



## The Rose and The Nightingale: an icon explored

Anna Seaman | May 19, 2014



On Dariush Hosseini's darkened canvas, the heavy curtains of paint in black, dark reds and purples are an attempt to portray "the historical burdens that weigh on much of life's realities". Amid the abstract painting are traces of images of the rose and the nightingale, or *Gol o Bolbol* as it is in Farsi, but their shapes and forms have been obscured by the act of painting.

"It shows the collapse of an empire; the collapse of identity," explains Maneli Keykavoussi, the curator of the exhibition.

The tone is echoed throughout the show, currently on display in Dubai's Jamm gallery in Al Quoz. Titled *The Rose and the Nightingale: A Persian Iconography*, Keykavoussi is exploring contemporary interpretations of the visual tradition of this particular bird and flower, which has been synonymous with Persian identity for many centuries.

"This show is about the demise of the whole concept of the kingdom of the rose and the nightingale – we live in a very different time now."

Almost every contemporary Iranian artist worth his salt has explored the symbols of the rose and the nightingale and as such, Keykavoussi could have filled the room three times over with art on the subject.

But she has chosen carefully and hence, the gallery is full of wonderful discoveries like the work of Hosseini's, which is being shown for the first time outside of Iran.

Another a personal favourite that I discovered during my tour was the work of Yashar Samimi Mofakham. His silkscreen prints also depict the bird, but rather than be at one with the rose and part of the symbolic story, they are stray and

floating across the image alighting on words or part of words that the artist has lifted from Persian poetry.

“This work talks about how we have lost our spiritual memory and although it is within you it is bothering you because you have not delved into it or embraced it,” says Keykavoussi “It represents the patchwork culture that we are living in now as Iranians.”

Mokfakham’s wife Tarlan Rafiee is also part of the show with *Love Letters*, an interesting subversion of the traditional gender roles also associated with the rose (female) and the nightingale (male). I was also drawn to a embroidery on canvas work by Rozita Sharafjahan – who depicts a child martyr with a rose stitched atop his face.

Throughout the show are stories and narratives entwined within the many pieces of art that vary incredibly in their medium and forms.

One worth mentioning is Farshid Mesghali, someone who Keykavoussi refers to as a “great artist who has been missed”.

Mesghali is an illustrator and graphic designer who won the Hans Christian Andersen prize in 1974 for a children’s book he illustrated called *The Little Black Fish*. His work portrays a world of animals and characters, that bring to life illustrations. “I think it is so sublime to work with glitter, gold, red and pink – everything that makes something super kitsch and yet for the work to remain so lyrical,” says Keykavoussi. “The pieces are from a child’s dream of heaven

Finally, the late Farideh Lashai who was Keykavoussi’s mother, has two works in the show. She was one of the most prominent female Iranian artists and her work is in the permanent collections of many top institutions. Even she, who was a leading abstract and multimedia artist, explored the concept of the rose and the nightingale because as an Iranian artist, it seems you cannot escape it.

Far from the cliched interpretation of a myth, Keykavoussi’s show gives a window into one of the oldest symbols of Persian society as well as many of the current narratives running throughout modern-day Iran.

You don’t have long left so you must make time to go and see it if you can.

\* Titled *The Rose and the Nightingale: A Persian Iconography* runs until May 29 at Jamm. For more info visit the gallery website [here](#)

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