

# HEAVEN ON EARTH **NOW**

Portraying the Iranian Woman



## **Introduction**

### **Contemporary figurative painting in Iran**

Figurative painting, in recent years, has unexpectedly emerged in Iran and occupied a place among other better known styles of painting. It is important to understand the reasons behind this sudden presence as they help us judge the artistic achievements of this style in the domain of visual arts and to explore the sociological changes that made it possible. There is no doubt that the global revival of figurative painting to reclaim the place that abstract painting once occupied till the last two decades, had some effect on prompting this movement in Iran. But there is more to this movement than just the global influence since there are at least two major differences between the rise of the figurative style in Iran and in the rest of world. The first concerns the background of the style in Iran as opposed to its background in the rest of the world and in the West in particular; the second involves the presence of a powerful rival in the tradition of Iranian visual arts: written words.

Iranian painting, in both its traditional and modern forms, was never fully devoid of the figurative style. Here, we shall not discuss the presence of the figurative style in Iran's Miniature painting as it is an entirely different topic of its own. As for the presence of the figurative style in Iran's modern painting, however, the fact is that with the exception of very few and rare cases – two of which are included in this catalogue – this style, at best, has never managed to go beyond a test of technical skills for Iranian painters. In other words, figurative painting in Iran has produced some beautiful and interesting works that, nonetheless, lacked aesthetical dimension. For the most part, figurative painting in Iran remained limited to skilful reproduction of reality and when in the 1970's, the search for Iranian identity became the main topic of visual arts, figurative painting began to represent geographical, symbolic and to a certain degree, historical identities, thus losing even more aesthetical dimension. That said, it is obvious that such a background is incomparable with the centuries-old background of figurative painting in the Western world. In fact, even during the times when abstract painting or other styles were dominant in the West, figurative painting was constantly present with remarkable products to offer.

The other key element which sets apart the domain of visual arts in Iran from the rest of the world is the use of script, as a powerful, ubiquitous rival. Artistic script in all its forms and methods – from calligraphy to book writing, calligraphic painting to sculptural words – has and will continue to occupy a significant place in Iranian visual arts. Interestingly enough, the writing of texts – mostly in the form of painted words and letters and sculptural words of course, which is newer than the completely traditional form – has in recent years, helped pave the way and drive Iranian visual arts into the international scene. Now, that success has added to the weight of written words in Iranian visual arts. But not in the sense that it does not leave space for other styles; rather, its mere presence motivates many painter artists to lean in that direction. In fact, there are many fairly well-established painters whom the market for script painting has driven to either change style entirely and shift to that method or incorporate texts in their art. It is in such circumstances that figurative painting emerges in Iran almost suddenly and on a relatively vast scale. That is why we believe that the degree of presence of figurative painting in Iran's visual art scene raises questions and demands reflection, especially since the presence is remarkable both in terms of quantity and quality.

As pointed out earlier, the external factor, that is global developments in the domain of visual arts, contributes toward the rise of figurative painting in Iran. With the explosive growth of mass media in the world today, Iranian artists can follow the latest developments in the global art scene: for instance, how the figurative paintings of Chinese artists have astounded the art world or how figurative painting in recent years has occupied an important position in such cities as Paris, London and New York. However, the main cause, that is the internal factor, has to do with the changes that have occurred in Iran's society and in the thoughts and practices of its people. To understand the internal reasons behind the rise of figurative painting in Iran, the best way is to explore the works of Iranian painters; whether those catalogued in this book or whether the much larger collection displayed each week in an increasing number of painting exhibitions throughout Iran. What is evident in the larger collection is the variety of subjects and the diversity of approach to those subjects. Iran's contemporary figurative painting is about daily life, it is about social presence, lifestyles, and indeed, young people who constitute a major part of the country's active population. In that sense, Iran's contemporary figurative painting is a reflection of Iranian society as a whole. Neither are the subjects exclusive to a specific social or economic class, nor are the painters focused on particular, well-known spaces, such as historical buildings or Courts of Kings. Rather, society is present in its entirety, a presence that indeed reflects the thoughts and concerns of the painters. The variety of subjects is further enriched by the diversity of approaches. The dominant perspective is clearly a critical one. Firstly, the criticism is both internal and external and secondly, it is a critical perspective that goes beyond the typical contexts of criticizing the status quo. It is not about the conflict between wealth and poverty, rich and poor, natural and artificial, or East and West. Rather, it is about physical presence, expression of emotions, social behaviours, individual experiences, psychic reflexes and living with the sorrows of parting and separation. In other words, although the perspective involves society, society is represented not as a whole but as a collection of individual experiences, the uniqueness and individuality of which the painters try to capture and display to us.

In fact, the portrayed subjects and the critical approach to the subjects testify to the emergence of a particular phenomenon which is the rise of individualism in Iran's present-day society; an individuality that the figurative style is naturally most suited for capturing. One could argue that the most important factor explaining the current

position of figurative painting in Iran's contemporary visual arts is nothing but the significance that individualism has gained in present-day Iran as an experience that cannot be overlooked. Experiences which can hardly reveal themselves in social environments, whether large or small, have not gone unnoticed by the contemporary visual artists who belong to these same times and are captured as visual stories before our eyes.

