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Art & Design

Revolutionary avant-garde

DePaul's "Iran Inside Out" refuses to pander. By Lauren Weinberg



On June 12, 2009—the day Iran held its presidential election—several of the country's artists shipped their work to New York City for inclusion in the Chelsea Art Museum's (CAM) exhibition "Iran Inside Out."

"If it had been any later, [the art] might not have gotten out," says CAM curator Sam Bardaouil, 34, an instructor at NYU who organized the show with CAM director Till Fellrath, 39. As thousands of Iranians took to the streets to protest Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's victory, which they deemed a fraud, violent government reprisals left the country in chaos. As a result, some of the artists participating in "Iran Inside Out" haven't been able to travel to the U.S. as planned, but last month their work reached the DePaul University Art Museum.

Bardaouil and Fellrath recently gave us a tour of the eye-opening, highly enjoyable contemporary art show, which received rave reviews in New York—where it also impressed DePaul's museum director, Louise Lincoln, and assistant director Laura Fatemi. They had discussed presenting an Iranian art exhibition "for a long time," Lincoln says.

DePaul's abridged version features 21 Iranian artists—most of whom live in Tehran—and 15 from the Iranian diaspora. Their media include video, photography, painting, sculpture and more; Behdad Lahooti makes unexpected use of a Turkish toilet.

We were surprised the Iranian artists were able to export their work at all, but according to Bardaouil, their situation isn't as dire as Americans might think. True, even before the election protests, some Iranian artists didn't dare exhibit outside private homes; some had

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their shows shut down by the government. Savvy gallerists and patrons in Iran, Dubai, Europe, New York and elsewhere keep the scene alive, however. Many Iranian universities offer undergrad art programs and M.F.A.s, Bardaouil explains. "People [outside Iran] don't realize it's a fairly affluent country," Fellrath tells us, adding that young, middle-class Iranians—more than half the population is under 30—are accustomed to Internet access and frequently travel abroad.

We thought of them when we saw Arash Sedaghatkish's life-size watercolor portraits of attractive Iranian students decked out in jeans and Puma accessories (apparently, hipsters are hipsters, even if they have to wear the hijab). Sedaghatkish represents a large contingent of "Iran Inside Out" artists who focus on everyday life. "Let's not hijack the artwork," Bardaouil urges. "[Iranian] artists are always burdened with all this history. This show is also about the artists as individuals."

Plenty of artists do address politics or religion, of course. Others respond to pop culture, consumerism, Iranian literature or street life. We found the most thought-provoking pieces in the section devoted to gender and sexuality. Our assumptions about veils and oppression were shattered by Abbas Kowsari's photographs of Iranian policewomen (pictured) rappelling down buildings and brandishing guns while dressed in chadors. Newsha Tavakolian's photos of Maria, a transsexual waitress, are equally powerful. Gay sex is punishable by death in Iran, yet sex-change operations are, astonishingly, government-subsidized. "Iran Inside Out" presents other evidence that notions of femininity and masculinity aren't as rigid there as we assume.

Fellrath and Bardaouil hope their exhibition encourages other American viewers to overcome their preconceptions about Iran. "The idea," Fellrath says, "is to get past the fear."

"Iran Inside Out" closes November 22 at the [DePaul University Art Museum](#).

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