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Persia Reframed

Iranian Visions of Modern
and Contemporary Art

Touch out artwork on back wall







Prologue

Iran has often been perceived primarily through the lens of the repressive regimes which have characterized its history, but the modern and contemporary art of the country and its diaspora tell a different story. Contradicting the prevailing view, the pluralism of artistic voices, and the variety of idiosyncratic means which artists have deployed to navigate recent history, point to the existence of a democratic ecosystem in which modern art was created, as it were one sensibility at a time. In today's climate, contemporary art in Iran continues to be a sanctuary for self-definitions and a platform for a range of assertions including protest.

Approaching art with a faith in its emancipating role, and selecting topics ranging from the specific (for example a slippery concept such as modernism, a single movement, a key exponent) to the panoramic (abstraction, contemporary art), this study proceeds from a belief in aesthetics as a coping mechanism, a repository for confession, aspiration and trauma, and a process through which, against all odds, the self is asserted. Just as the selected topics and approaches are varied, so is the tone. The personal explicitly informs both the epilogue and the final chapter, while the tenor of the chapters in between is more scholarly and critical. The media discussed are those standard in the study of modern and contemporary art, including performance, multimedia installation and video, in addition to painting, drawing, printmaking and sculpture.

"تروزیست"

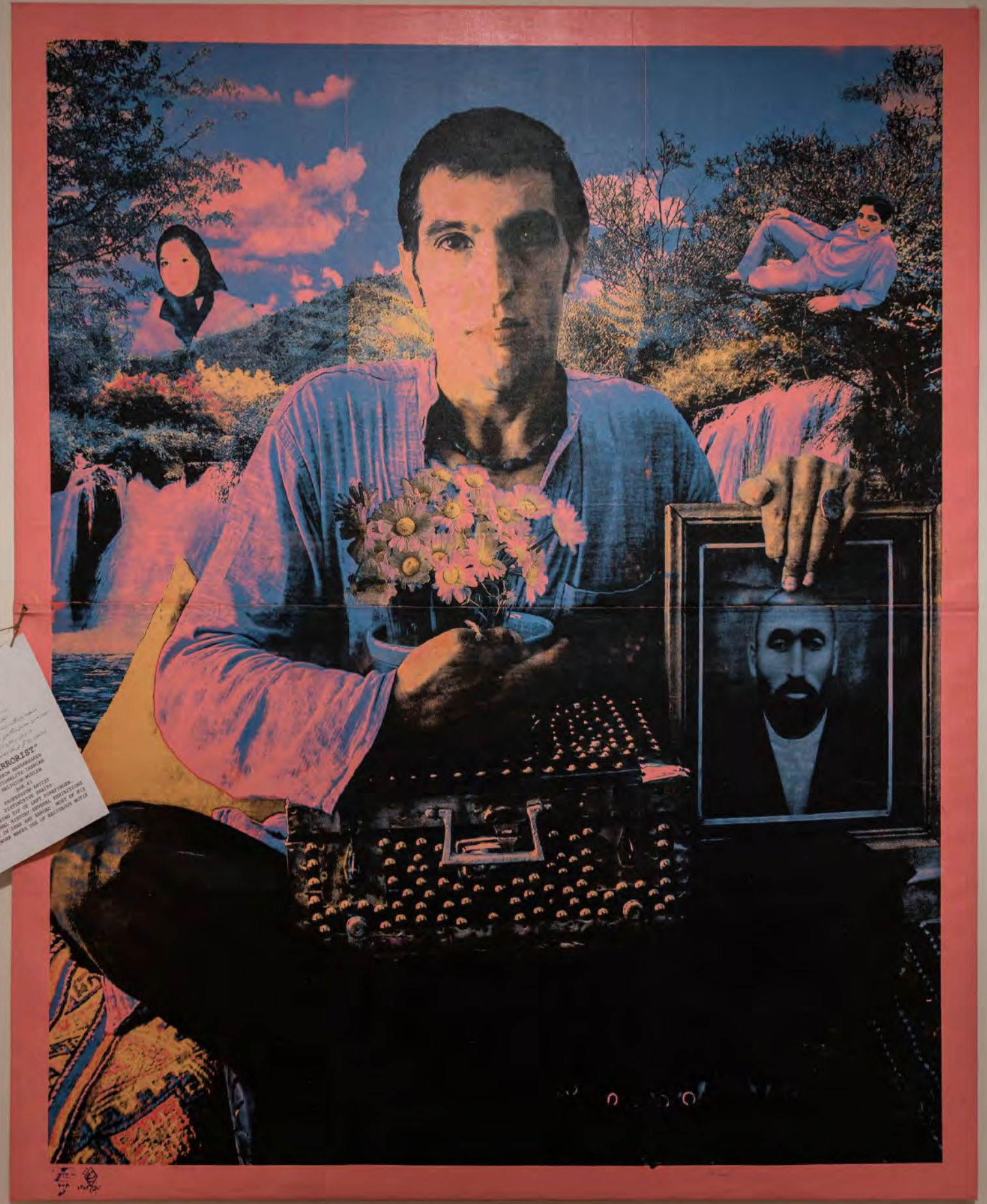
خسرو حسن زاده
ملیت: ایرانی
مذهب: مسلمان
سن: چهل و یک ساله
شغل: هنرمند نقاش

