



A woman of substance

Sara Rahbar started out in fashion, but abandoned it as too trivial. Yet her background in fabric, texture and colour often play prominent roles in her varied, conceptual and politically charged work. Although many of her pieces are arrestingly beautiful, her fundamental goals are intellectual. 'I am not an interior designer, and that's what a lot of artists are these days,' she tells *Ana Finel Honigman*. 'My worst fear is to make decoration. If you want that, then go to Ikea, but don't look to artists to make your house look pretty.'



'Sara's work is packed with symbolism. Her images are reminiscent of Persian miniature paintings.'

throughout centuries of biblical exegesis, scholars and artists have pondered the salient image of Eve eating the apple. Considering 'Genesis' as a historical narrative, the forbidden fruit was unlikely to be a shiny Macintosh, but was rather the infinitely more complex, poetic, sensual and regionally appropriate pomegranate.

In 'Oppression', Sara Rahbar's scintillating 24-part series of photographs, the Iranian-born artist depicts the sumptuous pomegranate as the source of knowledge. But this time it is the wisdom and tradition of her Iranian heritage that it embodies.

'For me, the pomegranate symbolises blood,' Rahbar explains over trout salad, cappuccinos and a herbed goat cheese with pomegranate syrup that we share in Café Gitain – the Moroccan restaurant in Nolita which serves as a stylish canteen for Manhattan's art and fashion community. 'The pomegranate is like a symbolic lifeline tracing me back to the poetry, art, roots and cultural heritage of Iran.'

In one image from 'Oppression', Rahbar's hand is thrust from between folds of black fabric, as she clutches a papier mâché and brightly beaded version of the fruit. This pomegranate's artificial seeds are supernaturally red and plump, as if they were actually swollen with fresh blood instead of infused with meaning through Rahbar's connection to her cultural bloodline.

Rahbar's firm hand gripping the pomegranate is one of three images from her 'Oppression' series scheduled to be exhibited in Bastakiyah at the same time as the Art Dubai Fair. The exhibition will include work by ten Western and Middle Eastern artists addressing the social, sensual and symbolic significances of food. Though food is not central to all of her work, Rahbar recognises its vast and varied metaphorical importance. 'Food is life,' she concurs. 'We need it

to live and our food choices reflect what our lives are really like and who we are.' The other images in Rahbar's 'Oppression' series of self-portraits show her

self posed in Khakhe Golestan wearing traditional Iranian clothing. The images were taken by the Kurdish film-maker Hamid Ghavami and directed by film-maker Hosein Gouchian and Farin Zahedi, the first female head of Tehran University's drama department. 'I didn't have an era in mind,' Rahbar explains of her aesthetic choices. 'But I asked for very, very old garments. I put them on, lay on the floor and then took the photograph.'

Sara's cousin, Sunny Rahbar, the director of the Dubai-based Third Line gallery, one of the premier tastemaker contemporary art galleries in the Middle East, says of her cousin's 'Oppression' series: 'It is packed with symbolism. They are reminiscent of Persian miniature paintings. The stories, though not always literal, are conveyed strongly through these meticulously staged photographs. Sara's work continues to mature as her visual language evolves and her journey back to her roots continues to unravel.'

BORN IN TEHRAN in 1976, Rahbar left Iran with her family when she was five years old. After training in fashion design at New York's Fashion Institute of Technology, Rahbar went on to earn a masters degree in fine art at London's prestigious Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design. After abandoning fashion as superficial, Rahbar redirected her talents to film, photography, textile sculpture and installation art.

Reflecting her fashion background, fabric, touch and texture often play prominent roles in Rahbar's work, but her intellectual foundations were ingrained at Saint Martins. Though her work is verbally compelling, and her sensitivity to colour and composition produces arrestingly beautiful images, her fundamental goals are intellectual. 'I'll never



Opposite: One of 50 photographs from 'Oppression Series 1', taken by Hosein Gouchian. Left: One of 12 photographs from Rahbar's 'Oppression Series 2', also taken by Gouchian. The shape beneath the material is the artist herself.



