tried to keep informed of the intellectual developments in other countries and particularly the West. Over the past two decades, this effort has caused the debates on multiculturalism, deconstructivism and postmodernism that emerged in the West, as well as other critical theories brought about

from cultural studies debated in Latin America and countries such as India in criticism of occidental-centric interpretations of modernity and at times in opposition to it, to influence Iran's intellectual life as well.

The impact of such disciplines on Iranian painting breaking free from modernism and its contemporary approach should not be overlooked. Familiarity with these theories has made it possible for painting in Iran to free itself from customary dualities, whether it be the dualities exclusive to Iranian painting such as the juxtaposition of detailed and minimal compositions or the subjective dualities dominating Iranian thought such as good and evil or tradition and modernity. The liberating aspect of these theories has made it possible for the new generation of Iranian painters today to see the situation of the past and present from a critical perspective without the criteria of the criticism being necessarily external or universal. In other words, they have made it possible for Iranian painting to engage in a kind of immanent critique; a criticism that draws its factors from the same environment that also provides the grounds for this same painting to grow and thrive. As the main cause of the dynamism and appeal of Iran's fledgling contemporary painting that could also contribute towards its instability and fragility, this immanent criticism has allowed Iranian painting to play a prime role in the country's cultural structure.

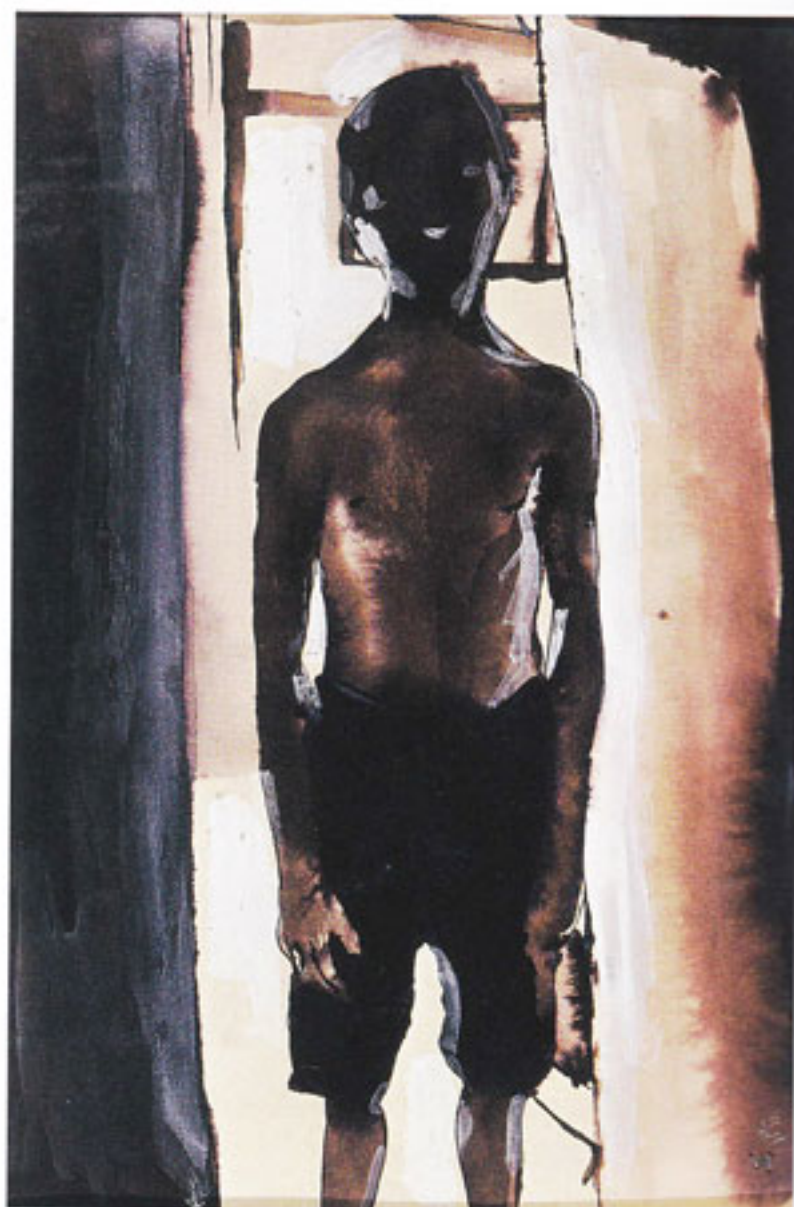
In fact, the question of how to protect and safeguard the legacies of the past in a world that, more than ever before, favors self-determination and exalting the future over the credibility and strength of the past is among the most important questions engaging the minds of Iranian elites, and in a sense, Middle Eastern elites, for many decades now. We know to what extent the hasty answers to this question that have been interpreted as conflict of tradition and modernity, East and West, piety and secularism or Islam and Christianity have led irrational and detrimental tensions. Conflicts that have seriously affected the world, although the peoples of the Middle East have suffered their greatest harms. Now, it appears that contrary to language, that bears with it a role from the past and has therefore never broken free of the old versus new conflict, visual art and as its dominant form, painting, has allowed a group of youngsters in this land to overcome those conflicts by turning contemporary and by giving priority to their own experiences and telling a story wherein beauty and aesthetics play the lead role.

**Morad Saghafi**



## Ahmad Morshedloo

Ahmad Morshedloo owes his unique place in Iran's contemporary painting scene to his power of subjective representation by which he illustrates the modern world's most ordinary scenes, individuals, events and phenomena. What impresses viewers at first is the realism of his work. Then, gradually, his staging starts to appear and as a spectator of a live performance on stage, the viewer's notice turns away from the faces to see the painting as a play in which the painting is staged. It is in the last phase that the viewer becomes an audience of an unfamiliar story that seems to be told for the first time despite its familiar components and recognized elements: the story of a child lost in a city, a difficult puberty, a young woman facing her inescapable fate that is nothing but the recurrence of the lives of past generations and dozens of other stories the painter is determined to tell the viewer. Ahmad Morshedloo's capability in using a range of techniques such as oil, watercolor, charcoal and even pen have helped him benefit from the advantages of neo-realism as a common aspect of his works – a kind of neo-realism that neither makes pretentious statements nor traces the works of the world's masters of painting but invites the viewer to judge the world readily with humility and tolerance. Ahmad Morshedloo's subjectivity in depicting the most ordinary scenes – scenes we all encounter – is so noticeable and presented so simply and honestly that viewers, too, are encouraged to express their subjectivity towards the world around them. Ahmad Morshedloo tells his story in a way that encourages viewers to tell theirs.



LMA1

## Ahmad Morshedloo

Untitled  
Ink on Cardboard  
40 x 20 cm  
Executed 2000



LMA2

Untitled  
Pencil on Cardboard  
20 x 40 cm  
Executed 2004







LMA3

**Ahmad Morshedloo**

Untitled  
Ink on Cardboard  
100 x 70 cm  
Executed 2004



LMA4

Untitled  
Ink on Cardboard  
100 x 70 cm  
Executed 2004

