

In 1997, I returned to Iran after 32 years to attend a seminar on women and film. I was so impressed by the country's buzz and feverish cultural activity that I was embarrassed by my ignorance of how much its art scene had to offer. This ignorance was due largely to the fact that, for almost two decades, Iran was beyond any visitor's reach, and almost no publications on its cultural activities were available. True, Iranian cinema had attracted some international attention, but there was no mention of the state of visual arts within Iran. The West seems to have been arrogantly unaware of modern art "behind the Islamic curtain".

During subsequent visits, I discovered many artists deserving of international exposure. Two small shows in London were organised, and the curiosity on both sides was such that I felt the time was ripe to share the excitement with a wider audience. "Iranian Contemporary Art" at the Barbican Curve gallery includes works on loan for the very first time from the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art and from a few private collectors in Iran. The exhibition covers key moments in the past 40 years, a period that covers the emergence of an original approach to contemporary art in the early 1960s to more recent works by artists who lived a completely different experience after the Islamic revolution of 1979.

In the mid-1960s, Parviz Tanavoli, Iran's leading sculptor, scholar and collector, began work on his series "Heech", a play on the Persian word for nothingness. This voice of protest against derivative, decorative, repetitive and commercial artworks occupied him for the next decade but was heard by only a few. Tanavoli's questioning of the temporality of trends and his search for a new artistic vision came just at the moment when Iran's artistic output was highly productive and receiving attention.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Iran's art scene witnessed the emergence of a new and innovative school, the Saqqakhaneh, a sort of "Spiritual Pop Art" movement inspired by popular votive art. Many artists, including Hossein Zenderoudi, Faramarz Pilaram and Mansour Qandriz, were followers of the Saqqakhaneh, with its mostly calligraphical or talismanic imagery. But the success of its original members resulted in poor imitations and inferior products.

Throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, Iran was one of the richest countries in the Middle East, and it enjoyed a promising increase in cultural activity. The Iranian petrodollar bought the best of Iranian and Islamic artworks as well as some of the best contemporary art from European and American galleries. International art experts, curators and collectors flocked to the country, scholarships were established, festivals arranged, and galleries and museums opened. The Iranian art scene looked modern and competitive, and these boom years made the pioneers of contemporary Iranian art known to the world, with several international biennials awarding Iranian artists.

During this time, several diverse styles and genres evolved: the poet Sapehri pursued a personal quest, painting elements of nature; the artist Massoud Arabshahi found inspiration in pre-Islamic Zoroastrian sources; others gave artistic form to their political concerns. As the voice of criticism heightened, some artists (such as Ardeshir Mohassess, Iran's best cartoonist) had to emigrate when their work was banned in the mid-1970s. This brain drain, however, did not alert the shah's regime to the discontent arising from the visible gap between the elite and the rest of the population.

Then, just as Iran's expanding contemporary art scene was developing with some panache, culminating in the creation of the Tehran Museum of Modern Art in 1977, the social turmoil that led to the Islamic revolution in 1979 brought all cultural activity to a standstill. University arts faculties gradually closed because of the many restrictions imposed by the new government: depictions of women's hair, the unclothed human body and anything "immoral" or against religion or politics was forbidden.

The limitations of these new and mostly unwritten laws, combined with the devastations



Post revolution, art's revelation

Just as Iran's contemporary art scene was taking off, it was stifled by the Islamic revolution. Only now, writes **Rose Issa**, after years of war and religious restriction, is it blossoming

of the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-88, in which more than a million Iranians died, diverted the nation's attention and changed its artistic priorities. Large murals in surrealist figurative style celebrating war martyrs, religious virtues or leaders became permanent public images.

It was only after the war that the arts faculties timidly reopened and a huge number

of students enrolled to learn photography or film-making, which came to the forefront of the arts scene. Their popularity was driven by a need to document events, by the fact that censors had less access to photography and by the limits placed on importing foreign films. The more traditional artists took the safe option of joining the schools of calligraphy or miniature-painting. What remains

from this period are some excellent photographs of key moments of the post-revolutionary years, expressed particularly vividly by Seifollah Samadian.

By the mid-1990s, Iranian cinema began to receive international recognition and fame, thus encouraging more students to join film and photography schools.

Soon, the clergy could no longer ignore the public's demand for more freedom of expression. When Mohammed Khatami, previously minister of culture, became president in 1998, the artistic community benefited from a relaxation of the rules: galleries had more freedom in their choice of artists and artworks, and artists began to test the limits of what could be allowed. With a silent consensus, galleries began to exhibit new works without feeling threatened, and it was not long before official permits for exhibitions were no longer required.

Today, one of the capital's most popular venues is the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, where the young meet to see temporary exhibitions or watch films programmed by the cinémathèque. Works that had been hidden for more than two decades in the museum's storerooms went on display, and artists could send their works to exhibitions outside Iran.

I have chosen to bring some highlights of the museum's collection to London and

also to show the work of a new generation of Iranian artists exhibiting outside the mainstream. These include the former soldier and fruit-stall holder Khosrow Hassan-zadeh, who became a painter and poet and has managed to show, in his "War" series, disturbing works that in other times would have seemed too critical of the war and the regime. As the Iranian scholar and philosopher Dariush Shayegan says in the preface to the catalogue of Bitā Fayyazi, another exhibitor, her ceramics of cockroaches "do not simply glorify fallen creatures despised by humans", but reveal "the extent of the damage caused by a claustrophobic situation, where the sole refuge of humans excluded from their realm is the solitary prison of their own repression".

In the photographs by 24-year-old Shadi Ghadirian, defiant and haughty young women are portrayed in traditional Qajar costume, posed with modern objects such as bicycles (which Iranian women are forbidden to ride), stereos (pop music is banned) or Pepsi-Cola cans (a banned US import). Her juxtaposition of opposites demonstrates the paradoxes faced by women in today's Iran, contradictions in daily life that are also highlighted in the video art of Ghazel, in which she portrays herself water-skiing, riding or doing aerobics — all in a chador. These humorous incongruities emphasise the absurdity of such situations.

The exhibition ends with the works of an eclectic artist, Fereydoun Ave, whose series of collages, "Rostam and Sohrab", are inspired by 10th-century poet Ferdousi's *The Book of Kings*. This Persian epic, intrinsic to Iranian culture, describes the limitations of individual monarchs, stressing Iran's national rather than Islamic identity. Ave's series illustrates the struggle between modernism, symbolised by the son Sohrab, and tradition, represented by the father, Rostam, the archetypal hero who kills his son out of loyalty to the sanctity of an unworthy king. In this tragic struggle between father and son, familial bonds and personal dignity are sacrificed to unwavering obedience to a ruler — a centuries-old sign of warning that has remained painfully relevant to this day.

Rose Issa is curator of the Iranian Contemporary Art exhibition at The Curve, Barbican Centre, until June 3, and author of its catalogue, *Iranian Contemporary Art* (£19.99).

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