

# In Chelsea, Art Intersects With Reality of Iranian Conflict



Michael Nagle for The New York Times

Newsha Tavakolian's photographs are part of a show at Chelsea Art Museum. [More Photos >](#)

By RANDY KENNEDY  
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It takes very little time to get a sense of the spirit animating an ambitious show of Iranian and Iranian-American artists that opened on Friday at the Chelsea Art Museum. As you walk in, the first room you see is sardonically titled "In Search of the Axis of Evil." And in another section not far away, a bright, Photoshopped self-portrait of the young Tehran artist Vahid Sharifian shows him, with a big Afro and '70s sideburns, in alarmingly intimate contact with a bored-looking lion. (The lion was one of the emblems of the Iranian monarchy before the Islamic Revolution.)

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"Vahid is like the [Jeff Koons](#) of Iran," said Sam Bardaouil, one of the exhibition's curators, looking over other photographs of Mr. Sharifian — boxing with a stallion, leading a herd of reindeer through a sleek kitchen and blowing flames from his mouth at a bald eagle. "It's hilarious and strange in a powerful way." And fully intended, he added, to grab the attention of Americans who probably have a hard time envisioning a Koonsian temperament at work in Tehran — particularly these days.

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Mr. Sharifian will not be in New York to see the exhibition, "Iran Inside Out," which runs through Sept. 5 and includes 35 artists living in Iran and 21 who live elsewhere or travel regularly back and forth. He is not allowed to leave Iran because of his refusal to serve in the military. And one of the last times Mr. Bardaouil tried to contact him, Mr. Sharifian was unavailable to talk about his artwork because of the protests that erupted after the disputed election.

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Mr. Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, the museum's managing director, said that they were vaguely aware of the election when they began planning the show last year. But they did not schedule it to coincide with the vote, they said; they wanted to ensure only that the show happened around the 30th anniversary of the revolution, which took place in early 1979.

So over the past several days they have found themselves and their artists in an unexpected whirlwind of attention as life has intersected with art in ways it rarely does in the white-cube world of Chelsea.

Most of the artwork coming from galleries and studios in Iran left only days before the unrest began and would have been hard to get now, said Mr. Fellrath, the show's other curator. Communicating by phone or e-mail with artists in Iran — many of whose work has not been seen in New York before — has also grown difficult, he said. Even when phone lines or the Internet are working, he added, "We have to be very careful about what we are saying because you never know what's being monitored — it's a very dangerous time." (Although several artists who live full-time in Iran had been trying to come to New York for the show, only one, Farideh Lashai, was able to. Ms. Lashai, who was said to be wary about the effects any comments would have on her return, declined to be interviewed.)

Mr. Bardaouil, who is half-Lebanese and taught for many years in Dubai, said the idea for the exhibition grew partly out of his interest in the thriving, very diverse and young art world in Iran. More than half of the country's population is under 30, and in Tehran gallery-hopping has become an increasingly popular social rite among the young. Many Iranian artists, while having to play cat-and-mouse with censorship inside the country, are showing work outside, in Dubai, Europe and New York, that squarely takes on government repression, the role of women, homosexuality and many other facets — good, bad and indifferent — of contemporary life in Iran.

"More than anything else we wanted to show works that didn't fit the neo-Orientalist stereotypes of calligraphy and veiled women that so many people think of when they think of Middle Eastern art," Mr. Bardaouil said. "No more 'behind the veil' or 'taking off the veil' or titles like that. No more veils."

From a group of more than 100 artists whose work was considered, the curators narrowed the show to 56, a group that includes established stars like Shirin Neshat and her partner, Shoja Azari, who live in New York. But many of the artists, like Pooneh Maghazehe, 30 — who lives in Brooklyn, was raised in Levittown, Pa., by Iranian parents and travels to Iran often — are little known. Ms. Maghazehe, who stood atop a ladder the other day helping to install a work, a brightly colored, piñatalike hanging sculpture, explained that as conventional as it might look, it could never be shown in a gallery in Iran because of the materials she used: hundreds of tampons, soaked in acrylic paints whose colors create a complex three-dimensional representation of how Iranians receive information from the Internet and how little of it is in Farsi, a particularly relevant subject at the moment.

Of her materials, Mr. Maghazehe said she did not choose them with a particularly subversive intent. "I just kept looking at tampons I had in my studio, and I liked the shape and then what you could do with them," she said. "And then they just turned into something else for me."

Another artist, Abbas Kowsari, who works as a photo editor at a newspaper in Tehran (9 of the 14 newspapers he has worked for have been shut down over the years by the authorities) presents photographs that show male Iranian bodybuilders, glistening and preening over their appearance, contrasted with training photographs of female Iranian police officers sheathed in black chadors, wielding guns and rappelling, SWAT team-style, down walls.

The show's organizers said they had struggled with how to respond to the events in Iran, seeing them as an opportunity for the work to resonate more than it might have — "I think the semantics of many of the pieces has tripled or quadrupled in power," Mr. Bardaouil said — but not wanting to be seen as exploiting them.



Leila Heller, whose Upper East Side gallery represents more than a dozen of the show's artists, canceled a dinner to celebrate the exhibition. Dressed in black with a bright green scarf — the signature color of [Mir Hussein Moussavi](#), the main challenger to Iran's president, [Mahmoud Ahmadinejad](#) — she went instead with Mr. Fellrath and others to a candlelight vigil in Union Square on Wednesday to commemorate the victims of the recent violence.

"We feel very strongly that the show is a way to send a message too," Mr. Fellrath said. "It's another form of peaceful rebellion, through these very limited channels that artists have available to them, especially those in Iran." He added, "We only wish they could all be here to see it."

### Other Shows With Iranian Artists

"Iran Inside Out," at the Chelsea Art Museum (556 West 22nd Street, Chelsea, 212-255-0719, [chelseaartmuseum.org](#)) through Sept. 5, is one of several shows in New York with works by Iranian contemporary artists. At Thomas Erben Gallery (526 West 26th Street, fourth floor, Chelsea, 212-645-8701, [thomaserben.com](#)), "Looped and Layered" offers pieces by 12 artists working in Tehran through July 10.

About 40 artists are represented in "Selseleh/Zelzeleh: Movers & Shakers in Contemporary Iranian Art" at Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller Gallery through Aug. 20 (39 East 78th Street, at Madison Avenue, third floor, 212-249-7695, [ltmhgallery.com](#)). And 5 Iranians are among the 28 artists from the Middle East and Central Asian regions and diasporas in "Tarjama/ Translation," through Sept. 27 at the Queens Museum of Art (New York City Building, Flushing Meadows-Corona Park, Queens, 718-592-9700, [queensmuseum.org](#)).

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