

Afshin Pirhashemi

Femafia

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Ayyam Gallery DIFC

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We live in an era where certain governments and extremist groups act like the mafia of the old days.

The only difference is whereas the mafia of the past respected women enough to keep them out of their dirty business, today's mafias do not distinguish between men and women when it comes to terror and killings.

Khaled Samawi
Founder of Ayyam Gallery

Femafia

By Jules Mcdevitt

Iranians have had a long and enduring tradition, some might say obsession with the notion of an idealised, youthful beauty. From the graceful moonfaced youths of the great Persian epics depicted in Timurid and Safavid era miniatures, to the country's unparalleled embrace of the cult of cosmetic surgery, Iranians are uncompromising in their pursuit of aesthetic perfection. Artist Afshin Pirhashemi embraces this legacy and pairs it with an innate respect and abiding veneration of feminine strength that shapes his entire body of work.

Born in Urmia, Northwest Iran in 1974, Pirhashemi's outstanding technical abilities were recognised early on; by the age of sixteen his work was being professionally exhibited. Awarded a grant by the Italian Ambassador to study at the prestigious Rome Art Academy, the artist went on to complete his studies at Azad University in 2007. Since then he has received numerous prestigious national and international awards as well as being included in the illustrious Top 500 Global Artists list, placing him alongside the most renowned names in the art world.

Instantly recognisable for their photo-realistic execution and neo-gothic elegance, the artist's paintings generally centre on the portrayal of beautiful young women and the many complex and perplexing aspects of their relationships with the world surrounding them. Unlike the aforementioned depictions of languid girls reclining on plush oriental carpets or circumambulating opulent gardens, present in fifteenth and sixteenth-century illustrated manuscripts,

Pirhashemi often rejects traditionally feminine associations. Rather, the artist places his subjects in the most audacious and unexpected situations, breaking down gender related barriers whilst simultaneously creating scenes rich with sensual, chaotic fantasy.

Influenced by the founders of photorealism, in particular Chuck Close, as well as mid-century photography, the painter's studies in Italy may also have had a contributing impact on his work. Along with Pirhashemi's preference for groups of exquisite flowing haired young beauties, one can draw certain parallels between Renaissance master Sandro Botticelli's use of the Golden ratio in his masterpieces *The Birth of Venus and Primavera* and Pirhashemi's complex compositions.

Primarily known for working in monochrome, Pirhashemi has recently started incorporating limited amounts of colour into his paintings, when, in his own words, he feels that he 'cannot express a particular feeling in black and white'. This not only adds contrast and drama to the works but also demonstrates a significant development in his practice.

Femafia seamlessly picks up from the artist's recent solo exhibitions, *The Wrong Women* (Ayyam Gallery, DIFC, Dubai, 2013) and *Seduction* (Ayyam Gallery, London, 2014) and deftly introduces new trajectories in the artist's work. Still focused on his anonymous young muses, here Pirhashemi adds a supporting cast of more familiar faces

into his latest works. Lending their substantial presence to proceedings, these bastions of popular culture and history are universally familiar adding an intriguing set of narratives and juxtapositions to his canvases.

In *Godfather* (2014), the artist reflects upon the patriarchal norms present throughout Eastern societies and dramatically subverts them. Borrowing the iconic image of Marlon Brando's portrayal of mafia boss Don Vito Corleone in Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972), Pirhashemi surrounds this embodiment of alpha-male power with a mob of gesticulating, gun-yielding young women, savage creatures who seemingly relish the violence and brutality of the scene. Blood sprays out across the canvas overlapping with the windswept hair of the female figures. In the background we see the Statue of Liberty—a conspicuous reference to New York, the setting of the film—but set aside by side with a herd of galloping horses, also a comment on the 'American Dream' and the many contradictions of a so-called free society.



In a Moment (2014) was inspired by the artist's admiration for the courageous Kurdish female fighters who helped to wrestle control of the Northern Syrian town of Kobane from Islamic State militants. The cluster of women stands proud and fierce, confronting the audience with their bravery and aggression. Only one fighter is rendered in colour, emerging from the shadows, she stands to the right, at the front of the group pointing a gun at the viewer, eyes squeezed shut. Two women robed in chadors and wearing sunglasses stand behind her at the centre of the composition, one grimacing, the other gurning, defiant in the face of their unseen oppressors. The remaining fighters start to fade away, perhaps casualties of war, their ghostly forms barely discernable, with one lonely figure disappearing into the far distance to the far left of the composition. These are not literal representations of the Kobane fighters; in fact they resemble the fashionable young women from the artist's hometown of Tehran. Rather, these formidable figures are empowering reminders of feminine capability and resourcefulness, the heroic women taking up arms to fight beside their brothers and husbands whilst rejecting the archaic, gender defining roles that still pervade society.