مشخصه: بند انگشت نشانه دست چپ قطع شده است.
سوابق: خسرو چندین نمایشگاه هنری با موضوع مذهبی و فرهنگ مردمی در ایران و خارج از کشور داشته است.
او در تهران زندگی می کند و صاحب دو فرزند می باشد.

"TERRORIST"
KHOSROW HASSANZADEH
NATIONALITY: IRANIAN
RELIGION: MUSLIM
AGE: 41
PROFESSION: ARTIST
DISTINCTIVE TRAITS:
MISSING TIP OF LEFT FOREFINGER.
PERSONAL HISTORY: SEVERAL EXHIBITIONS
BOTH IN IRAN AND ABROAD. MOST OF HIS
ARTWORK MAKES USE OF RELIGIOUS MOTIFS

Left
Detail of facing image

Opposite
Khosrow Hassanzadeh
Terrorist: Khosrow, 2004
Acrylic and silkscreen ink on canvas,
250 x 205 cm (98 x 80")
Mohammed Afkhami Foundation



was an instinctual impulse, predating the invasion of post-colonial thinking in academia, and anticipating the essentialist positions I would explicitly reject in the following decades. The dissertation, researched and written mostly in Paris and defended at Columbia University just after the end of the Iran–Iraq War, when the hostage crisis was barely a decade old, was my revenge against the polarizing narratives of the time.

Beginning in the nineties, Iranian art (not unlike the art of Africa and China) slowly gained greater exposure outside the country. For the first time in the modern era, it was no longer exclusively represented by illustrious examples from the past but was, rather, the product of living, contemporary Iranians, first a few in the diaspora and then, especially after the market surge in 2007 in Dubai, by artists residing inside the country. The art world in general was becoming increasingly



Chapter One

Modernism(s): Contextualizing the terms of discussion

The mere fact that the Gregorian calendar and the Persian solar calendar do not share the same year zero highlights the difficulty of borrowing Western taxonomies to describe the current and the previous centuries in Iran.¹ The Gregorian calendar's twentieth century (1900–1999), for instance, covers portions of both the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries of the Persian calendar (1279–1378). When referring to centuries, commonly, Iranians use the Gregorian calendar but when discussing decades they revert back to the Persian calendar. For instance the seventies (1970s) are known as the fifties (1350s). There may be no solution to this problem, but acknowledging the discrepancy must inform any venture into chronology. To avert the confusion that might result from a deceptive etymology, terms such as 'modern', 'contemporary' and, especially, 'modernism', as well as the concept of the avant-garde, all being contingent on local timelines, must be revisited and problematized and their reference points exposed.

In periodizing the modern era in Iranian art, the year 1979 (1358 according to the Persian calendar) is a convenient benchmark. It does not evoke any watershed in the West, but in Iran it marks the cataclysmic rupture brought about by a revolution that ended centuries of monarchy. In particular it marked the overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty (the reign of Reza Shah from 1925 to 1941 and that of his son Mohammad Reza Shah from 1941 to 1979), and the eradication



33. Behjat Sadr
 Untitled, 1977
 Oil on canvas, 53 x 70 cm (20 7/8 x 27")
 Collection Mitra Hananeh-Goberville

secret world with its reliefs, depths, and fantasies.⁵⁶ Thus the element of chance was a fundamental factor in directing the paths of both Sadr and Vaziri towards abstraction. (One might add that chance has no ethnicity.)

