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History, Identity, Memory: Nikzad Nodjoumi's *Arzhang*

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Abstract: One of the strategies available to scholars challenging the Western art-historical canon is the use of case studies of the careers of pioneering artists from the “periphery”. This essay will tell the story of a long forgotten chapter of the history of Iranian modern art which has only recently come to light. Just before the 1979 revolution, one of Iran's young avant-garde painters, Nikzad Nodjoumi (b. 1941), was invited to provide a set of illustrations for a publication and translation of the Manichean text of the *Arzhang* by the Niavaran Cultural Center in Tehran. Nodjoumi chose to focus on the theme of the prophet and painter Mani (AD 216–274) and produced a series of 280 visually and politically compelling small-scale paintings on paper. The paintings utilized a variety of strategies to construct a distinctly Iranian form of Modernism. In this series, the artist sought to synthesize Manichean themes and forms and traditional Persian manuscript elements with the abstract forms and gestural techniques of Abstract Expressionism. His principal formal inspiration was a group of folios of Manichean illustrated manuscripts datable to the eighth–ninth centuries AD located in the Museum of Asian Art in Berlin. This essay will begin by investigating the historical and cultural context of the commission; discuss the importance of the legend of Mani in Iranian culture and manuscript illustration, as well as the relationship of image and text in traditional manuscript illustration; and compare these paintings with their Manichean models. By exploring the works of one individual painter, the essay will show how Iranian artists of the post-World War II era were inventing a modernism that was both local and global. Through a close reading of this artist's creative process, themes central to Modernism such as history, identity, and memory will be illuminated.

Keywords: Nikzad Nodjoumi, modernism, Iranian art, Manichaeism, *Arzhang*, Iran

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“In order for the light to shine so brightly, the darkness must be present.” Francis Bacon

One of the strategies available to scholars challenging the Western art-historical canon is the use of case studies of pioneering artists from the “periphery”. This essay will present a long-forgotten project in the career of the Iranian artist Nikzad Nodjoumi (b. 1941), which has only recently come to light. Today Nodjoumi is internationally recognized for his politically compelling large-scale paintings set in an indeterminate yet vaguely modern time and place. His reputation has been enhanced by his affinities with post-World War II neo-expressionists who are seen as contemporaries.¹ Yet Nodjoumi belongs to an older generation of artists who began their careers in Iran after World War II.

1 The project: Revivalism and modernism in Pahlavi Iran

In 1974 the young avant-garde painter Nikzad Nodjoumi returned to Iran after a five-year hiatus studying in New York. The Tehran art scene had grown considerably in the intervening period but opportunities for Nodjoumi were limited. As a committed anti-government activist he was allowed to exhibit his works, but not to teach.² This led to presentations of his black and white figural drawings and paintings at the Seyhoun and Shahr galleries.³

The drawings at Seyhoun caught the eye of a well-known cultural impresario and publisher, Firuz Shirvanlu.⁴ A committed activist himself, Shirvanlu

1 Bui 2013: 7; Alipour 2016.

2 Nikzad Nodjoumi. “Art Education in Iran, 1963–1967. Reminiscences”. The lecture was given by Nodjoumi on November 1st, 2010 at the Iran Modern Colloquium, Asia Society Museum, New York.

3 See *Javanaan* magazine 1976: 43 for an image and *Modern Iranian Art: The International Art Fair 7'76 Basle Switzerland 16–21 June*, 1976, unpaginated, entry on Nodjoumi for a similar work. The artist's collection includes posters of his works in these shows.

4 For his biography, see entries in *Shirvanlu, Firuz*. Encyclopedia Iranica, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/shirvanlu-firuz> (04/17/2016) and Moezi Moghadam's *Kanun-e Parvares-e Fekri-e Kudakan Va Nowjavanan*. <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kanun-e-parvares-e-fekri-e-kudakan-va-nowjavanan> (17 Apr. 2016); Bidoun 2009: *Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children & Young Adults*. <http://bidoun.org/articles/institute-for-the-intellectual-development-of-children-young-adults> (17 Apr. 2016). The author and Shirvanlu were colleagues in the Secretariat and formed part of a team that opened the Negarestan Museum. The author was responsible for the installation and developed content and label copy while Shirvanlu designed and printed posters, educational and promotional materials, and publications.

