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Art Radar

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6 young Iranian artists to know now

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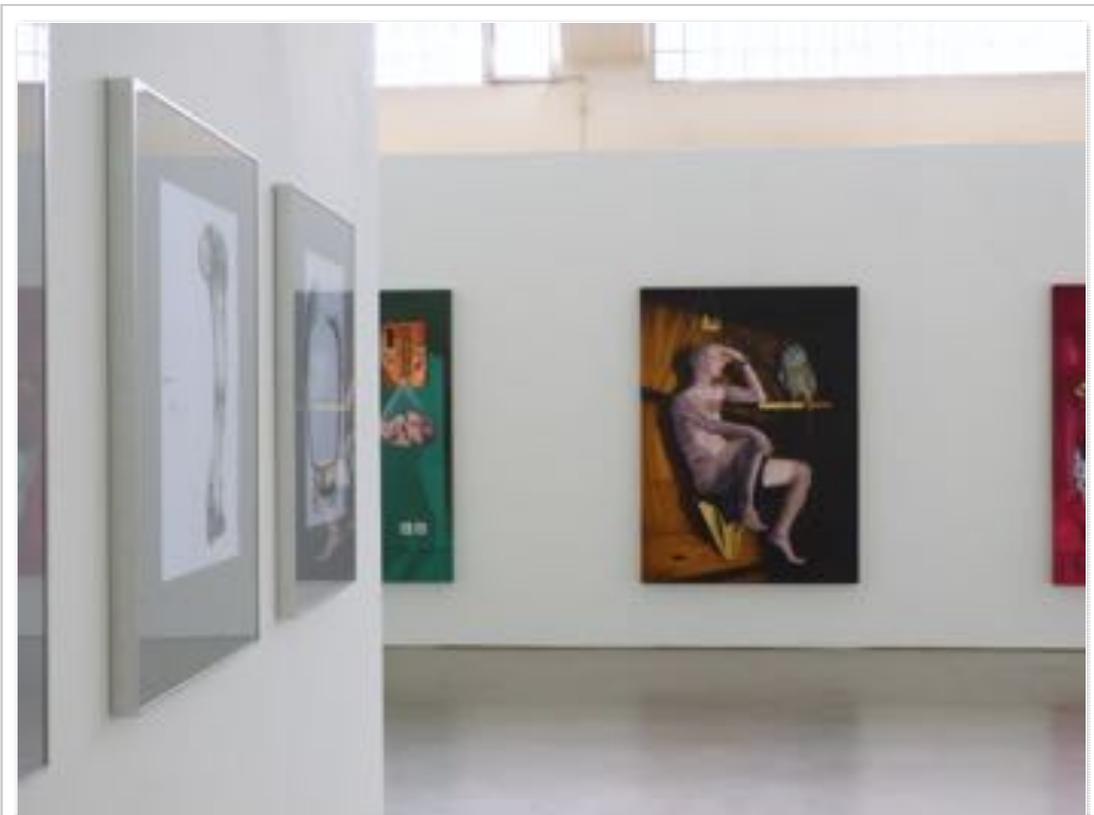
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Art Radar delves into the practices of 6 emerging talents in the Iranian art firmament.

As AB Gallery holds a group exhibition of young Iranian artists, *Art Radar* studies the works of Sara Abbasian, Ali Esmaeillou, Sahand Hesamiyan, Azadeh Razaghdoost, Nastaran Safaei and Samira Hodaei.



Installation view, "Made in Iran I" (30 August – 3 October 2015), at AB Gallery, Luzern.

Image courtesy AB Gallery.

Luzern-based **AB Gallery**, partly supported by the **Oryx Foundation**, is committed to the presentation and support of young artists 'Across Borders', from the Middle East to Africa, by promoting dialogue across cultures. In its current exhibition "**Made in Iran I**", the gallery is featuring four young artists from Iran – Sara Abbasian, Ali Esmaellou, Sahand Hesamiyan and Azadeh Razaghdoost – whose practices range from painting to sculpture, and represent some of the diversity of the art scene in the country today.

In addition to these four artists, *Art Radar* has selected two more from AB Gallery's roster – Nastaran Safaei and Samira Hodaei – who are garnering undivided attention from audiences at home and abroad.





