

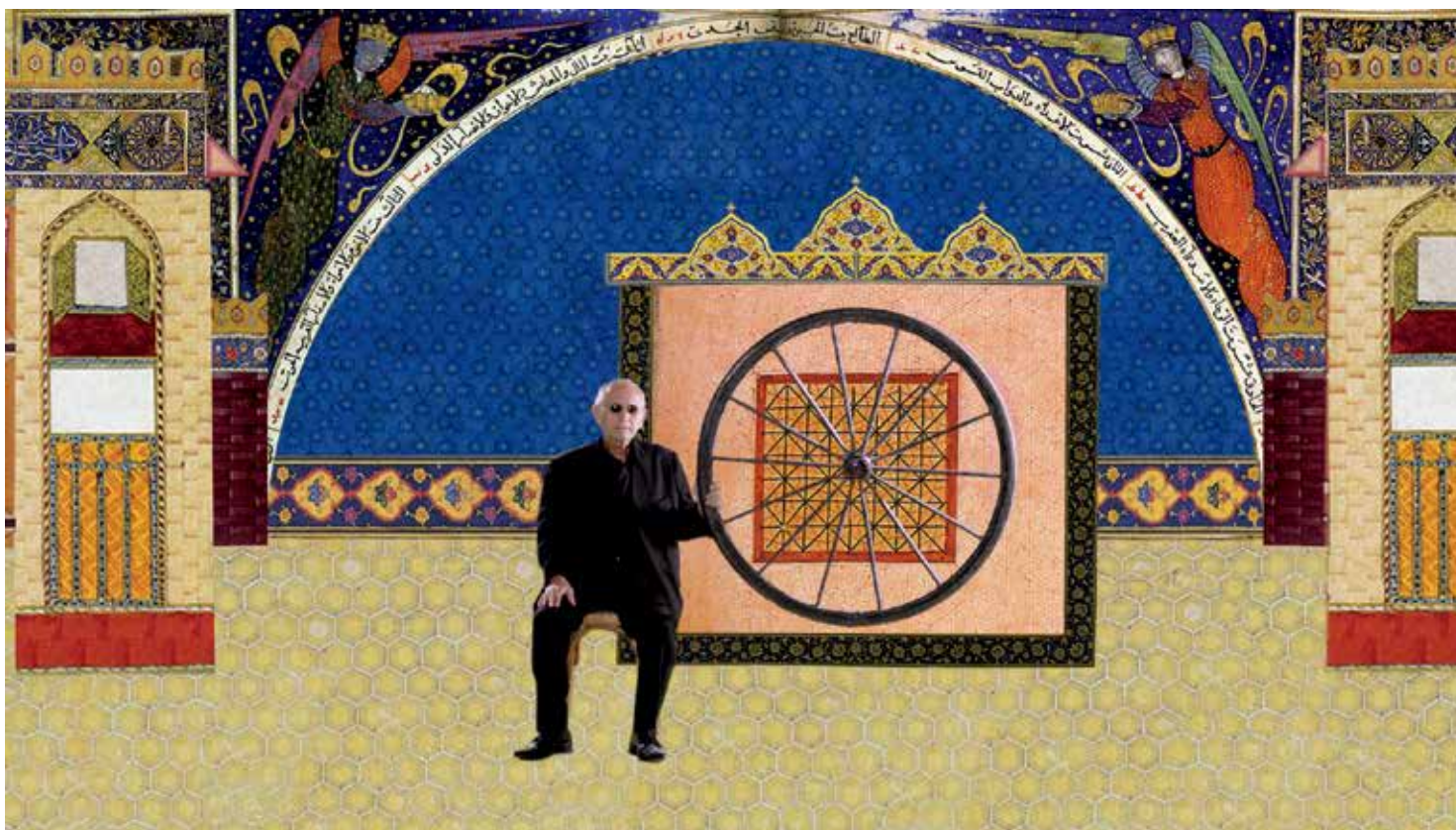
BY WENDY VOGEL

THE LONG VIEW

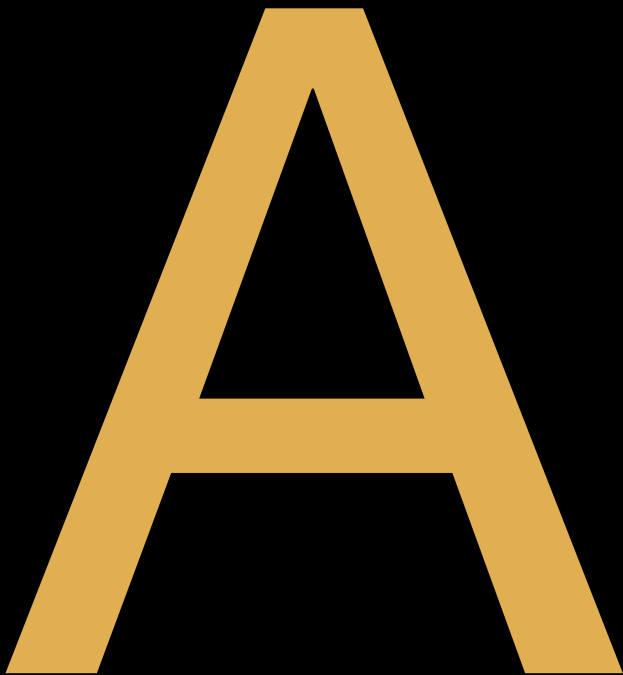
Shoja Azari animates Persian
paintings and the present



Portrait by Shirin Neshat.



