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Iranian Jewish Art Today: What Cultural Legacy Are We Handing Down?

by Shulamit Nazarian

How does an architect from Tehran become a gallery owner in Venice, California? Like most journeys, the steps are only clear when glancing back.

ART WAS MY FIRST LANGUAGE

I was born to Younes Nazarian and Soraya Nasi in Tehran, Iran, and was raised with David, Sharon, and Sam, my siblings. From our earliest years, we were taught to appreciate the arts, to love the land of Israel, to value learning, and to engage in philanthropy.

My mother’s father, Shokrolah Nasi, was an antiques dealer in Tehran and later in New York. He often traveled to France and England to purchase European antiques to sell in the United States. He understood European, as well as Persian, art history. It was from my grandfather that I learned the art of storytelling. He loved Persian poetry and used it to teach his grandchildren lessons about life. Additionally, he was a violinist and his great passion was Persian music. From him, and the rest of my mother’s side of the family, I gained a sensitivity toward the liberal arts: poetry, storytelling, and traditional Iranian crafts, including weaving, pottery, and silver engraving.

My mother’s uncle was a well-known metal engraver named Ben Mayeri (b. 1914, Iran; d. 2003, US). Growing up in a family that was active in the business of importing and exporting fine art nurtured Mayeri’s talent for drawing, calligraphy, and languages. He founded a factory and was involved
in designing, producing, and exporting metal engravings. This passion earned him international praise. He was acknowledged by *National Geographic* magazine and appeared in publications in Iran, Israel, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany and was interviewed by radio and television personalities. His talent brought him prominence and garnered him a faithful following. His clients include the late Shah and Empress Farah Pahlavi, US Secretaries of State William Rogers and Henry Kissinger, CIA Director and US Ambassador to Iran Richard Helms, General George Patton, playwright Arthur Miller, Elizabeth Taylor, German actress Elke Sommer, and many other collectors from the US, Europe, and the Middle East. Additionally, Mayeri served as the leader of Isfahan's Jewish community. He helped manage internal affairs, serving as a liaison to the civil government and representing the Jewish community at official state functions. He used these talents to make gifts and *ketubot* (marriage contracts) for our family and relatives. Mayeri's beautiful calligraphy, both in Hebrew and Farsi, is a continuous source of inspiration for my family.

My father's background is in building and construction. His deep morality, business acumen, and commitment to creativity have played a pivotal role in shaping my outlook and my career. The legacy of philanthropy that he launched through the Y & S Nazarian Family Foundation inspires me and is reflected in the Shulamit Gallery's commitment to building and strengthening the Iranian Jewish community.

My earliest memory of being exposed to art was in elementary school at the Etefagh School, a Jewish day school in Tehran. We did not study traditional art history; however, we had a wonderful art teacher who inspired me to look at the world and discover beauty in all my surroundings. This was a deeply powerful lesson for me, particularly because Tehran in the 1970s was overflowing with culture, tradition, and beauty. The homes of my family members and classmates were filled with fine Persian rugs, our everyday dishware and utensils were intricately decorated, and even our childhood TV programs were illuminated with bright colors, interesting characters, and vivid Middle Eastern motifs. I began to see beauty all around me.

My family immigrated to the United States on the eve of the Iranian Revolution in 1979, settling in Los Angeles. Like so many who fled, we left everything behind: rugs, pottery, paintings, and even family photographs, taking only what fit in our suitcases. As a young girl, it pained me greatly to think that all the beautiful things collected by generations of my family were lying in waste in a home and country that we could never see again. The trauma of our
flight affected me deeply and caused me to disconnect emotionally from my own heritage. It was only years later, through the interest of my non-Iranian classmates and parents’ work associates, that I renewed my interest and connection to my culture.

Because I was sixteen when we came to this country, I had two years left of secondary school. Starting at Beverly Hills High School was a new, overwhelming, and exciting experience. It was in the halls of this great public school, thousands of miles from my home, where I fell in love with architecture. I would continue these studies in college and graduate from the Pratt Institute in 1987 with my BFA, which exposed me to a variety of fine arts, art history, and theory.

Over the next two-and-a-half decades, several events guided my path towards becoming a gallerist. The first was watching my mother, Soraya Sarah Nazarian, begin to explore her own artistic practice. Her experimentation with stone carving opened up my family to explore contemporary art and inspired me to pursue my own dreams and talents, as she had done.

