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UNTOLD STORIES

Los Angeles-based Iranian artist, Farzad Kohan, draws on his own experience of immigration, as well as that of others, in his latest body of thought-provoking artwork.



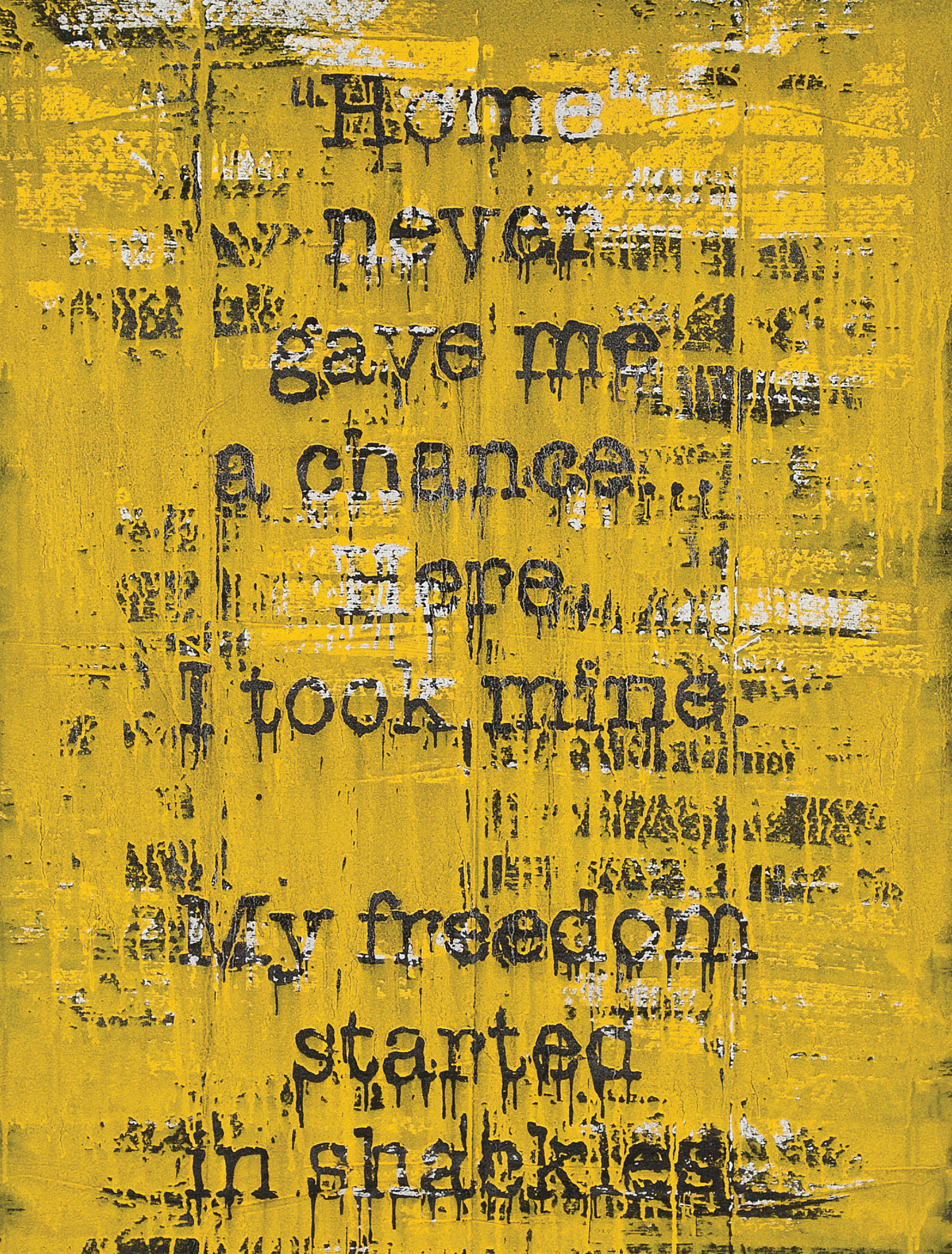
It's a relatively cool weekday evening during Dubai Watch Week, and the city's financial district, commonly known as DIFC, is humming with the soft murmur of curious watch connoisseurs, as well as the pitter-patter of businessmen and women, who are roaming the dimly lit courtyards that are lined with art exhibits. It's my first visit to Ayyam Gallery, which is renowned for showcasing the best in Middle Eastern art, and I'm surprised when I locate it rather quickly – my sense of direction usually abandons me in this part of town. Before entering, I pause to examine the artwork draped in the window. I had already seen Farzad Kohan's artwork online, but to see it in the flesh was something else altogether. Simple yet curiously complex swaths of canvas are weightily drenched in paint, which bleeds downward like mascara-sodden tears. Kohan, dressed in a crisp white shirt and jeans, is lounging in a reclining chair at the gallery's centre, surrounded by his own immersive creations. I had spoken with him over the phone a week prior to our meeting. Based in Los Angeles, he's travelled to Dubai for the exhibition's opening. His jovial smile is all-encompassing, stretching from ear to ear.

