

The Wrong Women of Afshin Pirhashemi

By Lee Ann Biddle



Untitled, 2006, Oil on canvas, 200 x150cm - Courtesy of Ayyam Gallery.

Afshin Pirhashemi is a young Iranian artist who made international headlines with several recent sales of his paintings in auctions. Though pedigreed through Biennales in Tehran and Beijing, his relatively unknown works shot to over half a million dollars in only three years. His prodigious talent, psychologically compelling subject matter, and newly exclusive representation by an internationally, expanding, well respected gallery who is holding a solo exhibition of his works in London in

October, will undoubtedly secure this young Iranian's place as one of the top contemporary painters from the country. Born in Tehran in 1974, Afshin Pirhashemi's preternatural ability was displayed in his first exhibition at the age of sixteen. He received a grant from the Italian Ambassador to study at the Rome Art Academy and completed his Bachelor of Arts at Azad University in 2007. Even prior to achieving his degree, his painting was recognized with Second Prize at the 2005 China



Lonely, 2012, Oil on canvas, 100x300cm. - Courtesy of Ayyam Gallery.

Biennale, ranking his work with artists such as Gerard Richter. Renowned for photo-realistic portraiture and subject matter that cleverly approaches the complexities of present-day culture and politics in Iran through the varied portrayal of women, Pirhashemi has since exhibited alongside indisputable masters of Iranian art, Abbas Kiarostami and Parviz Tanavoli, and was listed in the top 500 global artists in the company of acclaimed artists Reza Derakshani, Shirin Neshat and Farhad Moshiri. In his new aptly titled series, 'The Wrong Women', Pirhashemi delves into extreme personalities and succinctly portrays the darkness that can lie just behind a beautiful face. Once again, his canvases are colored - if monochromatically - with the contradictions of contemporary Tehran and the hidden facets of women.

A subtle layer of autobiography is hidden amidst the 'The Wrong Women', revealing insight into the personal life of this enigmatic artist. Readily understandable as a narrative, this new series powerfully demonstrates the cyclical pattern of pleasure and destruction. Through these paintings, the artist explores the motivations and behaviors capable of severing relationships and the recent dissolution of his marriage.

A Personal Reflection

Though much of his oeuvre aims to highlight the duality of contemporary Iranian culture, he occasionally allows a glimpse beyond this world by interjecting a personal reflection of his marital life. Always incorporating the same elements, namely a dwelling representing their communal home, a dog symbolizing fidelity and loyalty, and an image of his wife or modeled representation thereof, Pirhashemi allows his audience momentary access to the most personal of relationships.

In 2006, Pirhashemi painted his wife in monochrome, holding a cigarette in one hand and curbing a Doberman Pinscher with the other. Heeling proudly at her side, the dog is protective and obedient while the woman is portrayed in a position of control. If one is to personify the Doberman as the artist, then this time could be looked upon as a stage of marital bliss. Portraying himself as a Doberman Pinscher, the artist projects the traits of this noble breed into his own character. He stands beside his wife as a strong, loyal, fearless and intelligent man.

After fifteen years of marriage, Afshin and his wife separated in 2012. *Lonely*, the most recent personal reflection, was created to divulge the societal perceptions of his divorce. Of the work the artist has stated, "Lonely is very important to me and it took me a long time to finish. My wife and I separated around eight months ago,



Untitled triptych, 2008, Oil on Canvas, 100x300cm - Courtesy of Ayyam Gallery.

and this painting is a reflection of society's perspective towards the lonely me and the lonely her." This triptych is comprised of a left panel depicting an entrance to the property, a central panel with a female figure, and a right panel with a solitary canine. In the left panel, the gate opens inward and the foliage surrounding the wall, as well as the dandelions in the foreground, suggest Spring. The inclusion of dandelions is telling as they symbolize a wish, hope, faithfulness and a happy union. In Farsi, the word for dandelion, *ghasedak*, translates to 'the little messenger'. To blow upon the white puff of the seeding flower would scatter the pistils in the air, transporting the thoughts to the distant loved one. Not to doubt the paralleled interpretations of Afshin, dandelions have also come to symbolize grief and letting go.

