

## The Art of Storytelling in Elham Moaidnia's Paintings.

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*Through the stories we tell each other, we can set back the frontier of ignorance and darkness. We can strike a blow against prejudice. We can help tame the savagery within the human breast and make our world a gentler, more compassionate world.*

- Raouf Mama, 1999.

*Eventually someone will come, someone who is like no one – someone who pulls out their knife solely for cutting bread and dividing it among everyone.*

- Elham Moaidnia, 2016.

When I was a little girl, my brother and I would often stay the night at our grandparents' house, where we looked forward most to bedtime when my grandfather would sit at the end of our bed and tell us a story. Through his words, we travelled into worlds of ghost ships and magic pencils, mermaids and flying pigs, and we fell asleep dreaming of these enchanting places and scenes that he had created for us. I barely remember the words from my grandfather's imagined tales, his stories possessing a quality more visual than verbal, the memory of which have a different timbre to those that I read from books as a child. When I saw Elham Moaidnia's paintings, I recognised in them a similar quality – not quite real, not quite graspable, but patently magical.

At first, I couldn't explain the strong connection I felt with her work. Apart from being drawn to the indulgent colours, the intricate use of line, and the dramatic scenes in her paintings, I knew nothing of the subject matter or the historical context whence they came. I viewed the paintings through a veil of naivety, ignorant of their context and concept, and nevertheless, I found them to be completely enthralling. As I listened to Moaidnia speak about her work and her process, I realised the nature of my connection with them: Each one is a story, and like my grandfather, Moaidnia is a storyteller.

My fascination with the art of storytelling was rekindled a few years ago by an orator from Benin, Dr. Raouf Mama, who is renowned for his performances in storytelling that incorporate poetry, song, music and dance. He insists on the importance of storytelling in an increasingly conflicted world, writing,

*Whenever I tell a story from my country, my goal is to share some of my culture with my audience, to point out to them some of the moral and ethical values by which my people have lived through the centuries and how they have coped with change. Above all, I try to make them see the fundamental human similarities that lie beyond differences of culture, race, colour religion, and political creed.<sup>1</sup>*

Mama's words touch the quick of my own life. Coming from Zimbabwe, a country wracked with political turmoil, the conception of what it is like to live there is very different to the reality. This I think is something about which Moaidnia, also being from a country with a troubled history, feels very strongly. Her paintings are pervaded with the desire to show the world how Iranian people really are, how they really live, and not how they are often portrayed to be.

My own work as an artist is very different to Moaidnia's but it is similarly anchored by an interest in the different ways humans tell their stories, and how stories can be written not only in words, but through mark-making, through image, and through layers of time creating historical palimpsests. Zimbabwe is steeped in oral traditions of storytelling, in which folklores and myths, anecdotes and messages of wisdom are passed down from older generations to younger. In talking to Moaidnia, I found this to be a tradition present also in Iranian culture, which becomes apparent in her paintings the more you look at them.

So it is here, through the medium of Story, that Moaidnia and I find common ground. It is a medium through which two people from completely different backgrounds – hers, Iran, and mine, Zimbabwe – can communicate beyond the

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<sup>1</sup> R. Mama, 'To Make Our World a Gentler, More Compassionate World', in *Traditional Story Telling Today, an International Sourcebook*, M.R. Macdonalds (ed), Routledge, London & New York, 1999, pp. 11.

boundaries of culture and history. It is through the stories she paints that I have come to know her and about her life as an Iranian.

Moaidnia was born in Isfahan, a city celebrated for its long history of art, culture, and tradition, so much so that it has been nicknamed "Half of the World."<sup>2</sup> This is the place from which stems her richly layered tales. She leads you through the painted doors into her country and her life, bearing witness to a tapestry of traditional Iranian folklore, woven into her experience of, and emotional response to the present. Rather than depicting exactly what she sees, what she calls a "tragic reality," she shows us her history, her impressions, her memories, her hopes, her dreams. Within her process of making and discovery the images materialise with spontaneity and surprise, often not only for her viewers, but for herself as well.