Dynasty (2014) depicts the figure of a young girl, dignified and resolute. Behind her stands the epochal presence of Queen Elizabeth I, whose legacy is arguably one of the most enduring examples of female power in Western history. Partially obscured from view, the regal Elizabeth protectively envelops the girl with her embellished crimson gown, passing a symbolic baton, she empowers all of womankind with strength and possibility. Conjuring up the past and presenting it alongside the contemporary, the figures stand erect against a monochrome, partially abstracted background. A crescent shape atop a mound is just discernable to the left of the figures and dripping paint frames them to the right, alluding to the eternal spillage of blood in the name of theological doctrine.

In a departure from these complex, theatrical tableaux, two striking monochrome portraits deliver a more intimate experience of Pihashemi's painting. *Godfather II* (2015) depicts a bullet ridden Al Pacino set against a white background sullied with spatters and pools of inky blood. True to form, even in this pulverised state he belligerently stares out from behind a pair of dark sunglasses, enigmatic and menacing, still resplendent in his violent demise. In the equally compelling *Marilyn* (2015) the alluring mien of Marilyn Monroe gazes off into the distance, a poignant look on her exquisite face. A tragic figure in life and in death, here the timeless sex symbol is covered in blood... but the blood is not hers. Perhaps the artist is imagining a different outcome for Monroe, whose unmatched fame and celebrity ultimately cost the bombshell her own life. Pirhashemi's ability to masterfully capture a subject's physical features in



hyperrealism can be seen at its very best in these portraits. His fine markings alternate with loose brushstrokes and his skilful use of chiaroscuro lends a dramatic tension to the canvases.

In this latest manifestation celebrating female beauty and strength, *Femafia* explores both the benevolent and corrupt sides of power. Dislodging the generally accepted notion of women being the gentler, more demure sex the artist also uses characters associated with the underworld in an attempt to change the popular narrative.



Afshin Pirhashemi

(Iran, born 1974)

Afshin Pirhashemi examines the complexities of life in modern day Iran through photorealist portraits that often bleed at their edges into expressionist compositions, becoming dramatic tableaux. Pirhashemi is fascinated by the role of women in contemporary Iranian society and their relationships to the world around them. Tapping into the psychosocial dimensions of contemporary Iran, Pirhashemi explores manifestations of power as they appear or are negotiated through gendered bodies and spaces.

Born in 1974 in Urmia, Afshin Pirhashemi now lives and works in Tehran. Pirhashemi studied at the Rome Art Academy and completed his artistic training at Iran's Azad University. His works are housed in public and private collections throughout the Middle East and Europe and he is the recipient of awards from the 2003 Tehran 6th International Art Biennial, and the 2004 Beijing Art Biennial. Solo exhibitions include Ayyam Gallery, London (2014); Ayyam Gallery, Dubai (2013); Homa art Gallery, Tehran (2009); Seyhoun Art Gallery, Tehran (2005); and Barg Gallery, Tehran (2005). Group exhibitions include In & Out, Milan (2009); Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, Tehran (2006); Museum of Contemporary Art, Tehran (2004, 2003).

In Recrudescence, several moments in time are rendered in a single composition as a gun-toting heroine is shown reemerging from a battlefield. Amidst a sprawling landscape, the figure appears as a slow-moving phantom, registering the successive stages of her rebirth. Although the outdoor scene is relatively sparse with the exception of curved lines that outline her path, the sky above is depicted as a spectacular sunrise that seems to follow her lead as the woman's towering presence commands nearly every element around her. The painting's background establishes its context with armored horsemen that ride away from the scene, indicating the end of a conflict. At the furthest distance from the central figure is the Statue of Liberty, a recurring image in the artist's latest body of work. In this particular composition, the American landmark serves as an enigmatic symbol that is at once welcoming and foreboding.



Recrudescence
2013
Oil on canvas
200 x 400 cm







Mothers
2013
Oil on canvas
195 x 285 cm





Power
2013
Oil on canvas
200 x 300 cm





Bride
2014
Oil on canvas
100 x 100 cm

War and Love incorporates the imagery of classical art with the iconoclasm of a female subject who confronts the viewer with a confident stare. Behind the artist's muse is a composite of ancient bas-reliefs containing busts of learned men under attack from a brigade of soldiers on horseback, an apt description for our troubled times. His elegant protagonist appears to leave the scene behind as she approaches the viewer. Positioned in the foreground of the composition to her side are similarly dressed anonymous figures, equally aloof to the destructive power-struggles of men.

Much of Pirhashemi's work deconstructs the encoded gender norms that have survived centuries of Western visual culture, particularly as they persist in the form of 'the male gaze,' narratives as told from the vantage points of those endowed with power. Within the context of Iran, the artist's consideration of the semiotic makeup of history painting and portraiture resonates with viewers who are familiar with the ubiquitous pictures of imperial men and women of past dynasties, and the posturing of political leaders and religious figures who appear on billboards and posters in public spaces. Through allegory, symbolism, and appropriated imagery, the artist merges these two worlds, fusing the past with the present as he depicts women who refuse to be trapped by history.



