

Artist Firouz FarmanFarmaian Talks About His Personal Mythologies and Their Multimedia Makeovers

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Caspian 4

The artist Firouz FarmanFarmaian was born in Tehran in 1973. He left Iran at the tender age of four, and has never been back. Yet his work is infused with nostalgia for a long lost Iran.

FarmanFarmaian is showing his work at the Shirin Gallery in New York, in a joint exhibition with Sassan Behnam-Bakhtiar. "Memory & Future/Future & Memory" runs until November 13, 2016. Kayhan London caught up with the artist for an interview before the show's opening.

KL: Can you give a brief description of your exhibition at the Shirin Gallery in New York?

FF: The Summer At the Caspian series is an ongoing body of work that I started to produce in 2015. Truth be told, the first piece was originally created for my great-aunt Monir [Farmanfarmaian] as a gift to celebrate her Guggenheim retrospective. The work sparked a positive train of thought that led to a series. The 10 pieces that followed are going to be presented at the Shirin Gallery in New York.

The Caspian pieces are rooted in the sense of a paradise lost. I left Iran as a child, and my images of it have slowly melted into those of the photo albums and films I was shown after the revolution, creating semi-experienced and re-created memories – personal mythologies. Our family had properties on the Caspian Sea where some of us gathered in the summer. I didn't attend these happy gatherings as a child. Yet I later absorbed the stories and images from the clan's collective memory. After the revolution, all that was left of the summers at the Caspian were traces of the past, such as a scan of the property's original cadastral map and an hour of Super-8-mm footage.

The process of creating the artworks involved extracting still images from the super 8mm footage using digital tools, layering the cadastral map into each image, then transferring the result onto a canvas before completing the work with paintover techniques involving Moroccan pigments and acrylic paint.

KL: Your art is incredibly varied. It ranges from paintings on canvas and on tent fabric to sculpture, installation and photography. Why do you work in a variety of disciplines instead of just one?

FF: I firmly believe that contemporary creation today is, by its very essence, pluralistic, reflecting a globalized world where identities and certainties are at every moment challenged. This is mirrored in the way I approach media.

Painting has been a continuum. I was introduced to oil paint by my father at the age of 12, and went on to develop a strong rapport with paint ever since. My interest in alternative media developed rapidly when I came to interact with creative personalities studying architecture and

graphic arts in Paris. I went through phases in which I worked with film, music, live performance or photography. All of these explorations ultimately crystallized in my art.

KL: You left Iran at the age of 4. And yet you describe yourself as living in exile. Your work conveys a nostalgia for Iran, a place you can barely remember. How do you explain this attachment to your roots?

FF: For my grand-parents, parents, uncles and cousins, the years after the revolution were a traumatic experience that was relived and discussed every day, at every gathering, in a continuous outpouring of passionate nostalgia. That still is the case today. My brother Teymour and I grew up with countless stories and imagery involving ancestors and prerevolutionary sagas. In time, they took on mythical qualities, becoming a Fellinian mix of reality and fantasy. These projections touched something buried deep inside of me, a sense of nomadic displacement that led me to want to revisit, in my art, the place that I was forced to leave at the age of 4. I embarked on what I came to call a voyage identitaire – a quest for identity.

KL: Where did you grow up and go to school? When and how did you decide to become an artist?

FF: After the revolution, my parents settled in southern Spain. On the very day I turned 10, I was sent to France to attend boarding school. I was placed under the old-fashioned supervision of my grandfather, the Iranian architect Abdol-Aziz Farman-Farmaian. My predisposition for artistic pursuits led Aziz to convince me to study architecture at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris after my French baccalaureate, as he had done before World War II. That did not work out. I ultimately found my own way.

KL: Iranian artists are increasingly well known and internationally in demand. What are your thoughts on that? And how do you feel about getting an exhibition at the Shirin Gallery in New York?

FF: I share with Sassan a common vision of today's Iranian contemporary scene. Objectively speaking, it is true that, since the early 2000's, Iranian artists have received an increasing amount of attention. Some of that attention turned into a toxic, speculative art bubble that burst as soon as the global financial crisis hit Dubai, circa 2008. I believe this had positive aftereffects — creating a space for a new generation less prone to systematically feeding off such overdone themes as Persian calligraphy, for one thing. I feel the field is now open for

Iranian artists to take on a vast arena of expression, the way Chinese artists did before them. There is a lot left to do, and this is an excellent thing.

I obviously feel excited to have the opportunity to show my work for the first time in the U.S, all the more so in New York. The city was once the place of residence of Reza Derakshani, an artist whose work I love, and was long the home of my Great-Aunt Monir, who has been a lifelong inspiration to me. It has also been the home of Abstract Expressionists of the New York school, such as Robert Rauschenberg, Frank Stella or Helen Frankenthaler, whose sense of linearity and color speak to me.

At Art Dubai in 2015, I met Shirin Partovi Tavakolian and Laleh Pasdar Saghri during a Magic of Persia Foundation event, where one of my works was up for auction. We discussed the idea of a joint exhibition. I mentioned the idea to the Middle East contemporary art specialist Janet Rady in London. Janet took an interest, and decided to curate the show. She introduced me to Sassan Behnam Bakhtiar and to his work. We got on well. It all clicked from there.

KL: Would you like to go back to Iran?

FF: In the last two years, the question of a trip back has become more of a possibility, as the idea of a Tehran exhibition has been evoked. The inclusion of some of my works in exhibitions such as Remembering Tomorrow last February at the Niavaran Cultural Center are leading me in that direction. Personally, I would like to explore the possibility of a residency in Kashan to develop an on-site, inclusive installation project I have been thinking about for some time.

KL: Can you describe your next project(s)?

FF: My work tends to fit into two main segments – identity/memory and architectonics/the natural world. Although I am currently working on a project merging both segments into one body of work, Memory&Future / Future&Memory in New York will be followed by a study of color and linearity, rooted in my ongoing connection to the natural world. My next solo exhibition, called Strata, will inaugurate the Golan Rouzkhosh Gallery's new Hamburg space in January 2017. It will show my move towards an organic form of abstraction via a collection of large format paintings inspired by geological stratification.

Otherwise, this winter, I will be engaging in an immersion-collaboration with and into Moroccan local crafts ahead of next spring's exhibition at the Marrakesh Museum.