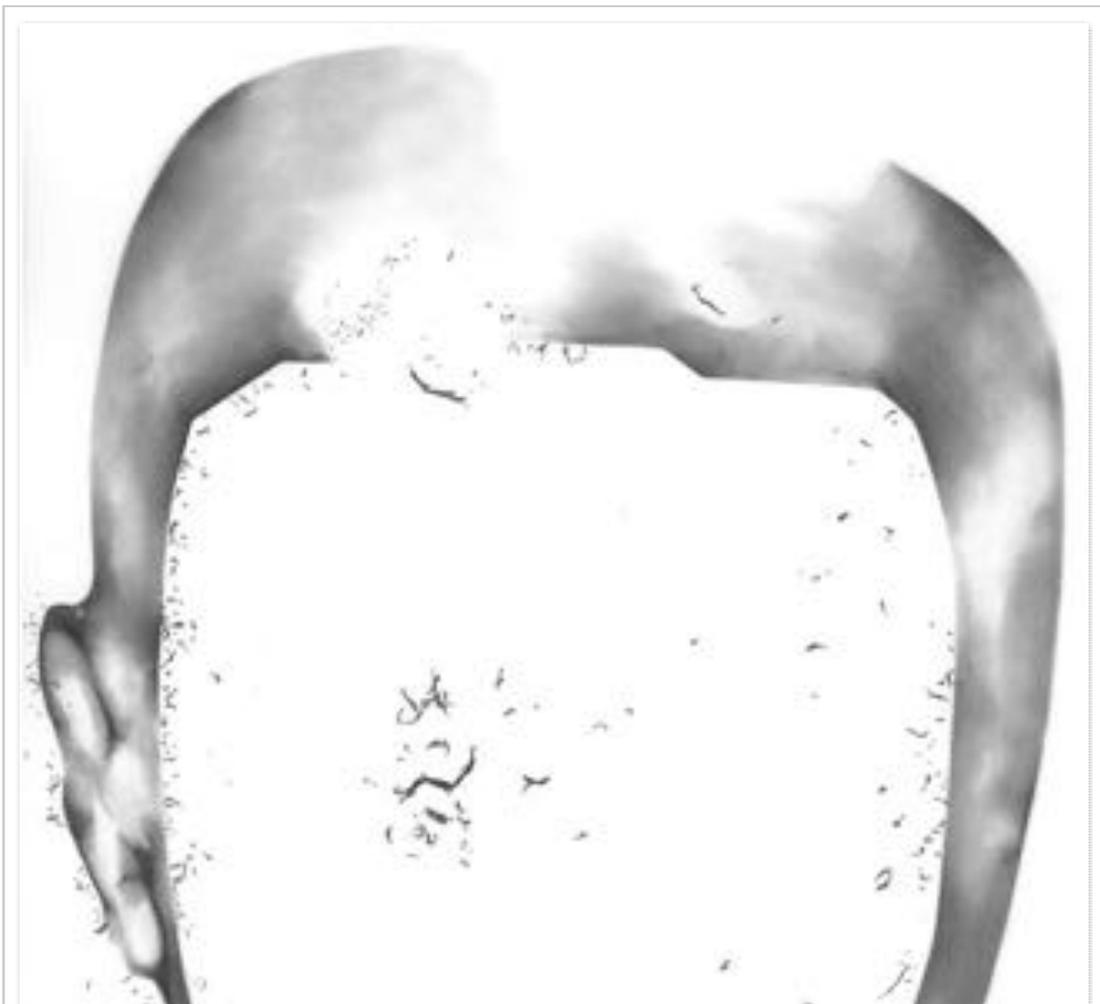
Sara Abbasian, 'Untitled', 2010, mixed media on canvas, 150 x 100 cm. Image courtesy AB Gallery.

