



MOJE SABZ, 2011, TAXIDERMIC, FIBERGLASS, JESMONITE BLOCK, CAR PAINT,
(C) SOHEILA SOKHANVARI, COURTESY OF SAATCHI GALLERY, LONDON

Soheila Sokhanvari

A Monographic Interview

Just a few steps from Sloane Square, London's leading contemporary art museum Saatchi Gallery is celebrating its 30th anniversary with *Champagne Life*, an exhibition that brings together the works of 14 women artists from four corners of the world and adopts a sarcastic attitude as demonstrated by its title and content. On display until March 9th, the exhibition includes striking examples of today's art and underlines the fact that, contrary to common belief, women artists do not pursue a luxurious lifestyle, sipping champagne night and day but instead withdraw into their shells, their studio, and work alone for hours on end. One of the most visited, most photographed halls of the exhibition that extends throughout three floors of the Saatchi Gallery is Gallery 3. Why? The answer is hidden in Hande Eagle's interview with multidisciplinary artist Soheila Sokhanvari, born in Iran in 1969.

Words Hande Eagle

Evolution through revolution

Soheila Sokhanvari was just 10 years old when the Iranian Revolution in 1979 - a popular movement leading to the foundation of a sharia republic under the government of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, based on Islamic law, and Shi'a sect principles, following a constitutional monarchy under the leadership of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi - shook Iran like an earthquake of 9.5 magnitude. Today, while the subsequent effects of the Iranian Revolution brought to the silver screen via films like *Persepolis* (2007), *Liberation* (2009), and *Argo* (2012), are still felt in the Middle East, Sokhanvari produces works that balance humor and politics between the two pans of the scale.

Her family sent Soheila Sokhanvari to England to

study, and "save herself" at the age of 15. Due to the fact that her family believed art was a talent rather than a career, Sokhanvari studied Biochemistry and then worked as research assistant at Cambridge University. When I make mention of her life before she started studying art part-time in 2001 at the Anglia Ruskin University in Cambridge, she says: "I was a biochemist. I was researching adult leukemia. I always felt I was in the wrong field. I felt that I always wanted to be an artist. My father was a designer. When they sent me to England, they paid for my education. They felt that if they were going to pay for my education then I had to do a degree where I was guaranteed a job afterwards. I cannot say that biochemistry was a personal choice. I was also under the pressure of my

Iranian identity; my family was of the mentality that an academician would have more opportunities in life. I think this mentality is still valid in the East. I studied art when I could make the decision and had the money. It takes a lot of guts to go and do art. Particularly when you have a job that brings you a regular income."

On the Teeterboard: The state vs. the people

Upon completing her postgraduate diploma at the Chelsea Art and Design School in 2006, Sokhanvari pursued an MA in Fine Arts at Goldsmiths College from 2009 to 2011. Her work, *Moje Sabz* (Green Movement; 2011) currently on display at the *Champagne Life* exhibition was her graduation piece at Goldsmiths College. Charles Saatchi, a collector who

keeps his finger on the pulse of the contemporary art market, owner of Saatchi Gallery, and founding partner of Saatchi & Saatchi, purchased *Moje Sabz* from Soheila Sokhanvari (who made the work at her home studio, barely three meters away from her kitchen sink) and added it to his invaluable collection. I had seen the work composed of a stuffed antique horse, standing on top of a mass made of 'jesmonite' (a composite material made of resin), and painted with automobile paint in *sabz*, a peculiar tone of green also used in the decoration of East Indian pottery prior to our interview during my visit to the exhibition and observed how it was attracting a great deal of attention from aficionados of contemporary art. When I asked her about the thought behind her work the next day, Sokhanvari took a deep breath and began to tell me the story of the mysterious horse: "The horse was a found object. It was already taxidermied 25 years ago. Then in 2010, and 2011, when I was doing my MA at Goldsmiths, there was an awful lot of events like the Arab Spring happening. There was quite a lot of uprising. My work is very much centered on the concept of trauma, and collective trauma told through the story of the individual. I was thinking of mulling the idea and *Moje Sabz* (literally translated as "Green Movement" – the Iranian Uprising of 2009 against the Ahmadinejad government). I was interested in creating an object that stood as an abstraction / a metaphor for something where I didn't take a stance. At the time, I was reading Slavoj Žižek's *Violence* (2008). In his book, Žižek compares revolution to a carnival. In a carnival, law of the land is suspended for one day. In a carnival you have the stress of a nation; the build-up of pressure for a nation is released during a carnival. He was underlining the fact that revolutions, just like carnivals, provided a collective relief through demonstration.

He also says that in a carnival you also have someone who becomes a king of fools for a day. Very much like the revolution, that person who leads the revolution could end up being a king of fools if the revolution is not successful. So I was thinking about the concept of carnival and the concept of revolution. My object, this stuffed horse, has to kind of embody something that could come out of a carnival. The horse has a massive symbolism in art history. It comes from either cave paintings, the Trojan horse, a horse that is often painted with a king, a general or leader sitting on it. In that sense, the horse represents the power of the state, the power of the leader. On the other hand, when horses appear in paintings like those of John Constable, where they are pulling a cart or doing manual work, the horse can represent also the power of people. It symbolizes freedom and power. The blue part is something I sculpted and painted by hand in my studio. To some people it represents a horse that is stuck in a blue object and others see it as a horse that is bouncing on a space hopper. That again has two meanings. It can either be a free animal that is stuck or a free animal that is bouncing instead of galloping. Therefore, I don't ever pin it down by directly explaining it. I feel that the trauma I'm talking about comes from the people towards the state and from the state towards the people. I think it's a two-way trauma."

