



# REFLECTIONS *OF SELF*

One of the greatest living Iranian artists, Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian celebrates her pursuit of geometry over four decades with a landmark exhibition in New York. **Alana Chloe Esposito** reports.

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onir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, an amiable and quick-witted nonagenarian born in Qazvin, Iran, is best known for her scintillating mirror mosaics. Inspired and guided by geometric principles, they are infused with her own inherent elegance and *joie de vivre*, qualities very much at the fore in the exhibition *Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian: Infinite Possibility. Mirror Works And Drawings 1974–2014*, which opened to great acclaim on 13 March at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. Organised by the Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art in Porto, Portugal, the show is the first museum exhibition of mirror works and drawings by Monir (as the artist is commonly known) in the USA. The sparkly three-dimensional works draw the viewer in and reflect the movements of visitors while also offering fragmented glimpses of individuals, including oneself. Monir's technique and designs are steeped in the legacy of Persian craft, Islamic decorative art and geometry, yet she uses them to arrive, perhaps unexpectedly, at Modern abstraction. According to curator Suzanne Cotter, "We can associate a familiarity with these different aesthetic traditions, but there is something that feels very contemporary in the objectivity she accords to them."

## NEW PERSPECTIVES

As well as plenty of seductive mirror work, there are also several previously unseen drawings on display, which, when viewed together, enable a more profound reading of Monir's *oeuvre*. "This is by no means a full-scale retrospective," says Cotter, noting that the artist has produced different types of



This page and  
facing page:  
Installation views of  
the exhibition.

Images courtesy  
Guggenheim Museum,  
New York.

work at various periods in her life. The point of this show, Cotter affirms, is to elucidate “something of the intentions in her work.”

Simply put, Monir’s objective is to explore the “infinite possibilities” of creating something new out of geometric forms. Her practice is underpinned by the study of geometry, algebra, astronomy and Sufi cosmology, all of which she undertook following a transformative visit to one of Iran’s cultural landmarks in 1975. Inside the Shah Cheragh Mosque in Shiraz, where mirrored tiles cover every surface to brilliant effect, Monir’s spirit was moved so deeply that she burst into tears, triggering her immersion in the practice of mirror mosaic-making under the tutelage of a master craftsman. “What’s beautiful about the work is that she begins with geometric principles of design but doesn’t use them rigidly,” says Cotter. “Her work is extremely subjective.”

To fully understand Monir’s intentions as an artist, it is helpful to glimpse into her past. Her first exposure to Western art came from seeing slides of works by Post-Impressionist Masters whilst at Tehran University’s College of Fine Arts. When the Second World War interfered with her dream of studying art in Paris, Monir made her way to New York instead. There, she studied art and fashion illustration, took dance classes with Martha Graham and found her way into a circle that was at the vanguard of New York’s art scene, including Frank Stella, Jackson Pollock, Joan Mitchell and Mark Rothko, among others. Youth and exotic beauty, she jokes, gained their acceptance and friendship.

## REVITALISED IDENTITY

Returning to Iran in 1957 after 12 formative years sparked a renewed appreciation for traditional Persian art, particularly coffeehouse paintings, Safavid decorative objects and Turkoman jewellery. It also coincided with

an era of artistic flourishing and cosmopolitanism in Iran, the enriching backdrop against which her career progressed over the next two decades. However, everything changed suddenly when the Islamic Revolution broke out in 1979. Monir was visiting New York with her husband at the time, which precluded their return home. Bereft of all her possessions, she continued to paint and make collages, but for a long time did not pursue anything artistically ambitious, with the exception of a few large-scale commissions to pay the bills. Nevertheless, she continued to engage with prominent artists. Speaking of Willem de Kooning and Philip Johnson, she recalls, “When I heard them speak, I never dreamt I would be one of them.”

Monir’s engagement with geometric abstraction was spurred by an invitation to exhibit in Tehran in 2004. While there for the opening, she decided, at the age of 80, to stay in Iran because it was easier to source local mirror-cutters and craftsmen who could meet her exacting standards. In the decade since, she has worked prolifically and produced increasingly sophisticated drawings and mirrored sculptures. Ever humble and self-deprecating, Monir is justifiably proud of this exhibition. Despite admitting that she preferred the setting and layout at the Serralves, it is the Guggenheim show that means the most to her. Not only was she present at the 1956 ground-breaking of the celebrated Frank Lloyd Wright building, but she fondly remembers strolling past the museum on many an evening with her late husband. “One night,” she recalls, “as we passed the Guggenheim, he told me that I had talent and would make it in there one day. I protested, reminding him I couldn’t afford a studio after losing our money in the Revolution, but he said that didn’t matter, I would find a way.”

*Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian: Infinite Possibility. Mirror Works And Drawings 1974–2014* runs at the Guggenheim New York until 3 June. For more information visit [www.guggenheim.org](http://www.guggenheim.org)