The second major event to impact me was my divorce. As a first-generation Iranian Jewish woman, I did not make the decision to end my marriage lightly. It took time for me to heal and to redefine my life as a single mother of three boys. Ultimately, however, I came to understand my own resiliency, and for the first time, I became comfortable with my independence. I realized that I have my own powerful story to share. Through one of the most tragic chapters in my life, I found my voice—from out of the darkness grew my brightest source of strength.

**FROM COLLECTOR TO GALLERIST**

It was my passion for art, architecture, and design that served as the inspiration to establish Shulamit Gallery. Before launching the gallery, I began independently exhibiting regional and international artists in my home in Holmby Hills, California. My beloved home, known as the Marvin and Sandy Smalley House, was built between 1969–73 by the noted architect A. Quincy Jones, and was featured in the Hammer Museum’s 2013 exhibition *A. Quincy Jones: Building for Better Living*, which was presented as part of *Pacific Standard Time Presents: Modern Architecture in L.A.*
During these early years, I was searching for my curatorial voice and message to the broader world. I realized through the first several exhibitions that I truly enjoyed working with artists and helping collectors discover new talent. There is something very powerful in connecting potential collectors or patrons with new works of art that move them. The more that I met artists, heard their stories, and witnessed their creative journeys, the more I knew that this was the path for me.

During this time, I met a truly remarkable man who would become a partner—in every sense of the word. Bruce Adlhoch, now my fiancé, is the owner of a major advertising and marketing company, Adlhoch Creative Inc. For the first time in my life, I had a truly supportive companion, and the impact on me was tremendous. From the beginning, he helped me to articulate my vision for the gallery. He supported me when I mounted my first exhibitions in my home. Later on, he offered his services as a creative advisor and helped me to develop the unique look and feel of the Shulamit Gallery’s public image and continues to support our marketing efforts. Most importantly, his enduring emotional support is a daily source of strength and inspiration for me.

In addition to Bruce, my early explorations as a gallerist led me to many wonderful partners and mentors. I became well acquainted with art consultants, curators, art historians, nonprofit professionals, and university faculty, including Lois Neiter, Adam Gross, Peter Mays, Gloria Gerace, Barbara Gilbert, Esther Netter, and Jocelyn Teltel. In 2008, I met Ruth Weisberg, who was then Dean of the University of Southern California (USC) Roski School of Fine Arts. It was Ruth who presented me with a major curatorial opportunity that would ultimately lead to the Shulamit Gallery. She asked if I would curate an Iranian Jewish exhibition for USC Hillel. I jumped at the chance. It was the first exhibition that I would be involved with that was inspired by my heritage.

As I began to research Iranian Jewish artists living and working in the United States, I was impressed by the magnitude of the work I discovered. It was amazing to me to learn of the number of Iranian artists and how many common themes became apparent in their diverse work, including a sense of reverence for traditional colors, cultural symbols, and Persian folklore. This vibrancy was often juxtaposed with the tremendous sadness of exiled immigrants, coping with the reality that they would never be able to return to Iran. There was a push and pull that I began to see in works by these artists, as they sought to celebrate their newfound freedom and yet missed a land in which they were oppressed, clinging to food, stories, and traditions that were familiar, yet also embracing American culture.
I titled the exhibition _Celebrating the Persian-Jewish Legacy_. It ran from March 5–May 20, 2010, at USC Hillel and featured the works of David Abir, Shahram Farshadfar, Mitra Forouzan, Krista Nassi, Soraya Sarah Nazarian, and Jessica Shokrian. These artists looked past the pain and trauma of being in exile and were motivated by the Middle Eastern value of *eftekhar* or honoring their heritage. They were celebrating Iran—past and present—while dreaming of a better future. Here the word “legacy” draws on the Jewish value of *l’id or v’idor*, “from generation to generation.” These artists were passing down a cultural legacy steeped with symbolism and meant to inspire a younger generation of Iranian Jewish students.

_Celebrating the Persian-Jewish Legacy_ was also the first time I worked alongside my mother in an official curatorial and art management capacity. This exhibition inspired both my mother and me to re-examine our careers and consider our next steps together. The positive support from the Iranian Jewish community led us in spring 2011 to organize a retrospective exhibition and catalog of work by my mother, Soraya Sarah Nazarian. The exhibition and publication were titled _Strength Revealed: A 25 Year Retrospective_. This exhibition was guest curated by Barbara Gilbert, senior curator emeritus of the Skirball Cultural Center. Noted curator and art consultant Gloria Gerace edited the catalog.