had now recanted his political beliefs and joined the Institute for Intellectual Development of Young Adults (hereafter Kanoon) and, subsequently, the Private Secretariat of Shahbanou Farah Pahlavi. There he developed cultural projects and produced publications. One of his projects was the Niavarán Cultural Center, slated to open in 1977. In preparation for the opening, Shirvanlu planned a series of publications, only one of which had survived until recently. Shirvanlu's ambitious plan intended to enlist Iran's leading modernists in illustrating classic religious and philosophical texts. These included the *Qur'an*, the *Avesta*, the *Arzhang* and works related to Mithraism and Mazdak.⁵

The interest in ancient Iran was a defining feature of the Pahlavi era. Major government support focused on archaeology and archaeological excavations. Government patronage encouraged the American scholar Arthur Upham Pope (1881–1969) among others to champion the cause of Iranian art at home and abroad and led to the establishment of the Society for National Heritage in 1922 (*Anjoman-e 'Asar-e Mellie Iran*). The Achaemenid-revival style flourished in architecture and art, while statues were erected to Iran's great poets and thinkers. Probably the best known events linked to this historicism were the 1971 Shiraz celebrations of 2,500 years Iranian monarchy and Mohammad Reza Shah's famous comment addressed to the Achaemenid ruler, "Rest in peace, for we are awake, and we will always stay awake" – highly visible manifestations of the ruler's identification with Iran's glorious past.⁶ Iran's writers and intellectuals also explored Iran's ancient myths and legends.

Long forgotten by cultural critics and art historians, Shirvanlu's multi-volume project enjoyed a brief revival with the publication in 1978 of a facsimile edition of the *Avesta*.⁷ By inference, it contextualizes the new evidence we are about to present since the two projects must have been commissioned at the same time. A lavish coffee-table-size book, this luxurious tome featured translations of the text and a preface and a lengthy scholarly essay by Shirvanlu himself.⁸ The work was illustrated with 80 odd plates by Nodjoumi's contemporary Massoud Arabshahi (b. 1935), executed in Arabshahi's signature style of geometric abstraction, blending early Persian texts and esoteric Zoroastrian symbols with Abstract

⁵ Nodjoumi. Oral communication, 29 April 2016. Farhangsara also presented an exhibition of portraits by Iranian artists with an accompanying publication. Email communication, Keyvan Mahjoor 3 May 2016. Hossein Zenderoudi's illustrated *Le Coran* (Paris 1979) may have been influenced by this project.

⁶ See Grigor 2009: 72, 73, 130, 158, 176 for the sculptures; and Diba 2013: 49–51. For the Shah's comment, see Wikiquote, *Mohammed Reza Pahlavi*. https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Mohammad_Reza_Pahlavi (05/18/2016).

⁷ *Avesta* is defined as the collection of sacred texts of Zoroastrianism.

⁸ Arabshahi/Shirvanloo 1978. The following account is derived from this publication's text.

Expressionist style brushwork.⁹ The plates did not directly illustrate the text passages but evoked general themes associated with Zoroastrianism.

The preface describes the project as presenting the work of Iran's modern artists. Their selection was based on their affinity with the mission of the Niavaran Center. An impressive list of scholars in the field of Zoroastrian studies and of scholarly institutions is appended. The interpretive essay presents Shirvanlu's philosophical and cultural theories and explains his choice of Arabshahi. Shirvanlu's text, informed by the theories of German philosophers such as Hegel and Heidegger, argues for commonalities between Iranian and Western art and presents Iran as a source of abstraction and symbolism. The author further proposes the *qanat*¹⁰ system as the context for this abstraction. Shirvanlu also sees a certain level of expressionism in ancient Iranian art – contrasting this with Western preference for realism – but singling out Cézanne and van Gogh for their affinities with Iranian abstraction.

