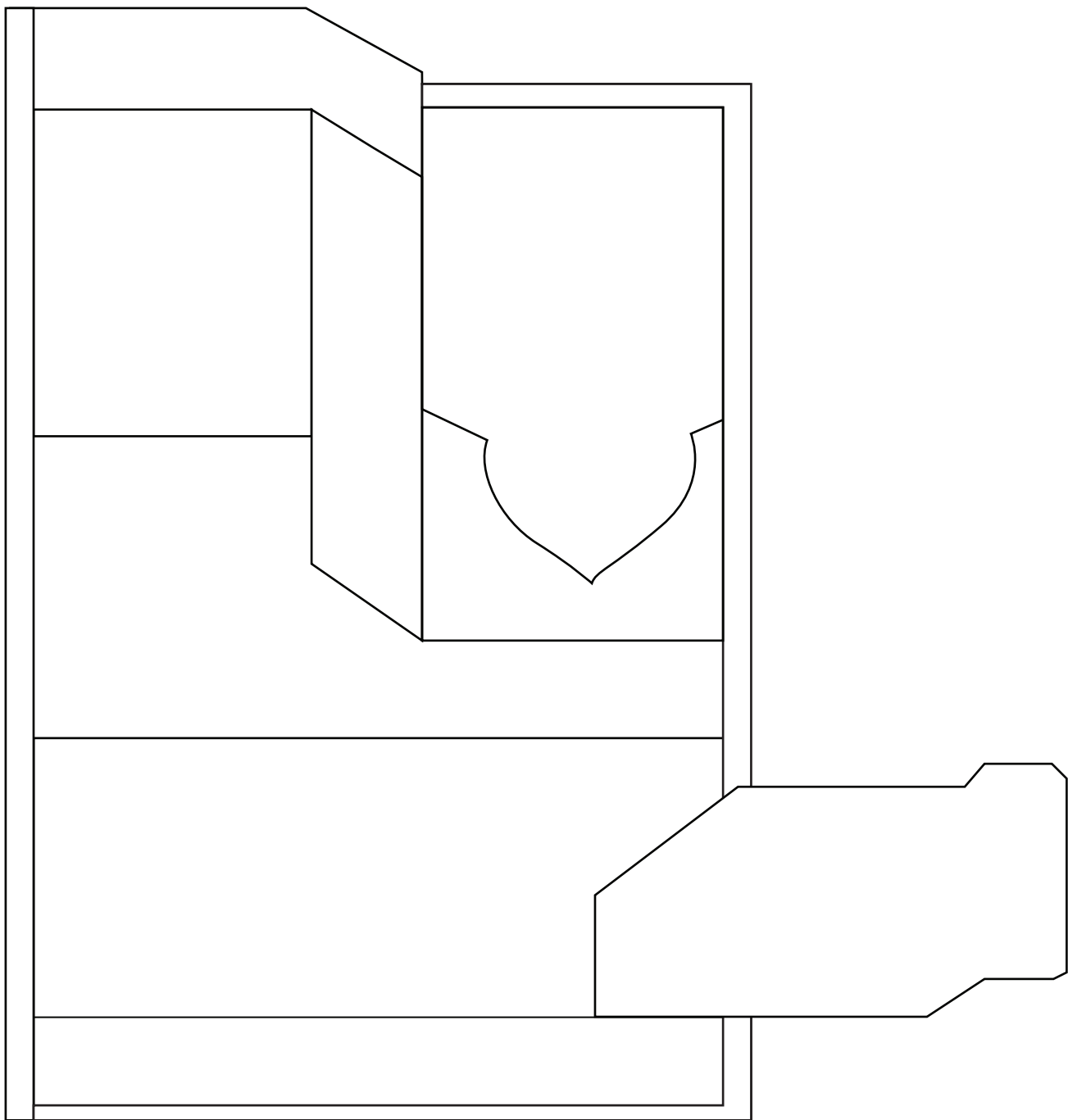


# Present Illuminations

Curated by **Takin Aghdashloo**

**Khadim Ali . Farah Ossouli . Elham Pourkhani . Abbas Shahsavari**



# Present Illuminations

February 16 – March 25, 2024  
Foundry, Dubai

Khadim Ali  
Farah Ossouli  
Elham Pourkhani  
Abbas Shahsavar

Curated by Takin Aghdashloo

Bavan Gallery Team: Koroush Ariabod, Shamim Bakhshizadeh, Mercedeh Ghorbanian,  
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Abbas Shahsavar artworks in this presentation are on display in collaboration with Azad Art Gallery.

