

OTHER KINGS... OTHER STORIES...

ON VIEW AT THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

APRIL TO SEPTEMBER 2022

BY ARTEMIS AKCHOTI SHAHBAZI & CYRUS SAMII

CURATED BY

LAURA WEINSTEIN, ANANDA COOMARASWAMY CURATOR OF SOUTH ASIAN AND ISLAMIC ART AT
THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON



The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, announces the display of a series of works by artists Artemis Akchoti Shahbazi and Cyrus Samii in the Arts of Islamic Cultures gallery. The six works, which belong to their project *Other Kings... Other Stories...*, will be on view at the MFA until September 2022.

Akchoti Shahbazi and Samii grew up in Iran but joined the large Iranian diaspora of the 1980s, eventually moving to the United States. In *Other Kings ... Other Stories ...*, they offer a chronicle of Iran's modern history from an insider/outsider perspective, offering both the cool gaze of the historian and the more intimate one of the émigré. The artists draw heavily upon the *Shahnama*, the 11th-century Persian epic that is a cornerstone of Iran's culture, while also reaching to other forms of art and storytelling such as the travelogue and *parde-khani* (storytelling before a painted scene). In so doing, they bring the language of elites and the masses into contact with one another. *Other Kings... Other Stories...* presents tales of canny prime ministers, melancholy kings, cunning alchemists, and tragic lovers, inviting viewers to step into the artists' minds and to view Iran through layers of imagination born both of history and myth, connection and loss, distance and proximity.

The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, is open 10am to 5pm Sunday, Monday, Thursday and Saturday, and 10am to 10pm on Friday. Timed tickets are not required.

NASSER AL DIN SHAH OUTSHINES THE SUN

PARDEH KHANI, 53x33 1/2 INCHES
ACRYLIC AND INK ON LINEN

PIVOT OF THE UNIVERSE, THAT WAS NASSER AL DIN SHAH'S HONORIFIC TITLE. HIS ENTOURAGE, WERE, AFTER ALL, SUNS OF THE EMPIRE OR GLORIES OF THE CROWN, SO IT WAS ONLY NATURAL THE UNIVERSE SHOULD TURN AROUND HIM. AND IT MIGHT EXPLAIN HOW HE WOULD OUTSHINE THE SUN. EXCEPT FOR THE STORY OF AN ENCOUNTER WITH THE BELLICOSE KURDS AND LORS. NASSER AL DIN, HOWEVER GRAND HIS CELESTIAL PRESENCE, WAS SLIGHTER IN STATURE THAN THE ROSTAM OF A MAN ADVERTISED. WHEN FORCED TO MEET THE BRISTLY TRIBAL CHIEFS, HE FINALLY EMERGED FROM HIS TENT, WITH SOME TREPIDATION, AT NOON. BEDECKED IN DIAMONDS. BLINDED BY THE BRILLIANCE OF HIS MUNIFICENCE, THE CHIEFS SHIELDED THEIR EYES. WHEN THEY LOOKED AGAIN, HE WAS GONE. HE MANAGED TO ESCAPE THAT ENCOUNTER, HONOUR AND GLORY FIRMLY INTACT. AT LEAST THAT IS THE STORY VITA SACKVILLE-WEST TOLD. BUT SHE WAS BRITISH. AND A WRITER.