His aesthetic theories on Iranian art also focus on Arabshahi's light symbolism expressed through the preference of gold and silver, and a revised definition of ornament, a central feature of Iranian art of the Islamic period. In this contemporary reading of ancient Iranian art, he proposes a concept of "eloquent ornamentation" as an alternative to Orientalist perceptions of ornament as mere decoration – thereby presaging Islamic art historians by decades. This brilliant, expansive, argument proposed new ways of looking at Iranian art and its relationship to the West. It was also anti-Western in spirit, as Shirvanlu criticizes modern Iranian artists for submitting to neo-colonialism and for being seduced by Western value systems and romanticism.¹¹

Shirvanlu praises Arabshahi for privileging his Iranian heritage and refutes the common perception that Arabshahi was a member of the *Saqqakhaneh* school. Shirvanlu's text shows his deep understanding of Arabshahi's aesthetic as he describes the cosmological and mathematical themes and forms inherent in the artist's works, as well as the evident dualism of compositions that could be simultaneously read as serene, flexible, harsh and filled with uproar – an art where serene symbols became violent fetishes. For Shirvanlu, Arabshahi's work reflects the *chaotic world* of the present.¹² This is probably the most perceptive and eloquent assessment of the artist's work to date.

⁹ Daftari/Diba 2013: 58.

¹⁰ This refers to an old system of water-supply, which is characterized by non-linearity and internal interconnectedness.

¹¹ Here Shirvanlu follows the doctrines of Al-e Ahmad in *Qarbzadegi*. See Diba 2013: 55 and Al-e Ahmad 1984.

¹² Arabshahi Shirvanloo 1978: unpaginated.



Figure 1: Nikzad Nodjoumi, Poster for Seyhoun gallery drawing exhibition. Tehran, March 1976, Mixed Media on paper, Artist's Collection, New York.

The symbolic dimensions of Nodjoumi's powerfully muscled figures in combat or struggle at Seyhoun (Figure 1), referencing pre-Islamic concepts of good and evil, would not be lost on Shirvanlu. As a result, in 1975, he invited Nodjoumi to produce a series of paintings for a new publication of the *Arzhang*,¹³ a sacred pre-Islamic religious picture book of the third century executed by the painter-prophet Mani (AD 216–274), the founder of the Manichean religion. The paintings were intended to illustrate Manichean dogma. However, Zoroastrianism was the state religion of Sassanian Iran and after Mani was executed in 272 for heresy

¹³ In sixteenth-century Persian sources, the work is referred to as *Arzhang Lavayeh* (picture tablet). Roxburgh 2001: 175 and following.

by the ruler Shapur, the religion died out in Iran in the seventh century.¹⁴ Nevertheless, his memory lived on and he remained a mythical figure in Persian literature, celebrated as the “exemplary artist”. The dramatic life and legacy of Mani are referenced in Ferdowsi’s *Shah-Nameh*; in Nizami’s *Khamsa*; and Sa’adi’s *Golestan* and he is acclaimed, along with Behzad, in Safavid aesthetic treatises such as Dust Muhammad’s celebrated 1554 album preface on Painters and Calligraphers and Qazi Ahmad’s 1602 Treatise on Calligraphers and Painters.¹⁵ Poetic descriptions of the *Arzhang* describe a silk painted with wondrous images of men, beasts, trees and birds.

While Zoroastrianism still had adherents in twentieth-century Iran and India, and Zoroastrians were active in Iranian political and cultural life, Manicheism and its memory had long since faded. The few references we have cited above were not common knowledge in the 1970s, although the *Shah-Nameh* passages on Mani’s life and Qazi Ahmad’s references to his skills as a painter may have been the exceptions to this rule. The only specific references to Mani’s *Arzhang* are in the history *Rowzat as Safa* and Dust Muhammad’s preface, neither of which would seem to have been easily accessible to Shirvanlu. The only text mentioning Mani readily available in Iran in the 1970s was a publication of Qazi Ahmad’s work.¹⁶

On the whole, while the selection of the *Arzhang* resonates with the era’s culture of revivalism, Shirvanlu’s choice shows the breadth of his scholarship. There may have been a special interest in Mani among the literati, as he combined the roles of artist and martyr and may have served as a symbol of dissent. Shirvanlu probably knew of the painting of the *Execution of Mani* from the royal *Mongol Shah-Nameh*, recently acquired by the Private Secretariat.¹⁷ This interest in Mani is also evidenced by the publication of a monographic study on Mani and his doctrines in 1978—just after Nodjoumi completed his paintings – which featured an image of a Manichean priest identified with Mani, on its cover.¹⁸

¹⁴ See Gulacsi 2013. <http://asr.revues.org/1155> (05/18/2016) on the religion’s later history until the seventeenth century, and on newly discovered Chinese style paintings believed to have been the original illustrations to the *Arzhang*. See also Gulacsi 2015.

