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FEREYDOUN AVE, *Rostam in the Dead of Winter*, 2009, mixed media and digital print on paper, 75 × 110 cm. Courtesy the artist and Janet Rady Fine Art, London/Dubai.

WRESTLING WITH HISTORY: MYSTICAL AND MASCULINE FEREYDOUN AVE

[PROFILES: INTERVIEW](#) BY SARA RAZA FROM SEP/OCT 2009

IRAN

With a career spanning more than four decades, Fereydoun Ave is a member of the first generation of Iranian contemporary artists. Since the 1970s, when Tehran rose to become one of West Asia's most active visual cultural centers, Ave has maintained a central position in the Iranian art community. Born in 1945 and educated in England and the United States, he established Tehran's first alternative art space, 13 Vanak Street, in 1984 in the affluent northern part of the city. Ave has launched the careers of several of Iran's most celebrated artists, including the effusive king of Iranian pop, Farhad Moshiri. Though he now divides his time between Tehran and Paris, Ave continues to inspire and mentor the current wave of Iranian artists, serving as the chief nominator for the British-Iranian charity Magic of Persia's Contemporary Art Prize 2009 (MOP CAP). In between preparing for MOP CAP and two solo shows of his own work, one in April at London's Rossi & Rossi gallery, and the other at Dubai's B21 Gallery, *ArtAsiaPacific's* West Asia desk editor Sara Raza caught up with the busy artist in Dubai.

How did you become involved with the contemporary art scene in Iran during its early days?

I belong to a generation of Iranians who completed their education overseas. I attended boarding school in England and then studied applied arts and theater at Arizona State University and film at New York University. It was always my intention to return to Iran. In the 1970s, under the patronage of empress Farah Diba and thanks to growing wealth in Iran from the oil boom, the Tehran art scene was flourishing. There were even plans to build what would become the region's first public contemporary art museum, the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art.

I began my career as resident artistic designer at the City Theater of Tehran, working on the International Festival of Arts in Shiraz, one of the first live-art festivals in the region. My role at City Theater doubled as the mandatory civil service that all young Iranians had to perform. That led to a similar position at the Iran-America Society Cultural Center, also in Tehran, an important bridge between the two countries before the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

How did the Islamic Revolution affect your art making?

The revolution changed everything, albeit temporarily. I had met the gallerist Homa Zand in Tehran and was working as the artistic director of her gallery, a meeting point for Iranian artists. Following the revolution, the gallery closed and I went to Paris where Homa had also relocated. I spent the next few years concentrating on my own artistic practice and exhibiting internationally. In the mid-1980s, I decided to return to Iran for a few years, but by then most of the art spaces had closed down. That spurred me to start 13 Vanak Street in an annex on my property in Tehran. With a large window facing the street, 13 Vanak Street specialized in

installations and performance-based works, which could not be sold, and was famous for causing traffic jams with large crowds gathering outside.

Is 13 Vanak Street still active?

I've closed it temporarily; dealing with so many governmental bureaucracies has become a headache. I haven't decided what I'm going to do next.

When did you decide to revert to concentrating on your art?

I don't believe that one *becomes* an artist. It's quite simple, you're either an artist or you're not. I have always been a visual person and perhaps one of my greatest influences was my friendship with the American painter and sculptor Cy Twombly, who was also my mentor. I assisted him on several sculpture projects and shared a studio with him in the Seychelles throughout the 1990s.

You recently made work in support of Tibet's resistance to China's imperialism. What was the inspiration behind this series?

I decided to make "D-Artboards For Tibet" (2008) in support of the Tibetan people's struggle through the image of nine dartboards in the form of mandalas. They feature depictions of Chairman Mao at the center as the bull's-eye and are punctured by darts with feathers painted in the colors of Tibetan prayer flags. The intention was to promote compassion and strength through the action of throwing the darts—negating the negative to make a positive charge.

Why have you made the mythological character Rostam, one of Iran's national heroes immortalized in the tenth-century Iranian poet Ferdowsi's Shahnameh ("The Book of Kings"), the central protagonist in your most recent body of work?

With Rostam, known as the "champion of champions" in Iran, I am trying to locate the position of masculinity in the Iranian cultural context. I started to create mixed-media collages with heroic-looking wrestlers, echoing Rostam's image, as in the series "Rostam in Late Summer" (1998–2000), with wrestlers, fruits and flowers, and in my current series "Rostam in the Dead of Winter" (2009–), with circling vultures and paint splashed like blood. It has been a long study.

What about Rostam's masculinity is interesting to you?

I am doing research on the macho-mystic, exploring the mystical side to chivalry in Iranian culture. From my perspective, machismo has negative connotations; however, the mystic is much more positive. I am interested in examining the trials and tribulations of Rostam to uncover a certain code of conduct.

After winter will there be spring?

That will depend on the gods of rejuvenation, but I can tell you that this is part of a much larger series.

As chief nominator for the Magic of Persia Contemporary Art Prize, what will you bring to the judges' table?

The current contemporary art scene in Iran is extremely exciting. Thanks to the good fortune of several mid-career artists, including Parviz Tanavoli, Shirin Neshat and YZ Kami, there has been a revival of investment in art patronage and collecting, both inside

and outside of Iran. My role is to help raise awareness of young artists who are making really cutting-edge work.

Are you pleased with the direction that your career has taken?

I once read about a debate in a magazine about whether it was better to be famous or rich. I'd bet my money on being rich! Being famous is much more work.

Tools

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