_Celebrating the Persian-Jewish Legacy_ and _Strength Revealed: A 25 Year Retrospective_ were my first experiences in supporting the creation of exhibitions and programming outside my home. In both cases, I was overjoyed that the press, art world, and our LA-based Iranian Jewish community received them well. The USC Hillel exhibition provided a model for me based in a non-profit venue while my mother’s exhibition followed a standard commercial gallery approach.

My participation in organizing _Strength Revealed_ was the first time I learned about what it takes to manage a commercial gallery. Alongside my mother and the guest curator, we had to develop gallery hours, hire staff, and guide visitors through the exhibition experience. We had to create sales, marketing, and press strategy. _Strength Revealed_ was open for a total of three months. It was during these moments, as I watched my mother’s career reach new levels, that I began to dream of my own gallery.
VENICE, CALIFORNIA: MY NEW ARTISTIC HOME
In October 2012, I realized my dream by opening Shulamit Gallery in Venice, California. Located on the same block as the venerable LA Louver Gallery, I purchased the gallery property in late 2011. It has since undergone a complete renovation. In January 2012, I began to collaborate with LA art consultant Anne Hromadka. She helped me create a strategic vision for the gallery, and together we crafted the mission statement, identified the first group of artists, developed an exhibition approach, created innovative programming, and hired additional staff members. She and I worked closely for two years building the foundation for my gallery and together envisioning a place where our artists, exhibitions, and programs could have a lasting impact in Los Angeles and beyond.

Shulamit Gallery, Venice, California
The first floor is the official gallery exhibition space complete with a renovated, top-of-the-line fireplace and an adjacent Project Space. The Project Space, initially the building's garage, was converted into a multi-use staging area for installations. The second floor includes a full-service kitchen, followed by a spacious office and lounge. The additional rooms consist of living quarters for artists-in-residence and offices for my staff. On a more technical level, the space was a residence from the onset, but drawing on my architectural background, I transformed the building into a more commercial arena, incorporating the warmth of the home in the gallery context. I strove to embrace the local Venice feel with a multilayered, clean, and contemporary twist.

I see this new art space as a venue through which we can expose others to contemporary Iranian, Israeli, and Middle Eastern culture. As such, the Shulamit Gallery seeks to engage Los Angeles locals through interdisciplinary exhibitions and programming, featuring artwork by emerging and established artists.

**In the Beginning . . . Inaugural Group Exhibitions**

Shulamit Gallery's inaugural exhibitions were entitled *My Heart Is in the East, and I Am at the Ends of the West* and *Leaving the Land of Roses*. Both explored the contemporary Iranian Jewish story. They were held in collaboration with the Fowler Museum at UCLA, whose exhibit entitled *Light and Shadows: The Story of Iranian Jews* was being shown at that time. The Fowler’s readapted exhibition, first organized by Beit Hatfutsot in Tel Aviv, focused specifically on L.A.'s Iranian community. Together, these exhibitions provided a survey of regional Iranian Jewish art. They tell the story of our continued cultural legacy.

Our first exhibition was *My Heart Is in the East, and I Am at the Ends of the West*. The exhibition title was inspired by Judah Halevi's (b. 1086; d. 1141) famous poem, which beautifully captures the sense of loss and longing of a Jew living far from his ancient homeland.

Using the artists as my guides, *My Heart Is in the East* was a chance for me to explore questions of hybrid and multilayered identities: What does it mean to be in exile? What is our relationship to the city or country in which we live? Is it possible to maintain a positive national identity while fleeing persecution? Is the place in which one seeks refuge ever truly home? The work of Iranian Jewish artists, including Farid Kia, Laura Merage, Soraya Sarah Nazarian, and Jessica Shokrian, all attempted to answer these complex questions.

The Jewish community of Iran, whose lives and experiences were explored in this exhibition, is one of the world's oldest Jewish communities.
During the early and mid-twentieth century, the Iranian Jewish community gained religious freedom, increased economic security, and experienced vast improvements to its quality of life. However, its acceptance proved to be fleeting and quickly evaporated during the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Quite literally overnight, the majority of Iranian Jews fled their homeland for new lives in Israel, Europe, and the United States. From Great Neck, New York, to Los Angeles, California, new communities emerged that had to wrestle with their pasts and define a new future.