¹⁵ See Roxburgh 2001: 175; and Sundermann 2009. <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/mani-founder-manicheism> (05/1/2015).

¹⁶ Roxburgh 2001: 175; Suhaili-Khwansari 1987/1366.

¹⁷ For an illustration, see Grabar/Blair 1980: 148–149.

¹⁸ Nateq 1978/1357. The publication became a standard reference work for Iranian scholars. My thanks to Ehsan Siahpoush for this insight.

Shirvanlu and Nodjoumi had worked together before. In the 1960s, Shirvanlu had established the advertising agency *Negar* and was awarded publication commissions by Kanoon. He invited contemporary artists and writers, many of them leftists, to collaborate on a series of children's books. One of the most successful was *Gol e Boloor va Khorshid* (The Crystal Flower and the Sun) published in 1968 and illustrated by Nodjoumi.¹⁹ Born in Hamedan in Western Iran in 1941, Nodjoumi had studied painting with a local artist, working from Russian nineteenth-century models. In 1962, he enrolled at Tehran University's Faculty of Fine Arts, where he studied with pioneering artists and socialized with fellow students who were to become the last wave of avant-garde artists and filmmakers just before the Islamic Revolution in 1979.²⁰ Nodjoumi was completing his art history degree at Tehran University and working with Shirvanlu's advertising and publishing agency before leaving to study art in New York in 1969.

Living between New York and Tehran after 1974, Nodjoumi produced 280 paintings for the *Arzhang* project from which Shirvanlu selected 80, approximately the same number as the *Avesta*, indicating Nodjoumi's work would also have been presented in a large scale format. Tragically, it was the eve of the 1979 revolution. The project was cancelled and Nodjoumi's paintings returned to him. It is not known whether Shirvanlu completed an introduction for the *Arzhang* and if he had, if it has been preserved. Judging by the *Avesta* text, it would have been an important contribution to the historiography of modern Iranian art. The paintings were thought to have been lost in the revolution's aftermath, but by 2014 thirty of the works were recovered.²¹ A booklet entitled *The Arzhang Sketchbook of Nikzad Nodjoumi*, illustrated with these extant plates, was published at that time.²²

¹⁹ Bidoun 2009. <http://bidoun.org/articles/institute-for-the-intellectual-development-of-children-young-adults> (04/17/2016).

²⁰ Nodjoumi 2010.

²¹ Ten of the works surfaced in 2010 when they were delivered to the offices of *Tavoos* magazine. Eight of these were recovered by the artist and included in the 2014 publication. In 2013 *Tavoos* published an anonymous article on Nodjoumi which included a brief illustrated discussion of the *Arzhang* paintings. In 2014, Nodjoumi signed and dated the recovered works with the dates 1975 and 1976. The artist and his publisher are investigating the possibility of locating the remaining works.

²² Account compiled from Nodjoumi's interview with the author January 21, 2015 and subsequent conversations. See also *The Arzhang Sketchbook of Nikzad Nodjoumi*, 2014. Anonymous introduction translated by Sohrab Mahdavi, and *Tavoos* entry, "Tavoos Featured Artist: Nicky Nodjoumi". <http://www.tavoosonline.com/FutureArtist/AloneEn.aspx?src=32&Page=1> (04/30/2016).

The paintings reveal Nodjoumi's prowess as an artist early in his career. They have never been considered in the context of the history of Iranian modernism or of his evolution as an artist. In these visually and politically compelling small-scale paintings on paper, Nodjoumi explored a variety of strategies in his struggle to invent a distinctly personal form of Iranian Modernism – a modernism both cosmopolitan and authentically local. In this series, the artist sought to synthesize Manichean themes and forms and traditional Persian manuscript elements with abstract forms and gestural techniques appropriated from Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art.

