

Insects and rugs and rock'n'roll

The Barbican's new show of Iranian art is full of surprises – from giant cockroaches to a Middle Eastern Tracey Emin. **Samantha Ellis** reports

Bita Fayyazi has made 2,000 ceramic cockroaches – and still they come. "They breed," the Iranian artist says, smiling. They are three times the size of any cockroach I've ever seen but creepily realistic. And Fayyazi is more than fond of them: "I'm obsessed with the creatures. I'm fascinated by them."

Before the roaches it was dogs. Inspired by seeing animals run over, she sculpted 125 dead dogs for a project called Roadkill. "I lived with the dogs, I cried over them..." Eventually she decided to dump them, then couldn't bear to. "I thought, why should I get rid of them? They are part of my life. So I found an empty field, I dug a hole and I buried them." She filmed the burial and is now planning to make more dogs to exhibit, this time life-size, with the film as backdrop.

All Fayyazi's work is obsessive and very personal. "The roaches are changing because I am changing," she says. "They started out like caricatures but now they are becoming more real." And when she is confronted with a real cockroach she doesn't kill it. "You know what's happened in our house?" she muses. "I don't see many roaches any more. Maybe they just became considerate towards us, like we are towards them. That's what I like to think."

Fayyazi is in London for an exhibition of Iranian contemporary art at the Barbican, a show that should bridge the gap between the Persian carpets at the V&A and shows from artists in exile such as Shirazeh Houshiary and Shirin Neshat. What is most surprising about the exhibition – at least for non-Iranians – is the prominent role played by women.

Life has clearly become easier since the ayatollahs came to power and blacklisted artists, shut galleries and outlawed the depiction of female nudity. Since Mohammad Khatami became president in 1997, the ban on female singers performing in public has been relaxed; last year Googoosh, the "queen of Persian pop", got her passport back. Unveiled Lives, the film festival accompanying this exhibition, reminds us of the fine films made recently by women directors, including two shorts by Neshat, as well as a new film by Marzieh Meshkini, whose husband, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, is one of Iran's top film-makers, and whose daughter Samira Makhmalbaf made the claustrophobic allegory *The Apple* when she was only 17.

But many women artists are still questioning the restrictions imposed on them. Shadi Ghadirian, at 27 the youngest artist in the show, re-creates pre-revolution Qajar-period studio portraits, posing her friends in traditional costume, sometimes



veiled, sometimes with the veils lifted (a sign of protest in Qajar times), holding a ghetto blaster or a can of Pepsi. The anachronisms highlight just how strange it is that women are legally required to wear the veil today.

Incongruity also drives the work of Ghazel, a 34-year-old video artist taking part in the exhibition. She

writes, directs and stars in her *Me* films, a series of funny, piquant vignettes in which she sunbathes, boxes and even waterskis – all while wearing her unwieldy black chador. She says she has had all the artistic freedom she wanted, but adds: "I never asked any permission. I don't know what would have happened if I

had." And while she describes the veil as "the reality of life in Iran", she won't be drawn on whether she wore a chador before it became mandatory.

Perhaps this obliqueness is a function of a culture of veiling: in a country where all women are veiled, it's no surprise to find work that is hidden, codified, obscured. And



Pest or pet? ... one of Fayyazi's ceramic cockroaches. Left, Untitled (1998) by Shadi Ghadirian

while Neshat's work is deeply critical of Islam, Ghazel seems to work within its traditions, however much she may question them. "It's all about me and my paradoxes," she says. "I live my parallel life with my camera." She went to an international school, speaking English at school and Farsi at home, and "always felt like an outsider". Now she divides her time between France and Iran.

Her sense of cultural dislocation comes through most strongly in the scenes shot outside Iran. One, an ice-skating film, is a refracted reconstruction of a true story: "I won a cup and no one came to take pictures of me." In the film she takes her own pictures. It's reminiscent of Tracey Emin's Turner Prize-nominated film about a disco-dancing contest in Margate, where boys yelled "slag" at her; in the film she goes back and dances how she wants to. There's some of that wish-fulfilment in Ghazel's film too, but it's a moment of sadness, years after the sullied victory.

Perhaps most poignant are the films in which Ghazel tackles the big issues. Inevitably, revolution and war inspires many Iranian artists – not least soldier-turned-fruit-seller Khosrow Hassanzadeh, whose paintings of white linen bodybags are the most haunting works in the show – but Ghazel's mode is humour. In her film *People Had To Find Amazing Ways To Sneak Out (Of Our Country)*, she rolls herself up in a Persian carpet, then rolls off screen. It could be a magic carpet, or the carpet Cleopatra arrived in for her secret assignation with Antony, but people did actually escape Iran hidden in carpets, so the joke is tinged with sadness. "It's the Iranian sense of humour," Ghazel says. "If a bomb goes off today, tomorrow there will be 10 jokes about it."

Iranian Contemporary Art is at the Barbican, London EC2 (020-7638 8891), from tomorrow until June 3. Unveiled Lives runs from May-10.