

ART

iranian contemporary art

Today until June 3, The Curve, Barbican, Silk Street EC2, Mon, Wed, Fri and Sat 10am to 7.30pm, Tue and Thu 10am to 6pm, Sun noon to 7pm, free. Tel: 020 7638 8891. www.barbican.org.uk
Tube: Barbican/Moorgate

Iranian film has been creeping into the British consciousness over the last few years, as directors such as Samira Makhmalbaf and Abbas Kiarostami attract increasing art-house audiences. Their quiet concern with ordinary people coupled with the exoticism of Iranian customs and locations may make a beguiling combination, but most of us have little knowledge of the artistic and socio-political backdrop that informs these movies; this art exhibition attempts the daunting task of remedying that information gap.

In the 1960s, Iran's liberal artistic environment reflected, fed off and constructively rebelled against that of Britain and the US with movements such as Saqqakhaneh (Spiritual Pop Art), involving artists (for example Qassem Hadjizadeh) adapting popular imagery to comment on contemporary Iran. Some experimented with sculpture, which Islam frowns on, or created works that referred to a pre-Islamic, Zoroastrian time. Less controversially, Mohammad Ehsai and his like adapted calligraphy and other traditional figures to their own purposes.

But these cheerful freedoms disappeared after the Islamic revolution of 1979 and the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88). Only recently have Iranian artists again



In profile: Qassem Hadjizadeh's *A Black-Haired Man And A Red-Haired Man, 1975*

had the opportunity to examine the tensions between Islamic culture and secular realities, either in bitter reappropriation of the recent past, with Khosrow Hassanzadeh's *Do I Have To Sign* or Bita Fayyazi's ceramic cockroaches, or in surreal imagery that returns once again to the Pre-Islamic

era, by artists such as the Zoroastrian Fereydoun Ave.

Video, film and photography have all been enlisted in the service of these enquiries; the results offer a gorgeous and intriguingly roundabout route to Iran's tumultuous recent past.

Nina Caplan