

Taravat Talepasand: In Her Own Image



TEXT / GABRIELLE SELZ

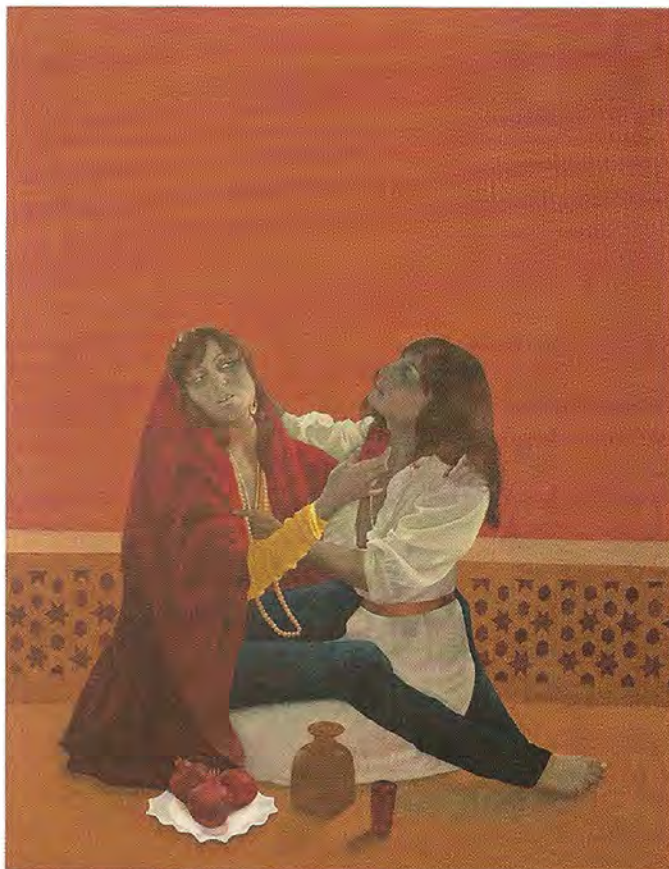
A man struggles across a luminous golden desert, bearing his donkey and his wife on his shoulders. Taravat Talepasand's painting *The Story of Shirin and Farhad*, 2005, depicts this ancient love story. However, while she borrows from the tradition of Persian miniatures, these figures differ: the woman, the husband, and the donkey all have the same face. Like God once created men, Talepasand has cast each of her creatures in her own image.

What does it mean to paint oneself into history? What knowledge is gained by exploring alternate versions of one's identity? How does the referencing of many cultures come into play? Talepasand was born in Portland, Oregon, to Iranian parents. In her work, she explores gender, identity, sexuality, desire, and the social dictates on women while simultaneously confronting the taboos of both Iranian culture and contemporary American society. Likewise, she enlists the self-portrait—as genre and tradition—to play multiple roles, to be maker and subject simultaneously.

In paintings such as *The Story of Shirin and Farhad*, *Amorous Couple*, 2007, or *The Great Occultation*, 2005, Talepasand presents multiple self-portraits in highly charged, and at times erotic, tableaux. She reinterprets stories that have excluded women or relegated them to the sidelines by inserting herself into them in much the same way as an actor dons a costume in order to portray a particular role. In this, Talepasand's work asks the viewer, quite literally, to transform history into herstory.

The artist admits that, by inserting herself into her paintings' narrative, she hopes to gain insight into the past and to develop a dialogue with her heritage. In *The Order of The Sun and Lion*, 2007, she painted herself as a lioness in a white bridal gown kneeling in front of the image of the male Sun. This work examines the erasure of women from public representation in modern Islam, most importantly the disappearance of the female form from the Iranian flag. "When women were removed from the public eye, femaleness was taken out of the culture," Talepasand explains.¹ Thus her work suggests a politics much greater than personal experience.

She borrows from multiple, diverse image sources—flags, pinup posters, photographs, cartoons, illuminated manuscripts, and so on. This repertory mirrors her double-life and the complex balancing act it entails. *The Liberal*



INSIDE FRONT COVER: Taravat Talepasand, *Suicide Is Painless II*, 2008, graphite on watercolor paper, 20 x 27 inches / OPPOSITE, LEFT TO RIGHT: *The Story of Shirin and Farhad*, 2005, egg tempera on gold leaf, 23 x 16 inches; *The Great Occultation*, 2005, egg tempera and gold leaf on panel, 23 x 16 inches / ABOVE, TOP TO BOTTOM: *The Liberal Iranian*, 2007, egg tempera on panel, 15 x 12 inches; *Amorous Couple*, 2007, egg tempera and gold leaf on panel, 31 x 24 inches [all images courtesy of the artist and Marx & Zavattero, San Francisco]



Iranian, 2007, marked a pivotal moment for Talepasand. She produced it right after she returned from Iran. With this work, she moved away from historical tales. Here, in an examination of herself—unconcealed by costume, role or character—she sits in the middle of an otherwise empty canvas. Legs spread, she wears nothing but red underpants and red pumps. A bright red chador draped around her shoulders flows down her legs, pooling like blood and merging with her red shoes. Red is the color of sexual liberation, the color of desire, power, blood, and danger. Talepasand's mother had cautioned her about wearing red in Iran, afraid that she would draw too much attention to herself—though interestingly, many Iranian women wear red chadors. This is the difference that Talepasand wanted to confront in her painting: the difference between the authorized expression of female individuality and sexuality, and what women actually allow themselves to do. In the end though, she admits she felt slightly ashamed, worried about how this very frontal image would reflect on women within her "other" culture. This is apparent in the perplexed and sorrowful gaze of the isolated figure, alone in the middle of the canvas.

