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Art in Review

By THE NEW YORK TIMES
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IRAN INSIDE OUT

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Photographs from Aaran Gallery, Tehran
Newsha Tavakolian's "Maria" (2007), part of "Iran Inside Out" at the Chelsea Art Museum.

Chelsea Art Museum

556 West 22nd Street

Through Sept. 5

In a group exhibition with 56 participants of different ages working in all kinds of mediums, coherence isn't the first thing to look for, and you don't find it in "Iran Inside Out."

What you do find is a high ratio of vigorous work by contemporary Iranian artists who live in their homeland or elsewhere. You get a sense of the cultural forces that have shaped those lives and continue to in this 30th-anniversary year of the Iranian revolution.

The Chelsea Art Museum's managing director, Till Fellrath, observes in the catalog that work by Iranian émigré artists tends to look more self-consciously "Iranian" than what's produced inside the country. And this seems to be true of pieces by the Iranian-Americans Negar Ahkami, Shiva Ahmadi and Ala Ebtekar that incorporate overt references to Persian miniatures and "coffeehouse" painting.

Often, though, inside-versus-outside is hard to discern at a glance. Almost all the artists here have a stake, in some way, in exploring what it means to be Iranian, and sometimes in the same way, no matter where they are.

Golnaz Fathi, who lives in Tehran, walks the line between calligraphy and abstraction in his paintings; so does

Pouran Jinchu, who lives in New York. The heroic epic

called "The Book of Kings" is given an action-hero update by Siamak Filizadeh of Tehran, but also in film stills by Sadegh Tirafkan, who spends part of his time in Toronto.

The show is strong in work by and about women: Alireza Dayani's fantastical historical drawings; Newsha Tavakolian's photographic study of a transsexual; Saghar Daeeri's paintings of Tehran's boutique shoppers; Shirin Fakhim's sculptural salute to the city's prostitutes. Abbas Kowsari documents cadet training for chador-clad female police officers in Tehran. Less interestingly, Shahram Entekhabi draws chadors in black Magic Marker on images of dating-service models.

It is a mistake to reduce new Iranian art to a checklist of social causes, particularly those dear to the hearts of many American viewers. And the exhibition's organizers, Sam

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Siamak Filizadeh's "Zaal arrives to help Rostam, ROSTAM 2 The Return" (2008) part of "Iran Inside Out."



Bardaouil and Mr. Fellrath, have taken care to include work without blunt messages. Ahmad Morshedloo's tender paintings of sleepers, Reza Paydari's portrait of school friends and the mysterious little films of Shoja Azari are in this category.

So are contributions by two stars. One is an ingeniously embroidered image, by Farhad Moshiri, with glitter and pixel-like painting, of a woman sleeping under an electric blanket. The other is a goofy set of wildlife self-portraits called "Queen of the Jungle (If I Had a Gun)," by the impudent Vahid Sharifian (born in 1982).

But even when politics are elusive, this is a committedly political affair. Repression both inside and outside Iran is under scrutiny in a piece by Mitra Tabrizian about the roles of both the West and Muslim clergy in Iran's modern history. In photographs by Arash Hanaei, brutal scenes from the Iran-Iraq war and Abu Ghraib are played out by bound and gagged dolls.

Several internationally known artists — Parastou Forouhar, Ramin Haerizadeh, Khosrow Hassanzadeh, Shahram Karimi, Nicky Nodjoumi — who have long understood the uses of ambiguity in art give an ambitious but uneven event some grounding. In a way the show is a tribute to them, just as their work honors the spirit of earlier Iranian artists, poets, thinkers and activists, at home and abroad. Mr. Karimi — born in Shiraz, now in Berlin and New York — has painted dozens of portraits of these inspirational figures on rice sacks that he has stitched into a single large sheet. It hangs, canopylike, from the ceiling of a gallery, making the exhibition look like a temporary encampment and like a shrine. **HOLLAND COTTER**

THE FANTASTIC TAVERN

The Tbilisi Avant-Garde

Casey Kaplan

525 West 21st Street, Chelsea

Through July 31

This unusual group show is long on history and short on actual art objects, but the unfamiliarity of its material and its sense of mission create a special intensity. It focuses on the little-known pocket of the early-20th-century Russian avant-garde that flourished in the small city of Tbilisi, sometimes called the Paris of the East, between 1910 and the early 1930s.

In Georgia in the southern Caucasus on the way to everywhere, Tbilisi had an out-size multicultural vitality. Its many cafes — the Fantastic Tavern was the most prominent — and its age-old poetry tradition spawned proto-Dada performances, readings and theater. Italian Futurism exerted an early influence, and there was a small but productive film industry.

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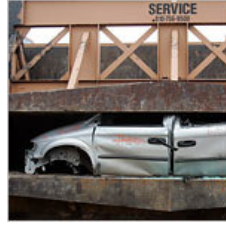
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