As in the romantic and relevant words of Halevi, the hearts of Iranian Jews continue to turn eastward. They embrace a nostalgic ideal of a birthplace where colors radiated with greater intensity, where flowers smelled sweeter, where spices were more alluring, where melodies could move women to tears, and where family was everything. Yet, here in Los Angeles—the literal ends of the West—Iranian Jews have created new lives for themselves and their children in the largest Iranian expatriate community in the world. Now, more than thirty years after the Revolution, they face the challenges that affect all immigrant populations: assimilation, acculturation, and intermarriage.

My Heart Is in the East, and I Am at the Ends of the West (2012), Installation View

This exhibition also included several historic pieces, which were displayed in Iranian homes and given as gifts to foreign dignitaries before the Revolution. They were given on loan from the collection of my uncle, Iranian
silversmith Ben Mayeri. The mixing of contemporary art and historic objects served to remind the viewer of nostalgic notions of home, and mirrored the display of cultural artifacts on exhibit at the Fowler Museum.

My Heart Is in the East, *and I Am at the Ends of the West* (2012), *Installation View*
Through our first exhibition, viewers were invited to traverse centuries of turmoil and discover some of the characteristics that make the Iranian Jewish story both unique and universal.

JESSICA SHOKRIAN AT THE FOWLER MUSEUM AND SHULAMIT GALLERY PROJECT SUMMARY
One of the ways in which the UCLA Fowler Museum adapted Light & Shadows for our Los Angeles Jewish community was to invite two regional contemporary artists to expand on its themes. I was pleased to have represented one of the artists, Jessica Shokrian. I worked alongside my curatorial team, the Fowler Museum staff, and with Shokrian to develop a multisensory interactive exhibition element. In retrospect, I believe strongly that this was the breakthrough work for Jessica Shokrian since it combined elements of her previous video, site-specific installation, and performance work to create a beautiful and holistic tribute to our shared culture.

Jessica Shokrian, Shajhan in Wonderland (2012), Installation View

Shokrian’s project at the Fowler borrowed from historic and current themes in participatory art. The goal was to encourage the viewer to interact
directly with her subject matter, joining in and activating the space to experience the sights, sounds, and scents of the Iranian Jewish experience. In service of this goal, Shokrian created an eighteen-minute, looping video. Below the video screen was a shelf displaying a traditional Iranian serving tray and a series of jars containing spices and other fragrant liquids. It is a well-known fact that our sense of smell is deeply linked with memory. The project capitalized on this idea by bringing to life the scents of the Persian market, holiday gatherings, and life-cycle events. Viewers were able to smell the fragrance of rosewater while it is gracefully poured into an open grave during a traditional Iranian Jewish funeral. They could smell her aunt’s spice rub while watching the aunt make pan-fried kebabs. For those familiar with these scents, each jar transported them back in time. Participants experiencing these fragrances for the first time gained a deeper understanding of the Iranian Jewish narrative.

Museum visitors are not often allowed to touch artwork. However, if given the opportunity to directly interact with art, it can be transformative. Allowing the public to touch and smell the fragrances selected by Shokrian created a shared narrative. It evoked associations between the viewer and the image. It created a poetic intimacy, capturing the complete sensory experience of the contemporary Iranian Jewish narrative.

Jessica Shokrian: Fowler Museum, UCLA
In an eighteen-minute video that spans fifty years of footage, artist Jessica Shokrian overlays portrayals of 1960s and contemporary Iranian culture in a format that mimics the cycle of life.

During the first segment, Shokrian shows us clips of the members of a nearby temple amid celebrations for the Jewish holiday Simchat Torah. Filtered atop this scene are images of text from the Islamic Quran, the Christian Bible, and the Hebrew Torah, essentially demonstrating that Iran was a place of many faiths.

Next, the Chief Rabbi of the Iranian Angeleno community sings traditional Iranian melodies while performing the Brit Milah, the Jewish ceremony for the newborn. Here again, we see two video clips playing simultaneously: one borrowed from the 1960s, the other from present-day LA.

