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## Saba Farhoudnia: Reflection

Reflecting on violence, particularly against women and minorities, Farhoudnia's paintings force us to see that the stories depicted in her works concern all of us and that we should not take freedom of choice for granted



*Reyhaneh Ameri, Negin Sheikhi, and Romina Ashrafi, 2022. Acrylic on acrylic mirror sheet, 15.5 x 15.5 in each. Photo: Farzan Ghasemi.*

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by NATASHA KURCHANOVA

Good exhibitions can be difficult to find. Saba Farhoudnia: Reflection, in the heart of Queens, is a case in point. About an hour's journey from the centre of Manhattan, it is at the Jamaica Center for the Arts, which occupies a beautiful building in a New York borough that is not known for beautiful architecture but is home to most of the city's immigrant population. It is an exhibition that makes us rediscover the power of painting in a deeply emotional way.

The subject of the show is reflection on multiple levels. On a more literal level, viewers are invited to see themselves in Farhoudnia's paintings because nearly all of them are painted on a reflective surface, a mirror of sorts. On a symbolic level, these works are a reflection on violence, specifically, violence against women, but also, and more generally, against the disenfranchised and disadvantaged – LGBTQ+, minorities, immigrants, the poor and the underprivileged. The artist is inviting us to join her in this experience. Competently curated by Adèle Eisenstein, this small but powerful exhibition contains 11 works, most of them paintings, which is a medium

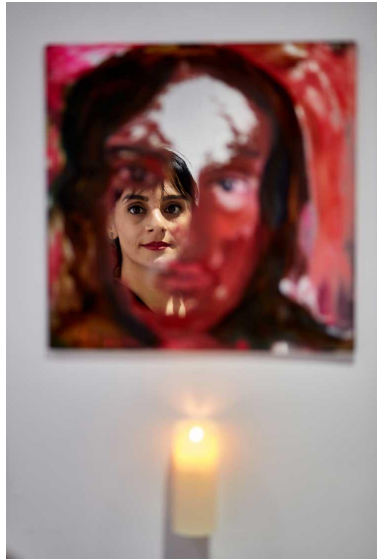
most familiar to Farhoudnia. This is the artist's first exhibition in which she has made installations – many paintings are grouped together with the aim of making viewers experience them spatially in the gallery. This allows us to connect with the works, the people and the stories about them on an empathetic and emotional level.



*Saba Farhoudnia: Reflection. Installation view, Jamaica Center for Arts and Learning, Jamaica, NY. Photo: Farzan Ghasemi.*

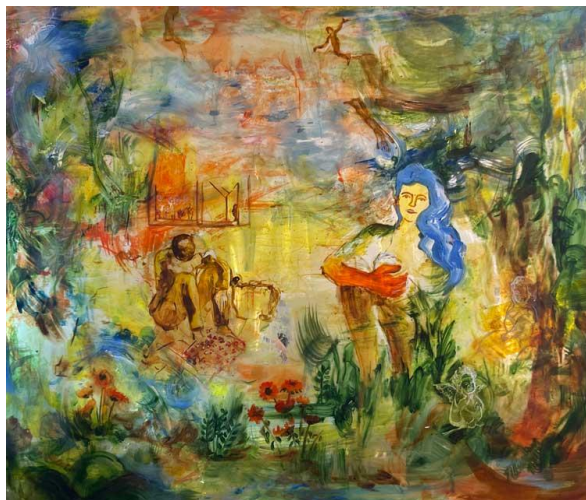
The show opens with one such installation, a memorial to Reyhaneh Ameri, Negin Sheikhi and Romina Ashrafi, three victims of “honour killings” in Farhoudnia’s home country, Iran. Painted with acrylic on a reflective mirror surface, the closeups of the beautiful women’s faces stare at us head-on, their gazes unflinching and serene, reminiscent of ancient Egyptian funerary portraiture in their steady stare into eternity. Farhoudnia applied the paint in intermittent, translucent brushstrokes, masterfully capturing the women’s likenesses and sometimes leaving large areas of the mirror surface open, allowing us to see our own reflection, making us connect to these women through their gaze and ours. This imaginary meeting on the level of the gaze makes us empathise with them and reflect on the way their lives were brutally ended.

The stories of each of these women can be obtained by scanning a QR code on the floor in front of their portraits. Each story is more horrifying than the one before: Ameri was 22 when her father killed her with an axe for coming home late; 26-year-old Sheikhi was murdered by her fiancée, who then set fire to her body with five litres of gasoline; Ashrafi was 14 when she was decapitated by her father with a sickle for running away with a man of whom he disapproved. Reading these blood-chilling descriptions of gruesome murders forces us to think about the senseless brutality that women and sexual minorities endure daily, often at the hands of family members.



