Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian is an artist whose primary material is light, manifested through her re-appropriation of traditional Iranian reverse-glass painting and mirror mosaics, or Aineh-Kari, historically used to adorn the walls of Persia’s royal palaces, shrines and mosques. Much has been written about the fusion of mysticism, numerology, Islamic pattern and modernist form in Farmanfarmaian’s work. Articles, interviews and reviews all refer to a cultural fusion, a melding of influences from her native Iran with the stimulus of Minimalism and Abstract Expressionism discovered in New York, where she lived throughout the 40s and 50s. In an extensive monograph published in 2013, editor Hans Ulrich Obrist identifies Farmanfarmaian as a pioneering figure not only in Iranian art, but in the emerging global discourse that serves to illuminate rather than annihilate local differences.

After all, this is an artist whose life and work has been forged from the currents of world history. There were the tempests of the twentieth century – two World Wars and a myriad of national revolutions, including Iran’s own in 1979. The historical legacies of the Renaissance and European Imperialism are embedded in Farmanfarmaian’s technique of choice, the practice of Iranian mirror mosaic, which originates with the seventeenth-century importation of reflective glass from Europe. Often sheets would arrive in broken pieces, and the resulting shards were used to produce the mosaics that would become characteristic of Iranian architecture. But Farmanfarmaian would be quick to point out (as she did in a 2012 interview[i]) that despite this history, mirrors have been a tradition in Persia for three thousand years.

Despite the vast web of influences that have grown around this artist’s long life and career (she turned eighty-nine in 2013), Farmanfarmaian’s practice has always remained tied to the land of her origin. Her interest in natural forms was nurtured as a child born in the northwestern town of Qazvin, Iran. She remembers houses colourfully decorated with stained glass and paintings of flowers and nightingales – a memory that drew her to the French modernists and the decision, after only six months at the University of Tehran, that she needed to be in Paris.
Fate and war decided otherwise. Despite her intentions, Farmanfarmaian left Tehran in 1944 but ended up in the United States, where she studied at Cornell University before moving on to Parsons School of Design in New York City. Here, she befriended the Abstract Expressionists – Pollock, Rauschenberg et al. – and studied under Milton Avery, who helped her develop a talent for monotype prints, a technique she employed in works that would later be presented (and awarded) at the Iranian Pavilion of the 1958 Venice Biennale. She became a favourite of Andy Warhol, whom she met while both artists were working as fashion illustrators. (Warhol kept a work of hers on his desk most of his life, while a Marilyn portrait from Warhol to Farmanfarmaian was confiscated during the Iranian revolution in 1979.) But Farmanfarmaian tends to play down this part of her life, on which so much has been written; for her, New York was but one moment in a life of many.

In fact, it was her return to Iran in 1957[ii] that precipitated the great shift in her practice: her turn to mirror mosaic, inspired by a 1966 visit to the Shāh Chérāgh mosque in Shiraz.[iii] The interior was completely covered in mirror mosaics, producing a space the artist described as being filled with “fantastic reflections”[iv] – a mirrored room in which the prayers and emotions of visitors was reflected and refracted in countless shards of glass. The artist once described the feeling as being akin to stepping into the centre of a diamond and staring into the sun.[v] Immediately, she knew she wanted to reproduce this feeling in her work so that such a “living theatre”[vi] might find a place not only in the country’s palaces, shrines and mosques, but in the homes of the Iranian people, so that everyone might experience such beauty on a daily basis.

As she writes in her memoir, A Mirror Garden, Farmanfarmaian returned to Tehran with a mission, which she immediately shared with her husband Dr. Abol Bashar Farmanfarmaian. (“I poured my enthusiasm out to Abol,” she wrote; “It will be easy,” he replied.)[vii] A friend of Abol’s was decorating his new home with traditional mirror mosaics, and the pair were able to facilitate a meeting between Monir and Hajj Ostad Mohammed Navid, the man who would become Farmanfarmaian’s teacher and collaborator – despite his initial resistance to working with a woman. From this unlikely pairing, a fruitful working relationship developed, in which Hajj Ostad cut the glass (“like butter”[viii]) that would turn Farmanfarmaian’s designs and reverse glass paintings into mosaics (“I quickly gave up on asking him to teach me to cut the mirrors myself. This was a master’s work which he had done since the age of seven,” she wrote).[ix]

Working closely with a team of assistants, Hajj Ostad taught Farmanfarmaian how to pound plaster – which binds the mirror pieces together – and mix it with sereesh: a foul-smelling liquid glue produced from tree root, which slows the plaster’s setting. (Farmanfarmaian later replaced sereesh with the less odourful Elmer’s Glue, with Hajj Ostad’s approval.) But there was still one issue: how to prepare supports on which Farmanfarmaian could arrange the fine pieces of glass cut by Hajj Ostad. In the end, the artist found a solution – epoxy mixed with coarse sand – that astounded even Hajj Ostad.[x]

Farmanfarmaian grew increasingly curious about the geometry behind the patterns and designs of traditional Islamic architecture and mirror mosaics. She learned from Hajj Ostad how an infinite variety of
patterns might be drawn simply with charcoal and string. She began to study the laws of geometry and the spiritual elements imbued in Islamic geometry and architecture, as well as writings on Sufi cosmology and arcane symbolism. [xi] Farmanfarmaian had found her vocabulary in lines, angles and intersections, inspired by her experience at the mosque in Shiraz: an architectural theatre of light and reflection that she sought to re-imagine in her own work.

For two decades, Farmanfarmaian worked in Tehran, building a career as an international artist with work shown and collected by institutions around the world, from MoMA to the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art.

She sought exile in New York during the Iranian revolution, a period during which she worked only intermittently, then returned to Tehran in 2004 – a date that marks the beginning of one of the most productive periods of Farmanfarmaian’s career, explored in a 2013 survey exhibition at Dubai’s The Third Line gallery (“Monir Farmanfarmaian 2004-2013”), through which the artist’s “cosmic geometry” finds its total expression. In this latest exhibition, Farmanfarmaian’s art objects are grouped together to form a non-denominational cathedral of light: ethereal, otherworldly, futuristic and almost alien.

I was lucky enough to meet the artist at the Dubai inauguration and asked her about the meaning behind her work. With a cryptic smile, she gestured towards Fire and Water (2010), a large shield-like form punctuated with cuts of red glass bursting upwards, like sparkling flints. “Look. It is like everything is moving,” she replied. “The surface is reflecting things and sometimes you don’t know where these reflections are coming from…” It was true: the work was luminous, multiplicitous, broken. It captured the movement of light as something that, like the world spinning on its axis, never ceases in its motion. Gazing at the work, Farmanfarmaian mused: “You communicate with the art as you stand in front of it. It takes your mood.” She turned to me: “Do you see it? How the work moves?”

In her words, I saw the point of all this refraction. Light, after all, is not just an external phenomenon; it is understood when it meets the eye. It is reflected in all of us.


[ii] Stephanie Bailey in conversation with Monir Farmanfarmaian, Ibraaz, April 2013: www.ibraaz.org/interviews/66


[iv] Ibid, and re-expressed in conversation with the author in an interview conducted for Ibraaz (April 2013).


[vi] Stephanie Bailey in conversation with Monir Farmanfarmaian, Ibraaz, April 2013: www.ibraaz.org/interviews/66


[viii] Ibid., 187.

[ix] Ibid., 187.

[x] Ibid. 186-189.

[xi] Ibid.