War and Love
2014
Oil on canvas
100 x 200 cm





Dynasty
2014
Oil on canvas
100 x 200 cm

Several paintings from the artist's new large-scale series address the recent conflict in Syria by detailing the unparalleled role of women resistance fighters. Demonstrating the artist's interest in visual culture as a socializing agent, however, is an evident line of questioning that takes apart how pictures are invariably constructed. In Western news media, the young women are often framed as fortuitous pinup girls. Although the militants are dressed in army fatigues and pose with guns at the frontlines of operations, they are hyper-sexualized through the lenses of foreign journalists. Pirhashemi's *Kobani* conflates such imagery with the seductive yet aggressive persona of a scantily clad vixen seeking revenge, appealing to the sensibilities of a culture driven by erotic fantasy. In *Bride*, the sultry heroine reappears with the same sense of calculated violence yet is depicted as a civilian—a disconcerting depiction of female empowerment that undermines the notion of women as docile subjects.



Kobani
2014
Oil on canvas
150 x 200 cm





In a Moment
2014
Oil on canvas
100 x 200 cm



Syria
2014
Oil on canvas
200 x 320 cm





Godfather I
2014
Oil on canvas
150 x 200 cm



Marilyn
2014 - 2015
Oil on canvas
150 x 200 cm





Scarface
2014 - 2015
Oil on canvas
150 x 200 cm





Godfather II
2014 - 2015
Oil on canvas
150 x 200 cm

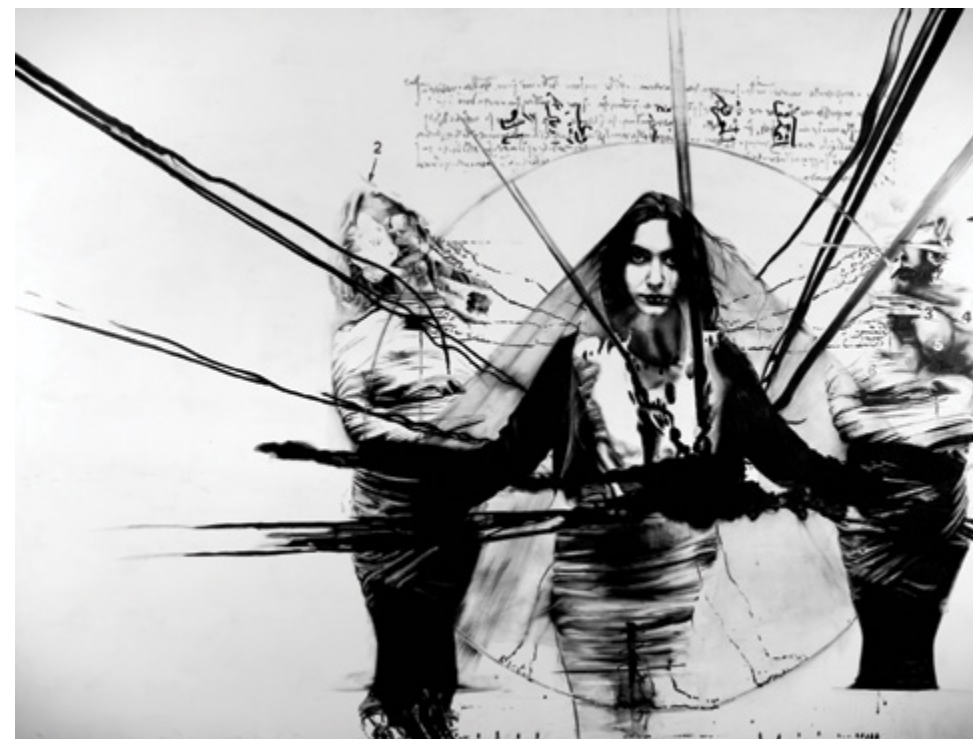




Yearning
2014 - 2015
Oil on canvas
150 x 200 cm



Vitruvian Woman is based on the fifteenth-century drawing by Leonardo da Vinci, which shows the ideal proportions of man according to ancient Roman findings. In a similar study, the Renaissance artist rendered the idealised human figure with the geometry of classical architecture, drawing the body to scale in several poses and with anatomical detail. Pirhashemi places his muse over Leonardo's subject, allowing his composition to overcome a reproduction of the illustration. The woman at the centre of the 2015 painting stares directly at the viewer as she emulates the triangular pose of the figure in the original image, indicating the geometric shape at its heart, the surrounding circle of which is believed to represent the cosmos. By referring to the symbolism of Leonardo's drawing, the viewer identifies Pirhashemi's heroine as the midpoint of the universe, a generative yet destructive force rendered as a modern-day icon.



Vitruvian Woman
2014 - 2015
Oil on canvas
150 x 200 cm



Ayyam Gallery

Founded in Damascus in 2006, Ayyam Gallery is internationally recognised as a leading arts organisation in the Middle East, representing a diverse roster of established and emerging artists from the Arab world and Iran. Spaces in Beirut, Dubai, and London, a widely respected imprint, and an associated non-profit arts programme have furthered the gallery's mission of promoting the dynamic art of the region.

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