2 Nodjoumi's *Arzhang*, Iranian modernism and the New York years

Although by this time a committed avant-garde artist, with this commission Nodjoumi revisited themes of Iranian identity and history that had engaged artists since the Reza Shah period. Post war artists such as Jalil Ziapour(1920–1999) – who introduced Cubism to Iran – and Ahmad Esfandiari (born 1922) – who channelled Fauvism – were not really successful in their attempts at fusing Western styles with Iranian subject matter. The approach was superficial – grafting Western styles of painting onto Iranian subject matter. Nevertheless, Parviz Tanavoli, one of the founders of the *Saqqakhaneh* movement, successfully blended elements of Western and Iranian popular culture with a semi-abstract style. Additionally, Tanavoli's identification with the Sassanian sculptor Farhad presents parallels with Nodjoumi's affinity with Mani – painter, political activist and martyr. As we have shown, Arabshahi was also a leading exponent of abstraction deeply grounded in pre-Islamic forms.

Like Tanavoli, Nodjoumi had been thoroughly immersed in mainstream modernism: Tanavoli in Minneapolis, Brera and New York, Nodjoumi largely in New York. The period from the late 1960s to the late 1970s was the era of Abstract Expressionism, Color Field painting, and the beginnings of Pop Art, Minimalism and Conceptualism, as well as political art, such as the work of Leon Golub. Nodjoumi would have been exposed to all of these as a student at the School of Visual Arts and at City College. In New York Nodjoumi and his wife, the artist Nahid Haqiqat, mingled with Iranian émigré intellectuals and artists such as Ardesir Mohasses. Nodjoumi was also connected with leftists belonging to the “Confederation”, also known as Iranian Student Organization. He attended exhibitions of artists that were to fundamentally influence his practice, such as Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, who were given

numerous shows by the influential dealer Leo Castelli, and visited shows of Francis Bacon – formative influences he readily acknowledges and which enrich and complicate his *Arzhang* paintings.²³ Arguably, this first-hand knowledge of current international practices was largely responsible for the success of the *Arzhang*.

3 The *Arzhang* and Nodjoumi's artistic evolution

After more than thirty years of quiet, persistent work in New York, Nodjoumi was “discovered” by the New York art world in 2013 when he was featured in *Iran-Modern* and given a solo exhibition at the Taymour Grahne gallery.²⁴ In Iran, he has been hailed as one of the ten most important Iranian artists of twentieth century.²⁵ Numerous reviews, articles and publications followed, but none sought to locate his recent work within his artistic evolution. That chapter of his career remained to be written. One difficulty was that most of his works were lost after he was given a show at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (TMoCA) in 1981.²⁶ Therefore, the thirty-odd rediscovered works discussed here fill an important gap: not only do they evidence his early maturity as a painter, but, together with a handful of other works, they also presage the themes and formal concerns of the older artist²⁷ According to Nodjoumi himself, the small-scale figures in the *Arzhang* paintings are the strongest links to his later work.²⁸

The *Arzhang* paintings show a profound awareness and engagement with both local painting traditions and international modernism. Far from simply replicating these models, Nodjoumi's process was self critical and reflective, evincing a sophisticated use of myriad, thoroughly internalized, sources.

²³ Nodjoumi. Interview, 2015. Other important influences include the Mexican muralists.

²⁴ Daftari/Diba 2013: 39–40; Anrather/Grahne 2013.

²⁵ Kaarnama 2015. <http://asrhonar.wix.com/asrhonar#!Building-a-Consensus-about-the-Iranian-Canon-of-Art/cjds/552be09b0cf21933cd59aee1> (04/18/2016).

²⁶ Nodjoumi 2010.

²⁷ The corpus of about 10–15 paintings and drawings includes works shown at the Roko in New York in 1975, the Seyhoun and Shahr gallery shows, Art Basel in 1976, TMoCA and in the artist's collection. Two works were shown in Iran Modern. See above note 24. Nodjoumi's illustrations for children's books which continued throughout his years in Iran show little relation to his works on paper and paintings. This essay's illustrations can only hint at the importance of these works. It is to be hoped that a comprehensive publication in the future would do them justice.

²⁸ Nodjoumi. Interview, 2015.