FROM TOP:
*Toil and The
 Banquet of
 Houries*, two
 stills from *The
 King of Black*,
 2013. HD video
 with sound,
 24 min.



buzz of activity greeted me when I entered Shoja Azari's vast second-floor studio, located above SoHo's bustling Canal Street, on a late-summer afternoon. The Iranian-born artist was helping Shahram Karimi—his childhood friend turned collaborator and studio mate—move a canvas in progress. Acclaimed film and video artist Shirin Neshat, the studio's third resident and Azari's partner, emerged from her half of the space to say hello. The couple's dog circled. Such ties speak to the throughline of Azari's work, grounded in collective practice and concerned with shared experiences of colonialism, trauma, and revolution.

Azari's collaborations with Neshat have achieved iconic status. Soon after meeting the fellow Iranian artist in 1997, he helped with production and played the male singer in Neshat's 1998 two-channel video *Turbulent*; the project catalyzed their relationship. Since then, he has shared directing and writing credits on all her film projects, including their 2009 collaboration *Women Without Men*. And over the past few years, his solo artistic output and "video paintings" produced with Karimi have garnered steady attention. On the day of my visit, Azari and Karimi were preparing two upcoming exhibitions. Their joint effort "Magic of Light" opened at Jersey City's massive arts complex, Mana Contemporary, in September, and this month Leila Heller Gallery in New York presents Azari's solo show "The King of Black."

Raised in the town of Shiraz, Azari trained as a filmmaker in New York from 1977 until he felt compelled to return home during the 1979 Iranian Revolution. After engaging in underground collective political activity, he relocated permanently to New York in 1983. Azari takes the long view of history in a cinematic and political sense. His films, such as *Windows*, 2005, have relied on long, sustained, often painterly views, as opposed to the quick-cut aesthetic of television and news media. Recently, his film works have taken a palimpsestic turn. He and Karimi have invented the technique of video painting. Azari films short sequences of images—for example, trees swaying in the fall breeze—which are looped and projected onto a canvas that Karimi has painted to closely resemble a still from the video. The layering of subtly shifting video footage over painting gives the impression of almost hallucinatory movement.

The artist has focused his desire to "fuse the past and present" in works that take Eastern imagery as a point of departure. Often, Azari layers traditional scenes with contemporary images as a critical gesture. For his "Icons" series from 2010, Azari animated a series of images of martyred Shiite imams—a kind of "religious pop kitsch" you find in every Iranian household, the artist explains. Azari filmed the tear-filled eyes of several Persian women and collaged this video footage over the male imams' eyes. An indirect response to the death of Neda

Agha-Soltan (the female victim whose murder by police during the 2009 Iranian election protests ignited mass political consciousness), the works function as a "subversion of religious patriarchy," the artist explains. An image of Mohammad Modabber's storyboard-like 19th-century Qajar "coffee house painting" forms the background of *The Day of the Last Judgment (Coffee House Painting)*, 2009. Azari projects contemporary video over Modabber's composition that depicts vignettes of hell and paradise. Each segment of the scene, in turn, is animated by equally hellish sequences sourced from YouTube. These include footage of American soldiers wreaking havoc in Iraq, the 2009 demonstrations in Iran, testimony from the 2005 Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse and torture trials, and an epistle from a female suicide bomber.

Azari and Karimi's new series of four video paintings, "Forsaken," traces the passage of seasons and the dissolution of a nuclear family in the small, economically depressed mining town of Port Henry, New York. These slices of life, featuring a mother, father, and two children, dramatize the dark underbelly of Western capitalism. Azari would eventually like to produce a film with local actors on this theme.

"The King of Black" will center on Azari's 24-minute film of the same title. The work premiered in "Love Me, Love Me Not," an exhibition at the Arsenale Nord of this past summer's Venice Biennale. *The King of Black* recounts the first chapter of Persian poet Nizami Ganjavi's 12th-century epic *The Seven Beauties*. In this pre-Islamic Zoroastrian myth, a man comes to know the world through his relationships with seven women, representing seven planets. The live-action film takes place in an animated background composited from images of hundreds of Persian miniatures. Structured with intertitles, like a silent film, the work narrates a king's search for discovery, leading him from a land of sorrows to a paradise populated by unearthly virgin beauties (styled, ironically, according to conventions of Western Orientalist harem scenes). When the king shows his impatience to bed the Queen of the Virgins, she expels him from paradise to become king of the miserable. Nizami's proto-postmodern "deconstruction of Islamic paradise," Azari says, as well as the original myth's celebration of female knowledge, attracted him to the story.

The work will join a video painting entitled *Idyllic Life*, 2012, based on a 16th-century Persian miniature, and an installation of paintings produced by a hired master painter. In these canvases, contemporary stereotypical signifiers of Middle Eastern "terrorists" will be inserted into traditional Orientalist scenes. For example, Jean-Léon Gérôme's *The Snake Charmer*, circa 1870—the painting that graces the front cover of cultural theorist Edward Said's 1978 postcolonial groundbreaker *Orientalism*—will be transformed by the addition of modern weaponry. "The pornographic gaze of today is a continuation of the odalisque first produced by Orientalist painters" of the 18th and 19th centuries, Azari notes. Additional Pop-inspired paintings that emphasize Western erotic tropes underscore this formal connection.

Azari is quick to say that biography—his past political engagements in Iran, his relationship with Neshat—should not overshadow the reading of his work. And indeed, his output stands as more than the distillation of personal details. But these very facts are indissoluble from his artistic position. His personal experience of revolution, marginalization, and consciousness, as much as any abstraction, drives his excavations of history's grand narratives for connections to our collective present. **MP**