

SAMIRA HODAEI: PERSIANESQUE ART THAT EMPOWERS WOMEN AND QUESTIONS REALITY

Born and raised in Teheran, the Iranian artist Samira Hodaei is relentlessly inspired by her home country. Daily experiences as a woman and as an artist in a country where both are constantly neglected and sometimes totally forgotten, serve as an unconscious drive for her to practice her art.

Through her art, she has adapted cultural conflicts, divisions and complexities that have shaped her motherland. As a result, characters and developments that have been entwined into Iran's history have motivated Samira to manifest herself as an Iranian, as an artist but, first and foremost, as a woman. Her oeuvre, representing the role of women in contemporary and historical times, pays homage to all females whose suppressed feminine power is on the verge of exploding.

Growing up with artistic aspirations, however, was not easy. Once she started Art School, all she knew was that she wanted to draw and paint whilst forgetting the restraints of such a career path in Iran. 'Nothing really major happened in the art scene back then,' mentions Samira, acknowledging by then that painting was thought of more as a hobby than 'real' work. And although it was a tough path to take-as an independent, female artist-Samira persevered and got her family to accept her artistic and creative lifestyle.

Next to the feminine theme in her oeuvre, her personal technique makes her work incredibly captivating. Indeed, characteristic of her methodology and style is the precise application of tiny dots on each canvas, which bring it to life: as if each dot could pop out from one dimension and move into a second dimension, making the work incredibly catchy. Aware of the technical element in her paintings, she calls the dots 'pixels' and, by doing so, Samira questions what is real and what it is not. Her work also calls us to question what goes on below the surface, thus what happens below the shell of our perceptions. She is also fascinated by the virtual world and by what that world means. According to her, 'Pixels become like the DNA which shapes this virtual world and the virtual identities we all adopt and create of ourselves, yet we know that our vision of the cyber world does not truly exist. Just the same way that I know my own identity may not be real'.

Even though Islamic origins are unmistakably reflected in Samira's art, in general her works are not highly focused on religion. She rather expresses herself according to the experiences she has been through as a female artist. Moreover, she stands up controversially for womanhood in what she does. Indeed, Samira states that she '...is trying to be authentic and personal in her creative work'. She attempts to tell her story, which could also be the story of so many other women.

Her works are of such autobiographical resonance that they are highly controversial and challenge the female role in society. Women are indeed ever-present symbols in Samira's entire oeuvre. For instance, she dares to step into forbidden territory and comments critically on social attitudes in her country. 'As women', mentions Samira, 'our lives are shrouded in mystery to the unassuming eye. For centuries we have been told how to live and behave in order to be socially accepted. We are discouraged from thinking for ourselves, exploring unknown territory, or daring to step where no other has stepped before.' The question of the role of women in her art is therefore exceptionally daring and ubiquitous. Being a woman in Samira's Iran has never been easy. According to her, women are 'never truly seen as who they truly are or asked what they truly desire or how they really feel'.

Her latest work, 'Harem of the Heart', also relates to a certain extent to female representation. In this case, the three-dimensional interactive and 'pixelated' installation expresses womanhood through symbolism in Islamic architecture. The shape of the dome and Minaret being featured are all gender related for instance. Consequently, she translates the minaret as the interpretation of the masculine form and the dome as the feminine. Likewise, the ultimate female figure, 'The Sacred Female' or 'Mother Nature', is powerfully omnipresent in the second room of 'Harem of The Heart'. For her, 'Mother Nature'-The female figure par excellence-symbolises a holy feminine supremacy. This entails a powerful womanlike energy that has recently been unleashed, probably in vengeance of centuries of suppression from society; 'A force that has been loved yet feared at the same time', states Hodaei.



Harem of the Heart Installation, 2013. 21 pieces, mixed media on canvas - Courtesy of AB gallery.

Also noteworthy of Samira's symbolism is the use of colour in her approach. Colour use is by no means a coincidence in her art. In 'Harem of The Heart', for example, every single room and geometrical panel depicts a narrative related to its colour. Accordingly, there are rooms painted black, which represent a physical love, still regarded as immoral in Iranian society. The colour red is also deliberately selected to represent sexual energy and to reflect how filthy menstruation is considered. Even to this very day, women are forbidden from interacting with anyone during their period as they are seen as 'unclean' during that time. Having any sort of contact is hence considered a shameless act and sinful.