Soon the whirling expressionist brushstrokes of Sadr's early work yielded to the ebb and flow of gesture, to criss-crossing patterns and waves of marks travelling across the canvas (fig 33). She relished experimentation with the material and the process of sign making, sometimes shaping the paint she had poured onto her support, sometimes removing it from the surface in an action she called 'negative painting.'⁵⁷ Using a variety of instruments (a spatula, razor, trowel, and palette knife) she allowed her material, the oil paint, to evoke the dryness of tree bark, the fluidity of water, the nervous energy of an electrical current, or the viscosity of industrial oil. At times, motion was the subject matter and nature the inspiration. In other moments, the geometry of architectural decoration, such as the brick patterns of the Friday mosque in Isfahan, took center stage. Typically, her palette was austere, and even the blue and green she picked up when she studied Persian ceramics (for a commission to decorate the façade of the Hilton Hotel in Tehran) are invested with a certain gravitas; in their dark turbulence they recall oceans. Occasionally she used bright colours such as red and yellow. The supports she selected varied from canvas to paper to aluminum to ready-made objects such as window blinds; in these latter works, the blinds open to reveal imagery other than what appears when they are shut.

Several commentators have remarked on the 'virility' or 'masculinity' of Sadr's brushstrokes.⁵⁸ Without any feminist agenda or particular social engagement, Sadr nonetheless exclaimed, in a language belonging to her generation, 'As a woman, I had the vigor of men.'⁵⁹ Forough Farrokhzad, a free-spirited poet retrospectively considered to be a feminist figure, was a close friend. Both intimately identified with the vitality of nature, an organic force that contradicted the artificial constructs of social and religious decrees.

In Sadr's work, abstractions tied to a visceral identification with nature gave way to its literal representation in photographic images. In 1980, when she permanently settled in France, she began incorporating the photography she had pursued throughout her career into collages where abstract markings, without losing their prominence, recede to the periphery to allow photographic images a central place; abstraction and photographic realism coexist. During her self-imposed exile in Paris, she was diagnosed with cancer, and it is hard to abstain from constructing a narrative of illness and displacement around the artworks. The artist attributed the change of medium and style to her illness, which forced her to work sitting down, but the dislocation she

experienced when she moved from a Tehran in turmoil to Paris seems to have seeped into the iconography.⁶⁰ These collages are composed of photographs – often a picture of a place left behind or a desolate view of the River Seine near her apartment – framed with strokes of oil paint (fig 34). Sadr remarked, ‘One should not forget that I created these photo-paintings during periods of illness. In such a situation, the very act of cutting and pasting was an important activity with significant meaning’⁶¹ – metaphorically rephrasing the experience of a scarred body and an uprooted life.

Works from this late phase of Sadr’s oeuvre enrich the pluralist terrain of Iranian art in the 1980s, a perspective that remains absent in the one-dimensional treatment of the period in exhibitions such as *Iran: Unedited History, 1960–2014*, held in Paris. These wistful collages were made in diaspora, contemporaneously with the propaganda art of the Revolution that was raging in Iran. Contrary to the bombastic tenor of paintings and posters that glorified war, revolution, and martyrdom, Sadr’s collages emanate a longing for peace and serenity. They present a sharp contrast to the violent daily news of executions and war that refugees and diasporic Iranians received in Paris in that decade. Additionally, Sadr’s late interest in narrative and the hybridity of media speaks to a trajectory straddling modernism and post-modernism.

Vaziri also cannot be restricted to the post-World War II European landscape of abstraction. His practice was not limited to



34. Behjat Sadr
Les Dangers (The Dangers), 1985
Oil on canvas and photograph
52 x 66 cm (20½ x 26")
Private collection



35. Mohsen Vaziri Moghaddam
Untitled, 1962
Sand and synthetic polymer paint on canvas,
100 x 180.3 cm (39¾ x 71")
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
Helmut Bratsch Fund, 1965

his sand paintings, an example of which was acquired by the Museum of Modern Art in 1965 after being exhibited at the 1964 Carnegie International in Pittsburgh (fig 35).⁶² Just as Sadr made a form of kinetic art with her paintings on window blinds, Vaziri devised an entirely new concept for mutable sculpture, inviting viewers to intervene in the work by manipulating its configuration (figs 36; see also below, fig 116). Such participatory art is closer to contemporary relational aesthetics than to the art of around 1970. The work of the Brazilian artist Lygia Clark might be the only precedent, albeit in a different fashion, on a different continent, and totally unknown to the Iranian artist.⁶³ In harmony with his interest in the elemental (in the ‘human signature’), his abstract sculptures may be extended in configurations that resemble the



Opposite

43. Ahmad Aali

Self-Portrait, 1964

Reconstructed in 2010. Mixed media,
214 x 76.8 x 61.6 cm (84¼ x 30¼ x 24½")
Aaran Gallery, Tehran