Viewers then vicariously experience a day in the life of Shokrian’s aunt as she shops at local kosher marts for ingredients to prepare Kebob digi, a customary Iranian dish. Her aunt listens to Persian music, bringing tears to her eyes, as she reminisces about her past life in Iran.
Two weddings ensue with a parallelism similar to previous segments: Shokrian’s parents’ 1960s wedding and the recent ceremony of a cousin in 2009. Lastly, in a somber funeral scene, the audience gets a glimpse of Persian Jewish mourning practices: the casting of flowers and the pouring of rosewater upon the grave.

All throughout, Shokrian chants a poem titled “Your Persian Bride,” referencing the role of the Persian matriarch—be it daughter, wife, mother, or grandmother.

*Your Persian Bride*

Dear Tehrangeles rich and scandalous  
Oh Teherangeles my heart’s entwined  
Dear Teherangeles some can’t handle us  
Oh Teherangeles tell me why  
Querido Teherangeles, ciudad de Los Angeles  
My Teherangeles carpet ride  
Dear Teherangeles Cyrus alive in us  
Oh Teherangeles Esther cries  
Dear Teherangeles the revolution ignited us  
Oh Teherangeles though many died  
Dear Teherangeles we made our exodus  
Oh Teherangeles as the stars aligned  
Dear Teherangeles you light shines bright for us  
Oh Teherangeles now we kiss your skies  
Dear Teherangeles lost and glamorous  
One day, I’ll Be Your Persian Bride

*Leaving the Land of Roses*

*Leaving the Land of Roses* was the second exhibition at Shulamit Gallery. Our Western notion of paradise and the imagery of the Garden of Eden find their origins within the innovations of ancient Iran—the word paradise itself stems from a translation of Old Persian *pairidaeza* for the walled-in area of an enclosed garden. Travelers, merchants, armies, and missionaries would share tales of these beautiful grounds, which ultimately became associated with the idea of the Judeo-Christian origin story, sparking centuries of awe-inspiring horticulture and utopian myth.

Persia is said to be the native country of the rose. From there, the cultivation of these flowers spread across the globe, simultaneously moving east and west. This single flower has internationally and inter-culturally embedded
itself as a pervasive symbol. To those who have left this land behind, the scent is nostalgic. The extraction of rose oil originated in Persia; rosewater continues to play an essential role in cultural, culinary, and spiritual traditions.

Leaving the Land Of Roses (2013) Installation View

Leaving the Land of Roses continued our inaugural exhibition’s exploration of questions of multilayered and ambiguous identities and the nostalgia for paradise lost. Drawing on the work of artists including David Abir, Krista Nassi, Tal Shochat, and Marjan K. Vayghan, this exhibition tackled the questions: What does it mean to long for your native land? How does scent or sound so vividly recall a forgotten or hidden memory? How do a people reconcile yearning for their homeland and its culture, even though they cannot return and have no desire to? How does a land that once inspired the vision of paradise become a place of such oppression and violence?

Krista Nassi was born in Iran and immigrated to Los Angeles after the Iranian Revolution of 1979. In her homeland, she had experienced political hardship; now, in an effort to dissect her understanding and disseminate her perspective, Nassi creates elaborate photomontages, manipulating their surface with ink and pigments. Within her works, Persian iconography is abundant. As she continues in pursuit of uninhibited creative ventures, Tehran’s Museum of Contemporary Art (TMOCA) as well as a select number of galleries throughout Europe have all collected her work.
Emerging artist Marjan K. Vayghan was born at the crossroads of Judaism and Islam and often explores this dual identity as a visual and performance artist. “Fly with the Cage” Legacy Crate, 2009, a kinetic audio and light installation, featured an altered shipping crate. Illuminated panels highlight images of Iranian mosaics. In her performance, the crate became a symbol of...
her displaced heritage and immigrant narrative. The viewer was invited to enter the open crate and see the world through a kaleidoscopic view of her home, partake in familial and political dialogue, and join Vayghan as she explored her own history.

Tal Shochat, an Iranian Israeli photographer, was born in 1974 in Netanya, Israel, and currently lives and works in Tel Aviv. In a vivid review by *The New Yorker*, Shochat’s work is described as having a certain stylized, storybook quality that is reminiscent of Eden. Her images often create epic narratives, and this exhibition included new works exploring the roles of Iranian women as matriarchal figures. A line of poetry by a famous Iranian poet inspired each carefully crafted scene. Her works have recently been acquired by the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, England, and can be found in the collection of the Jewish Museum in New York City.