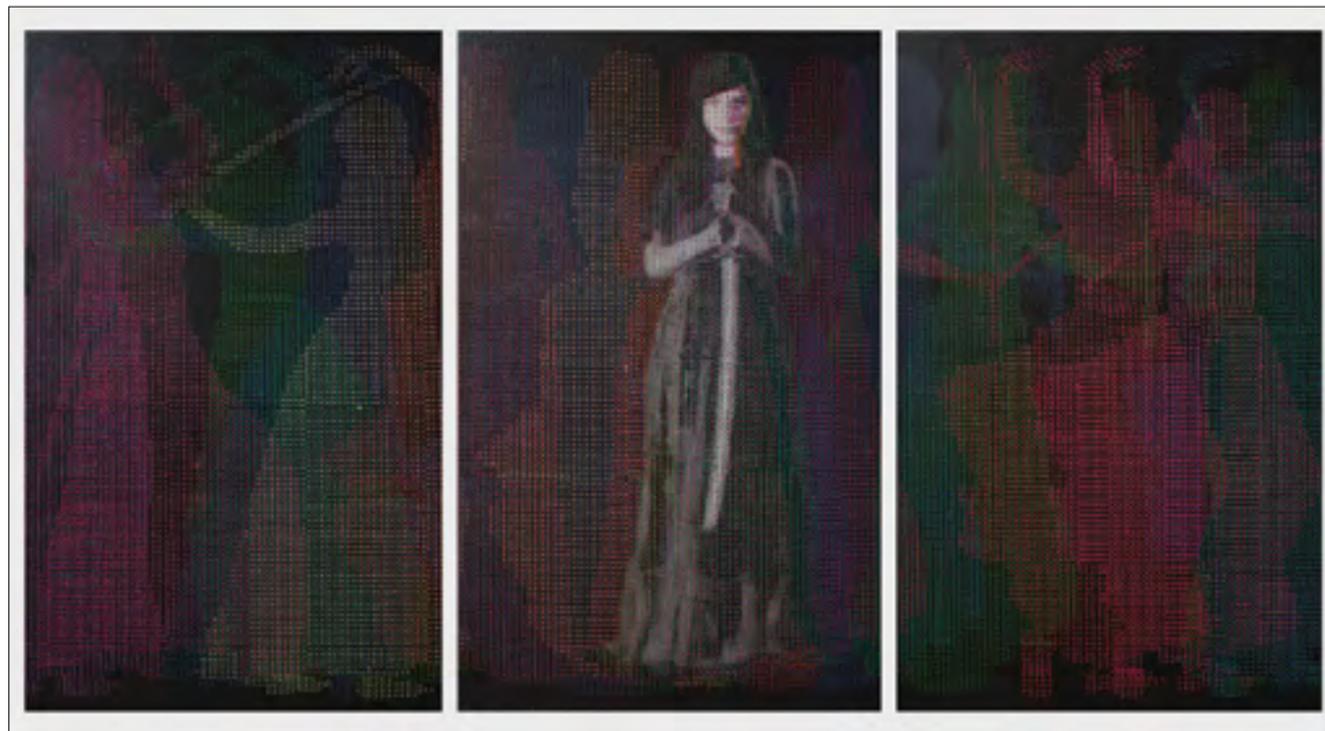
For Samira, expressing herself is to tell female audiences that in order to change the outside world, one should first start changing from the inside.

After her bachelors at the Al Zahra University of Tehran, the young, up and coming artist worked for six years as a studio assistant of Reza Derakshani, the internationally admired artist. She also took part in several group exhibitions in Tehran before becoming an artist in Residence at the AB Gallery, a

programme of the Oryx Foundation in Switzerland. While Samira is still an emerging young artist, she has exhibited regularly at several international galleries in Switzerland, Qatar, Australia, Turkey, Germany and in the United Arab Emirates. However, despite the up and coming art scene in Iran, her work has not been exposed in her home country. She nevertheless represents an entire generation of Iranian artists and women in general. Currently, she lives and works in Teheran.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Laura Beltrán Villamizar is a freelance visual journalist, writer and digital media consultant living in The Netherlands. Specializing in art, culture and photography, Laura has written on an array of subjects including: climate change activism, contemporary art, and sustainable development. She has interviewed a dozen emerging artists, photographers and climate change activists and covered art fairs in Brussels, Amsterdam and Berlin. She was born in Bogotá, Colombia and lived in Argentina, Belgium and Germany. Her work has been published in Revolve Magazine and TIME Magazine. To view more of her work, visit: <http://beltranvillamizar.pressfolios.com/>



2. Virtual Dance (triptichon), 2013, mixed media on canvas, 224x145cm each - Courtesy of AB gallery.



The flower garden, remember those days, 2013, mixed media on canvas, 110x90cm - Courtesy of AB gallery.