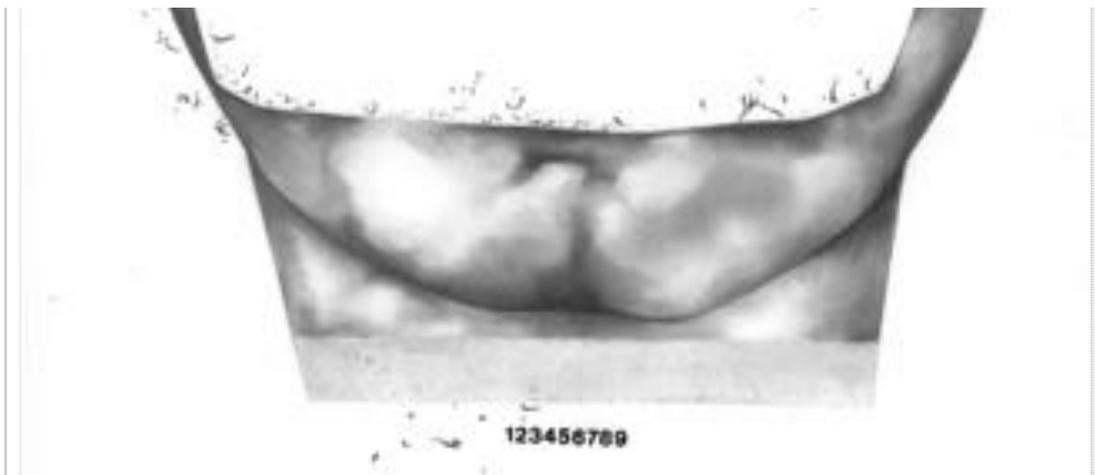
1. Sara Abbasian

Sara Abbasian (b. 1982, Tehran) engages with multi-faceted concepts surrounding the idea of 'human being', through a variety of media, from painting, drawing and collage, to video and installation. Her work examines the quotidian with the gaze of a stranger to our human, daily lives.

In a review of the artist's work, curator Fereydoun Ave calls her a **"futuristic excavator of the present"**, who creates an atmosphere of mystery that pulls the viewer into a process of "re-discovery of the ordinary". Her oeuvre invariably unbalances, disorients, challenges us to question what we see and experience.

Her early work resembles technical sketches, characterised by absence of colour and simplicity in composition. Abbasian used pencil on paper to explicitly represent objects, such as in her "Bicycle" and "TV" series. Her work then shifted to depict the shocking and unaesthetic elements of human life, such as naked bones, human fetuses and raw flesh, and deformed faces. Abbasian also includes serial numbers, as if she was categorising biological specimens and archaeological findings.





Sara Abbasian, "Human Communication" series, 2010, pencil on cardboard, 41 x 30 cm.
Image courtesy AB Gallery.

In her "War" series (2006-2008), she depicts bones, in shades of black, white and grey, the only signs of human existence along with the code numbers that almost seem to identify them as individuals. In her **Saatchi profile**, Abbasian writes:

Subjects are such as war, life, death and human being which are somehow an embodiment of his existence and his concerns for living. [...] The works are presentation of my interactive impressions with the world around me in a routine which is called life.

In her series *Human Communications* (2010), Abbasian returned to black and white, with human portraits in which faces were completely erased, as if stripped of any individuality and downgraded to copies of themselves. Some of these portraits also feature detailed drawings of bones, as if representing scientific studies of humans.





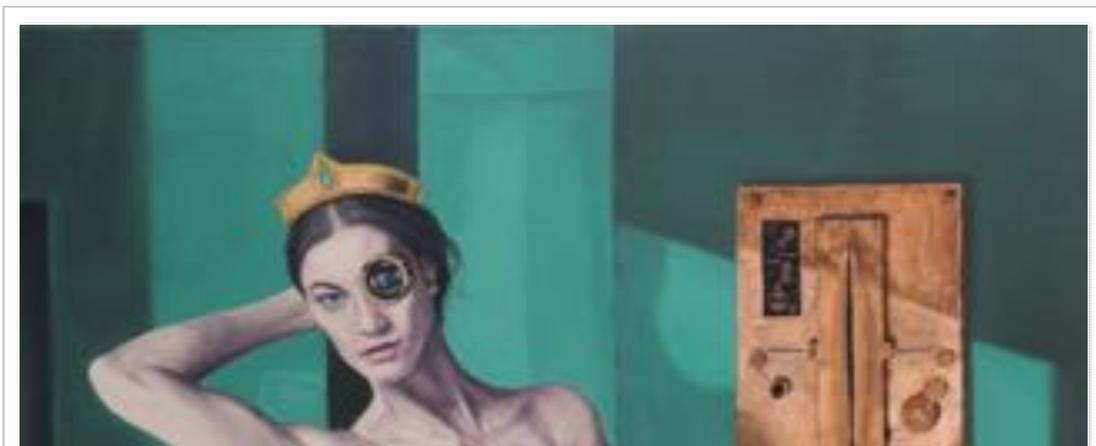
Ali Esmaeillou, '5 Minutes to Reign', 2014, oil on canvas, 180 x 130 cm. Image courtesy AB Gallery.