Naked or clad, playful provocateur, male lover, wife beater, donkey, victim or conqueror, Talepasand is always revealing herself. In *Native Influences*, 2008, she cast a *Playboy* centerfold in the national colors of the U.S. and Iran. A naked woman—Talepasand—in a seductive pose reminiscent of 1940s pinup posters is painted in the red and white stripes of the American and Iranian flags with the green bands representing the color of Islam. A chador rises above her head, like smoke from a candle, casting its shadow on her. Such clever combinations of icons and images are hallmarks of Talepasand's work.

In *Cry Uncle*, 2008, two men hold a girl—perhaps the daughter of history—between their arms. One sports Uncle Sam's traditional garb; the other is a lion-headed figure. The lion is of course a symbol of courage associated with ancient Persia, Iran, and Britain. The girl, both herself and a synthesis of classical, pale-skinned European women, is clutched in the men's embrace, attempting to pull her two worlds together. Here, as in *Native Influences*, the figure of a woman unites these opposite cultures.

Death to Bitches!, 2008, the last work in this series, is the most disturbing and challenging. It was inspired by a Russian prisoner who tattooed an image of his crime on his arm: the beheading of two of his neighbors, women of different nationalities. Here, a man with a double-edged sword has just committed a double beheading. In one hand he holds his upraised weapon, in the other two women's bleeding heads: the fair-haired female from *Cry Uncle*, and the dark-haired siren from *Native Influences*. Their naked bodies bear multiple stripes, like the figure in *Native Influences*. Here, however, the picture is in black



and white, canceling the viewer's reliance on color to distinguish between the two cultures—except for the red blood.

Many Middle-Eastern artists focus on the sphere that women are allowed to occupy in cultures such as Iran—how they can be seen, depicted, and heard. In their work, artists such as Talepasand, Shirin Neshat, Ghada Amer, Shadi Ghadirian, and Mona Hatoum all explore the politics of gender and sexuality and the restrictions placed on women. It is striking—but perhaps not unexpected—that these artists have resorted to a range of subversive approaches to comment on repression. In her installations, Palestinian artist Hatoum transforms everyday objects into surrealistic, and at times threatening, sculptures that expose violence and danger. In Neshat's photographs and films, women are often on the verge, silent yet non-conformist. In her sewn line drawings, Amer enlists pornographic representations of women as icons of desire. Ghadirian, who lives and works in

Tehran, must comply with the nation's dictates on the depiction of women. In her compelling and humorous portrait series, *Like Everyday*, 2000-2001, each woman, completely draped in fabric, expresses her individuality by holding an everyday object—a teacup, broom, iron or skillet—in front of her face like a mask.

Similarly, Talepasand subverts iconic objects such as the martyr's scarf, the chador, the skull, and the beanie cap worn by American gang members. In a series of graphite works on paper, which includes *Suicide is Painless*, 2008, and *Skeletara*, 2008, she explores the use of the skull as a mask. In these images, only the eyes—her eyes—are visible. Talepasand's depiction of the skull as a covering turns the notion of concealment—and more specifically its imposition on women—on its head. Usually hidden underneath flesh, the skull is here being revealed while, as a mask, it hides.

Taravat Talepasand's works are admirably audacious and irreverent. Her systematic

reliance on her own image transforms her art into a powerful vehicle to address the erasure of women from the cultural language of her past. In this, Talepasand's self-portraits venture beyond individuality to write a broader, communal story. Essentially, when we get down to our skeletons—our bones—we are all pretty indistinguishable.

NOTE

1. Author's interview with the artist, November 23, 2008.

Gabrielle Selz is a writer and memoirist. She writes on art, memory, and sustainability and is a contributor to *Newsday*. Her essays have appeared in *The New York Times*, *MORE*, *The East Hampton Star* and *The Sag Harbor Express*.

OPPOSITE: TOP TO BOTTOM: *Native Influences*, 2008, egg tempera on linen, 22 x 17 inches; *Native Americans Beware of Native Influences*, 2008, egg tempera and gold leaf on panel, 16.75 x 11.5 inches / ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: *Death to Bitches!*, 2008, graphite and watercolor on paper, 40 x 30 inches; *Skeletara*, 2008, graphite on watercolor paper, 20 x 27 inches