The collection **Heaven on Earth, Now**, presented here, can help us understand how individuality is reflected through Iranian women. First, the paintings do more than portray women's faces; they show biographies, not always identical, often unhappy, and mostly conveying a sense of solitude; a solitude one cannot understand by focusing on the efforts of women to gain new identity in present-day Iran. The solitude is rooted in deeper historical layers and its understanding demands delving into Iran's contemporary history.

One may argue that contemporary history cannot help us understand the present, that the times and episodes that Iran and its people have seen and lived through over the last century are unrelated to one another and that the issues of one period are so different and even at odds with those of another that one cannot be the basis for understanding another one. There is no doubt that the periods and their issues were different and this historical review does not try to find a common or recurring pattern; it rather focuses on the layers that every experience has deposited in society. Those deposits, however, seem to follow a constant pattern, at least in terms of what women have experienced over the last century.

From the time when in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Iran began the process of coming out of isolation and interacting with the rest of the world, participation of women in society has been a contentious issue for the elite, each of whom had their own idea about advancing that trend successfully. On the one hand, we have the arguments about the legal framework of that participation and on the other, the disputes over its actual quality. That is, in what way and to what extent women's presence and participation should effectively occur. The fact is, neither the legal achievements nor the actual progresses came without troubles and hardships that were often unbearable. In other words, although in the final analysis, the struggle advanced the interests of women, one cannot overlook the price that women, as the beneficiary group, and consequently the whole of society, paid and continues to pay for this advancement to this day. The solitude of the women portrayed in this collection and the bitterness of the experiences that led to this presence are the result of gruesome struggles.

One could argue that the same applies to the entire world and that every repressed social group has fought and paid a heavy price for social and legal equality. That is true. But the circumstances in which Iranian women fought for equality, it seems, were so particular and hard that the price they paid is incomparable with most other groups in the world.

Without going into details, the single most important factor behind that extraordinarily high price is the direct and unusual intervention of governments in the spontaneous struggles of women for independence. That intervention, the likes of which you cannot find in any other social, economic or cultural issue, testifies to the fact that in the eyes of governments, women were entities which are not quite human. The fact that they held a status as women, that was at times superior and at times inferior, at times heavenly and at times hellish, or a character at times angelic and at times demonic, does not make a difference in the fundamental issue that they were overlooked as humans. What is important is that discrimination has constantly prompted governments to interfere in women's ,

attempts to take control of their own destinies. That means that Iranian women had to make an extra effort in their struggle: they had to fight against history, against the dominant culture and also against government intervention, an extra effort the origins of which were often at odds with their final aims and sometimes self-contradictory. The price that was paid for that extra effort has now manifested itself on every level of society as more or less bitter pictorial biographies, or more or less unsuccessful individual attempts that are captured on canvas so clearly that failing to see them only amounts to utter ignorance or opportunistic oversight.

Now, those experiences are laid down on canvas as layers of colour to reflect the tireless struggle of women for recognition as human individuals. And through those layers and the works of Iranian painters, shines a ray of hope in spite of all those bitter experiences. A hope that is seen in the multiplicity and diversity of the experiences in portraying Iranian women, which, even if gone unnoticed by us ordinary people, artists have recognized: it is through the various styles of art that social realities are indeed reflected. Expressionism, existentialism, hyperrealism, land art, kitsch art, pop art, illustration, and other styles are employed to portray individual and solitary experiences and turn them into a social experience.

In that sense, although contemporary figurative painting in present-day Iran has grown from the stream of individualism, it is the way many young Iranians have explored to express their personality as well as their social concerns. Visual arts provide a means for a small part of society which has the courage to self-reflect, while neither giving in to the temptation of turning the tradition of calligraphy into something that resembles a painting, nor accepting the status quo without criticizing it merely because it is the reality.

**Morad Saghafi**

### **Ahmad Morshedloo**

Ahmad Morshedloo owes his unique standing in Iran's contemporary painting scene to his power of subjective representation in which he illustrates the most ordinary scenes, individuals, events and phenomena of our modern world. What impresses viewers at first is the realistic aspect of his work. Then, gradually, his staging begins to take shape, and as the spectator of a live performance on stage, the viewer's gaze turns away from the faces and sees the painting as a play in which the painting is staged. It is in the last phase that the viewer becomes the audience of an unfamiliar story that seems to be told for the first time despite its familiar components and recognizable 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 former generations, and dozens of other stories the painter is determined to recount.

Ahmad Morshedloo's capability in using a range of techniques such as oil, watercolor, charcoal and 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 and invite 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 which encourages viewers to tell theirs.



PAM7

**Ahmad Morshedloo**

Untitled / 2007

Mixed Media on Cardboard

120x90 cm



PAM1  
**Ahmad Morshedloo**  
Untitled / 2007  
Mixed Media on Cardboard  
90x120 cm



PAM2  
**Ahmad Morshedloo**  
Untitled / 2007  
Mixed Media on Cardboard  
120x90 cm



PAM3  
Untitled / 2007  
Mixed Media on Cardboard  
120x90 cm







PAM4

**Ahmad Morshedloo**

Untitled / 2007

Mixed Media on Cardboard

90x120 cm



PAM5  
**Ahmad Morshedloo**  
Untitled / 2007  
Mixed Media on Cardboard  
90x120 cm