TAJ AL SALTANEH RIDES A BICYCLE

11x14 1/2 INCHES

ACRYLIC AND INK ON MUSEUM QUALITY PAPER

TAJ AL SALTANEH WAS NOT MUCH OF A HEROINE WHEN WE WERE YOUNG. SOME MIGHT SAY SHE IS NOT MUCH OF ONE TODAY. WE COULD NOT TELL YOU MUCH ABOUT HER LIFE, EXCEPT SHE WAS A QAJAR PRINCESS WHO GREW UP SEQUESTERED IN THE ANDERUN, AND BROKE WITH CONVENTIONS. SHE DIVORCED HER HUSBAND, AND WAS OUTSPOKEN ON MANY ISSUES FROM EDUCATION TO MARRIAGE TO CHILD-REARING. BUT THERE WAS NO MORE RISQUÉ ACT, IN THOSE DAYS, THAN FOR A WOMAN TO RIDE A BICYCLE. SHE MAY HAVE DONE SO. IN THE POPULAR IMAGINATION, THAT IS PRECISELY HOW SHE IS SEEN, A WOMAN IN QAJAR GARB RIDING A BICYCLE. NARRATIVES SELDOM ADHERE TO FACT WHEN THEY SEEK TO REFLECT THE TRUTH. ESPECIALLY IN VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS.



SADEQ HEDAYAT PENS THREE DROPS OF BLOOD

11x14 1/2 INCHES

ACRYLIC AND INK ON MUSEUM QUALITY PAPER

BLIND OWLS AND STRAY DOGS, DEAD ENDS AND DARK ROOMS. HE GAVE US LAST SMILES, AND BURIED US ALIVE ALONG THE WAY. HUMOUR AND HOPELESSNESS, POIGNANCY AND GROTESQUENESS JOSTLE ON PAGES FRAUGHT WITH CHAOS, MORAL BANKRUPTCY, FALLEN ANGELS, AND NOT A SINGLE HOPE OF REDEMPTION. AND A MENAGERIE THAT INCLUDES THE ANTI-CHRIST'S DONKEY AND THE MOST TRAGICALLY POETIC OF TALKING PARROTS. SORROWS SO SORROWFUL THEY CAN ONLY BE CURED BY DEATH. SUICIDES FEATURE, NOT ONLY IN HIS STORIES, BUT ALSO IN PARIS ON THAT DAY WHEN HE CLOSED ALL THE WINDOWS AND TURNED ON THE GAS. AT THE AGE OF FORTY-EIGHT. WHICH IS WHY, IN THAT CORNER, AT THE FOOT OF THE PINE TREE, THERE WILL ALWAYS BE THREE DROPS OF BLOOD.



THE CONSTITUTIONALISTS IN THE BRITISH LEGATION

11x14 1/2 INCHES

ACRYLIC AND INK ON MUSEUM QUALITY PAPER

BY MANY ACCOUNTS, THE TURNING POINT IN WHAT CAME TO BE KNOWN AS THE CONSTITUTIONAL REVOLUTION WAS WHEN THOUSANDS AND THOUSANDS OF MERCHANTS SOUGHT SANCTUARY AT THE BRITISH LEGATION, VOWING NOT TO LEAVE UNTIL THEIR DEMANDS WERE MET. BY SOME ACCOUNTS, AN ELECTED NATIONAL ASSEMBLY WAS AMONG THEIR REQUESTS. IT WAS 1906 AND MOZAFFAR AL DIN SHAH WAS ON THE THRONE. HE WOULD BARELY LAST OUT THE YEAR. BUT BEFORE DEPARTING ON THAT DEFINITIVE JOURNEY, THIS ABSOLUTE MONARCH AND SON OF AN EVEN MORE ABSOLUTE MONARCH GRANTED IRAN A NATIONAL ASSEMBLY AND A CONSTITUTION BASED ON THE BELGIAN MODEL. IN MANY ACCOUNTS, AND SOME PHOTOGRAPHIC DOCUMENTATION, IT ALL CAME TO FRUITION WHEN THOUSANDS OF MERCHANTS TOOK REFUGE IN THE BRITISH LEGATION.