The anecdotal elements, flattened picture plane, calligraphic marks and rich colours that saturate her works evince her connection with the tradition of Persian Miniature painting that developed between circa 1300 until the seventeenth century.<sup>3</sup> This genre of painting originally developed as a means of illustrating manuscripts, producing highly detailed works of art that, because of their minute size, can only be looked at by one person at a time, creating an intimate and contemplative experience.<sup>4</sup> In her essay, "The Hidden Eye: An Approach to Persian Painting," Oleg Grabar maintains that these paintings should be treated as if they are "a secret, a hidden eye" leading the viewer to a greater understanding of the poetry or prose that they illustrate.<sup>5</sup>

This analogy marks two points of interest in connection with Moaidnia's work: Firstly, there is a historical link between word and image in Iran that dates back to 522 BCE with one of the oldest texts in the world, the Behistun Inscription.<sup>6</sup> The text, written in Old Persian, Elamite and Babylonian, is an account of Darius I, the Great's ascension to the throne. It is engraved into a limestone cliff on Mount Behistun, and accompanied by carved images illustrating the story.<sup>7</sup> This ancient culture of illustration by which a text is accompanied with an image is reminiscent of the inception of Persian Miniatures, the paintings appearing as complimentary aspects of a text. A significant point is that the images manifest *after* the work of prose or poetry is written, whereas Moaidnia's artistic process resists this chronology. Although her work is rooted in a tradition that dates back thousands of years, she turns it upon its axis by creating the images first, the stories within them transpiring afterwards, and not in a way that you would expect. There is no written explanation behind each work – it is up to the viewer to create this in their own mind, bringing to the paintings their own stories and experiences. She thus asserts the importance of an audience in order for the work to be complete, in the same way a storyteller must have someone to listen to them. In this way, her paintings become a fluid, ever changing narrative, rather than an image frozen in time. Furthermore, because she does not provide a text to "illustrate" her works, she determines the profound ability of a painting to tell a story in its own rite.

The second point of interest is the scale she uses. A doorway is made with dimensions that allow an average human body to fit through it easily. Most of Moaidnia's paintings are this size, forging a direct analogy between the works and our physical presence in front of them. It is a link that makes them behave very differently to the miniature paintings that you have to examine closely, your body bent into a position of intense, private focus over the time that you choose to look at them. In contrast, Moaidnia's works actively assert their presence in the world of people. Yet, despite their size and their public semblance, the details within them tell stories of intimacy, making the viewer feel privy to a secret. She reveals to us fragments of her world: a temporary mistress, the grim transformation of a chicken into a rooster, a New Years feast (called "Norooz" meaning New Day), the ceremonial naming of a new-born child, the public privacy of a master bedroom, the rituals of a bathhouse, and the continuous rotation of life's omnipotent wheel.

Each of these fragments indeed acts as a "hidden eye," the paintings emerging as manifestations of gestalt; The colourful fissures become part of a larger visual vocabulary with one anecdote laid next to or upon another, a physical process that accumulates in the same way as the development of a character, the construction of a narrative,

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<sup>2</sup> S. M. A. Jamalzadeh & W. Heston, *Isfahan is Half the World: Memories of a Persian Boyhood*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1983, pp. 11.

<sup>3</sup> O. Grabar, 'The Hidden Eye: An Approach to Persian Painting', in *Foundation for Iranian Studies*, March 2003, viewed on 1 February 2016, <http://fis-iran.org/en/programs/noruzlectures/persian-painting>

<sup>4</sup> C.P. Gonzalez, *A comparative visual analysis of nineteenth-century Iranian portrait photography and Persian painting*. Diss. Department of Art History, Faculty of Humanities, Leiden University, 2010, pp.10.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> D.L. Fink, *The Battle of Marathon in Scholarship: Research, Theories and Controversies since 1850*, MacFarland and Company Inc., North Carolina, 2014. pp. 73-74.

<sup>7</sup> A. Robinson, *The Story of Writing: Alphabets, Hieroglyphs and Pictograms*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1995, pp. 76-81.

the telling of a story. Examine each of these details, and you find yourself looking through a keyhole into another world.