David Abir, *Tekrar (2012)*, Installation View

David Abir, born in 1969, is an Iranian American sculptor. His project for the exhibition revolved around a set of fictional monuments viewed through a historical and archaeological context. The sculptures and installations were presented as “ruins” in a state of excavation. The essence of his work is a coded language of music that emanates from within, further shaped by the acoustic distortion and phenomena of the resonant inner spaces. Several ruins were on display in our Project Space as part of this exhibition. As of the spring of 2013, the first edition of *Tekrar Level Four* was permanently installed.
in Istanbul as a part of the collection of Ahmet Kocabıyık’a at the Borusan Contemporary Museum.

**East Meets West: From Artists to Exhibition Approach**

In March 2013, we mounted two exhibitions whose artists and approaches related to each other despite their very different backgrounds. It was the first time the gallery created an artistic pairing highlighting our various target audiences.

Doni Silver Simons comes from an Eastern European, highly religious Jewish background, and spiritual themes are often evident in her work. Pouya Afshar is Iranian from a Kurdish background. This pairing aligns closely with the mission and vision of the Shulamit Gallery as an innovative art space committed to engaging locals through cross-cultural exhibitions and programming.

Silver Simons earned her Bachelor of Studio Arts degree from the University of Pittsburgh in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and holds a Master of Fine Arts degree from Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. Silver Simons’ work has been shown in museums and galleries in the United States, Europe, and Israel, and her pieces are included in many private and public collections. She has recently shown in the Museum of Art, EinHarod, Israel; the Wolfson Museum, Jerusalem, Israel; and the Pacific Standard Time exhibition *Breaking in Two*; in addition, her documentary film *Omer 5769* premiered at

*Doni Silver Simons, Neilah (2007), Acrylic on Linen, 91.25 x 195.5 Inches*
the twenty-second annual Washington, DC, Jewish Film Festival in 2011. Across multiple mediums, Silver Simons explores the marking of time, identity, and memory.

Her artwork often explores how modernity confronts her religious identity. At times, her work is directly inspired by Jewish practice, as evidenced in her series of omer (the period between the holidays of Passover and Shavuot) or in her piece titled Neilah, created just before her work for Kol Nidre began in 2007.

Silver Simons’s exhibition dé•nou•ment (n.) included two seminal bodies of her work. The title referenced both the metaphoric and literal aspects of her work. Featured in our main gallery were three totemic works originating from the classic fairy tale Rumpelstiltskin. Together they took on the lyrical facets of storytelling as residuum of her durational performances. As part of her discourse, Silver Simons literally deconstructed her primary medium: the canvas. In a dramatic gesture, she unraveled her artwork—much like the miller’s daughter in the classic tale given the impossible task of spinning straw into gold. She displayed the fallen strands in various vessels and had created a video project looping the twine, drifting gingerly downward. It was these elements that suggested the exhibition’s title, dé•nou•ment, a term originating from old French, meaning “to untie” or “to undo.” The cloistered nature of the miller’s daughter resonated deeply with the artist, seeing her quest as a parable to the modernist ideal of the artist tucked away in the atelier, seeking revelation and creation.

Doni Silver Simons, de-nou•ment (n.) (2013), Installation view
The second body of work that was on display was Silver Simons's *Caesura* series from 2012. These two undertakings are linked by the artist's ongoing interest in literature. A caesura is the breath of air inhaled before the reading of a line of poetry. Here, the artist alluded to the primordial narrative of creation: breath, life, and water. Each melodic painting in the *Caesura* series referenced the California coastline, the ocean, and the tides. For example, *Tidal* and *Tied* depict washes of pigment. Embedded in layers of paint are references to the tide schedule, the lunar calendar, and waves crashing against the sandy shore. The subtle use of color creates a delicate juxtaposition to the monochromatic works in the fairy tale series.

Pouya Afshar moved from Iran to the US in 2000 to study film, animation, and illustration. His videos, new media installations, and figurative paintings have been exhibited widely in Iran and Los Angeles, including locally at the J. Paul Getty Center. He has received numerous awards and recognition from the Marc Davis Foundation and Walt Disney. Currently, he teaches New Media at the Art Institute of California.