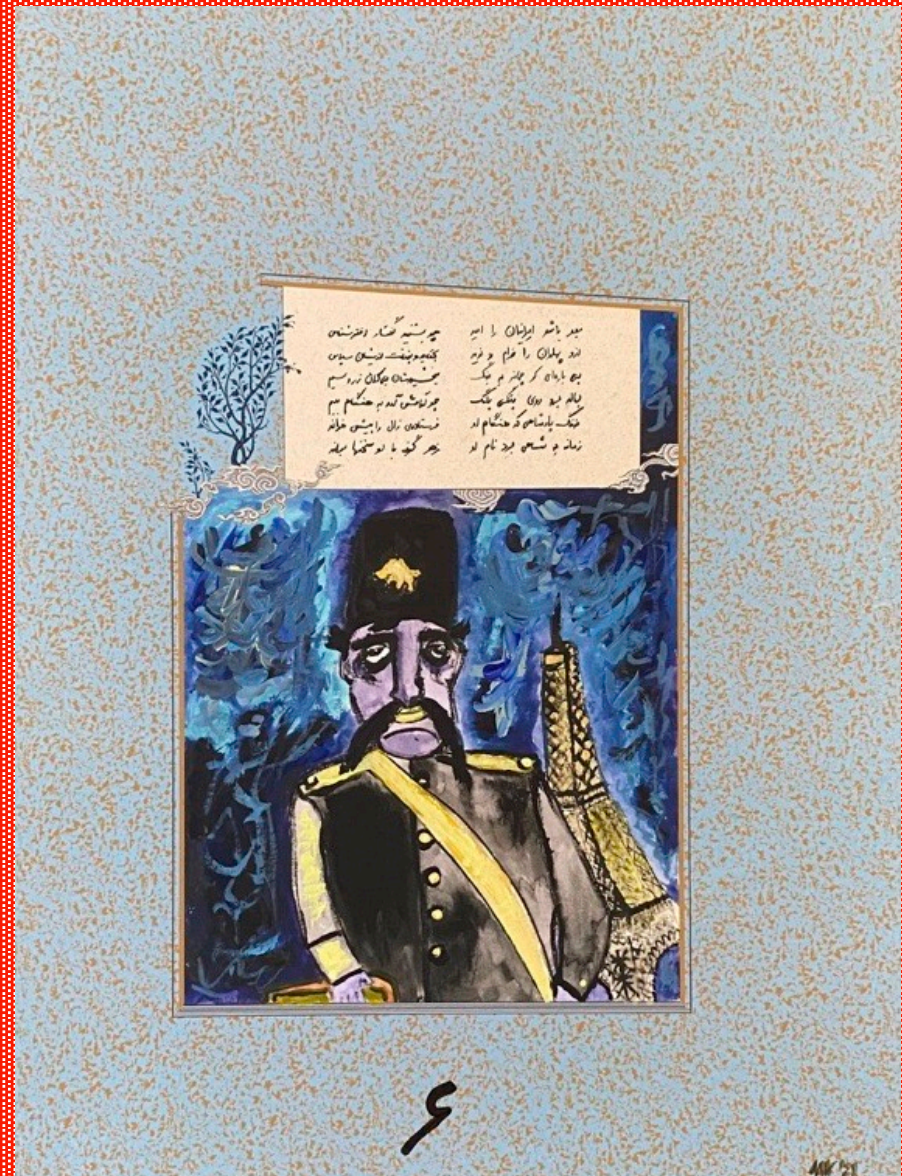
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MOZAFFAR AL DIN SHAH IN PARIS

11x14 1/2 INCHES

ACRYLIC AND INK ON MUSEUM QUALITY PAPER

IRAN HAD NEVER HAD A TOURIST FOR A KING. THE MAIN REASON TO LEAVE ONE'S COUNTRY, AFTER ALL, WAS TO EXTEND ITS BOUNDARIES. OVER THE COURSE OF THE CENTURIES ATHENS WAS BURNED, DELHI SACKED, AND SHAH-IN-SHAHS WERE WORSHIPPED AS GODS IN EGYPT. BUT TOWARDS THE END OF THE 19TH CENTURY QAJAR KINGS BOARDED OCEAN-LINERS AND BOOKED WAGON-LIT COMPARTMENTS TO TOUR OTHER LANDS. PERSIAN PORTRAITS AND CARTES DE VISITE, POP UP FROM LONDON, PARIS, AND MARIENBAD. BADEN-BADEN AND CONTREXÉVILLE. SHAHS VISIT CRYSTAL PALACES AND EXPOSITIONS UNIVERSELLES. IT IS THE DAWNING OF A NEW ERA. OR THE END OF AN OLD ONE. APTLY SUMMED UP IN AN IMAGE OF THE SHAH WITH THE DROOPING MOUSTACHES AND THE MELANCHOLY EYES, EIFFEL'S DARING CONSTRUCTION IN THE BACKGROUND.