Moaidnia's paintings not only tell of her own experience, but of other histories as well. An integral part of her work in this exhibition is the various objects on which she chooses to paint: the doors, the fabric, the wheel and the screen are all surfaces that reflect a previous story, and by engaging with them, Moaidnia posits herself as an interlocutor. The marks she makes become strands in the fabric of a larger conversation that began long before she decided to take brush to surface. This process of painting requires a certain empathy towards the lives of these objects because one has to consider their past, their tactility, their age and their history in order to engage with them. The artist has to be sensitive to the act of propelling something with a metaphysical presence into the world of imagination. She cannot dictate the direction the paintings move, and must abandon herself to the dialogue of time. This can be a very difficult approach to take, requiring open-mindedness and a willingness to yield. It is also a very rewarding process, presenting possibilities in places you might never otherwise find them.

I remember sitting with Moaidnia as she began painting the first of the five doors that she had been given by Sharon Harvey, who had reclaimed them from a restoration project in the historic town of Ras Al Khaimah.<sup>8</sup> Moaidnia explained to me that through her use of the doors as surfaces on which to paint, she was asserting a point of connection between where she was born and brought up, and where she has made her home in the U.A.E, the doors merging the stories of her past with those of her present. This is an apt correlation, given the symbolic import of doors as points of connection that has been evident since early human history.<sup>9</sup>

In a remarkable essay by Marianne Hem Eriksen, she describes doors and thresholds as being "near-universal expressions of social transformation, boundaries, and liminality,"<sup>10</sup> and the act of passing through a doorway as being "an embodied, everyday experience prompting numerous social and metaphorical implications."<sup>11</sup> Doorways are a part of almost every culture in the world and yet, while taking up space, they are not spaces in and of themselves. Rather, they act as a border between public and private, between outside and inside a place of habitation, and at the same time, they act as a passage, allowing you to move between one space and another. Doors define how a doorway is apprehended: when they are open, they allow free movement. They extend a welcome to those outside to come in, allowing free access and egress. When they are closed, they become impenetrable frontiers.

The metaphor of the doorway has an exceptional significance within the socio-political context surrounding Moaidnia's exhibition. The doors of Iran have been opened, after a long period of their closure, hence the show's title, "Welcome to the Party. The Doors are Now Open." The underlying message is a poignant one: Visit Iran. Discover her people. Create your own story. Iranian viewers will recognise the colloquialisms that pervade the show, and for foreigners, Moaidnia divulges the truths and realities of where she is from by recounting her own lived experience.

Last year a London-based writer, Ann Morgan, took it upon herself to read a book from every country in the world, and a crucial observation she made from this experience was that all of the countries about which she knew nothing came to life not from the "factual" research she did, but through the stories she read about them.<sup>12</sup> Her project showed the extent to which it is through stories that we are able to discover the richness of the world's cultures, that we can celebrate our common humanity by learning about our differences. It is a project that doesn't need to be restricted to books, but can extend its reach to all art forms, including painting, as exemplified by this exhibition.

Being bound to time and space through surface and paint, Moaidnia's paintings are ontologically different to my grandfather's bedtime stories, which were ephemeral and are now a memory. Nevertheless, they possess the same ability to convey the boundlessness and necessity of the human imagination. Whether they are expressed through dance, music, written text, verbal testimony, visual impressions or painted marks, stories have the ability to spark empathy and understanding. They allow us to recognise the possibilities of living in a "gentler, more compassionate world," and to see the virtues of using a knife for the sole reason of dividing bread to share with others.

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<sup>8</sup> S. Harvey & E. Moaidnia, interview with the artist and director of Showcase Gallery, 16<sup>th</sup> November 2015.

<sup>9</sup> M.H. Eriksen, 'Doors to the dead. The power of doorways and thresholds in Viking Age Scandinavia'. *Archaeological Dialogues*, vol. 20, 2, December 2013, pp. 187-214.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 187.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 189.

<sup>12</sup> A. Morgan, 'Broadening the Mind: Empathy and Politics in Literature', in *Reading the World: Confessions of a Literary Explorer*, Harvill Secker, London, 2015, pp. 170-191.

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