*Saba Farhoudnia and Reyhaneh Ameri. Photo: Arash Adibi.*

One of the most striking photographs from the exhibition, taken by Arash Adibi, shows the artist's face reflected in the portrait of Reyhaneh Ameri. In this image, Farhoudnia's face is reflected in the mirror of an unpainted part of Ameri's face. She appears to be looking us straight in the eye, her face blending in and framed by that of the victim of a filicide. Here, Farhoudnia identifies with the slain woman by placing herself in her image, looking at us from the painting in unison with Ameri. Farhoudnia found reliving the victim's pain very difficult. She told me that painting these works was emotionally draining, because it made her feel that she painted on her own face. She had to interrupt the work periodically to take breaks from this spiritually overwhelming labour. This photograph conveys well the artist's desire to make herself visible, insert herself in her work to become an active agent in communicating the victim's emotional pain and the injustice done to her.



*Saba Farhoudnia. The Opacity of Truth, 2022. Acrylic on acrylic mirror sheet, 40 x 48 in. Photo: Farzan Ghasemi.*

In *The Opacity of Truth*, the artist paints her own features on to the face of the female figure crouching in the foreground and looking out at us, while a grieving man whose wife and children were brutally murdered by their family in a so-called “honour killing” is sitting in a similar position in the background to the left, hiding his face from us in his unbearable sorrow. The image of the brutalised man was taken from documentary footage of him at the grave of his wife and children. In this work, the artist most clearly acts as a spokesperson for him and his family, making his story known to the world.

Farhoudnia first thought of painting on a mirrored surface 18 months ago, not long after she and her husband split up. The pandemic was in full swing, and she was alone, completely isolated. She often found herself looking at her reflection in the mirror, trying to think about who she was, to discover herself after the end of a long relationship. As the pandemic began gradually to ease, she started to move out of the apartment and walk around the city, noticing her reflection in the windows and other reflective surfaces, some of which were creative and aesthetically elaborate. One day she thought: “How about if I work on a mirror, and what if the mirror were my surface?”

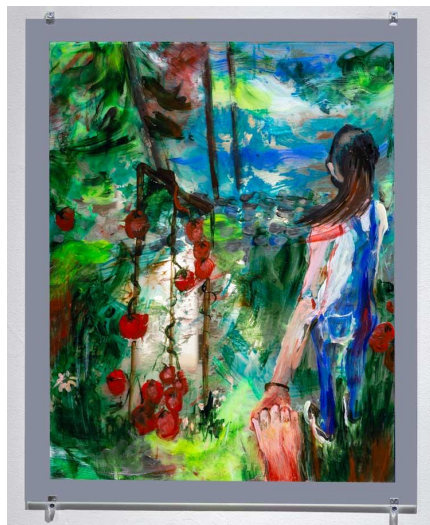


*Saba Farhoudnia. Dis-Appear Like Dis-Honor, 2022. Acrylic on canvas; site-specific installation with reflective mylar and cord, 40 x 21 in. Photo: Farzan Ghasemi.*

As we move through the gallery, we are surrounded with more mirrored surfaces, more reflections, more images on the same subject. In *Dis-Appear Like Dis-Honor*, the artist painted portraits of two sisters, Amina, 18, and Sarah Said, 17, from Texas, who were shot by their father for disobeying him and “dishonouring” the family. In this work, Farhoudnia also used a piece of canvas for support, which she placed in front of the mirror. As in the previous work, the subjects are staring straight at the viewer. Formal devices, such as starkly outlining the girls’ facial features in thick black paint and exaggerating the red of their lips and faces recalls the German expressionists, particularly Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. Behind this portrait of the two sisters is a portrait of their father, his face smudged and a swath of black paint running down the lower part of his face to his belly.

Describing this work to me, Farhoudnia said: “You could see the two sisters and behind them is their father. I had to start painting the father almost three times. I would start and could not continue. I could not disconnect the emotion – I was very angry. The last touches of paint that I applied were on his moustache. My dad had a moustache and, perhaps for this reason, I always liked men with moustaches. It reminds me of my dad. When I had to paint this killer’s moustache, I could not put the paint on the surface. So, then I picked up a palette knife and I scraped the paint down with all my anger. You can see how the moustache goes down the painting. I just wanted to destroy this image, but stopped myself, because I had to have his portrait in this show. But I did not want it to be facing anything, because the show is about the victims and not about this murderer. In my culture, when people are punished, they are made to face the wall to hide their face. I wanted to hide his identity in this way, but I also wanted the reflection to show who this man is [or should be] to you. That’s why I was thinking about this piece like this and that’s why I wanted to finish it. The last thing was the palette knife here. There are big marks left by the knife on the canvas. His moustache does not look like this.”

