

**PRESSBOOK**

Farhad MOSHIRI  
*South China Morning Post*

*March 2013*

## Artist's journey of rediscovery

Life is a double-edged sword for Iranian Farhad Moshiri, who spent 12 formative years in the US, writes Fionnuala McHugh

Fionnuala McHugh

Sunday, 17 March, 2013



Farhad Moshiri with his knife work *Comfort*, part of the "Picnic" exhibition at Galerie Perrotin. Photo: K.Y. Cheng

Last month, *Argo*, a film about the Iranian hostage crisis, won the Oscar for best film. When its director, Ben Affleck, made his acceptance speech, he referred to "our friends in Iran living in terrible circumstances right now". The morning after the Oscars, when this line is read out to Iranian artist Farhad Moshiri (who'd watched half of *Argo* on his flight to Hong Kong - his plane landed before it finished), he gives what could only be called a wry smile.

Moshiri left Iran in 1979, the year of the hostage crisis, and went to live in Los Angeles. He was 15. He lived there for 12 years, studied at the California Institute of the Arts, sold one work at his first show in 1989, worked in pizza parlours, didn't exactly gorge himself on the fruits of the American dream. In 1991, he returned to Iran. In 2008, he became the first Middle Eastern artist to have a work sold for US\$1 million.

You can understand why there might be an element of internal conflict there.

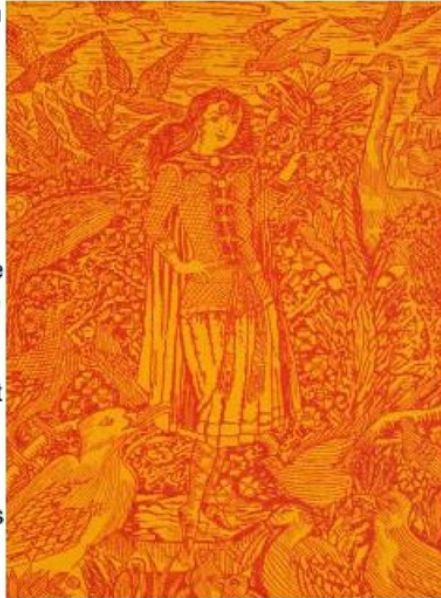
"This media attitude regarding Iran is something I've been in the middle of for a long time," he says, mildly. "To tell you the truth, I was fed up with Los Angeles, fed up with the one-sidedness of everything. A few artists were jumping on the bandwagon, conveying a dark, chador-covered country where everything was forbidden. I didn't think I was worthy of conducting that sort of criticism."

Worthy? "A lot of Iranians in my age group, living in the States, had hit rock-bottom and were returning so when I went back to Iran, I kind of felt a sissy, I didn't feel that I deserved to criticise a country I had fled. I was an upstart."

To study Moshiri's subsequent artistic journey is to watch someone re-acquainting himself with his own culture; he's like a boy following a trail of fascinating artefacts laid out in a forest.

In the beginning, he was drawn to the classic, archaeological simplicity of Persian jars, deliberately making his canvases look aged. Then he added calligraphy. The bling-bling element of contemporary society in Tehran inspired a series of furniture sculptures covered in gold-leaf. He discovered the artistic possibilities of embroidery. And chandeliers. And knives.

One of these knife works is in his "Picnic" show at Galerie Perrotin. It's called *Comfort*, the ironic word spelt out by 294 blades plunged into the wall (which the Central gallery spent weeks sourcing, with some difficulty, in Kowloon). A couple of days before this interview, Moshiri supervised its installation, standing in front of a time-lapse camera that clicked every few seconds as if it were recording a crime scene.



Embroidery on canvas 'Bird Girl'. Photo: Florian Kleinfenn



**I didn't feel that I deserved to criticise a country I had fled. I was an upstart**

FARHAD MOSHIRI

Moshiri, who turns 50 in September, is as slight as an adolescent and when he stands against the wall in the camera's light, weighing up a knife in each hand, his shadow is that of Edward Scissorhands.

He's amused when he hears the comparison. A sense of damaged - and damaging - innocence is the sort of paradox he wants to convey in his work. The fact that his (Iranian) mother left home, and country, for America when he was about four - "She was an Iran hater from the beginning" - consistently permeates what he does. "It's chronic," he admits. "I'm constantly going back to create a cosy environment, a fantasy life of stories, because I didn't have enough of them after my mother left."

But the domestic cosiness of his art isn't what it seems. If your mother's land is America and your (now dead) father's land is Iran, and you've lived in both, is it any wonder the contents of your fantasy household appear divided?

The cute acrylic cupcakes in *Choc Line* (2007) traces a corpse's outline. In 2008, he created the words *Home Sweet Home* on a gingham apron - with kitchen knives (the first of those installations). In his record-breaking, US\$1 million work, *Eshgh (Love)*, love is conveyed in Farsi script using Swarovski crystals, a deliberately cynical comment on the link between the spiritual and the commercial.

Of course, the minute Bonham's sold *Eshgh (Love)* at auction in Dubai in 2008, the work became a symbol of the new relationship between creative and commercial in the Middle Eastern art world. Moshiri, who says he was catapulted from getting US\$100 for his works to US\$1 million in about two years, is aware of the irony. But he also felt he'd deserved recognition; by then, he'd been working for years as an artist in a region where people, literally overnight, were deciding art was the way to make a quick buck.

Was that infuriating? "Yes, it was," he replies, candidly. "I have to admit I was envious. I didn't get a break very soon in my career and alongside me there were artists doing their first painting."

His glossy use of familiar objects has evoked comparisons with, among others, Jeff Koons (a double-edged blade of a compliment if ever there was one).

Moshiri, who has a sly sense of humour, has executed occasional self-portraits over the years featuring himself as - paging Dr Freud - a little boy nestled amid dream-like, childhood scenes. One of these has a Koons-like bunny; another has a Damien Hirst-like shark. "I don't go into the symbolism behind my works. On some middle ground, something clicks. I weigh up the theory and my past history quite quickly, I don't dwell on things. It's the samurai effect - a one-stroke thing, you've killed, you move on."

Apart from the knives of *Comfort*, however, the new show consists of seven distinctly un-samurai embroideries. It's true that three of them depict images of male self-defence but the rest have the quaintness of a sepia storybook.

Moshiri employs a group of about 30 women for this craft; he's more comfortable working in the female world, and in the past, he's collaborated with his Iranian artist wife, Shirin Aliabadi.

"I suppose my work is self-serving and escapist," he says. "The vocabulary of it becomes the surprise element. I always resist the type of attitudes that you're supposed to have as a contemporary artist." And those attitudes are? Moshiri utters one word, as incisive as a fatwa: "Vulgar."

You'll seek, in vain, for some underlying political comment in the show. "Sometimes I'm satisfied with the uncomplicated image, as a break," he says, strolling around the gallery.

The exhibition's title, "Picnic", is a comfortable childhood word. "I'm trying to do the opposite of what's expected. Again, it's irony, the clash between something serious which is the climate of the moment in the world and ... a picnic."

Did he go for picnics much in the Iranian countryside, with his sister and his cinema-owning father? "Not often," he replies. He smiles, grinning at his own perception of himself. "A thousand picnics right now won't make up for one you didn't have as a child."

**Farhad Moshiri's "Picnic", Galerie Perrotin, 50 Connaught Road, Central, Tue-Sat, 11am-8pm. Inquiries: 3758 2186. Until Mar 30**