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Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian: Infinite Possibility, Guggenheim, New York

Ariella Budick | April 9, 2015

The Iranian artist's first US retrospective shows how her mirror work refracts her two cultures



Farmanfarmaian in her studio working on 'Heptagon Star', Tehran, 1975

Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian's mirrored artworks ricochet between the sublime and the deliciously tacky. The 91-year-old Iranian artist's Guggenheim retrospective is her first in the US, and it feels like a 1970s time warp. A cluster of sparkling, faceted balls evokes thumping disco nights at the Ritz Ballroom. Wall-sized mosaics encrusted with reflective slivers recall the days when foil-bedecked wallpaper brightened shag-carpeted dens.

And yet Farmanfarmaian's allusions actually go back another 600 years, to the era when craftsmen covered the interior of a shrine in the Iranian city of Shiraz with countless tiny, mirrored shards. It's to her credit that she manages to conflate the era of Andy Warhol with 14th-century Iran, and the results will undoubtedly drop some jaws, but to me her work tries too hard to dazzle. Spiralling ramps made of reflective tiles sit on low pedestals, and giant mirrored snowflakes hang on the walls, as if the artist had looked through a microscope at nature's crystalline structures and then had them supersized.

She comes by her gaudiness honestly, having enjoyed a life of glamour, exile, return, revelation, parties, and hard work. She was born in 1924 to a family of Iranian merchants who traded Persian pistachios, wool, and animal skins for fine Russian fabrics. Her father designed carpets in his spare time. She had a privileged upbringing in the city of Qazvin, moved to the capital when dad was elected to parliament, and briefly studied drawing at the University of Tehran. The Paris art scene beckoned but, unfortunately, the second world war placed it temporarily out of reach, so Farmanfarmaian made her way to New York the long way around, via Bombay and Los Angeles

The war ended six months after she alighted in Manhattan, but by then she had begun infiltrating the New York art world and had lost her yen for Europe. As a student at Parsons and the Art Students League, and later as fashion illustrator at Bonwit Teller, she mingled with a staggering list of 20th-century giants, including Milton Avery, Larry Rivers, Joan Mitchell, Louise Nevelson, and a young Bonwit co-worker named Andy Warhol. She hung out at the Cedar Tavern with Pollock and de Kooning, danced with Martha Graham, and heard the first performance at Woodstock of John Cage's 4'33". She had stumbled into the centre of the avant garde, although, as she regularly jokes, its members treated her more as an ornament than a peer, "like a beautiful Persian carpet".



'Mirror Ball' (c.1974)

In 1956, Farmanfarmaian returned to Tehran. She painted rather pretty flowers that were included in the Iran Pavilion of the 1958 Venice Biennale but the Guggenheim has judiciously excised from her record. And she got to know her country, travelling around and buying tribal arts and antiques, silver horse trappings, tapestries, portable hookah bases and Turkoman jewellery. “When I returned to Iran, my eyes were opened,” she has said. “I saw so much beautiful native art.” By the mid-1970s, she had amassed a trove of some 900 objects, which included works by Warhol, Tom Wesselman and Alexander Calder.



'Untitled' (1980), a work in felt-tip pen and coloured pencils

It's hard to remember now how close Tehran seemed to the west in those days and how easy it was to toggle back and forth between those different worlds. While Farmanfarmaian plunged deep into the art of her nation's past, she also swam with the big international fishes

Her second breakthrough came just in time — in 1975, when she was over 50 and Iran was just a few years away from puritanical revolution and isolation. In the company of two American minimalists, Robert Morris and Marcia Hafif, she travelled to Shiraz to see the Shah Cheragh, a mosque whose high-domed hall is covered in tiny square, triangular, and hexagonal mirrors that explode every light into a supernova. “The very space seemed on fire, the lamps blazing in hundreds of thousands of reflections. I imagined myself standing inside a many-faceted diamond and looking out at the sun,” she recalled in her memoir. “It was a universe unto itself, architecture transformed into performance, all movement and fluid light, all solid fractured and dissolved in brilliance in space, in prayer. I was overwhelmed.”

The sight furnished Farmanfarmaian with a patriotic epiphany, opening her eyes to the transcendent possibilities of ancient craft. She sought out the artisan Hajj Ostad Mohammad Navid, with whom she collaborated in synthesising cut mirrors, matt plaster and painted glass into glistening tableaux. Her sculptures spring from wells of minimalism and classical Persian mosaic. They merge time-honoured folk practice with the avant-garde cult of the bracingly new and the drug-induced nirvana of nightlife. Warhol visited Tehran in 1976, and she presented him with a faceted reflective orb called “Mirror Ball”, which looks as though it could have been spinning on the ceiling at a 1970s bar mitzvah.

In its traditional form, Iranian mosaic technique evolved from the mirrors that arrived from Europe and had shattered en route. Farmanfarmaian used it to refract her two cultures in each other's broken lens. She has spent her life bridging two nations that distrust and misunderstand each other, piecing their images out of distorting shards.

That visionary flowering was abruptly terminated in 1979 by the Islamic revolution, which took place while she and her family were on what was supposed to be a short Christmas visit to New York. Unable to return, she spent decades in exile, cut off from her collaborators and her sources of inspiration. The new government confiscated her precious trove of objects, a loss she still grieves. She returned to Iran in 2004, even in her eighties eager to get back into the studio with the skilled craftsmen who made her creations possible. The Guggenheim show presents this stunning late-life efflorescence: massive, almost architectural creations that keep trying to reproduce that eureka she experienced 40 years ago at Shah Cheragh. It's hard to know which is the right response: to pray or shake your booty.

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