



ABOLFAZL SHAHI

Born in Kashan, Iran in 1974
Lives and works in Tehran, Iran

EDUCATION

- 2000 B.A. Graphic Design, Tehran Azad University, Tehran, Iran
- 2010 Studied Theology and Sufism at University of Human Science, Tehran, Iran

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2012 *The Next Generation: Contemporary Iranian Calligraphy*, Galerie Kashya Hildebrand, Zurich, Switzerland
- 2012 *Alternative Calligraphy*, Gallery Homa, Tehran, Iran
- 2005 The 4th Tehran Sculpture Biennial, Tehran, Iran
- 2005 *Herbs and Happy Couples*, Homa Art Gallery, Tehran, Iran
- 2005 *Wall Angels*, Eye gallery, Dubai
- 2004 *Negative & Positive*, Barg Gallery, Tehran, Iran
- 2004 Urban Sculpture, Dubai Festival, Dubai, UAE
- 2003 *Contemporary Calligraphers*, Saba Art Hall, Tehran, Iran
- 2002 *Dancing with Closed Eyes*, Saadabad Gallery, Tehran
- 2001 *Self-portrait* Atbin Gallery, Tehran, Iran

PUBLICATIONS

- 2002 *Asking the Way* (Poems), Mahiz Publication
- 2007 *Use Low Gear* (Poems), Mahiz Publication

Though fully trained as a calligrapher, Abolfazl Shahi has turned to creating carpets that make important statements about Iranian culture. In fact, according to the art critic Shahrouz Nazari, Shahi's carpets are the most fascinating carpets woven in central Iran in the past 50 years. Born in Kashan, a city with a rich but vanishing tradition of carpet making, Shahi has turned to weaving in order to preserve the art of his homeland – the carpets of Kashan have all but disappeared over the last 30 years. In particular, Shahi seeks to preserve the memory of the women carpet weavers of Kashan by weaving into his carpets lyrics from the songs these women whispered as they worked. His carpets, then, serve as mute memorials, ensuring that the weaving songs will not be forgotten.

Literature, calligraphy, and carpet making have long been a vibrant part of Persian heritage, and Shahi's carpets bring all these art forms together. However, his practice is somewhat unorthodox: while words are ever present in Persian culture – texts rendered in beautiful calligraphy adorn mosques and public spaces – it is not common to find them woven into carpets, especially because it is considered disrespectful to walk upon words. Although Shahi's carpets are meant to be shown on the floor, it is not his intention for them to be walked on; instead, they are meant as conceptual art. In fact, placing the work on the floor creates a conceptual tension: the work is meant to preserve two vanishing art forms (weaving songs and carpet weaving) using woven calligraphy, but it is placed where viewers might trample on it. With his carpets, Shahi makes viewers reflect on their power to remember and preserve as well as to forget.

Interview with Abolfazi Shahi

What inspired you to become an artist?

Art is my communication tool. My preoccupation is to build a new language in my work. I've benefited from the richness of Iranian culture, and I want to connect its light (flame) with the rest of the world. Persians have a proverb about walnut trees that I like so much: others planted so that we could eat, so we must plant for future generations. The light of our culture has been kept alive by other artists before us, and it is our duty to carry the torch and ensure that it is transmitted to the next generation.

What training did you receive that influenced your career?

Studies are a road that guides us, but if you are not in Love and have nothing to say through your work, it will be a meaningless and long way. The Persian poet Hafez says, "To get to the house of your beloved, there will be endless dangers; you will get there if you are madly in Love."

How did you go from a graphic design career to textiles and carpets in your art form? Were you trying to reflect on classical Persian heritage in a contemporary way?

In my opinion, graphic design is the first subject any conceptual artist should learn. The best Iranian graphic designers are the carpet weavers of Sarogh, Kashan, Nain, and Bakhtiari – their tile designs and carpets still seem modern, as does Iranian architecture. In my opinion, there are simply good and bad artistic works. Time is not as important for conceptual art as it is for historians. All the good art works from 5000 years ago or today are avant garde, and the bad art works are old and dead.

Who have been your mentors or teachers?

My first mentor in the art world was Sohrab Sepehri, the "Persian poet," but I've been influenced by many learned people in the world, from Lao Tse, Russell, Burke, and Nietzsche to Eleni Karaindrou, Marlon Brando, Roger Waters, and Maradona.

Do you view yourself as a calligrapher or a graphic designer?

Both.

Do you find your graphic design education to have some relevance to calligraphy?

Graphism is knowledge of space, framing, and composition. Calligraphers write well without knowing the principles of order that graphists know, and they just assemble the well-written words together. I think understanding the space is more important than writing beautifully, and I use graphism techniques in my work.

What influences your work most: politics, current events, classical history?

Most things influence me because I am a human before being an artist – a human that knows the happiness and sadness of being a human being. As an artist, I have developed my sensibilities even further, so my happiness and sufferings are more acute. I am also a poet, so I am as sensitive about words as I am about images. An artist can be so affected by events: in extreme cases, he might even cut off his ear!

Before you used textiles as an art form, were you a painter or illustrator?

Yes. I've also had sculpture, photo, and calligraphy exhibitions. I won a prize at a sculpture Biennale. I have published a story and poetry book as well as 50 articles about Iranian popular culture and Iranology. I also have a photo project in progress. I was the artistic manager of an avant garde magazine and managed the restoration of a historical house in Kashan. Having built these projects, they, in return, have built me. Exploring popular culture, calligraphy, weaving, literature, and graphism has brought me to weaving, which tied these elements together in the carpet project – and we'll see what future projects will look like.

Have you ever lived outside of Iran?

Yes.

Have you travelled outside of Iran?

I was the artistic manager of Gallery "Eye" in Dubai for several months.

If so, did that experience impact your art in any way?

No, not much. I try to express my feelings in a beautiful language.

Does your work make any reference to your own identity and personal struggles you have experienced?

Night replaced by the morrow
Joy has conquered every sorrow
Sunlight, pervasive and thorough
And so we say, may it be so

Mawlana (13th-century Sufi poet)