## Catalogue

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# Curatorial Statement

Deeply rooted in Persian culture, history, and aesthetics, Persian miniature embodies a storied tradition that spans centuries. This distinctive art form has evolved through Iran's dynamic social and historical epochs, continually influenced by the shifting contours of its society. Today, it finds new expressions in the works of contemporary artists across generations who delve into its conceptual and technical depths, pushing the boundaries of this majestic style into new realms.

A remarkable narrative in the historical journey of Persian culture is the philosophy of the great 12th century Persian philosopher Sohrevardi who posits that light is the most primary and profound reality, from which all creation emanates. Sohrevardi's School of Illumination, or Ishraqi philosophy, sought to emphasize the role of light as a fundamental principle of all existence and knowledge. This deeply metaphysical notion, transcends the physical realm, symbolizing knowledge, truth, and the divine.

Similarly, Persian miniatures – renowned for their detailed craftsmanship and vibrant luminosity – echo Sohrevardi's metaphysical exploration of light as both a physical and transcendent element. It is fascinating to note that one of the main visual characteristics of Persian miniatures is the absence of shadows, as if the entire universe is awash with light. These paintings are not just visual narratives but are imbued with the essence of Ishraqi philosophy, serving as windows into the soul's journey towards enlightenment.

*Present Illuminations* examines the works of four prominent contemporary artists whose practices are profoundly influenced by the Persian miniature tradition, and share the same devotion to truth-seeking and illumination of the soul. Each has developed a unique transformative approach to the traditional style, reinterpreting and reimagining various aspects of it from a contemporary perspective. Their work not only pays homage to the historical legacy of Persian miniature but chart new courses for its future. Their contributions underscore the art form's lasting significance and vibrancy within the contemporary art landscape.

– Takin Aghdashloo

## About the Curator

Takin Aghdashloo (b. 1982, Tehran, Iran) is an independent curator and art critic. He received his BFA in New Media Art from Toronto Metropolitan University in 2011. Aghdashloo worked for several years as the Creative Director at Toronto's Harbourfront Centre before moving to Tehran in 2017. He has written extensively on contemporary art and has edited several volumes including monographs. Aghdashloo has also translated works related to art into Persian, most notably Hans Ulrich Obrist's *A Brief History of Curating*, published in Tehran.

He has been curating exhibitions since 2012.

# Khadim Ali

Khadim Ali's artistic journey is deeply rooted in the rich traditions of classical miniature painting. From an early age, the *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings), the tenth-century national epic of Greater Iran penned by Ferdowsi, played a pivotal role in his cultural and artistic education. Read to him by his grandfather, with illustrations by the legendary Persian artist Behzad serving as his initial foray into art history, Ali was captivated by the epic's narratives, especially the tales of Rostam, the embodiment of heroism and virtue, and his battles against demonic forces representing evil. These stories profoundly influence Ali's work, framing contemporary issues of identity and oppression within a mythological context.

As a member of the Hazara ethnic minority in Afghanistan, Ali has personally experienced the violence and discrimination perpetrated by the Taliban against his community. The Taliban's ironic self-comparison to Rostam, casting the Hazaras as the demons from the *Shahnameh*, profoundly impacts Ali's art. His works narrate the loss of cultural heritage and human values amidst the distortion of meaning as words and images are co-opted by ideological forces.

In his piece, *Untitled 21*, Ali depicts three demonic figures—or *Divs*, as known in ancient Iranian mythology—with angelic wings and halos, subverting traditional moral dichotomies of good versus evil. These figures echo the nuanced depictions of demons found in fifteenth-century Siyah Qalam miniatures, suggesting a dialogue with these historical representations. *Divs*, often seen as deities who fell from grace after defeat, embody a vulnerability that challenges their vilification. This narrative of fallen deities, akin to "fallen angels," enriches the artwork with layers of cultural and symbolic depth, inviting viewers to reconsider the simplicity of good versus evil in the context of cultural heritage and personal identity.



