

THE ROOT OF IT ALL

Representing both humble beginnings and the support structure for complex ecosystems, roots are at the very heart of our world. Sustaining, nurturing and expansive, they provide the very basis for life, for connecting with the land and providing a home and refuge. They also represent the symbolic give and take between humans and nature, particularly as we try to navigate our way through an environment increasingly disrupted by our own activity and in need of replenishment and restoration.

In this section of *Canvas*, we look at how artists explore the concept of roots and rootedness. Whether as a source of food, the basis for cementing identity and sense of place, the inspiration for artistic assessment of the past or the means to create new landscapes and communities in the future, the physical and metaphorical value of roots fascinates and compels.





ROOTS REDEFINED

The recent exhibition *Connective Strings of Resilience*, presented by **Bavan Gallery** at Dubai's Foundry, highlighted a new generation of artists who offer a contemporary take on Persian miniature painting.

Words by Marziah Rashid



"I believe reaching out to the valuable resources of the past is one of the most contemporary ways to express concerns and issues of the present," says Ava Ayoubi, speaking about a recent exhibition presented by Bavan Gallery, of which she is the founder and director, at Dubai's Foundry. Ayoubi is referring to a contemporary turn in Iranian art towards the distinctive style of medieval Persian miniature painting – a trend that, while not the subject of the exhibition, shines through in many of the works on display.

Entitled *Connective Strings of Resilience*, the show brings together works by 28 Iranian artists that capture the multiplicity of life in Iran, in contrast to the homogenising and exoticist narratives propagated by international media and even expatriate artists comfortably ensconced in the West – particularly in the wake of the ongoing 'Woman, Life, Freedom' movement sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini in police custody in September 2022. An obvious example is Shirin Neshat, who has long faced (somewhat reductive) accusations of complicity in Orientalist discourse for her depictions of the veil. Most recently, anti-regime protesters themselves objected to her support for 'Woman, Life, Freedom', claiming that her views contradict those of the movement.

What do Shirin Neshat and 'Woman, Life, Freedom' have to do with Persian miniatures? Perhaps the exhibition's inclusion of paintings influenced by the tradition is intended to assert some vague notion of an 'authentic' Persian identity via heritage, in response to Western viewpoints. With its flat, two-dimensional perspective and intricate detail, for example, Elham Nafisi's painting of does in a rose garden looks as though it could belong in a medieval illustration of the ancient fable *Kalileh va Damneh*. Collected in illuminated manuscripts called *muraqqas*, miniatures were often painted as visual renditions of literary epics dating back to the 11th century.

In these paintings, narratives are sometimes translated visually through the composition, characterised by what art historian Anna Sloan calls 'architectural space', where multiple overlapping stories unfold across the picture plane in stark contrast to the European single-point perspective. "What I draw from Persian painting is the way it uses figures, animals, plants and nature together to make a single piece that includes different stories, with a kind of integration as well as discontinuity," says Mahsa Tehrani, whose oil-on-canvas diptych *A Grand Love Story* (2023) depicts a green mountain landscape populated with a surrealistic

Mahsa Tehrani. *A Grand Love Story*.
2023. From the series *Hunting
Ground*. 260 x 200 cm.
Image courtesy of the artist
and Bavan Gallery



mélange of creatures, objects and people in various states: a couple embracing here, a woman lying face-down in the grass there.

The prevalence of nature in the works on view also suggests a running theme of cultural roots. Iran is famous for its historic gardens or *baghs*, which are consistently present in miniature paintings between the Ilkhanid and Mughal periods, indicating they were a central setting for daily life, political affairs and social events. The significance of the natural world dates back even further. The Zoroastrian myth of the mother of all beings Sepanta Armaiti, who is likened to nature in the Avesta, serves as the foundation of Pooneh Oshidari's *Survivors and Parallel Pines* (2022), showing a courtyard in front of a built structure reminiscent of the pavilions often paired with gardens in miniatures. In the foreground, ghostly figures of children scrounge in the dirt. "When nature dries up due to the environmental crisis, all creatures will become like helpless children suffering for survival," Oshidari adds.

It bears questioning, though, how an exhibition that equates miniature painting with identity can claim to challenge prevailing discourse. Does the emphasis on a past artistic tradition simply reiterate the Orientalist notion that the East is trapped in tradition as opposed to modernity, not unlike Neshat's work? Equivocating on the increased popularity of contemporary miniature work among artists in Pakistan, curator Hammad Nasar has written: "The 'miniature' has become a tag of easily exportable exotica for an international market looking to consume something that looks Pakistani." Does *Connective Strings* similarly engage with self-exoticism? Why, in the final instance, does it highlight miniature painting?

A clue to the answer is offered by the Pera Museum's landmark 2021 exhibition *Miniature 2.0*, which featured 14 contemporary miniature artists. Predominantly from Iran as well as Turkey and Pakistan – where the art form migrated via contact between the Safavids and the Ottoman and Mughal empires – they included Shahpour Pouyan, Cansu Çakar and Shahzia Sikander. In his contribution to the catalogue, Nasar argues that these artists innovate by "engaging the past in critical dialogue without being restrained by it". In other words, they entirely reject the binary of modernity/tradition upon which Orientalist thought rests.

This approach can be seen at play in the Bavan exhibition. For

much of Persianate history, art and literature were the domains of the upper classes. The production of miniature paintings was patronised by emperors who often commissioned works representing themselves and their courtiers. Natural settings, in particular, depict courtly affairs such as royal feasts and political negotiations. The artists in *Connective Strings* similarly deal with political themes, but co-opt the lofty art form of miniatures to portray the concerns of the masses. "For me and many Middle Eastern artists, miniature painting is a form of survival," explains Nafisi. "In a patriarchal and dictatorial society, it is possible for serious, critical subjects to be broached under its guise."

Survival is the chosen subject of many of the featured artists, who came of age amid conditions of political and economic strife in the aftermath of the 1979 revolution and the Iran-Iraq war. With its layering of elaborate floral designs over colour-inverted images, Roghayeh Najdi's *The Collapsed Wall* (2022) is more a reinterpretation of the miniature style than a formal reproduction. The natural elements in the foreground evoke hope and growth against the grey, dystopian background – a composition she also uses in more recent works to reference the 'Woman, Life, Freedom' movement.

Tehrani's painting is from a series entitled *Hunting Ground*, which explores the fight for survival at the core of human and animal existence. According to the artist, the work depicts the contradictions of life in Iran, encapsulated in the hunter/prey binary. The intricately painted surface of a blue china vase shows two lions locked in primordial battle. Delicate figurines of pristine white peacocks sit in the grass opposite toy soldiers pointing guns. "Sometimes you wonder how you can experience joy in the midst of everything that is going on," she says. "That's the main contradiction."

Connective Strings as a whole revolves around this story of resilience. The exhibition is the first iteration of a project called *The Land of Cypress Trees*, with upcoming editions in September this year and early 2024. The title derives from the legend of the cypress tree of Abarkuh, believed to have been growing for as long as 8000 years. "The tree, an undying symbol of resistance and resilience, of survival within the most extreme conditions," reads the catalogue essay, "can itself resemble the perseverance of artistic vision." ■