*Pouya Afshar, The Mystery of Süveyda: Within the Artist’s Mind (2013), Video Installation*

Afshar delved deep into the psyche of the artist and the immigrant in his media installation, entitled *The Mystery of Süveyda: Within the Artist’s Mind*. In this work, Afshar blurred the lines between our conscious and subconscious. Creating a solitary room, he emulates the sensation of an artist struggling
with the limitations of his or her own imagination. In a theatrical way, Afshar opened up a fourth wall, allowing the viewer to step into a three-walled enclosure. Here, the audience was confronted by three images: a window looking out onto a faraway landscape, a fetus growing within a mechanized womb, and a running horse opened up to reveal the exposed tendons. These images projected on an imagined stone edifice are meant to be mysterious, overwhelming, and provocative. Reminiscent of a prison cell, the space invited the viewer to acutely feel the passage of time.

Once the viewer turned away from this walled room, the final element was revealed. Tucked away in the corner was a touchstone amid the surreal: a glimpse of the artist’s studio, complete with desk, chair, and monitor. The participant was invited to sit and view several illustrative short films. Afshar, as artist and creator, highlights deeply buried fears, questions, and concerns. In the Sufi mystical tradition, this process takes place in the form of a small black dot upon the heart: the Süveyda. For Afshar, Süveyda is an atelier that seldom allows him to explore the depths of his being.

Viewed together, both Silver Simons’s and Afshar’s works examined our core understanding of the human experience through the investigation of the passage of time. Both explored the narrative traditions of folklore in Western and Eastern cultures. They delved into the metaphor of the artist cloistered in the studio—the familiar trope of the solitary figure, offering the viewer a unique window into the artist’s subconscious. The Shulamit Gallery is a place where East meets West, where the Jewish and Islamic worlds encounter one another through their shared traditions and imagery, and I feel that this joint exhibition was one of our greatest successes thus far in making that vision a reality.

NAMING THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM OR WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?
During the first two years of running my gallery in Venice, I am grateful to have experienced much success. Like all small business owners and particularly those heading new start-up ventures, I’ve had my fair share of the expected challenges.

However, our gallery’s unique mission has led to a different and much more complex set of challenges, rooted in community and political dynamics that are much bigger than we are—among them the conflict between immigrant
and American values, the power of the Western-centric art world with its history of both xenophobia and antisemitism, and the complicated intra-religious tensions between the Ashkenazi and Persian communities in Los Angeles. I would like to take some time to address some of the issues highlighted by these challenges and where I feel we must go from here if we are to overcome them:

• **How do we as a community define what it means to be the provider for a family?**

For many members of the Iranian Jewish community, like many other immigrant communities, there is a fairly narrow version of what success looks like. In general, Persian parents have encouraged their children to enter into professions like law or medicine, or into business and entrepreneurship. These career paths are seen as ways to ensure the security of our families. I respect and understand this value. As a mother of three young men, I too want my children to be self-reliant, strong, and financially secure.

However, I feel that the cultural pressure to achieve financial success also has the effect of pushing the next generation away from participating in the creative fields. We must remember that, for centuries, our artisans were among the most valued members of our community. A community’s legacy and its strength are derived from its arts. It can and should be that way again.

Beyond our basic parental fears, we need to address gender biases. Far too often we expect our men to be the primary supporters of our families and to walk a well-worn path to conventional success. Our community has been more open to women artists; however, they are often accepted under the guise of a “hobby.” I have met with too many members of our community who define themselves as “struggling artists.” When I ask what that means to them, they often reflect not on financial deprivation, but on their struggle to be supported by their families, friends, and community.

• **What to collect?**

During a recent interview with an Iranian artist for a possible exhibition, the first thing he said was, “It is really refreshing seeing an Iranian gallerist and patron who is actually supporting Iranian artists.” This comment reinforced for me that artists in our community often feel unsupported, particularly by our own. On the whole, I have found that many collectors do not value or understand Iranian art, unless it can be tracked on the
Western market through a proven auction record. I understand that there is safety in collecting a modern master like Warhol or Monet, and that there is a certain cachet to having those well-known artists on one’s wall.

However, my hope is that more people will adopt a more regional and cultural approach to collection and art patronage. We in the Persian community should collect Iranian art, and we should care about art produced in our own region of the country. This is the art that tells our story. It depicts our pain and our success. It shows what it is like to long to return to native soil. There is a use of color and shapes that evoke memories only we share with the artists. We should revere the most talented artists among our community and support them by collecting their works, commissioning new projects, and inspiring museums to support our heritage and tell our stories. Good art is not just defined by how much a work will trade for at Sotheby’s or Christie’s. Our artists are talking to us, and it’s time we paid attention.