Climate of dissidence and ambiguities

The history of dissent by painters and sculptors before the revolution is a highly complex matter and is in need of much greater research and objective scrutiny than has been provided. *Iran: Unedited History, 1960–2014* exposed dissent during the Pahlavi regime as expressed in media other than painting, which was the privileged medium of the time. While it left out political paintings by artists such as Nicky Nodjoumi,⁹⁰ it managed, however, to simultaneously acknowledge some of the refined ambitions of the regime – as expressed at the Shiraz Arts Festival (1967–77), where both traditional and global avant-garde performances were showcased under the patronage of the Queen – and offer a critique of them, by also exhibiting a series of photographs by Kaveh Golestan (1950–2003), a photojournalist who probed the squalid living conditions of prostitutes in the red-light district of south Tehran.⁹¹

As indicated in the anonymous catalogue text for the 1979 exhibition at TMOCA, within the political sphere accusations and questions surfaced after the Revolution about the ethical integrity of artists. For example, a controversy brewed around the question of whether artists should have boycotted government institutions (first the Private Secretariat of the Queen and then TMOCA, when it overtook the Secretariat's acquisition program). Should those who didn't resist be considered collaborationists, as post-revolutionary critics suggested? My own position here is not to be an apologist for either the regime or the artists, some of whom, as I show in this book, created works of coded dissent, but to try to nuance some of the strident criticism of this period. In the foreign press, TMOCA has almost always been condemned for whitewashing the Pahlavi regime – a criticism that, even if legitimate, reveals an Orientalist bias because it denies Iranians the right of access to the international art of our time. The same criticism is not directed at certain government-supported American museums when American foreign policy favoured repressive regimes and regime change. According to one critic, the American sculptor Claes Oldenburg 'as a matter of principle opposed any of his works entering TMOCA's collection,'⁹² but he does not seem to have objected to his works entering the Smithsonian. To be fair, American museums are mostly privately funded. As for the Smithsonian and all of its museums and collections, they are owned by the United States Government, acting in trust for the American people, to whom they truly belong. The Government covers about seventy percent of the total costs. Public programs, exhibitions, and special events are almost completely reliant on private (non-government) funding.

Some, I recall, argued (absolving Iranian artists) that the decision



Left
44. Leyly Matine-Daftary
Still Life, 1967
 Oil on canvas, 78 x 58.5 cm (30¾ x 23")
 Mohammed Afkhami Foundation

Opposite
45. Leyly Matine-Daftary
Lydia, 1975
 Oil on canvas, 130 x 97 cm (51¾ x 38¾")
 Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris



took on a propagandistic turn and a figurative style purportedly accessible to the dispossessed masses. Didactic figurative art was not privileged just by the regime; it was also demanded by the Left. The leftist poet Ahmad Shamloo, for instance, is said to have issued a proclamation stating that any art that did not revolve around the human figure and condition was invalid.¹⁰⁰ Options such as those offered in the earlier twentieth century by the avant-garde post-revolutionaries in the Soviet Union – the Constructivists and Suprematists – were unavailable to Iranian artists. A group of artists born in the 1950s became affiliated with the Art Bureau of Islamic Propagation, simply referred to as *howzeh*, the main artistic voice of revolutionary aesthetics.¹⁰¹ Kazem Chalipa (b. 1957), for one, exemplifies



49. Farideh Lashai
 Untitled, 2009
 Oil on canvas, 200 x 200 cm (78 x 78")
 Private collection

50. Abbas Kiarostami
 Untitled (from the *Snow White* series),
 1978–2016
 Silver gelatin print on paper and ink print
 on canvas, in 3 panels, each 189 x 100 cm
 (74 x 39½")

as ciphers of resistance because of the artists' refusal to dwell on death and destruction and other themes either with a propagandistic baggage or an overt political content. In an expression of passive defiance, they contradicted the pervasive anti-aesthetic stance and instead offered lyrical imagery as an antidote to the unsightliness of war and a social life drained of colour. In his 1987 film *Where is the Friend's Home*, Kiarostami glorified loyalty and friendship in a period when the regime was encouraging the opposite: turning in anyone, even friends and family, for dissident activities.¹²⁰ Casting children allowed Kiarostami to bypass the adult dress codes mandated by the regime for the field of representation; it is also a metaphor for innocence and noble intentions, contradicting the imposed ethics of the time.