In the central panel, a woman stands with her hands clasped in front of her stomach. Representative of Pirhashemi's ex-wife, she looks outward at the viewer with a stern and somber expression. This, coupled with the tension in her tightly clasped hands, apparent by the engorgement of her veins, suggests inapproachability. She is enveloped in a cloak with indistinguishable script that appears weighted on her shoulders, as if the past is bearing down upon her; yet her hair flows with the wind, alluding to her new freedom and lack of restraint. Notably, her hair blows freely toward the right panel where a lone Doberman Pinscher is seen galloping

from a sparsely wooded area in the distance. Although uncertain as to the nature of this action, whether the animal is aggressively lunging or frantically searching, it is clear that without a master and without a home, this dog is left to the wilderness. The small stature of the dog in relation to the central woman, and the stark, winter environment, contrasted with the welcoming entrance and seeding dandelions of the left panel, suggest a great separation of space, whether physical or temporal.

Pirhashemi has used this composition in happier times as evinced by an earlier triptych forming part of an important 2009 exhibition of Contemporary Middle Eastern Art in London, 'Routes II', which is compositionally similar to *Lonely*, though its mood differs vastly. Where the central woman in *Lonely* appears burdened, the woman portrayed in the 2008 painting is carefree; her hair lapping on the breeze, the scripted shawl lightly veiled over her long hair, her easy smile softening the hard monochrome palette. The left panel depicts a closed door to a home, not merely an entrance to the property grounds and perhaps most relevant, a pair of dogs run together in the right panel. A sense of security and comfort in companionship pervades this composition that is in direct opposition with his new work, which is overwhelmingly solemn and forlorn.



The First-timer, 2012, Oil on canvas, 100x150cm. - Courtesy of Ayyam Gallery.

A Tripartite Representation

With a nod to Freudian metapsychology, Pirhashemi's tripartite representation of the women in *The First Timer* and *Untitled* prominently portrays the three parts of a psyche: that which is revealed to the external world; that which is kept to oneself; and that which is not readily apparent and is the unmasked dark side of a personality. A young woman hides her face in the cowl of her sweater in three different poses in *The First Timer*. Fraught with emotion, sensations of innocence, anger and determination are captured on her face and her hands display a progression of increased tension. This is a suggestive work as its title implies. Overtly sensual references such as a large V-shaped viscous matter with dripping trails and a fibrous central hole, a small male to the right of the canvas urinating, as well as an ithyphallic larger male half covered in the dark matter, further elucidate this intimate theme. Yet, like his models, his paintings also possess more than a

single layer of interpretation. The hands of the figure in the center of the composition differentiates her from the other two figures because one of her arms wraps protectively around the waist while the other raises the cowl neck. Clasped within the palm of her closed hands is the grip of a handgun. Her eye focus shifts from the viewer to the sight of the gun, the barrel of which has been censored to leave a myriad of interpretations. Yet, the splattering of blood and sense of violence and aggression is discernible in either reading of the work. Ever faithful to presenting the social complexities of his homeland, Pirhashemi paints his cleavage-bearing, chador-clad ladies sipping glasses of whiskey in *Untitled*. A sign at the top of the canvas discloses the cause of the protagonist's angst. Even though she is responsible for the eviction of her male partner, she is still portrayed in three divergent emotional states, which correspond to Freud's theory of the id, the ego and the super-ego. The central figure is shrouded in the shadow of her



Untitled' 2012, Oil on Canvas 2012, 100x150cm - Courtesy of Ayyam Gallery.

dark, inner personality. Head tilted slightly upwards, she inhales her cigarette in defiant denial of her pain. She retains a great strength, stubbornly assured in her convictions and the dismissal of her lover, glaring out of the corner of her eyes, willful revenge plagues her every thought. This harshness of attitude is offset by the delicate earring scintillating in the light; a juxtaposition to reflect her once soft femininity and further enforce the idea that great beauty is capable of inflicting great misery. This basic instinctual desire for revenge represents the id. The figure on the left is bathed in light. Staring directly at the viewer, she sits exposed with her loneliness and pain on view for all to see, even if she wills it to disappear. In an almost rationalizing manner, she holds a lit cigarette between her fingers and raises the glass to her lips. Clear-eyed and aware, this figure constitutes the super-ego, that part of the psyche that plays a critical and moralizing role. With

a wider negative space separating her from the central figure, lighter coloring and deliberately cropped face, Pirhashemi positions this figure and her mood at variance with the other two. The figure to the right is slightly darker. The grief and sadness of the situation has set in, yet her anger and thirst for revenge has not been quenched. As the ego, she strives to appease the id's thirst for revenge, while through eyes brimming with tears, the super-ego's influence of conscience is clearly perceptible. The strength wielded in revenge is here tempered with its weakness. Feelings of anger, denial, repression and guilt weigh down upon her and she detaches, glowering with furrowed brow over the rim of her glass.



Repent' 2012, Oil on Canvas 2012, 100x150cm. - Courtesy of Ayyam Gallery.

Repentance

After following their revengeful desires, whether carried out with violence or with the exchange of intimacies for sleight of hand over an old lover, the protagonists of Pirhashemi's works seek absolution for their committed sins. Turning to prayer, these women repent for their ill deeds and try to impart new meaning into their lives. And yet, through the text accompanying each piece, doubt of this newly found salvation is ever present. Lapping tongues of flame engulf requisitely chador-clad women and a sense of restriction and the loss of the individual permeates in the painting *Repent*. The lyrics, "Repent, repent, I wonder what they meant when they said Repent", from the refrain of Leonard Cohen's song "The Future", reinforces the absurdity of repentance. Surely one is aware of the sin while they commit it; hence Pirhashemi questions whether the act of repenting and confession is in fact encouraging the

practice of sin. This uncertainty of doctrine and loss of the individual is further exhibited in *I Am Lost In God*. Holding the veil in both hands, a central woman is superimposed on a mass of large black brushstrokes rising into a vaporous grey cloud of illegible calligraphy crowned with the words 'I Am Lost in God'. Illustrating a beautiful woman lost in licentious behavior striving to find herself, her blonde hair and bluntly cut bangs are a sign of the influence of Western notions of beauty and promiscuity infiltrating Tehran's younger generation. Yet she is only to be lost once more in God. A sense of naivety and rawness of religious devotion is displayed in her expression of surprise and the handwriting of these title words. Whereas the typeface in *Repent* and the Farsi script in his paintings are remarkably fine, the English titling conveys an almost infantile impression with inappropriate spacing between letters.



Join Now, 2012, Oil on Canvas, 100x150cm - Courtesy of Ayyam Gallery.

A Narrative

In inferring a narrative from the paintings of this series, precise picture order is not exact or important. The moral follows key works – those with themes of marriage, intercourse, betrayal, revenge, attempt for redemption, and ultimately the destruction of both parties. Even with the search for salvation and a new life, the past is inescapable and the vicious cycle returns time and again. The protagonist of this series is led into vice and all manner of sins through the betrayal of her lover and, at the end, she is portrayed as the party capable of inflicting the largest wound because it is the wound of regret that our absent antagonist now faces. ‘The Wrong Women’ is the story of the secretive, deceptive women who are not suitable for true companionship and therefore deemed ‘wrong’ by the artist. Read it as you may, for Afshin Pirhashemi is a vivid storyteller in this new series.

About the Writer

Lee Ann Biddle attended University of Miami and received her BA in Art History with a double minor in Sociology and Legal Studies. In 2008, she completed her MLitt in Early European History of Art and Connoisseurship at Christie's Education, London with the dissertation, 'Two Outsiders' Understood From Within, A Study into the Janiform in Classical Greek Art with Observations of Plastic Vases, Jewellery, and Bronzes'. She has since worked in various London commercial art galleries promoting the talents of emerging conceptual artists. In 2011, she relocated to Dubai to work with a private art foundation and collection. She has written 'Chants From Paradise, A Selection of Safavid Carpets from The Farjam Collection', the Contemporary Practices article, 'An Iconic Face, An Empty Chair: The Evolution of Motifs in Safwan Dahoul's Ever Expanding 'Dream' Series', and acted as a contributing writer and copy editor to 'Jazz From Paradise, Miri Creation Contemporary Carpet Masterpieces from The Farjam Collection', as well as the exhibition catalogue, 'The Samawi Collection II'. She resides in the United Arab Emirates.



Detail of Rapture, 2009, Oil on Canvas, 200x100 cm - Courtesy of Ayyam Gallery.