

“YOU CAN BE A WOMAN AND BE STRONG”

As celebrated Persian painter **Roshanak Aminelahi** opens her new exhibition in Dubai, she talks to Kate Wills about finding inspiration in the UAE, reflecting the political in her paintings and being a single mother

Styling by GEMMA DEEKS
Photography by ETHAN MANN

When Roshanak Aminelahi first heard the story of the fearless Persian princess Gordafarid, who disguised herself as a male soldier to ride into battle to defend her homeland, she was a young girl, growing up in 1980s Tehran. “My father read me the epic poem *The Shahnameh* as a bedtime story,” she explains. “This story of Gordafarid captivated me at the time. She has this very strong personality and she just puts on a helmet and charges into battle. She’s not afraid of doing what needs to be done when it comes to her pride and her people. The story stayed with me and I was reminded of it last year when I heard the news of the Kurdish women who dressed as men to go into battle with ISIS to protect their village in Northern Syria. I was so moved, I had tears in my eyes.”

Roshanak’s painting *Gordafarid* – a 3 metre-high swirl of red and gold raised brush marks riding on a white horse – is the first thing you see when you enter her solo exhibition at Ayyam Gallery, Dubai. “I knew that when I wanted to paint my Gordafarid it had to be huge and in bold, beautiful colours because she’s a beautiful woman but she’s also strong and powerful.”

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It’s a powerful combination and one which, in person, Roshanak encapsulates. She has a remarkably warm, relaxed manner – asking me to address her as Roshi and sending me an email full of smiley emojis to tell me how much she loved talking to me – but also an unmistakable grit and determination at her core. It’s this aspect of her personality which allowed her to leave Tehran in 2006 and move alone to Dubai with her three-year-old son. “It was crazy and very difficult,” she recalls. “My now ex-husband didn’t come with me so I was having to sort out my work and my job and where we would live, and all with a little tiny boy where everything was new for him. I had just finished a few solo shows in Tehran but here in Dubai I had to start from scratch. It was ground zero.”

She now exhibits all over the world – from Miami to Vienna – and travels internationally with her work. With the natural eye of an artist she describes periods of her life in shades of colour – the period of war dominated by grey, and more recent years becoming more vivid and strong, as she develops her



Roshanak Aminelahi wears: her painting uniform teamed with Rundhulz shoes



Roshanak wears: Caroline Herrera shirt, Massimo Dutti skirt, and Oscar de la Renta earrings, all her own

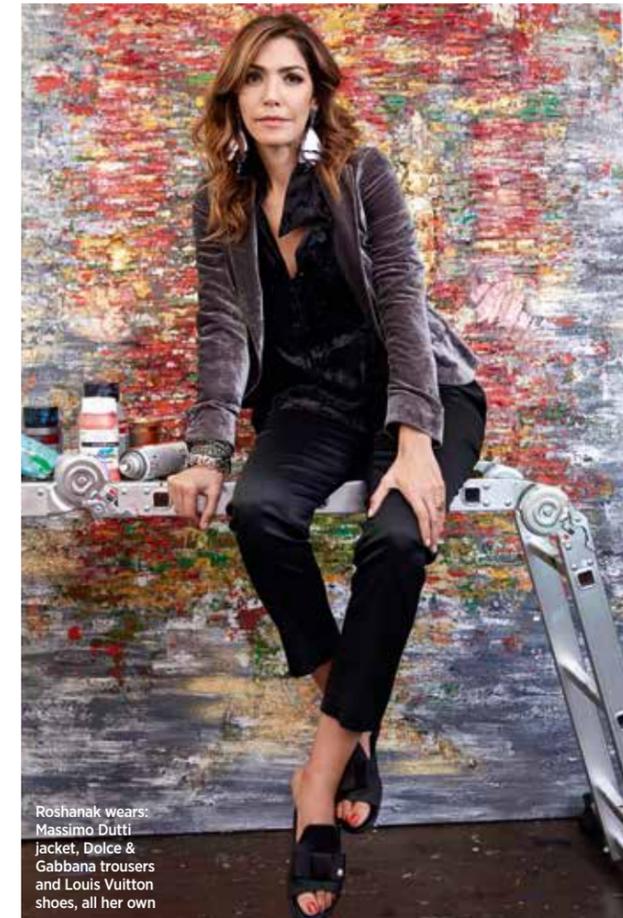
own identity. Eleven years on she says her adopted city feels like home. “Dubai is a beautiful city to live in,” she explains. “It’s extremely close to Tehran which is important because my main source of inspiration is my Persian culture – the literature, the art, my background – and I go back a lot to see my family. But here in Dubai I’m exposed to so many nationalities and cultures – not only what’s happening in the UAE but the rest of the world – and the art world as well.” However, one thing she says both cities have in common is their great respect for the role of the artist.