2. Ali Esmaeillou

Ali Esmaeillou (b. 1982, Tehran) deals with the "human condition", as well as digging into **the deepest and darkest nature of humankind**. The composition in his surrealist paintings owes much to his training as an architect, with its studied spaces, proportions and relationships.

Esmaeillou explores the darkest recesses of the human psyche, starting from its own myths, fables and archetypes. In the 2011 series *Bells of Shahnameh*, he explores mythical figures from the classical Persian tales of the *Shahnameh*, and depicts his characters' experiences of living these stories.

In 2013, he began to explore one of humanity's oldest archetypes – the warrior. Warriors have been glorified and held as models of bravery and morality throughout history. Esmaeillou delves into the psychological battles of these figures and their "lonely often torturous existence of ever-increasing high expectations".





Ali Esmaeillou, '9 Month Greatness', 2014, oil on canvas, 180 x 130 cm. Image courtesy AB Gallery.

Yet, the most compelling of his work deals with something much closer to us: the simple, ordinary man and his darkest nature. His paintings are populated by unsettling representations of obsession, self-destruction, self-loathing, jealousy and envy. All of his ordinary humans wear a monocle, through which the artist seems to send a message – one that reveals mankind's tendency to see and experience things univocally. This restricted vision is limited to corporeal cravings that often lead to destructive weaknesses, often uncovered in his subjects' shadows.

The artist uses shadows, analogue devices and electrical plugs as **"metaphors for the crippling ways in which humans tie themselves to hopes, dream and desires"**. In *9 Month Greatness* (2014), for example, a beautiful princess/model-like woman stands against a green background – the colour of envy – with a newborn in a bag hanging from an electrical plate, fitting into the shadow of the woman's belly on the wall, representing her envy for those in motherhood.





Sahand Hesamiyan, 'Nail', 2012, steel, 40 x 115 x 26 cm, edition 1/3. Image courtesy AB Gallery.

3. Sahand Hesamiyan

Sahand Hesamiyan (b. 1977, Tehran) creates sculptures influenced by Islamic traditional architecture. The artist expands the geometry, reflection and repetition of the Islamic tradition, intensifying the relationship between angles, symmetry and structure.

Working mainly with welded steel, he produces large abstract forms whose dynamism, as his website biography explains, "challenge[s] the viewer's perception of Islamic art, eradicating its often-associated ornamental quality". The particularity of his sculptures does not lie only in his re-interpretation of tradition, but also in its primarily interactive nature, whereby the artist invites the audience to question the nature of the architectural form and our experience and perception of it.

In an interview with *The National*, the artist said:

I am mesmerised by the domes of ancient houses in Iran and my inspiration starts there. [...] I want people [...] to have a spiritual feeling and to think about this as the infinite universe. During producing and making the piece I only concentrate on the mechanics, but during the design process I certainly have the same sense of spirituality that I wish the audience to have. I want to give the audience a sense of self discovery and spiritual discovery.





Sahand Hesamiyan, 'Tavizeh', 2015, steel, 100 x 60 x 60 cm, edition of 3. Image courtesy AB Gallery.

Sulook (2012) is a steel sculpture covered with UV colour exhibited in a dark environment only lit by black light. Engaging with **"ancient concepts of transcendence in an ultra-modern context"**, the work takes its inspiration from the traditional architectural structure of the Orchin dome, unique to southern Iraq and Iran. The dome, despite its ancient origins, revealed at its conceptual core one of the pivotal elements of modernist architecture – the interdependence of aesthetics and functionality.

Khalvat (2014) is another example of Hesamiyan's study of traditional architecture through a re-interpretation of the Persian **Rasmi** dome, which is rooted in a star pattern. The work, whose name translates to **"a hidden, private sanctum"**, uses the same structure of the traditional dome, but adds in an element of 'transparency', giving the viewer a look into the structure. Hesamiyan thus juxtaposes the external embellishment with its abandoned equivalent – the architectural carcass.



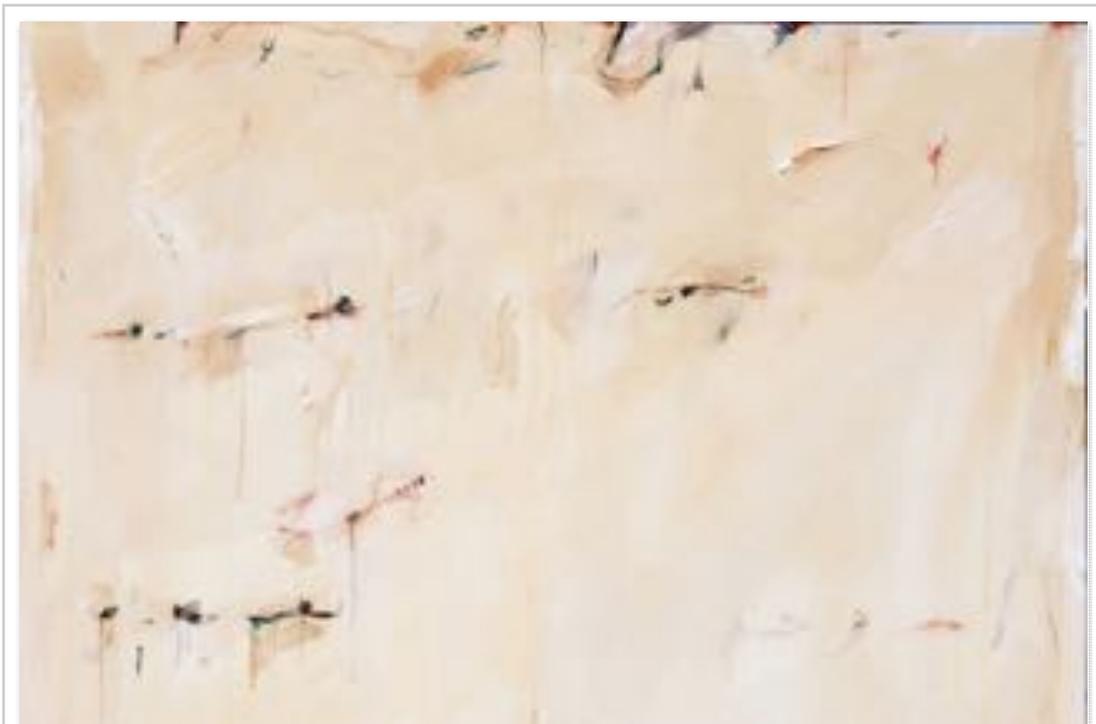


Azadeh Razaghdoost, 'Untitled' from "Letters" series, 2010, mixed media on canvas, 150 x 100 cm. Image courtesy AB Gallery.

4. Azadeh Razaghdoost

Azadeh Razaghdoost (b. 1979, Tehran) finds inspiration from 19th century Romantic poets like William Blake and Charles Baudelaire, as well as later ones such as Federico García Lorca. The 'romantic' rooting of her work takes further expression through the idiosyncratic use of the colour red. As in many traditions, red is associated with passion and love, but also pain and blood. It is both a creative, generative fire and a destructive force.

Razaghdoost plays with these different meanings to imbue her paintings with metaphoric significance, oscillating from negative to positive. The artist believes that her extensive use of deep red on her pale canvases might be an indirect reflection of her childhood dream of becoming a heart surgeon.