Next time you are at a museum, pay attention to whether the section dedicated to the Middle East is listed as Islamic Art or Middle Eastern Art. Exhibitions in major markets, from New York to LA and from London to Paris, are featuring Iranian and Middle Eastern artists at record levels. Examples include: Iran Modern at Asia Society in New York City, LACMA’s current exhibition Islamic Art Now: Contemporary Art of the Middle East, and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London’s Year Light from the Middle East. Yet many museums still mislabel all art from this region as “Islamic,” rather than reflecting the true diversity of the Middle East. Calling all the works Islamic rather than by their proper geographic marker ignores the contributions of other civilizations present in this region, including those who arrived prior to the rise of Islam circa 630 AD.

While Iranian art is finally getting its time on the national and international stage, it is still not being seen on the same level as other non-Western art. This is just the beginning, and it will take time for Iranian art to provide staying power with collectors and museums. As momentum continues to build, I challenge the institutions and patrons to rethink how to classify these works.

Despite the growing attention, some emerging Iranian artists don’t want to be so identified.
Among some of our most talented emerging artists, there is a great deal
of anxiety about being identified as specifically Middle Eastern or Iranian artists. They resist participating in Iranian group exhibitions or showing at Middle Eastern-focused galleries. They fear that doing so will permanently label them and perhaps make their work less appealing to collectors, museums, and curators on the international market. This is ironic as many of these same artists deal directly with their Iranian identity in their work. Yet the fear persists that by proudly identifying with their culture, they will wind up pigeonholed and unable to achieve their full potential.

- *I have modeled my gallery on my identity as a Jewish Iranian immigrant. However, I have learned that a hybrid mission at times can lead to complicated conversations.*

I knew before opening our doors that it was important to me to represent a whole picture of the Middle East at Shulamit Gallery, which includes Israel—a place that I care deeply about. And I knew that since I wanted to represent both Israeli and Iranian artists, it could get complicated.

Overall, our experience has been that we have found many wonderful program partners and artists who represent all aspects of our mission and who welcome the opportunity for dialogue and growth. However, we have found that some European partners and artists, particularly those who travel back and forth to Iran, have struggled with partnering with the gallery because of the language on our website and social media that includes clear mention of Israel and Judaism.

When confronted with these often-painful moments, it has allowed me to have nuanced conversations with the artists and potential partners. I try to point out how all our artwork carries power and meaning and that by bringing them together, we can break down long-held stereotypes. Nevertheless, it remains an ongoing challenge to find the balance that works for my company, my collaborators, and myself.

- *Since I opened my doors, I have received a steady stream of Iranian Jewish and non-Jewish artists interested in showing with me.*

This tells me a very important and clear message: A cultural space dedicated to the Iranian experience is needed in Los Angeles. There are an abundance of talented artists waiting to share their journey with us. I hope you will join me in supporting them and paying attention as they craft the next chapter of our cultural legacy.
IN CONCLUSION
My aesthetic perspective carries over into everything that I try to do, from running Shulamit Gallery to funding artists and creating community-wide programs. I have been blessed that our first three years of exhibitions and programs were well-received by the Los Angeles arts community and have paved the way for successful solo exhibitions by gallery-represented artists: Doni Silver Simons, Orit Hofshi, Gary Baseman, Jonas N. T. Becker, Pouya Afshar, Jessica Shokran, Inbal Abergil, Andi Arnovitz, Anisa Ashkar, Fereydoun Ave, Miri Chais, Kamran Diba, Sussan Deyhim, Melanie Daniel, Shahab Fotouhi, Carol Es, and Galia Linn.

In opening Shulamit Gallery, I have had a unique opportunity to reflect upon my lineage and family legacy. I have made it my mission to unravel that history and get to the essence of my Iranian Jewish experience—with all its beauty, cultural richness, and pain. I strive to raise awareness with regard to the feminist front in Iran. I make it a priority to encourage dialogue and spark debate. Bringing my knowledge into a contemporary context, I aim to share this wealth of inherited knowledge with friends, family, and the broader community, hoping that I will pass on my values and perspectives to a new generation.
Works Cited

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