“From a very young age I was always drawing and painting,” she says. “My parents were very encouraging and supportive and from 10 years old I was taking lots of art classes.” Rather than studying Fine Art at university she fell into Graphic Design, and went on to work as an art director for advertising agencies. “I always wondered if I should’ve stuck with Fine Art but the artist I am today is the result of working in the advertising industry for 25 years, while at the same time improving my skills in painting and drawing,” she says. “The mix is there and it feeds into my process. I don’t sketch exactly what I want to do before I start, I have a minimal geometric form instead. I work a lot with shapes which is my graphics training.”

Ferdowsi’s epic poem may have been written over 1,000 years ago, but Roshanak found much in the *Shahnameh* fables which she could reinterpret and make relevant to today’s issues. “For me symbolism and allegory gives your message a twist,” she says. “In advertising you learn that if you want to make people remember your work you need to make people pause. Whatever the message you need to make sure it’s approachable and that people connect with it.”

Alongside her striking Gordafarid, Roshanak also depicts the character of Rostam in this series of paintings. “He’s the superhero-like warrior who fights for his country,” she explains. “I’m constantly questioning this need for heroes. I think it comes from growing up in Iran, and listening to tales of *Shahnameh* from my elders. These stories revolve around the love, passion, strength and devotion of heroes who somehow save the day and offer life lessons in the process. Unlike other artists who shy away from making their work overly political, Roshanak says she considers it her responsibility to address what’s happening in the world. “Right now I’m working on another body of work which is directly talking about the situation in Syria,” she says. “They are large works and they take a long time but it’s important to me. These are subjects we’re constantly living with – you just open your eyes and it’s there in front of you so you can’t stay away from it and I wouldn’t want to stay away from it.”

It’s fitting that the theme of her current exhibition is ‘strength’ because even her paints have been specially reinforced to be more durable. “I’ll mix sand, cement, whatever it takes to give my paint the depth and dimension it needs,” she explains of her unusual technique. “Then I’ll mix all these different layers to create this thick, strong texture which I love to play with. Then I just observe what happens. That’s why for



Roshanak wears: Massimo Dutti jacket, Dolce & Gabbana trousers and Louis Vuitton shoes, all her own

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Roshanak Aminelahy

me, even though an artist has to know when to stop, in a way it’s never ready and the layers could keep on building and playing with each other.”

The overall feel is of movement and texture captured on canvas, and Roshanak’s inspirations range from French Impressionists to digital imagery. “I only realised afterwards that this technique I’m working with looks like Pixels made from paint,” she says. Her works draws on the pointillist brushstrokes of the Impressionists such as Georges Seurat’s famous *Bathers at Asnières*, the abstract paintings of Beat generation artist Jay DeFeo and the intricate tile work in Islamist architecture in Iran.

Although the over-riding message of this exhibition is strength and courage, Roshanak says that she rejected the idea of making the show about female strength specifically. “I want an equal world, I don’t want men fighting for women and I don’t want there to have to be a special day for women to have to fight for their rights,” she says. “I’m aiming for balance.” And yet being a woman and an artist has its own unique challenges. “Of course it’s difficult overall as a woman, to be

a mother and run a house and at the same time be a professional,” she says. “But in Dubai I just feel support everywhere I go, I don’t feel resistance.”

The British culture critic Cyril Connolly famously said, “There is no more sombre enemy of good art than the pram in the hall”, but Roshani manages to find space for creativity alongside the demands of single motherhood. “I live in a villa with my studio downstairs and my bedrooms upstairs, so I can combine taking care of my teenage son and taking care of my art. The difficult bit is that when your studio is in your home the work never finishes. You don’t have set hours where you say ‘OK, I’m done, now I can be a mother’, but my son knows that when I’m in my studio I’m working. At the same time when he’s studying he’s doing his thing. Dubai is an extremely safe city to live in for teenagers and kids so I feel very comfortable in that

sense. He loves the fact that his mom is an artist and he brings his friends over and introduces me, so it’s sweet.”

Although the exhibition might not focus specifically on women, Roshanak is the embodiment of female empowerment. “I married when I was very young, I had my son in my thirties but I worked the whole time,” she says, with noticeable pride. “Even when my son was born I remember the next week I was sat behind my computer. It’s difficult – I’m constantly managing a million things and as a single mom I feel this huge responsibility, but at the same time I’m following my dreams. And I think that that makes me a better mother. The most important thing is that being a woman – and all the responsibilities that come with being a mother, a partner, a daughter – shouldn’t stop you.”

That’s the message she wants to give to other women in the UAE. “You can’t bring excuses, you can’t say, ‘Oh, but I’ve got kids, I’m a wife, I’m a woman...’” She says, sounding so impassioned she could shake me. “If you want to do something, you have to do something. Just do it.” She may not be wearing a helmet and riding a horse, but in her work Roshanak Aminelahy is waging a battle all her own. ■

HAIR AND MAKE-UP: BLOWOUT & GO