



Abbas Kowsari. *Untitled*. From the *Reds and Greens* series. 2015. 100 x 150 cm. Digital photography. C-print on Fuji metallic paper mounted on dibond. Edition of 5. Image courtesy of the artist and Ag Galerie

MIGHTY OAKS FROM LITTLE ACORNS GROW

Things have never been easy for Iran's gallerists and artists, and the recent tightening of US-led economic sanctions has ushered in a new currency crisis, affecting an art market already insulated from the rest of the world. Yet the Iranian capital boasts over 200 galleries and a thriving cultural scene, as recently demonstrated by the small but well-presented Teer Art fair (24–30 June). Founded by Hormoz Hematian and directed by Maryam Majd, both gallerists themselves, the fair was the first of its kind ever to take place in Iran. **Tahereh Sariban** swung by to take a look.



Exhibition view of Dastan's Basement's booth at Teer Art, 2018. Photography by Matin Jamei

It was a summer of seesaw records in Iran. Unprecedented high temperatures had baked entire swathes of the country to a crisp, creating pressing demands for water. A different mercury – the pulse of the nation – rose for days after national football team goalie Alireza Beiranvand defied a penalty by Cristiano Ronaldo, giving millions of Iranians a footbridge for a proud exit from the World Cup in Russia. Then came the sudden fall in the value of the Iranian rial under a mix of renewed Trumpian sanctions and America's pull-out from the nuclear deal. It had never been quite this bad indeed – prices for daily goods doubled, then tripled. Some quadrupled. Overnight, pharmacies were raided for the last packs of imported nappies; corner stores began stocking up on canned food.

Such was the backdrop to Teer Art (*teer* meaning “pillar” or “bullet” in Farsi, as well as the Iranian calendar month of June–July), held in late June as a small committee of ten Tehrani galleries and lodged in an airy parking space with sweeping views of the city. For many,

holding an art fair in such a context might appear rather surreal. But this would be overlooking the fact that for decades now, millions of Iranians wake up on a daily basis to the surreal as the new real, which puts a different spin on things. Fair director Maryam Majd displayed a healthy dose of modesty about the scale of the event. “This fair couldn't yet be called an ‘art fair’ in the full sense of the word. We were very local. Our first edition was small on purpose; we first needed to know that we could do this.” It's a sentiment echoed by Hormoz Hematian, the fair's founder: “The odds are stacked against us and Teer Art was an exercise in overcoming the paralysing doubt that we couldn't do this. The main goal – successfully met – of this first edition was to establish the practical feasibility of organising an event like this.”

Hematian had to contend with a number of challenges in setting up the fair, which was four years in the making: finding a suitable space, obtaining the right licences and pitching the project to other



Exhibition view of Assar Art Gallery's booth at Teer Art, 2018. (Left) Javad Modaressi. *Untitled*. 2018. Oil on canvas. 150 x 150 cm. (Right) Mojtaba Tajik. 2018. Acrylic on canvas. 180 x 110 cm. Photography by Matin Jamei

gallerists. Majd explains how it all came together: "Like many others in the industry, I had thought about having an art fair for a long time. I think the private sector found it difficult to initiate one, and the infrastructure for holding an art fair with international standards still isn't available. But when Hormoz brought up the idea, I thought we could do it together. So we got started!"

At the venue, Ava Centre, visitors walked along a circular parking lot pathway, repeating their trajectory in as many circles as necessary. Ab-Anbar gallery showed the aerial vein-like paintings and drawings by Sirak Melkonian, reminiscent of the paths forged by water rushing downhill. Relative newcomer Ag Galerie presented a strong photographic booth that explored contemporary Iranian male identities. Here, Abbas Kowsari's bizarrely dreamlike shot of a knight in armour waiting in the mud for his entry in a makeshift *Ta'zieh* theatre rubbed shoulders with Peyman Hooshmandzadeh's capture of a young boy inside a hammam – everything in his body

language indicative of the imminent transition into the world of manhood. Mohsen Gallery exhibited *Epidemy*, a series of strikingly dark depictions of half-human-half-bat creatures by Sara Abbasian, who explores the relationship between the physical body as both the agent and victim of violence.

Strategically scheduled in the lead-up to Tehran Auction, the most significant event in Iran's art calendar in terms of revenue generation, Teer Art and Tehran Auction aimed, on a small scale for this first round, to generate a greater interest amongst collectors and buyers than each event could have mustered separately. "Our long-term aim is to create a Tehran art week, similar to other cities," says Majd.

When asked about the room for growth, both Hematian and Majd are candid: more galleries, including art spaces from around the country and why not, one day, the world? "The reason we decided on 10 galleries – with a selection criterion of prior participation in an international art fair – was that, given the circumstances we are



Sara Abbasian. *Untitled*. From the *Epidemy* series. 2017. Pencil on cardboard. 107 x 75 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Mohsen Gallery

dealing with, we needed to stack every chance of success on our side. We needed experienced players, even though we have no intention of keeping it that way," Majd explains.

Such 'circumstances' extend beyond the international economic and political order that has kept the country in pariah status for decades. "We are at war on many more fronts than people can imagine," says Hematian. "As a gallerist, I am in a constant battle to place contemporary Iranian artists in people's homes. Teer Art was born out of this battle..."

On closing day, the sense of relief amongst the organisers was palpable. Though critics will inevitably point out that a handful of galleries don't make an art fair, foreign artists would enrich the conversation, and an institutionalised curation of the fair would improve its overall positioning, Tehran has always had to make its own rules and learn from its experiences. The presentation was high quality throughout and local collectors visited the fair in sufficient

numbers – aided, in the spirit of collaboration, by a promotional hand from Tehran Auction. "Sales were satisfactory," says Majd. The artistic community was by and large won over – happy at least that a fair is finally off the ground – whilst also underscoring the quasi-absence of new media, performance art and video.

Most importantly for Hematian and Majd, the fair took place despite the lingering doubts, economic circumstances and the heat, testing the boundaries of the possible. There are high expectations that it will be back again next year, same time (although maybe not same place), stronger from its experience and more equipped to represent contemporary Iranian artists to an ever larger art community.

What can this community expect? According to Majd, "More first-time sightings of artworks and a much, much larger venue to include many more participating galleries." Rendezvous next year for Teer Art edition two?