How to preserve it: Taxidermy or memory?

"Can we just go back to how you found the horse?"

People don't usually 'find' antique taxidermied horses..." I say, chuckling. She laughs in return and replies: "I live in Cambridge, it's very rural here. I found the horse being advertised online. The lady who owned the horse was living in the countryside. I wrote to her, and told her I would like to buy her horse. I was interviewed by her because she had several buyers. The horse belonged to the owner as a pet and they were brought up together. When the horse passed away she was so loved as a pet that the family paid for the horse to be taxidermied. I think, later on, they decided they did not want to pass it on. It wasn't a horse that was killed for my art."

"You can't escape war"

Born in Shiraz, Iran's culture capital situated in the south, Soheila Sokhanvari's horse reminds me of the physical characteristics of the Caspian horse, still bred in the north of the country. I recall the Palmyra offensive that took place in May 2015. At the time I was following the events through newspaper articles about the Syrian Army's and local archeology enthusiasts' efforts to protect the historical monuments and structures in the ancient city of Palmyra against the terrorist attacks of ISIS. I remember that among the rescued works, there was a relief sculpture of a figure riding a horse. I ask Sokhanvari "In which ways do you think 'terrorism' as defined by politicians across the world changed the ways in which we look at art?" Sokhanvari replies: "I think today many works and exhibitions are created with this question in our heads. The last Venice Biennale had quite a lot of political art in it. There are moments that art, these days, must have a critical stance as well as a political position. I think that has become more extreme since the 1980s. It seems to me as if more and more art takes on a stance. I wouldn't say that terrorism has changed it. I think violence has. Throughout art history, we witness the violence that men exercise on men, and his surroundings; in the works of artists such as Goya and Velázquez we observe references to the state of men. You can't escape war."

"How about recent events like ISIS destroying the ancient city of Palmyra?" I ask to deepen our conversation. "That, to me, says so much about the importance of art and culture in our life. When a civilization is wiped away the only thing that remains is the art. When that happens, the one thing that everyone is concerned about is the loss. We mourn over that culture, that civilization. For me, that flagged up how important art is in our life and how people are not aware because it's always been there. They are not so precious about it until they actually lose it. As an artist, when you make art you have to think about the longevity of it. I find such situations tragic" adds Sokhanvari.

Intellectual migration

As the citizens of two geographically and culturally close countries who live abroad, I want to draw the interview to a more sincere and mutual subject. "The current situation in Turkey is quite complicated. Many artists are torn between staying in the country and leaving. The artists who choose to stay are hopeful of the change they may be able to bring about and those who want to leave believe they couldn't make a change even if they stayed. Do you ever feel that if you stayed in Iran you could have made a change?"

Sokhanvari is surprised; she hesitates, and then gathers her thoughts: "This is a really good question actually. Probably the best anyone has ever asked me. If I stayed in Iran would I have been an artist? That, I don't know because I became an artist here. It was here that I was able to make that decision. My husband is English and he was supportive of me. If I stayed in Iran and I married an Iranian man and he told me 'You are not going to do art' that would have led to a divorce. I haven't got that life so I can't speculate how it would be. I understand what you are saying about artists wanting to stay in Turkey. You have to make work, but at the same time you have to exist and you have to be safe. It's really tricky to answer. If I was in Iran and I had the opportunity to become an artist I would start and I would make art, yes."

Being an Eastern woman in Europe

I tell her that I think Saatchi Gallery celebrating its 30th anniversary with an exhibition consisting of the works of 14 women artists is a tribute to women from different occupations across the world. Soheila Sokhanvari also shares her views on the exhibition: "People ask me 'why is it important to be part of an exhibition consisting solely of the works of women artists?'. The exhibition, does not just present a selection of works by women artists; it also celebrates the bringing together of work that strays away from gender. None of the women artists in the exhibition produce art from a feminist perspective.

That is not to say feminist works couldn't be exhibited. I'll give you example; in an exhibition where I had this work (*Moje Sabz*) exhibited, one of the visitors congratulated my husband for his work. When my husband replied that it was not his but mine, they asked me "Did you have this made?" They thought as a woman artist, I could not have produced a work of this scale myself, or perhaps they just didn't realize that my name is a female name in the East, and thought it was made by a man. I have been judged as an Iranian woman all my life. That is exactly why the exhibition is very significant, because it asserts the fact that women can ambitiously and competently produce great works that exceed expectations."

The artistic relationship between Iran and Turkey

With sanctions against Iran lifted in January 2016 the country will go through a substantial economic growth in the following years which will undoubtedly have a parallel effect on Iran's art market. As our interview draws to a close, Sokhanvari tells me she will be participating in the 2016 Culture of Peace Biennale of Tehran, which will be sponsored by UNESCO for the second time in May. When I ask her whether she will be participating in the 2017 Istanbul Biennial, she informs me that the Culture of Peace Biennale will be visiting Istanbul from June to August. A week after my interview with Soheila Sokhanvari, during a phone conversation with Majid Abbasi-Farahani, the Director of the Culture of Peace Biennale, I found out that the Biennale management had an agreement with an Istanbul-based museum (I'd rather not say which one) to host it but that the museum dropped it at short-notice. I can only assume that we will witness many more unexpected developments, such as *Champagne Life*, on the axis of all that we think we know. X