According to the artist, his personal goal with these paintings was to explore the structure of Persian manuscript painting and how to accommodate this with the strategies of modernism.²⁹

These figurative compositions were conceived as evocations of long lost histories with secondary contemporary references. They are necessarily less specifically modern in their political content when compared with the large-scale paintings and drawings after 1975. They are also small in scale, referencing the “Persian miniature” but nevertheless as powerful in impact as the larger works of the era. Further, the small-scale paintings are perhaps easier to understand as well since – once decoded – they refer to familiar imagery and themes, as we will discuss. Finally, the *Arzhang* corpus allows us to chart Nodjoumi’s process in detail – a rare opportunity in the field of modern Iranian art. This process shows Nodjoumi’s trajectory working though and exploring various formal concerns. The works are in a sense unfinished – which is perhaps the essence of Iranian Modernity – making Nodjoumi one of the quintessential Iranian modernists.³⁰

4 The *Arzhang* paintings: Formal and thematic analysis

According to the artist, the remaining paintings suffice to illustrate the main themes and approaches of the missing works. It is not known how Shirvanlu would have organized the images in his publication. The current order begins and ends with paintings evoking the image of Mani, alone and with followers (Figure 2). In between, a series of compositions presents a range of themes and approaches noted previously. The works were not intended to be direct illustrations or present narratives as in traditional manuscript painting, a similar approach to that of Arabshahi.³¹

The works are executed in mixed media on paper approx. 68 by 53 cm in size. The size references manuscripts while the technique – pencil, gouache, ink, eraser – is clearly related to the techniques and materials of Rauschenberg and Johns. In 2014, Nodjoumi signed and dated the recovered works with the dates 1975 and 1976. The artist has identified four different styles in the works; an abstract version of a manuscript page with vigorous brushwork (Figures 4 and 5);

²⁹ Nodjoumi. Interview, 2015.

³⁰ Kapur 2001 [2000]: 287, 298.

³¹ Nodjoumi. Oral communication, 14 May, 2015.



Figure 2: Nikzad Nodjoumi, *Mani with followers*, Arzhang Sketchbook. Tehran, Circa 1976, Mixed Media on paper, 28 × 22 in, Artist's Collection, Tehran.

folio-like paintings with burned edges and Manichaean style script (Figure 3); closer interpretations of Manichean manuscript folios (Figure 7); pages centered on words, especially “*fariad*” (cry) which Nodjoumi describes as subjective (Figure 6). Each of these experiments carries complex layers of meaning and references current painting concerns and local politics: the first fuses traditional structure with Abstract Expressionist gestures; the second references the burning of Mani’s books by his enemies and indirectly censorship issues in modern Iran, as well as contemporary artistic experiments with the medium; the third engages more directly with Manichean painting; the fourth refers to the struggle for light to emerge from the darkness, a symbolic cry for freedom.



Figure 3: Leaf from a Manichaean Book, Khocho, Temple K, eighth-ninth century. Manuscript Painting, 17.2×11.2 cm, Museum für Indische Kunst Berlin, MIK III 6368, r.

Formal analysis of the traditional features of the paintings reveals some elements are appropriated from the figural style, script and iconography of Manichaean manuscript and wall painting, such as grapes and trees or details of costume and headgear worn by the figures (Figures 3 and 7). Indeed, among his sources Nodjoumi has identified a publication in English on Manichaean art lent to him by Shirvanlu.³² The division of surface into rectangles and colour blocks is reminiscent of the structure of sixteenth-century illustrated manuscript folios and landscape compositions of mountains inhabited by genies and

³² Unfortunately the artist's description has yet to be identified with a specific text.



Figure 4: Nikzad Nodjoumi, *Untitled*, Arzhang Sketchbook.

Tehran, Circa 1976, Mixed Media on paper. 28×22 in, Artist's Collection, Tehran.

animals. Fantastic animals and monsters recall the *divs* and *jinns* of Persian folklore and popular and manuscript painting, although they are entirely original creations of the artist's imagination. Intriguingly, Nodjoumi's compositions seek to escape the boundaries imposed by the organization of the page into a central rectangular space for text or image and large margins, a feature of fifteenth and sixteenth-century Persian manuscript illustrations.

