Lyles & King

Arghavan Khosravi
Tightrope Walking the Red Lines
Opening Reception: Friday, October 11th, 6-8pm
October 11 - November 10, 2019

Lyles & King Gallery is pleased to present the first New York solo exhibition of Iran-born artist Arghavan Khosravi (b. 1984). Khosravi paints metaphysical and vivid, contemporary scenes that confront the challenges of existence under religious-ideological autocracies through the consideration of a woman seeking independence. Set in the present day, Khosravi’s subjects are grounded in multinational influences of an ever-looming sociopolitical or cultural past.

In 1010, Persian poet Abu al-Qasem Ferdowsi wrote *Shahnameh*, or ‘The Book of Kings,’ an epic poem recounting the foundation of Iran across mythical, heroic, and historical ages, which inspired lavishly illustrated illuminated manuscripts that would become central to Iran’s cultural and artistic self-definition. In 1979, the Iranian Revolution led to the establishment of an Islamic Republic which would come to define Iran’s political landscape to this day, where women’s rights have become increasingly restricted, and where the core ideas of *Shahnameh*—with its celebration of royalty and pre-Islamic Iran, seems polarized by a regime that poses political risk to artistic expression. This is the landscape in which Arghavan Khosravi was born and raised by liberal parents and studied fine art in Tehran. Khosravi arrived in the United States in 2015 and has remained ever since, restricted by the Travel Ban.

From ‘The Book of Kings’ to the present day, Khosravi references and distills essential details across time and territory to build her humanist paintings that feel at once surreal and emotionally familiar. She places realistic figures in tangled compositions, rendering iterations of the contemporary Persian female experience in its seen and unseen extensions and engaging with motifs and architectural elements of historical importance. All of this is bound gently by omnipresent structures of power—be they the enforcement of sharia law or subtle undermining women within a broader patriarchal society. Her subjects’ gestures or expressions evoke a cinematic wariness, and the action of the surrounding scene stands as supporting evidence to the sentiment.

In *A Family Portrait (Childhood Memories)*, the maternal subject sleeps soundly in bed with her supremely long hair sweeping beyond the frame of the canvas. Outside the home, Iranian law obligates women to cover their hair, so the emphasis on its flow feels like revealing a precious secret. Beside her, top and tail, is her daughter, clutching a marble Greek miniature figure that elegantly proffers a metal bullet, or, on its flip-side, holds a toy soldier in snow globe. The bedding they lie upon is patterned with medieval scenes of battlefields, imagery inspired by the miniature paintings of ‘The Book of Kings’ and memories of the storied and organized chaos which, from an early age, children are raised to understand as foundational to their present-day society. Disrupting the canvas with cement in place of paint, the
silhouetted absence of a male figure lies anonymously beside mother and child, suggesting a felt consequence of the surrounding impressions of war and its magnetic absorption.

In other works, such as You’re Free to Fly, the female figure is depicted in multiple forms, none of which are 100% human. The figure is grafted with Persian-style, USA-made textiles (the artist-made trim of which hang off the base of the canvas,) but her flesh-toned arms wear an Apple™ watch. The base of her skirt is yanked upward by a thin red string, which is also tying sparrows to the severed limbs and head of a kneeling classical sculpture. The reality of what’s manipulating whom is unclear, but the traces are there to follow. The thin red line, rope, tape, or blindfold is a central motif running within and throughout many of Khosravi’s works in the so-titled exhibition, instilling a delicate yet constant presence of control and repression. These are below-the-radar traumas, so fine you might not notice their domineering consequences from afar, but strain them further and they might destroy you. By walking the line like a tightrope, the artist achieves a sense of balanced levity. In You’re Free to Fly, the blindfolded, translucent figure in the foreground blows a round, pink bubble with her gum as her chest planks upward towards the dove grey sky. Amidst all the beauty and chaos that shapes her metaphysical surroundings, the bubble suggests a woman lost in thought. Can you blame her?

Arghavan Khosravi (b. 1984, Shahr-e-kord, Iran) lives in New Jersey and works in New York as a member artist of the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts. She is a 2019 recipient of the Joan Mitchell Foundation’s Painters & Sculptors Grant and a 2017-8 recipient of the Walter Feldman Fellowship. She received an MFA in painting from the Rhode Island School of Design after completing studio art program at Brandeis University. Khosravi previously earned a BFA in Graphic Design from Tehran Azad University and an MFA in Illustration from the University of Tehran. She has exhibited her work at Museum of Contemporary Art, Yinchuan, China; Yossi Milo Gallery and Fridman Gallery, both in New York; Newport Art Museum, Newport, RI; and Provincetown Art Association and Museum, MA; among others. She has a forthcoming solo exhibition at Stems Gallery, Brussels, Belgium. Khosravi’s residencies include the Fine Arts Work Center, Provincetown, MA; the Studios at Mass MoCA, North Adams, MA; and Residency Unlimited in Brooklyn. Her work is in the permanent collections of the Newport Art Museum and Rhode Island School of Design Museum.