

NEW YORK

An Iranian Artist Recalls Her Life in New York and Tehran

By Carl Swanson
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The 91-year-old Iranian artist Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian misses New York, where she lived in the late '40s and into the '50s and again after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. She returned to Tehran ten years ago, to reopen her art studio after her self-imposed exile in New York. It's a place where, as she put it in her memoir, "the earth smells so good after a rain."

She was recently in Manhattan again for the opening of an exhibition of her work [at the Guggenheim Museum](#) (as it happens, she attended the building's ground-breaking in 1956). "Infinite Possibility: Mirror Works and Drawings 1974–2014" is a jewel-like show of her elaborate drawings — each with foundations in Islamic architecture, numerology, the zodiac — alongside exquisitely handmade, glittering geometric sculptures, which she makes with a team of traditional craftsmen who translate her drawings into meticulous reflective objects. Today, especially set against the geometric interior of the Guggenheim, they recall a certain breed of modernism while also evoking ancient traditional handicrafts.

Even now, Farmanfarmaian's gaze is steady, her white hair thick and her sense of humor intact (at a reception earlier in the week, she'd wrapped a scarf around her head, then removed it, joking: "Now I'm civilized again"). "I used to go to the theater, to Off-Broadway, to listen to modern music, read the *New Yorker*," she recalls. She first moved here in March of 1945 to study (World War II interfered with her fantasy of moving to Paris). She attended Parsons, and then "stayed 12 or 13 years," she says. Later, because of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, she was exiled here for 26 years, albeit stylishly, living in a penthouse on Fifth Avenue with a 70-foot terrace and music room with a dome.



Courtesy of the artist and The Third Line, Dubai/ via Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum



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Farmanfarmaian working on Heptagon Star in Tehran, 1975.

Her incredible journey is detailed in her chatty, astringently poetic memoir, [A Mirror Garden](#), which Knopf published in 2007. Born in 1924 in the ancient Persian city of Qazvin — the daughter of a reformist battling the mullahs to open the country to the rest of the world — she grew up in an old house with stained glass, wall paintings, and nightingales. In New York, she summured in Woodstock and became friends with

John Cage and Frank Stella and — back when they both worked in advertising — Andy Warhol, who let her keep some of his shoe drawings.

Years later, he came to Iran for the opening of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, and gave her one of his Marilyn Monroe silkscreen prints as a gift; she gave him one of her mirrored balls, “which lived on his desk until he died.” (There are some on display at the exhibit; they look a bit like holy disco relics.)

The memoir also details her visit to the mirrored Shiraz holy site that inspired much of her later work, even the time she played Twister at a party with the Shah. In another scene, she recalls a time she had three monumental nudes painted on the bottom of her swimming pool, with a horned devil eyeing them hungrily from behind a tree (the Shah’s helicopter would often take a path right over it, presumably so the pilot could get an titillating eyeful) — and goes on to detail her time in post-revolutionary exile in New York. She has work at the Victoria & Albert Museum, as well as a big stained-glass window at the Dag Hammarskjold Plaza building in New York.



Farmanfarmaian in the '70s. Photo: Lucas Samara/courtesy of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

Ten years ago, she moved back to Iran. As she writes, “revolution or no, I was determined not to end up in an American nursing home, fading into lonely grumpy oblivion under the watchful eye of a television.” But if she returned home, “could I live under the Islamic regime as an artist? As a woman? Was there anything left of a cultural life in the city, or had the mullahs squeezed its soul dry?” She returned partly for practical reasons: After her husband died, she couldn’t afford the apartment on Fifth Avenue. “I had to sell it,” she tells me, gently shaking her head. “I bought it for \$375,000 and I sold it for almost \$2 million and now who knows what it’s worth ...”

When I ask about life in Tehran, she grimaces. “With the bad policies and the pollution, the people are sad and angry. But at the same time I have no social life. I don’t need anything. At ten o’clock in the morning, I go into the studio. And I go home at three.” That said, at 91, “I like it because I can create there and I have a nice driver and cook and they take care of me.” Besides, even if she could live here, she says, “I don’t have the energy anymore. I used to go to Zabar’s to do my shopping and now — no.”



Farmanfarmaian working in her studio. Photo: Leyla Fakhr/Courtesy of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum