The Rise of Heroes

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The Rise of Heroes

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Fine Art Studio

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Rochester Institute of Technology
Rochester, NY
November 16th, 2023
Thesis Approval

Thesis Title: The Rise of Heroes

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Abstract

*The Rise Of Heroes* is a body of work that represents an era in which Iranian women first revolted for their rights. This body of work incorporates my experiences, feelings, and observations of social incidents that happened during the course of my life as an artist both inside of and outside of Iran. This thesis paper explores the history, culture, and art that I was inspired by to give the visual form to my emotions. These elements clarify the use of traditional art and culture in my Paintings.

The research for this body of work originated with my interests involving the value and place of Persian women, culture, and art as seen from the perspective of the ancient world, prior to the revolution.

The investigation of how social and cultural freedoms, especially as they pertain to women, were abandoned and oppressed by religion, authorities, and societies became the subject of further research in my thesis. The invasion of Persian culture by Arabic and Islamic culture and how these affected women in the society is significant within this research.

“The Rise of Heroes” is a series of paintings with women’s figures surrounded by Persian cultural elements and aspects of mythology within colorful environment. The aesthetics of these works are intended entice viewers to enter into images and environments that deal with the bitter reality of what is occurring in contemporary Iranian culture today.
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Introduction

The Iranian Revolution or the Islamic Revolution refers to a series of events that culminated in the demolition of the Pahlavi dynasty in 1979. It was conducted to provide an alternative to the Imperial State of Iran through the construction of what is the present-day Islamic Republic of Iran. The monarchical government of Mohammed Reza Pahlavi was superseded by the theocratic administration of Ruhollah Khomeini, a religious cleric who had headed one of the rebel factions. The removal of Pahlavi, the last Shah of Iran, formally marked the end of Iran's historical monarchy. From the start of the rule of the Islamic Republic, Iran has been raided and persecuted by entities who embrace a variety of Islamic traditions while the government in power has been trying to eliminate the value of structures from the ancient Persian culture, that embraced the economy, art forms, and human rights.

One of the significant changes of this revolution, was the reduction of women’s power and even presence in all parts of society. It started with a compulsory hijab in which women had to cover their hair and body in order to physically exist within the environment. These restrictions expanded continuously, and women became increasingly suppressed by the government. This regime has publicized and promoted a level of violence towards women that has resulted in widespread femicide within families, especially in smaller cities. Men are allowed control over as many wives as they wish, while women are excluded from almost any freedom.

On the 16th of September 2022, Mahsa Amini, 22 years old Iranian woman was beaten to death by the religious morality police of Iran's government because she was not wearing the proper hijab stipulated by the regime. This incident marked the beginning of a wave of anger from a society that had tolerated 47 years of human abuse crimes by the government. This was the start of the “Woman-Life-Freedom” revolution in Iran that addressed an almost unsurmountable number of abuses and crimes that have occurred within its short lifespan.
This thesis body of work deals with all of the emotions, challenges, experiences, and limitations that I faced as an Iranian-woman artist. Where carnal depictions are censored, and sexual identity is scrutinized and politicized, I as an activist, have always been trying to show my stance against the government’s crimes throughout society by defining them within the frame of my painting. While I strive to create compelling images full of beautiful colors and patterns for the audience, I most desire them to think and understand the contents of these images and the intense pain that is associated with these events. Through my images, I desire to bring my audience to an understanding and awareness of what is happening in the 21st century to women in the Middle East.

The rich culture and art of my country and my desire to keep it alive has been a fundamental inspiration for my creative practice. My interest in promoting the inherent dignity of a women’s body, has compelled me to incorporate realistic figures in contemporary manifestations of the traditional Persian miniatures and a more mythological style of painting. The patterns and colors of the Persian paintings, palace ceramics, and colorful glass designs of old houses in Iran form the main structure of the surrounding space.
Context

My personal experience of representing social and political events within my artwork has played a fundamental role in my development as an artist. I believe that this activity of using art to amplify the voices of oppressed peoples and communities is essential to implementing action when no other societies are willing to become involved.

When the Islamic Republic attacked and took over the governance of Iran, oppression and sense of suffocation gripped the country. I used to listen to my parents talking about how Iran was before the revolution, and I watched many documentaries and read articles about that era. I found out how advanced Iranian society was in almost every area. I saw how the Shah kept the cultural and historical celebrations of the past important and meaningful. An example was the “Sadeh” festival a celebration that dates back to the Achaemenid Empire. Sadeh celebrates 50 days before Nowruz and signifies the birth of spring. It was a celebration to honor fire and defeat the forces of darkness, frost, and cold. This event is one example of the valuable and meaningful aspects of Persian culture that have been got forgotten since the revolution.

The Achaemenid Empire was the ancient Iranian empire founded by Cyrus the Great in 550BC; the first Persian empire. It was the largest empire the world had ever seen at its time. Cyrus was well known for having respected the customs and religions of the lands he conquered. He is also recognized for his achievements in human rights, politics, and military strategy and he wrote the first declaration of human rights called Cyrus Cylinder. He remains a cult figure amongst modern Iranians with his vault serving as a spot of reverence for millions of people.

With my Iranian cultural background, it is personally sorrowful and painful to see how this abusive regime has harmed my native culture. The Persian culture, however, has been documented in art and literature throughout a large part of history and continues to provide me with information and inspiration for my own art.
A significant change after the revolution was the social status of women and their freedom. Women in Iran are now forced to cover their hair and body in society as per the rules of the Islamic Republic. I have always struggled with not having control over what I wanted to wear. I was threatened and punished by the morality police many times for not having a proper hijab. The anxiety of getting arrested and not feeling safe because of the police, took over activities that I undertook in my outdoor life. Women are prohibited from singing and dancing which is another loss of rights, and all of the old singers had to leave the country. Women are not allowed to have a position of authority in most of the institutions. Even riding a bike is not allowed because of the risk of body parts appearing during the activity. These are part of the restrictions that women have faced every day for almost 46 years.

As a woman, an artist, and an activist living in a country where I am not allowed to evaluate severe political issues, I have no place in that society. Art is the language of freedom for me. In 2015 I had a solo exhibition in which I wasn’t allowed to show all of my works because they were women and some nude abstract paintings. This was only the first struggle of my professional life. After a couple of years, I started to work as a graphic designer in a company where I saw that male employees were the priority to get promotions or even take a women’s place. Seeing all these discriminations motivated me immigrate to somewhere where I have the freedom to express my feelings through my art. With all these oppressions and restrictions, I decided to work to share these experiences and feelings with other people around the world.

As saving Persian culture from invasion of other cultures has been important for me, Iranian art and culture play a crucial role in shaping my work. I am inspired from both the timeless beauty of Persian miniatures and the innovative expressions of modern interpretations, and they are essential to my creative process. My inspiration from Persian miniatures stems from their distinctive features, which include the attention to detail, vivid and harmonious color palettes, and intricate patterns. In terms of context, another crucial aspect of my art is the utilization of mythological characters to narrate stories within the miniatures.
Persian miniature painting is a form of small-scale art on paper, often found in albums called muraqqa. It draws influence from Western Medieval and Byzantine traditions of illuminated manuscripts. They flourished in the 13th to 16th centuries, influenced by Chinese art after Mongol conquests. This tradition continued, with some Western influence, and had an impact on other Islamic miniature traditions, such as Ottoman and Mughal miniatures.

Persian miniatures prominently feature figures, often in private contexts, while ornamental decoration, known as "illumination," ornamented manuscript borders and pages and they are known for their bright mineral-based colors and detailed depictions. Faces are often youthful, and lighting is even, without shadows. Buildings and landscapes are carefully rendered, and figures vary in size to indicate importance.

The themes represented in Persian miniatures are as diverse as Persian culture itself. They contain a wide range of subjects, including epic tales from Persian literature, religious narratives, historical events, courtly life, and even scenes of nature and hunting. Each miniature involves a captivating story into a specific aspect of Persian culture and history. With its origins in ancient Persia and a legacy that endures to this day, Persian miniature art stands as a testament to the creativity, precision, and cultural richness of the Persian world.

The French painter Henri Matisse who was inspired by Persian miniatures said: "the Persian miniatures showed me the possibility of my sensations. That art had devices to suggest a greater space, a really plastic space. It helped me to get away from intimate painting."
I have been inspired by numerous artists, not only on emotional, cultural, political, and social levels but also in terms of their technical expertise and the subject matter that they explore. Researching their work has been an enormous benefit to my creative process.

Mahmoud Farshchian (b.1930, Isfahan, Iran) the professional Persian miniature painter known as Surrnaturalism once said “When a drop of light falls into the glass of a human soul, what would it create with love?” Farshchian was inspired by the designs and tile patterns of Isfahan’s architectural monuments. He was also interested in the poetry of Hafiz, Saadi, and Rumi amongst others and he illustrated the story of these poems in his miniatures. Many of his paintings, which have been exhibited around the world, depict beautiful women in paradisiacal elements as the inspiration of his love to his wife.

“I mostly draw women as angels in my work. Kind, compassionate women are indeed like angels. They are precious.”

-M.F.

After Iranian Revolution in 1979, and with many friends arrested and exiled, Farshchian left Iran with his family. His painting entitled “Quo Vadis/Where Are You Going?” addresses the feeling that he, and 20 million other Iranians had, as friends disappeared, and communities disintegrated during the revolution.

I find his use of colors, patterns, and complex details within the context of the human body truly inspiring. His unique selection of vibrant, saturated colors and the way they harmonize have become a valuable resource for my research in creating the perfect backgrounds for my paintings.

Farshchian says “Art is a sacred matter. It’s a kind of worship. It’s like serving God.”
Shirin Neshat (b. 1957, Iran) Iranian visual artist, film, video maker, and photographer has inspired me as an activist by focusing on women and the problems they face in Islamic law of Iran. After Neshat left Iran to pursue her art degree in the US, she began to photograph herself wearing the veil as was dictated by the Islamic Republic as the dress code for women. Her work discusses the physical, emotional, and cultural implications of veiled women in Iran. Neshat’s work, which never been shown in Iran, declares the female presence in a male dominated culture. In her films and photographs, the female gaze becomes a powerful and dangerous instrument for communication. She further explores cultural taboos through videos. Her ability to address social and political issues through her art has been truly inspiring to me and it took away my fear to of showing women’s nude bodies in my paintings. It has not only helped me develop my own ideas but also guided me in shaping them to align with my goals.

When it comes to the technical aspects of painting figures in a dramatic style, I draw immense inspiration from the work of Roberto Ferri, a contemporary Italian painter. His profound admiration for Baroque paintings is evident in his art, infusing a modern sensibility into some of his pieces. I am particularly captivated by his mastery in depicting skin tones and rendering figures in dynamic and dramatic poses which is the influences of Caravaggio in his work. His art serves as a wellspring of insight for me, guiding my creative process as I strategically position figures alongside other elements within my compositions in more contemporary way. Studying his techniques has not only illuminated my artistic path but has also enriched my appreciation for the interplay of light, form, and narrative in my work.
As an artist, working and gaining experience with different mediums has had a significant role in the development of my creations. It helps me to understand how to make a connection to each method and use the parts that most interest me in my work. Through these explorations, I found painting the medium that gives visual expression of my feelings and thoughts. The painting itself is a vast world for me and my work has improved and changed dramatically in 10 years. I started with gouache and paper, then I experienced watercolor, and ink and before I chose acrylics for a to work with. After I started my academic lessons, I became more familiar with oil paint, and it transformed my work very quickly and gave me a new medium from which to draw my ideas.

The fundamental aspects of my work contain women’s figures with colorful patterns and textures in the background. I use the woman’s body not only because of the content that I am working on but because I find it powerful and elegant despite the requirement that it say covered in Iran and its association with sin and provocation within society. I use the storytelling style of traditional and old book illustrations and wall and ceiling ceramics of palaces from Iran. These style of patterns in books forms the background of figures and it is an important element of Persian art to show the perspective and culture. The diversity of the colors in these pictures and their harmony is an inspiration for me to give a dreamy mood to my work. The depth in these pieces is made with a mixture of flat colors and patterns.

My goal is to show women’s power by mixing figurative forms with cultural elements. To do this, I start to imagine a part of a true story and then I start to search for different people that have worked on similar content with different mediums such as films, photography, installation, etc. I gather ideas and inspirations and I mix them with my own feelings and ideas in a drawing to make it cohesive. Then I look for traditional patterns and elements that best fit my drawing. The color choice for me is more sentient and it is decided upon after I finish my drawing. Each painting utilizes different color schemes and saturations in order to differentiate them from the
larger body of work. Working with color to unify my compositions is sometimes challenging for me.

Oil paint gives me the ability to build and evolve my paintings in a faster and more flexible way. It also helps me to work closely with the traditional methods that I am interested in using in my work. It is reversible and it gives me the quality that I desire my finished work to have. It allows me to use my hand movement and touch the surface with a brush. The blending properties of oil paint, allow me to build the form of the body naturally. It is adjustable for any surface that I work on whether on canvas or wood panel. During my thesis work, I experience different surfaces and I found wood panels to be the best fit because they give a desired smoothness and flatness to my work and allow detail to be shown clearly. Also, they give me smooth surface for the flat areas.

Painting has become a fundamental medium for me, allowing me to express and visualize the pictures that I imagine in my mind with all the emotions and thoughts about contemporary women’s rights. Painting is a way for me to incorporate all of the subjects and elements that are important to me in a mythological space. These images function like windows for both me and my audience, to revealing the world as I truly see it.
Body of Work

I have created a collection of ten paintings, each showcased on different-sized canvases and panels. Each piece narrates a unique story, incorporated with mythological and cultural elements that harmonize with the essence of its narrative.

"Keeper" (fig.1) is an oil painting on panel that symbolizes a woman's journey towards freedom. The idea for this image came through my thinking about the unity of a suffering society. It illustrates the sacrifices made by those who've been oppressed, executed, or killed during protests. I used the mythical creature Simurgh, from Persian mythology that surrounds the woman's back, as the sign of unity and hope. Simurgh, distinct from the phoenix, holds a unique place in Persian folklore. Its name, meaning "thirty birds" in Persian, draws from Attar of Nishapur's allegorical tale, "The Conference of the Birds." In this story, various bird species debate over their leader. Only thirty birds embark on a quest to find the rumored mightiest bird residing beyond distant mountains. Upon arrival, they discover not a king bird, but their own collective reflection in a lake, forming a magnificent, colorful bird. This story beautifully illustrates the power of unity as the essence of freedom. I used Simurgh in “Devastation” (fig.4) again and it surrounds the woman’s desperate figure to show the hope of a freedom will be the savior ending current misery.

Within the Simurgh's rounded form in "Keeper", I placed the souls of those who've perished in the pursuit of freedom, to signify their eternal presence and remembrance. On the left side of the painting, I used turquoise to indicate purity and sanctity, and patterns from the ornate ceramic walls of Tehran's Golestan Palace as sources of inspiration. In "Keeper," I tried to incorporate myth, history, and the spirit of unity to convey a powerful message of hope, resilience, and the permanent memory of those who've strived for freedom.
"Struggle" (fig. 2) portrays a woman's journey from oppression (depicted by the devil reaching out to her) towards the heavenly realm of peace and freedom. In this painting, I experimented with the architectural style similar to Persian miniatures, blending it with the figures. I used a combination of flat and gradient colors to produce depth into the artwork, effectively creating spaces with the use of flat borders decorated with detailed patterns.

While I paint the female figures in a realistic style, I take a more abstract and illustrative approach to my other characters. The demon and angel within the composition draw inspiration from ancient motifs and paintings of praising from various stories and eras. The angel finds its roots in a tile painting originating from Kermanshah, Iran, while the demon's design is derived from an age-old illustration found in miniature storybooks.

"Pose" (fig. 3) reveals a compelling narrative inspired by the contemporary Persian miniature artist Mahmoud Farshchian. It exhibits the glaring display of male cruelty and dominance within the regime, particularly towards women. To personify this evil authority, I drew upon the character known as the "White Demon" (Dive Sepid) from Ferdowsi’s timeless Persian epic, Shahnameh (977-1010 CE). This character symbolizes violence, wild power, and destruction, effectively emphasizing the theme of oppressive authority.

I extended this narrative thread into "Victory" (fig. 5), maintaining the same artistic style and symbolism. Here, I demonstrate how a woman defeats the white demon, signifying that women will finally dominate in their struggle to reclaim their freedom and rights. Through these interconnected artworks, I aim to emphasize the resilience and eventual victory of women in their fight against oppressive regimes, crafting an affecting visual critique on this timeless struggle.
"Woman-Life-Freedom" (fig. 6) forms the heart of my thesis project, where I've channeled my ideas into a powerful statement. This project has allowed me to explore intricate patterns, objects, characters, and artistic styles rooted in the cultural heritage of my ancestors.

This painting reflects the slogan of the Iranian people's fight against an oppressive regime that began on September 17th, 2022. It's a revolution where people have been united, especially to champion women's freedom. This profound moment has been my inspiration, motivating me to create art that clearly portrays women's struggle to break free from a patriarchal society and an oppressive government.

In this piece, I painted three women bound and controlled like puppets by sinister beings inspired by collective demonic creatures from Persian illustrated storybooks and miniatures. The arrangement of these women forms a central triangle. At its base, one woman lies down, another is partially raised, and the third stands tall. This composition symbolizes the growth of courage and determination in women as they collectively fight for their rights, making a powerful statement about their journey towards freedom.

"Woman" (fig. 7) represents a contemporary reinterpretation of an abstract eglomise painting (glass painting), originating from the Safavid Empire (1501-1736), titled "A Girl." In this piece, I've taken the challenge of modernizing and reconstructing a realistic portrait while incorporating the recurring patterns from the original artwork into the background. These patterns serve as symbols of elegance, art, and culture.

My primary intent in creating this piece was to challenge the societal taboos that I, as a woman and an artist, have confronted. It revolves around the idea that women's bodies and nudity shouldn't be depicted in visual art. In "Woman," I strive to depict a confident and empowered
woman who fearlessly presents her body in a sensual manner, all the while wearing a smile that conveys her disinterest in the world's judgment. The artwork, therefore, becomes a powerful statement of self-assurance and a rejection of societal constraints.

"Freedom" (fig. 8) is inspired by the tragic stories of women who have lost their lives at the hands of their own family members and husbands due to their resistance against the oppressive roles they're expected to fulfill. In some societies, women are treated as custody of their fathers and husbands, and they face severe punishment, even death, if they dare to disobey. This cultural outlook often has its roots in certain religious teachings.

The disturbing source of my inspiration for this artwork came from a shocking image I once faced on social media: a man holding his wife's severed head in the street, having brutally murdered her for disobedience, and he was laughing. In my painting, I illustrated a naked man holding a set of scales. On one side rests the severed head, while the other side remains empty. The leveled balance symbolizes the perception of how little worth women hold in the eyes of a patriarchal society.

The recurring pattern and color in the background serves as a representation of the influence of religion and deeply ingrained beliefs in this tragic narrative.
Conclusion

My thesis work "The Rise of heroes" transformed into a powerful medium for expressing the personal challenges I've faced as a woman. It expanded to encompass the broader issues confronted by Iranian women in our modern world.

Initially, I struggled with the task of incorporating diverse themes, from cultural elements to social and political concerns, as well as the fundamental topic of women's rights, all within a single painting. Although I started this creative journey driven by my passion and determination, I have embraced the opportunity of freedom to create the art I desired for a long time. This endeavor was rooted in extensive research and my own profound experiences.

From a technical perspective, I had primarily worked with acrylics for an extended period before transitioning to oil paint. This shift was not without its challenges, but it significantly influenced my painting style and opened up new possibilities, particularly in making realistic skin and figures.

Another technical challenge I confronted was the delicate integration of modern and traditional elements, alongside abstract and realistic figures within my compositions. Through continued research and a progressive creative process, I found a harmonious balance that allowed me to achieve the best possible results for my project.

"The Rise of heroes" is just the beginning of my journey as an activist and artist. It is my form of protest, my voice, and my way of shedding light on the struggles experienced by women and societies. I am fully committed to continuing to tell these stories and raise awareness in a world where these issues deserve the spotlight.
Figure 1, *Keeper*, Oil on Panel, 24x36 in, 2023
Figure 2, *Struggle*, Oil on Panel, 24x36 in, 2023
Figure 3, *Pose*, Oil on canvas, 24x36 in, 2023
Figure 4, *Devastation*, Oil on Panel, 8x10 in, 2023
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Figure 6, *Woman-Life-Freedom*, Oil on canvas, 16x20 in, 2022
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Figure 8, *Freedom*, Oil on canvas, 16x20 in, 2023
Figure 9, Exhibition view, 2023

Figure 10, Exhibition view, 2023
Figure 11, exhibition view, 2023
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