Contemporary details include modernist figures and words rendered in newspaper font as well as references to numerical charts, favored by the

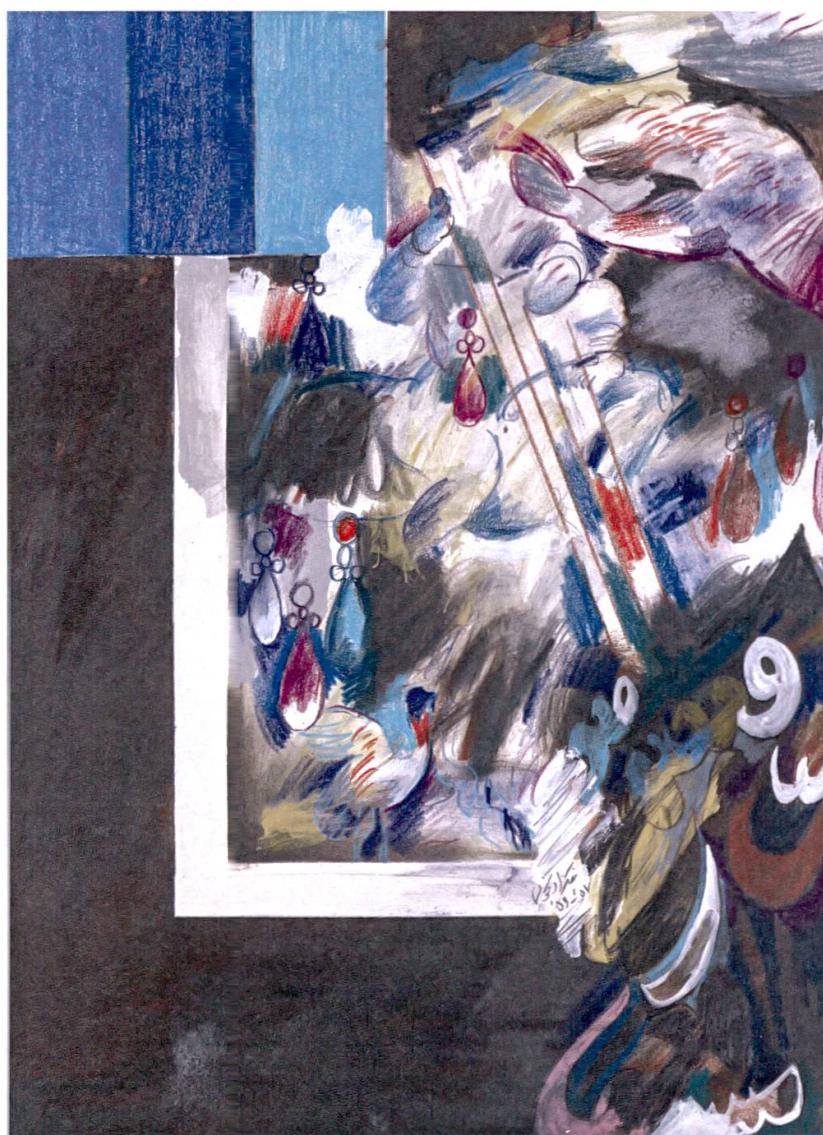


Figure 5: Nikzad Nodjoumi, *Untitled*, Arzhang Sketchbook.
Tehran, Circa 1976, Mixed Media on paper. 28×22 in, Artist's Collection, Tehran.

Saqqakhaneh painters. The artist has also appropriated Jasper Johns's target forms. A haloed figure with superimposed hand may be read as an Iranian Shiite saint or referring to Johns's Pop Art imagery.

It is in his execution that we see how the artist has used the techniques of Western painting of the era such as erasures (Rauschenberg), or division of surface into planes (Bacon).³³ The gestural brushstroke creates large swaths of

³³ Nodjoumi also appropriated the grid, a favourite strategy of avant-garde painters, for his paintings.