DOKHTAR-E LOR (OR THE IRAN OF YESTERDAY AND
TODAY) IS SCREENED
11x14 1/2 INCHES
ACRYLIC AND INK ON MUSEUM QUALITY PAPER

BOY MEETS GIRL. IN LORESTAN TO BE SOMEWHAT
MORE SPECIFIC ABOUT GEOGRAPHY AND ACCOUNT
FOR THE LOR GIRL TITLE. BOY AND GIRL FALL IN
LOVE BUT HAVE TO OVERCOME THE EVIL BANDITS
WHO KIDNAPPED THE GIRL WHEN SHE WAS STILL A
CHILD. ESCAPES AND PURSUITS ENSUE AND EVIL-
DOERS FALL BY THE WAYSIDE. THOUGH
ADVENTUROUS, THE PLOT, IN ITSELF,
IS NOT PARTICULARLY HEROIC. BUT THE FACT THAT
DOKHTAR-E LOR IS THE FIRST PERSIAN- LANGUAGE
TALKING FILM DOES SOMETHING TO COMMEND IT TO
POSTERITY. AND TO PICTORIAL INTERPRETATION.
AND THEN THERE IS THE SUBTEXT OF
LAWLESSNESS THAT FORCED THE YOUNG COUPLE
TO FLEE TO BOMBAY, ONLY
TO RETURN TO IRAN WHEN ORDER HAS BEEN
ESTABLISHED. THAT IS THE IRAN YESTERDAY AND
TODAY PART OF THE SUBTITLE.



ARTEMIS AKCHOTI SHAHBAZI & CYRUS SAMII

MORE THAN TATTERED PAGES OF LEILY AND MAJNUN SCATTERED ACROSS CONTINENTS AND COLLECTIONS, WE HAVE BEEN DISPERSED ACROSS THE GLOBE. AND SOME HAVE LEFT TO KEEP APPOINTMENTS IN SAMARRA. IN THIS VERY PERSIAN DIASPORA, ARTEMIS RESOLVED TO EXPLORE HER HERITAGE THROUGH VISUAL ARTS —INTERPRETING EPICS AND TRAVELOGUES, PAINTERS, AND PRIME MINISTERS; MELANCHOLY KINGS, CUNNING ALCHEMISTS, AND TRAGIC LOVERS. CYRUS DECIDED TO WRITE ABOUT IMAGINED LANDSCAPES, FORGOTTEN PROMISES, AND BLUE FLOWERS. IT WAS ONLY NATURAL THEY WOULD FIND EACH OTHER.

OF COURSE THEY DID NOT ELECT TO COLLABORATE ON OTHER KINGS ... OTHER STORIES... THERE WAS AN EARLIER TITLE, FROM PERSIA TO IRAN, AND ANY NUMBER OF OTHER EPISODES ANNOTATED BY QUOTES FROM WESTERN TRAVELOGUES. BUT AT ONE POINT ARTEMIS BEGAN PLAYING WITH IMAGES FROM FERDAWSI'S A KING'S BOOK OF KINGS, AND CYRUS WITH LITERARY THEMES FROM THE SAME EPIC, AND THEY RESOLVED TO PLACE THEIR SCENES WITHIN THE FAMILIAR IDIOM OF THE ILLUMINATED MANUSCRIPT. SHAH TAHMASP'S TO BE SPECIFIC.

A FEW RANDOM PAGES FROM THEIR COLLABORATION ARE SHARED HERE. A SELECTION FROM, OR PERHAPS A REFLECTION OF OUR STORY. AND OUR CONDITION.