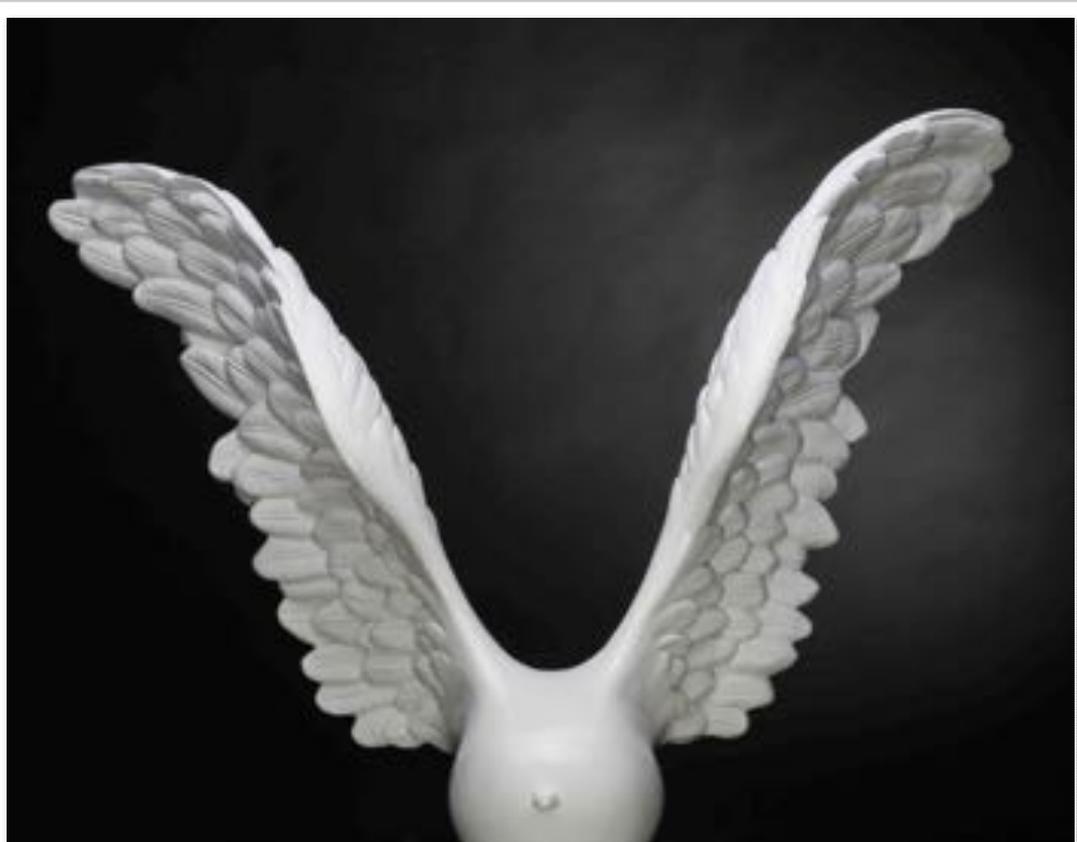


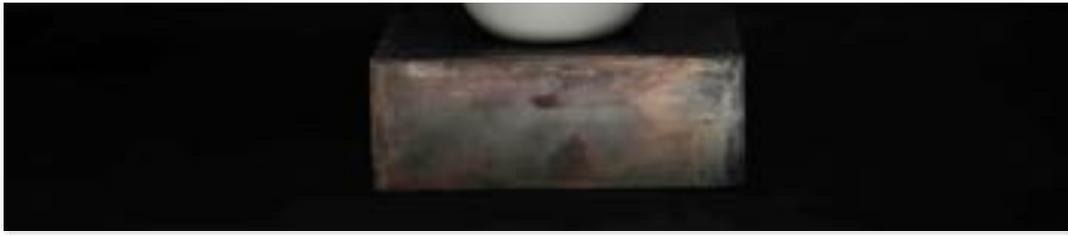


Azadeh Razaghdoost, 'Untitled' from "Letters" series, 2010, mixed media on canvas, 120 x 100 cm. Image courtesy AB Gallery.

Razaghdoost's poetic and literary inspiration is apparent in both her choice of titles, such as *Sick Rose* or *Les Fleurs du Mal*, as well as her use of fine pencil markings on canvas that emulate a **hybrid of script and musical notes**. Composed of different layers, from pencil on white canvas, to ink and paint, her works recall the nature of poems and books, which need to be read page by page. Some of her paintings also incorporate small fragments written in Farsi and Latin.

In her recent "Letters" series, Razaghdoost has expanded her chromatic reach to include shades of green and blue, which function as colder, logical counterparts to the warmth of the fiery red. The series was inspired by the book *The Veil and the Male Elite* by Moroccan feminist writer **Fatima Mernissi**.





Nastaran Safaei, 'Flying', 2014, fibreglass and iron, 75 x 92 x 58 cm, edition of 5. Image courtesy AB Gallery.