Lashai, late in her life, began adding figuration as a layer projected onto her abstractly painted canvases. She drew inspiration from literature and appropriated images from foreign films and Persian B movies. As a disciple of 'doubt and uncertainty',¹²¹ she found figuration suitable for challenging fixed meanings. The hybrid





53. Nosratollah Moslemian
 Untitled, 1992
 Acrylic on canvas, 120 x 120 cm (47 x 47")
 Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art

Nosratollah Moslemian (b. 1951), choosing abstraction, the *'dépasse'* generic modernist language, has translated the ravages of war and its brutality into entangled knots of lines without any representational reference.¹²³ In other instances, when he found inspiration in Persian aesthetic traditions, he has scattered into a landscape of colourful forms and autonomous lines (in the vein of Kandinsky's abstractions) figurative debris, such as cypress trees, ubiquitous in 'Persian miniatures', and a severed hand, a reminder of the ongoing war (fig 53). The result is a space of paradoxes and fragmentation, not unlike Iranian society, then and now, torn between contradictory claims and definitions, at times looking for local 'authenticity,' at other times escaping from it.

Kouros Shishegaran (b. 1944) began as an activist, producing bold graphic posters in celebration of freedom. At times they featured a different vision for the future from the Islamic regime's. He was arrested and incarcerated from 1982 to 1983.¹²⁴ His concern was to make his work accessible to the masses, hence his adoption of posters as a mode of production.¹²⁵ Starting in the mid 1980s, he focused on linear abstractions painted on canvas (fig 54). While abstract, the intimation



54. Kouros Shishegaran
Hanged Man, 1985
 Oil on canvas, 185 x 185 cm (72 x 72")
 Collection Laleh Javaheri-Saatchi and Cyrus
 Pouraghabagher, New York



61a-c Sohrab Sepehri
 Untitled, 1967
 Oil and charcoal on canvas, triptych,
 100 x 300 cm (39½ x 118") each
 The Farjam Foundation

She embarked on a project of erasing from her work any sign marking ethnicity, gender, culture, nationality and politics, which she considers divisive. Instead she conjures a vision that embraces all humanity.

As demonstrated in this chapter, in the work of Iranian artists abstraction is fixed neither in form nor in meaning. It transitions easily into figuration and meanders through a multiplicity of philosophical positions. Its fluidity allows it to articulate a myriad of affiliations stretching from the local to the global, and beyond into the spiritual. It may refer to tradition, just as it can supersede tradition and give birth to new visions. It coincides with the secular aspirations of one regime as well as those of its revolutionary nemesis. While it may expediently camouflage self-censorship or signal apathy towards politics, it can also be a subterfuge, a safe haven for political critique. And finally, artists have easily switched to figuration and effortlessly returned to abstraction. Just as realism and figuration have the ability to navigate different political landscapes, abstraction, too, has had a peripatetic trajectory. Whether a site of personal or cultural identity, a place of political resistance or neutrality, or a space for meditation, abstraction in Iran and its diaspora should be considered for its ability to convey a variety of ideological positions instead of being simplistically condemned as art for art's sake.

62. Abolghassem Saidi
 Untitled, 1973
 Oil on canvas, 200 x 200 cm (78¾ x 78¾")
 Collection Sam Bayat and Charlotte
 Denise Madeleine Bayat





Chapter Five

The tip of the iceberg: Contemporary art in and out of Iran

The term ‘contemporary’ is elastic in its meaning and slippery in its origins.¹ It generally signals the tail end of the modern era (a convention now globally adopted), a period closer to the present, and, in Iran, new aesthetics and concerns that were mostly absent before the 1979 Revolution. Its onset is by no means clear-cut. Our use of the term here shall exclude the modernist art of the pre-revolutionary era, discussed elsewhere in this book, but also the 1980s. That turbulent decade, presided over by a two-term president, the conservative cleric Ali Khamenei (1981–1989), introduced ideologically partisan and didactic painting that trumpeted Islamic values and glorified the martyrs of the Iran–Iraq War. From today’s perspective, that kind of aesthetics is already historical. For this author, art, to be considered contemporary, must involve itself with issues that are still relevant today. As I maintained in Chapter One, the contemporary period in Iranian art begins in the 1990s, with the gradual shift to subversive art inside Iran and the emergence of new artists in the diaspora.

With the proliferation of exhibitions, picture books and monographs, the literature on Iranian contemporary art is rapidly expanding.² During the preparation of this book, two scholarly publications on the subject appeared in English that are noteworthy for their exhaustive research. While the intention here is not to offer a critical review, some differences in viewpoint may be noted. Of the two, Hamid Keshmirshakan’s 2013 survey appeared first.³ It is