## Biography

Khadim Ali (b. 1978, Quetta, Pakistan) is a painter currently residing and working between Sydney, Australia, and Kabul, Afghanistan. Ali's passion for art and art history was ignited at a young age when his grandfather read him the Shahnameh, the national epic of Greater Iran, which featured captivating illustrations accompanying the poems. He received formal training in classical miniature painting at the National College of Arts in Lahore and further honed his skills in mural painting and calligraphy in Tehran, Iran. In 2016, Ali earned his Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of New South Wales. Khadim Ali belongs to the persecuted Hazara ethnic minority in central Afghanistan, a group that has endured a troubled past and years of oppression, which serves as a pivotal influence in his work. Ali's art is featured in numerous prestigious art collections, including the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the British Museum in London, the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum in Japan, the Foreign Office in Islamabad, the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra, the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney, and the Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane.



*Untitled 21*, 2021  
From *The Arrival of Demon* series. Gouache, ink and gold leaf on Wasli paper, 71 x 55 cm





# Farah Ossouli

Farah Ossouli stands as a seminal figure in the contemporary evolution of Persian miniature painting. She is celebrated for her ability to fuse contemporary subjects with timeless narratives, infusing traditional art forms with a sense of urgency and fresh perspective. Ossouli engages deeply with themes of violence, oppression, and romanticism, intertwining them with modern narratives and feminist viewpoints.

*Present Illuminations* features three significant works by Farah Ossouli, two of which belong to her series *All My Wounds Are From Love*. This series serves as an homage to the romantic poetry of Forugh Farrokhzad, a towering figure in Iranian modernist poetry. Through her art, Ossouli brings to life Farrokhzad's poignant verses:

*I will let go of lines, of counting numbers too / and from among the limits of geometry / seek refuge in the soul of infinity. / I am naked, naked, naked / Naked as the hush between words of love. / My wounds are all exacted by love / love, love, love. / I guided this wandering isle away / from the ocean's tempest, away / from the volcanoes' eruption / To shatter was the secret of that unbroken body / from whose humblest pieces the sun was born.*

The third painting, titled *Seven Sleepers*, portrays a female figure extending her long hair towards armed men asleep below, symbolizing an attempt to rouse them from their ignorance. This piece, which delves into the themes of tyranny and religious fundamentalism, draws inspiration from the 2022 women's rights protest movement in Iran. Embracing the margins of this powerful work is a poem by Rumi that enhances its

*All forms, go (away), since new forms have come / Your flags will be over-turned since that plentiful (one) is coming.*



## Biography

Farah Ossouli (b. 1953, Zanjan, Iran) is a painter based in Tehran. She started her art practice while studying Graphic Design at the College of Fine Arts at University of Tehran, and went on to become a pioneer in reimagining the traditional Persian miniature, using contemporary themes. She has achieved a unique fusion of techniques, materials, concepts, and narratives during her forty-year career as an artist. Her works have been presented in numerous solo and group exhibitions in Iran and internationally, and are held at permanent collections of major art institutions including Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Devi Art Foundation, New Delhi; Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam; Ludwig Museum, Koblenz, Germany, and Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, Tehran.



*He, 2023*  
From *All My Wounds Are From Love* series. Gouache on paperboard, 56 x 56 cm



*Flower and Dagger, 2023*  
From *All My Wounds Are From Love* series. Gouache on paperboard, 56 x 56 cm



*Seven Sleepers*, 2023  
Gouache on paperboard, 76 x 56 cm



# Elham Pourkhani

Elham Pourkhani's art masterfully intertwines the grandeur of classical Persian miniature painting with modern sensibilities, creating works that resonate with echoes of both past and present. Influenced significantly by her literary background, Pourkhani employs her canvas to weave intricate narratives that deeply engage the viewer.

Featured in the exhibition are three of Pourkhani's works, each showcasing her impeccable and meticulous technique. Grounded often in Persian mythology, her art draws from seminal literary works pivotal to Persian culture, such as the *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings). Through a contemporary lens, she adapts and reinterprets these stories, exploring themes of historical and ongoing socio-political injustices in Iran. *A World Ruled by Demons* features masked figures navigating a landscape where anonymity is their only safeguard against malevolent forces. *Beheading of Khosrow at Bisotun* captures a critical moment from Nizami Ganjavi's tragic romance, highlighting the enduring power of storytelling.

The diptych *Simurgh* is inspired by the twelfth-century poet Attar of Nishapur's *The Conference of the Birds*. This allegorical tale, rich with political undertones about unity, follows birds of all kinds on a quest to find the legendary Simurgh to be their king. After traversing seven treacherous valleys, they discover a profound truth: they themselves collectively embody the Simurgh. Pourkhani's depiction not only celebrates the narrative's complexity but also its relevance to contemporary discussions on governance and collective strength.