'I am not political. I cover contemporary events. I am not an activist. I am not anti-anything. I am only pro.'

lectual and conceptual passions, Rahbar has also produced a series of American flags constructed from strips of beautifully ornate antique Middle-Eastern textiles. Another series of self-portraits show Rahbar wearing vari-

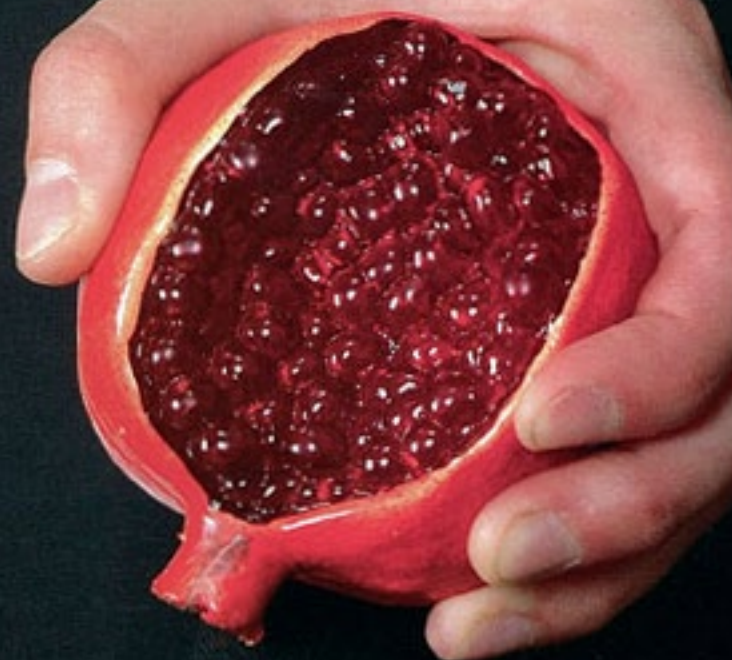
ous flags as a *hijab*.

Yet Rahbar eloquently argues that she is not solely a political artist. 'I am not political, I cover contemporary events. I am not an activist. I cannot be shuffled to different sides. I am not creating advertisements for one political party or another. But I am not anti-anything. I am only pro. I am pro-human rights and pro-women's rights. I often get asked whether I am creating work that is anti-Iran or anti-American, but I am not. All I am saying is that all this is not working. And I am not contributing to it.'

In an interview with Neda Sarmast for Iranian.com, Rahbar elaborated on this point with the statement: 'You can't compare America with Africa or with Iran or any other culture. In the end we are all made up of the same fibre, in the end we are all human; we lose sight of that so easily. I want to remind people of that, through my work.'

YET DESPITE REJECTING chauvinistic notions, Rahbar is adamantly attached to her native culture and yearns to connect with Iran. 'My dream is to show in Tehran,' she says. 'It would mean closure for me. Whatever I do, I want to complete it by showing it at the Museum of Modern Art in Tehran. But I am aware that you cannot show there unless your work is obviously apolitical. Friends keep reminding me that my interpretation of the work is irrelevant.' And she concludes with a wisdom that every artist understands: 'What matters is how my work is seen.' — *END*

Right: In this image, Rahbar's hand is thrust from between folds of black fabric, as she clutches a papier mâché and brightly beaded version of the pomegranate. 'For me, the pomegranate symbolises blood,' she says. 'It is like a symbolic lifeline tracing me back to the poetry, art, roots and cultural heritage of Iran.'



forget how my professor there told me, 'Put a glass of water on a shelf and back it up with text and arguments and you get an A. Do a painting the size of this classroom, with no story, you fail.'

A pretty painting is design.' I am not an interior designer, and that's what a lot of artists are these days. My worst fear is to make decoration. If you want that, then go to Ikea, but don't look to artists to make your house look pretty,' she declares. 'My professor said, 'Use your head and make me think.' That is what I always want to do.'



ne element that Rahbar wants viewers to think critically about is the overt political message in much of her art. Rahbar's confrontation of the war in Iraq at the Queens Museum of Art Biennial was positively reviewed, and after her participation in the

high-profile group show she was selected from a pool of highly qualified artists to become a 'teaching artist' and create a solo show for the Museum.

There she developed a room-sized installation addressing the subject of war in the Middle East and also screened 'Nobody's Enemy', a documentary she produced with Neda Sarmast on the youth culture of Iran. The striking physical impact of the installation was described by critic Martha Schwendener in the *New York Times* thus: 'Just inside the entrance, a collaborative installation, "Nobody's Enemy", recreates the look of a living room in a Middle East war zone, with walls pockmarked by shrapnel, and furniture and carpets covered with dusty grime.'

Combining her expertise with textiles and her intel-