

In her latest exhibition, "The Desert Beyond the City Belongs to Me," Houston-based artist Soody Sharifi re-imagines the landscapes of her native Iran. Beginning with photographs from her travels across Iran, Sharifi interjects historical imagery culled from Persian miniatures to create tableaux laden with humor and ambiguity. The disjunctive photographs bring together historical and contemporary figures in a layered narrative that speaks to her dual-citizen status.

Sharifi states: "I have lived here in the United States for 37 years. I feel like I have an insider as well as an outsider view when I go back to Iran. There are things I pay attention to which might be insignificant to an Iranian who lives his day-to-day life in Iran. So when I see the desert landscape, it reminds me of all the issues about the Middle East which I have observed while living in America, as well as my experiences as a teenager growing up in Iran. Most of the time, I feel like I see things which maybe are hidden from the average Iranian observer."

Spurred by the 2009 Iranian election, the Arab Spring, and the concomitant media maelstrom, Sharifi was inspired "to start a series which shows the paradoxes and contradictions in the social and political life in the Middle East." Looking at newspaper images and television reports, Sharifi began to wonder: "What would it look like if those events were depicted in the style of classical Persian miniatures? How would these people look in a contemporary landscape, interacting with each other? Would they be able to represent what is transpiring in the Middle East?"

Sharifi turned to her library of old books she had brought from Iran, scanning images of Persian miniatures, extracting figures from different manuscripts and inserting them in her own photographs to "tell my stories through them." For instance in *The Siege*, Sharifi remakes a contemporary battle scene with historical protagonists culled from the Safavid and Timurid periods of Persia as well as Indian

miniatures. "I'm not using just one period," she explains. "I'm bringing images from all over. Because what's happening right now, the different factions are fighting each other in the Middle East. This could be a day in Syria where it depicts different Islamic religious sects hostile to each other."

Her attention to contradiction and paradox also led to one of the more seemingly lighthearted images in the series, *The Sea that does not See*. The inspiration came from a recent trip to the south of Iran where Sharifi and a friend visited a private, women's only beach. While outside the beach's compound walls the Iranian women wore the habitual hijab, in the water the women swam in bathing suits, bikinis, and even topless. Stunned by the separation between public and private, male and female, decorum and abandon, Sharifi says, "I thought there was so much contradiction here between outside and inside world. So I wanted to depict that through my own fictional story."

However, Persian miniatures depicting nude figures are very rare. "That was very difficult," Sharifi admits. "I tried very hard to find them. It wasn't easy to find uncovered women in the Persian miniatures. It took a long time. But I found a lot of the imagery in the Indian miniatures of the Mughal period." Describing the bathing scene Sharifi likens it to a harem: "All these women in the nude, they are so comfortable with their bodies and are just playing around." The humor arises from the happenings outside the beach's protective wall. Sharifi has peppered the wall with a selection of Peeping Toms. With female skin out of sight in contemporary Iran, the nudity takes on an extra charge. "I wanted to just play with the idea of the veil and the woman's body," Sharifi divulges, "and so that's how this image came about."

In the same way that *The Sea that does not See* confounds the dictates of public and private realms, Sharifi's medium of choice also disrupts expectations. Sharifi uses the innovations in digital imaging including Photoshop and Illustrator to cannibalize older forms of image making—disrupting both the craft conventions of historical miniatures and the supposed veracity of documentary photography. As a result, her digitally collaged photographs reveal an uncertain world where time has collapsed and received narratives are open to question.

—ELLIOTT ZOOEY MARTIN

"Soody Sharifi: *The Desert Beyond the City Belongs to Me*," remains on view through January 26, 2013, at Deborah Colton Gallery. www.deborahcoltongallery.com



"THE SEA THAT DOES NOT SEE," 2012
ARCHIVAL INKJET PRINT OF DIGITAL COLLAGE
35" x 42½" EDITION OF 1/3
PHOTO: COURTESY DEBORAH COLTON GALLERY