## Biography

Elham Pourkhani (b. 1979, Tehran, Iran) is a Tehran-based artist. In her practice, she combines the structures of Persian miniature painting with stories inspired by ancient literature and epic poetry, as well as narratives from the contemporary world. Pourkhani received her BFA in Persian Painting from the University of Applied Science and Technology in Tehran in 2017. She has participated in solo and group exhibitions domestically and internationally, including *Tactile Memoires*, Daniela Mercuri Gallery, New York (2023); *Connective Strings of Resilience*, Bavan Gallery, Dubai (2023); and *Event: Iranian Contemporary Art and Shifting Realities*, Bavan Gallery, Cromwell Place, London (2023).





*A World Ruled by Demons, 2024*  
Watercolor and gouache on paper, 70 x 50 cm



*Beheading of Khosrow at Bisotun, 2024*  
Watercolor and gouache on paper, 70 x 50 cm



*Simurgh*, 2024  
Watercolor, gouache and 24K gold on paper, 211.5 x 23 cm



## Abbas Shahsavar

Employing the style of Persian miniatures, Abbas Shahsavar's art practice addresses the social and economic issues facing the Iranian middle class. Through rigorous study of the history and techniques of Persian miniature painting, Shahsavar has masterfully merged traditional forms with modern aesthetics, while remaining true to its core characteristics. He is among those artists who modernize the subject matter of Persian miniatures, adhering to centuries-old craftsmanship techniques such as papermaking, *pardaz* (painting with points or small dots of color), even lighting, and frontal perspective.

In his painting *Kulbars*, Shahsavar focuses on the plight of the kulbars—porters who carry goods on their backs across Iran's borders, traversing long distances, often through the impoverished, mountainous Kurdish regions bordering Iraq. These individuals risk their lives, facing systematic targeting and lethal encounters with Iranian border guards. The painting depicts a mountainous landscape rendered in the traditional style of Persian miniatures, scattered with abandoned goods—a poignant testament to the dangers faced by the kulbars.

The second painting showcased here titled *How's it going, Mark?* features two male figures, clad in traditional bath towels, the one on the left donning a VR headset facing Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Meta. The work offers a critical exploration of the postmodern condition and digital consumerism. Despite its contemporary appearance, the artwork incorporates elements of Persian miniature technique and decoration, showcasing Shahsavar's skill in weaving traditional craftsmanship with modern narratives.



## Biography

Abbas Shahsavari (b. 1983, Kermanshah, Iran) is a Tehran-based painter. He started miniature painting as a teenager, and continued to study painting academically at Ferdowsi University in Mashhad. Since 2009, he has been working on joint projects as a collaborative artistic duo with Maryam Ayeen (b. 1985, Bojnord, Iran). Their work has been on permanent display at the Mausoleum of Attar of Nishapur, the great Persian poet, in Nishapur since 2000. They have participated in solo and group exhibitions domestically and internationally, including *Misunderstanding in the Blue Room*, Azad Art Gallery, Tehran (2014); and *The Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane,



*Kulbars*, 2024  
Acrylic, oil and gouache on canvas, 200 x 150 cm



*How's it going, Mark?*, 2023  
Acrylic, gouache and watercolor on paper, 29 x 19.5 cm





## About Bavan Gallery

Bavan Gallery is a contemporary art gallery based in downtown Tehran, Iran established in 2018 by Ava Ayoubi. The gallery was launched with the inaugural site-specific exhibition titled *Revision at the House on Abdeh St.*, after which a year-long period of planning, research, and renovations took place. Bavan Gallery officially opened its doors to the public in 2019, and it consists of an two exhibition spaces on two floors, a small project space in the basement, and an outdoor pool altered to provide an open cube for site-specific installations.

The gallery represents a diverse group of artists from emerging to established, in order to facilitate a multidisciplinary multi-generational dialogue. Bavan Gallery's artistic vision is based on new experiences in contemporary art, focusing on presenting its evolving landscape. Bavan Gallery provides a growing platform to support its artists and acts as a bridge between the vibrant Iranian contemporary art scene and international audiences.



**Foundry, Dubai**  
**February 16 – March 27, 2024**

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