Without hesitation, he embraces me. "I'm so delighted you were able to come," he gushes. Born in Tehran in 1967, an 18-year-old Kohan was forced to flee his native country because of the armed conflict between Iran and Iraq, which lasted from 1980 to 1988 and resulted in at least half a million casualties. "I was being drafted," he reveals, "and I basically didn't want to go to war. So, my family had me smuggled out of the country. I crossed borders illegally and ended up in Sweden, where I became a refugee." Although he had a brother who was already living there, a vulnerable Kohan had no choice but to complete his "unexpected and crazy" odyssey alone. "I'm the only one from that group of people – there were about 19 of us escaping – who didn't get caught."

In the early Nineties, Kohan moved to California where he trained as a sculptor and currently resides with his teenage daughter. "I look at my daughter and other kids who are roughly the age I was when I left Tehran," he reveals, "and I think about what I had to go through. I look at the differences and how time has changed, particularly because of technology." He steadfastly acknowledges, however, that modern-day migration, particularly in Europe and the Mediterranean, is proof that a refugee's fortune has not improved. "It's one of the main reasons why I started my latest project," he concedes, when discussing the current crisis in Syria. "Migration has always been a part of what I do because being a migrant dominates my life."

Kohan's latest body of work, which is titled *Migration Stories*, tells the experiences of migrants who have resettled in the United States or Europe. In some instances, these stories are being told for the first time. Kohan sourced these narratives using social media, by asking friends, colleagues and acquaintances to summarise and share what defined the process of migration for them. "The entire thing [project] became a learning experience for me," he reveals. "You have to understand that not everyone

"Not the birds of passage,
my father
intended for us to be.
My parents and I are
political refugees.
Grateful to America
for giving us
a new beginning
and hope that the world
embraces others
the same way today."



is comfortable with sharing personal stories and not everybody I spoke to had told their story before. They'd kept it a secret or had only told a few people. Then I suddenly show up and tell them I want to paint their story. It's intimidating."

Some of his subjects responded with partial memories of leaving home as children, while others offered harrowing accounts of fleeing due to political persecution or the outbreak of war. "I spoke to this girl from Australia," he says. "She was a victim of domestic violence and that's why she escaped. In the end, what she escaped from killed her father. As a result, she became an advocate for people like herself." Kohan's optimism is inspiring. "She went through a dark period, but she turned a negative story into a positive." This is frequently portrayed in his use of paint, which in several artworks starts off ominously dark, before brightening. His biographical portraits almost always explore themes like love. "Love is the only way of surviving the madness of this world," he sighs, "even though it's cheesy, it's reality. It's the only way the world is going to become a better place."

He continues, "The kind of love I'm talking about happens through the act of migration. It's about acceptance, going through hardships, gaining ground, and then losing things. It's a constant game of gaining and losing, but in the end this is what keep us strong as individuals." After all, "migration is nothing new," he points out. "It's just the stories that are new. It used to be my story, now it's your story, and one day, it'll be someone else's story." Encapsulating a refugee's tale in only a few words, however, proved to be difficult. "I asked them to send me two or three short sentences and they'd send me closer to half a page," he laughs, before becoming serious. "They told me, 'I can't put my life into a sentence for you.' You have to respect that about people."

Kohan's text-based paintings are written in American typewriter, a font he specifically chose to represent his Californian identity.

Using a projector, Kohan carefully paints the text onto the canvas, after accumulating countless thin layers of paint that weeps into the canvas. Multigenerational and from diverse communities, his respondents represent a cross-section of today's ever-increasing migrant population, and through Migration Stories they are able to disclose their experiences without revealing their identities. The difficulties of assimilation are further characterised by Kohan's use of oil and water-based paints that separate upon contact. He attempts to unify these two paints, an apt metaphor for a migrant's struggle to integrate into broader society.

"I carry around their stories with me," he admits. "These stories, they are not just paintings. They are somebody's life. It's in front of me and I am responsible for that, I'm responsible for bringing it out in the best way I can." The vertical folded canvases feature delicate creases that give the impression that the artwork is a lost letter that's been shared in secret or tucked away for safekeeping. The soft material was additionally chosen for practical reasons; it's flexible and easy to fold, which is essential for a migrant's lifestyle. "When you're a refugee, you need to be able to pack things up quickly so you're able to flee or quickly move on."

The notion of home is instrumental to Kohan's artwork. "Home is important. We all want to lead a happy life, we all want stability. When you're a migrant, all those things change, because home isn't your home anymore. The concept of home changes." Kohan admits that he no longer considers Tehran his home. His own family is dispersed around the world, which is far from uncommon for migrants. He speaks English, albeit with a Farsi accent, and strongly identifies as American. But for Kohan, home is not where you live, but where the heart is. His overriding message is one of "peace and unity", he concludes with an encouraging smile. "I'm all about bringing people together."

