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‘Thirty Years’: A war cry for sanity

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An Iranian couple reflect on the pointlessness of violence and the voicelessness of women for their first solo show in Dubai

By Jyoti Kalsi Special to Weekend Review
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Image Credit: Supplied

Mofakham uses a lone cypress tree as a symbol of strength and hope

Iranian artists Yashar Samimi Mofakham and Tarlan Rafiee are in their mid-thirties. The couple belongs to a generation of Iranians that has endured war, revolution and various social movements in their country. In their first solo show in Dubai, “Thirty Years”, the two artists recall their own experiences of growing up in a turbulent, restrictive and conflicted society, and express their dreams for the future. Although their work refers to Iranian history and features traditional Iranian symbols, it speaks about the violence, patriarchal mindset and sociopolitical turmoil in the entire region.

“My generation has seen the horrors of war, suppression and suffocation, protests and underground movements,” Mofakham says. “Sadly, we have personal experience of things that most young people only see or read about in movies and books; but we have been deprived of simple experiences like listening to music, watching performances by women, feeling a hug or a kiss and even reading a book of our choice. The show’s title ‘Thirty Years’ refers to the struggles of our generation. But it also has a deeper meaning in Iranian culture, because the great poet Firdausi worked hard for 30 years to write the epic ‘Shahnameh’, but his efforts were not appreciated by the ruler at that time. This show is not just about Iran or the recent past. It is about the turmoil and the meaningless wars going on in this region for centuries. It is about looking at the past to understand what is happening around us today.”

Mofakham references the myths and harsh realities of his youth to question war propaganda and the futile deaths of young soldiers in an emotionally charged installation featuring soup bowls and tulips. “The bowls allude to the Iranian ritual of families offering a traditional Persian soup to the community for the safe return of loved ones who are setting out on a journey.

And our folklore says that when a young man gives his life for his country, a tulip grows from the blood of the martyr. In our childhood we saw many scenes of soup being distributed for the safe return of a young soldier leaving for war in one house; and in another house, the body of a martyr decorated with artificial tulips being carried away. These flowers are rare in Iran, so we only saw them on the shrouds and in the war propaganda posters. And we wondered how such a beautiful flower could bloom from the ugliness of war. This work is a reminder that in our region young lives continue to be lost in meaningless wars and the tulips keep growing,” he says.

Another popular Iranian motif seen in Mofakham’s work is the cypress tree. “In Persian epics and myths this strong, evergreen tree represents brave, young men; and the death of a young man is compared to the falling of a cypress tree,” he says. A lone cypress tree standing upright appears as a symbol of strength and hope in a beautiful painting by the artist. In one corner of the stark, black-and-white triptych are written the poignant opening words of the tragic tale of Rustom and Sohrab from the ‘Shahnameh’ — ‘There is a story full of tears’. “Tragic events are unfolding all around the region, and many cypress trees continue to fall. But I want to convey my belief that the youth of this region will stand strong and overcome the adversities,” the artist says.

While her husband has addressed the violence and propaganda experienced by his generation, Rafiee talks about the equally brutal war against women and the patriarchal culture that suppresses their voice and confines them to their homes.

She registers her protest by celebrating female icons from the region. Her installation, “Holy Home”, features

handmade and hand-painted porcelain plates decorated with big, bright red roses and portraits of female pop icons from the region such as Googoosh, Fairouz, Umm Khlout and Ghamar-ol Molook Vaziri, the first Iranian woman to perform her music in public without a veil.

“I am 34 years old, and I have never seen a woman perform live in Iran. The singers and actresses I have painted on these plates are icons from the past. But we have kept them alive by defying the laws and clandestinely watching recordings of their performances. This is a silent war being fought by the people around the country,” Rafiee says. “Like porcelain, women are fragile and beautiful. But they are also strong. They should be able to come out of the home and bloom,” she adds.

In another series, pictures of these icons are collaged on to silk screen prints of places the artist loves. The shapes of these artworks are inspired by Persian carpets and miniatures, and they are framed with mirror mosaics. Once again flowers in full bloom signify beauty, hope and happiness in the compositions.

“This combination of the flowers and my favourite architecture and women performers from the region depicts my idea of happiness. I have included cypress trees in the compositions as a symbol of the strength and fighting spirit of both men and women, because we can build a better society only if we work together. And I used mirrors in the frames so that viewers can see themselves as a part of these happy places,” Rafiee says.

Jyoti Kalsi is an arts enthusiast based in Dubai.

“Thirty Years” will run at JAMM Art gallery, Al Quoz, until October 30.