5. Nastaran Safaei

Nastaran Safaei (b. 1984, Tehran) trained in Graphic Design, but later started to focus mainly on sculpture and installation. Her oeuvre engages with the inner, personal sphere as a woman – her personality, her emotions, self-reflection – and, by extension, with the social issues attached to femininity in general. Her work often involves bronze casts of her own body parts, as well as elements of feminine identity, such as mirrors, dresses or hearts.

Quoted in the press release for her solo exhibition "**Inner Selfie**" (2015) at AB Gallery, Safaei explains how her conflicting and changing emotions are at the basis of her work, which explores the transformative dimensions of her own being:

I have attempted to include a quite personal part of my essence in my works while depicting my power over what I present others with and how I can become transparent in the face of judgments and comments. The embodiment of this, along with a contradicting sense of purity and evil – that can coexist in my soul – is displayed in my works.





Nastaran Safaei, 'Dress', 2014, mixed media, 180 x 85 x 85 cm. Image courtesy Hamid Eskandar.

Flying (2014) is a symbol of the balance and harmony between anima (the breast) and animus (the wings), as Safaei writes on her website. The artist references Jungian philosophical thought, where anima is the symbol of womanhood and animus of manhood, co-existing in each individual regardless of gender. Through this sculpture, Safaei depicts what she calls **"the fruit of evolution"** – and the power as a result of perfection.

Her work *Dress* (2014) addresses the complexities of humankind, and her attitude about external appearance and true, inner character. The sculpture is of a colourful dress made of found and recycled everyday objects and papier maché attached to an iron frame. Where the womb is located, there is a dark, cavernous opening, with small bronze hanging sculptures.

The womb, "a place of genesis and nurture", plays host to these shapeless pieces, which represent the artist's yet-to-be-determined future events of her life. Safaei **explains**:

People usually see my appearance and judge me on the basis of how I look. But I have secrets inside me... formless secrets that even I cannot define completely; secrets and complexities that are quite special and valuable.





Samira Hodaei, 'The Waq Waq Tree', 2014, mixed media on canvas, 130 x 190 cm. Image courtesy AB Gallery.

6. Samira Hodaei

Samira Hodaei (b. 1981, Tehran) creates large-scale paintings with a mixed media technique that includes covering the canvas millimetre by millimetre with dots of glass paint. The style recalls that of Pointillism, as well as Persian carpets, while it also emulates the digital image: Hodaei metaphorically calls her dots "**pixels**", as a reference to our increasingly technological and virtual world.

The dots relate to the material world as symbols of small stones and deep pain, as well as being used to question reality. The artist pushes the viewer to cross beyond ordinary perception and look beneath the illusory surface. Hodaei explores issues relating to femininity and womanhood, especially with significance to her own experience in Iran's society.

Hodaei says about her work, as quoted in an AB Gallery **exhibition catalogue**:

In order to depict the obscure nature of the captured feminine force, I chose to apply a pixelated matrix form to somehow express my own ambiguous perception of the world and how situations and circumstances differ according to the observer's personal views and perceptions. At first glance the figures stand motionless like statues: yet the tiny intermingling dots generate a delicate vibration with the use of colours and their different wavelengths, thus leaving the viewer in a parallel state of doubt and certainty between the real and the unreal.





Samira Hodaei, 'There's Someone Hiding Here No. 2', 2015, mixed media on canvas, 150 x 150 cm. Image courtesy AB Gallery.

In her "Stones and Mute Birds" series (2011), Hodaei portrayed traditionally veiled women as empowered individuals, but the dots represented a darker aspect of their existence. Referring to injustice and condemnation, pain and suffering, the "pixels" subtly and delicately recall stones used in punishment for love or involuntary intimacy.

Dancing the Sharp Edge (2012) is for Hodaei **"a homage to all the women who have lived and died in ambiguity"**, and was a natural evolution from the previous series. Here women are depicted as much stronger, powerful individuals armed with knives and dancing in a variety of contorted positions. Hodaei took inspiration from the Persian Qajar dynasty (1785-1925) and their tradition of royal portraiture with insignias and weaponry.

Her most recent *Philosophy of the Bedroom* (2015) uses a much more muted palette compared to the vibrancy and darkness of her previous work. In accordance with the theme of the new series – **sexual intimacy and freedom** – and with its 'secretive', private location (the bedroom), the compositions flourish in a variety of pastel tones, recalling soft, quiet dreams, blurring the boundaries between reality and imagination.

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