The artist’s emotion fuels the show. It permeates every image in the way it was created and displayed. As a painter, Farhoudnia uses every expressive element in her vocabulary to convey intensity of the stories captured in her works. She uses bright, contrasting colours and gestural, unpremeditated brushstrokes. She disrupts the continuity of the image with these devices, filling every inch of the surface with a reflection – be it of her thoughts and feelings on the tragedy of the victims or with the literal reflection of us, the viewers, looking at the images, reading the stories, and trying to find ourselves in them – imagining ourselves in the place of the victims and responding empathetically to their suffering.



*Saba Farhoudnia. Red Like the Tomatoes, Red Like the Heart, 2022. Acrylic on glass mirror, 24 x 30 inches. Photo credit: Farzan Ghasemi.*

In *Red Like the Tomatoes, Red Like the Heart*, on the right side of the picture, close to the frame, we see the figure of a woman from behind, holding someone’s hand. The hand is cropped by the frame, giving the sense that it could be us following this woman into the luscious



landscape that opens up to our gaze and hers. The story that inspired this painting is as heart-wrenching as the others the artist chose for the show: Sajida Omer, a teenager from North Darfur, was murdered in 2021 by her father and brother simply for talking to a man at their tomato farm. The horrifying brutality and senselessness of this crime is intensified by the attempt to normalise it by the corrupt justice system in Sudan.

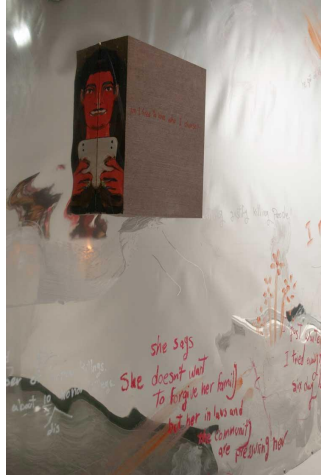
The artist makes a point of not confining the stories that inspired her images to a particular period or geographic location. Her works reflect tragedies that are happening around the globe, not only in the Middle East or developing countries. To expand the historical and geographical scope of this subject, Farhoudnia includes her interpretation of Titian's famous depiction of the rape of Lucretia.



*Saba Farhoudnia. Tarquin and Lucretia, 2022. Acrylic on acrylic mirror sheet, 48 x 40 in. Photo: Farzan Ghasemi.*

According to legend, Tarquin, the son of the last king of Rome, raped Lucretia, a noblewoman, after threatening to kill her if she refused to accept him as a lover. The next day she killed herself after making the fact of the rape public. This exposure and her suicide brought about an insurrection in which the king was overthrown and the Roman republic was established. Farhoudnia's rendering is a pastiche of Titian's image: she has simplified it, reducing the amount of descriptive representational details and leaving only the outlines of the figures and elements indicating expressive action, such as the bright red colour of blood symbolising the violence of the attack, and the dynamic composition of Tarquin charging at Lucretia and her recoiling from this attack.

Stories are at the centre of this exhibition. They are the reason it exists. They are also the reason that there is a strong element of theatricality in the work – because the artist wants us to emote with her, to join in her indignation and her desire to convey the strength of her feelings. The artist uses the exhibition space as an installation in which this emotionally charged experience can take place.



Saba Farhoudnia. *Ali Fazeli Monfared*, 2022. Acrylic on wood panel, 20 x 8 in.  
Photo: Farzan Ghasemi.

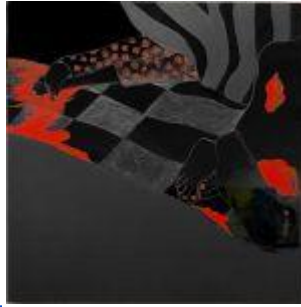
The work *Ali Fazeli Monfared* is actually three-dimensional. In it, the artist painted a portrait of a young man from Iran on a block of wood, with a split in the middle. The 20-year-old Monfared was allegedly beheaded by his half-brother and cousins for being gay. The reason Farhoudnia used wood in this work is because the killers dumped the victim's body under a tree, telling his mother where to find it. Because the tree became such an important element in this murder, providing evidence of the crime and the possibility for its exposure, the artist incorporated the material into the work. The split in the middle signifies the violent act of beheading – making us think that Ali was beheaded with an axe, which is also used for cutting trees. There are other works in the exhibition that incorporate materials that figure in stories about the crimes – such as ropes, blankets and poisons. The portrait of Monfared is rather small, but it is mounted on a huge piece of reflective surface that occupies a large part of a gallery wall.



Saba Farhoudnia. *Can You See Yourself?* 2022. Lipstick, oil marker, acrylic on reflective mylar, 48 x 264 in. Photo: Farzan Ghasemi.

Called *Can You See Yourself?*, this work confronts each of us with this question, forcing us to see that, even if we do not know the victims personally and they are not part of our internal world, the stories concern us directly. Farhoudnia's message is that these stories are not only about individual tragedies, but about freedom of choice for the victims and for us, the viewers, and we should not take that freedom for granted.

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