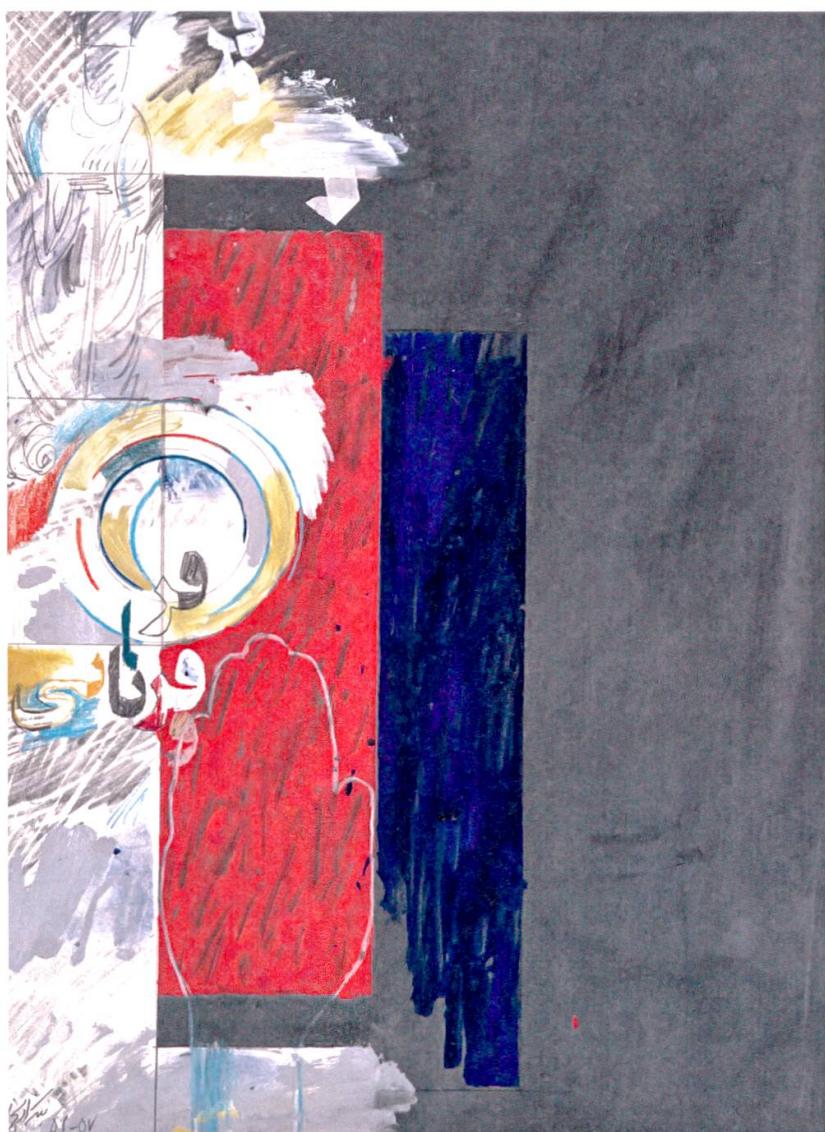


Figure 6: Nikzad Nodjoumi, *Untitled*, Arzhang Sketchbook.
Tehran, Circa 1976, Mixed Media on paper. 28 × 22 in, Artist's Collection, Tehran.

colour, especially black, from which figures and other forms emerge. Perhaps Nodjoumi's closest affinity is with the enfant terrible of the 1960s and 1970s Robert Rauschenberg: both artists were politically committed and Nodjoumi's works present formal similarities with those of Rauschenberg, especially his works on paper (Figure 8).³⁴

³⁴ We see certain correspondences between the *Arzhang* project and Rauschenberg's illustrations for the *Inferno*. See Richardson/Vanity Fair 1997.



Figure 7: Members of the Manichean Church, photograph of now-lost original.
H: 88 × W:168.5 cm, Fragment of a Turfan Manichaen Wall Painting; SMPK, Museum für Indische Kunst (Berlin), MIK III 6918.

More specifically, the power of the paintings stems from their evocation of the struggle for freedom symbolized by colour forms pushing through the darkness,³⁵ a formal strategy used in almost all the paintings. Nodjoumi's masterful manipulation of form and colour is complemented by his sparing use of words and letters subtly alluding to the political atmosphere of the era. This political content becomes clearer by comparison with his large-scale paintings of hulking menacing figures and an atmosphere of repression recalling the visual language of Leon Golub, who openly dealt with political oppression and torture.

Ultimately these elements are successfully fused into a whole so the viewer remains unaware of the artist's sources so carefully decoded in this essay. The *Arzhang* paintings may be grounded in a Manichean world view and evoke the spirit of Mani's silk and its legacy in Persian painting yet simultaneously they suggest a modern world of chaos caught between political systems and fundamental differences in value, as Shirvanlu had intuited in the paintings of Arabshahi. Nevertheless, in these small-scale images of the artist's world, we may perhaps discern some hope, a ray of light emerging from the primeval blackness.

³⁵ Nodjoumi. Interview, 2015.

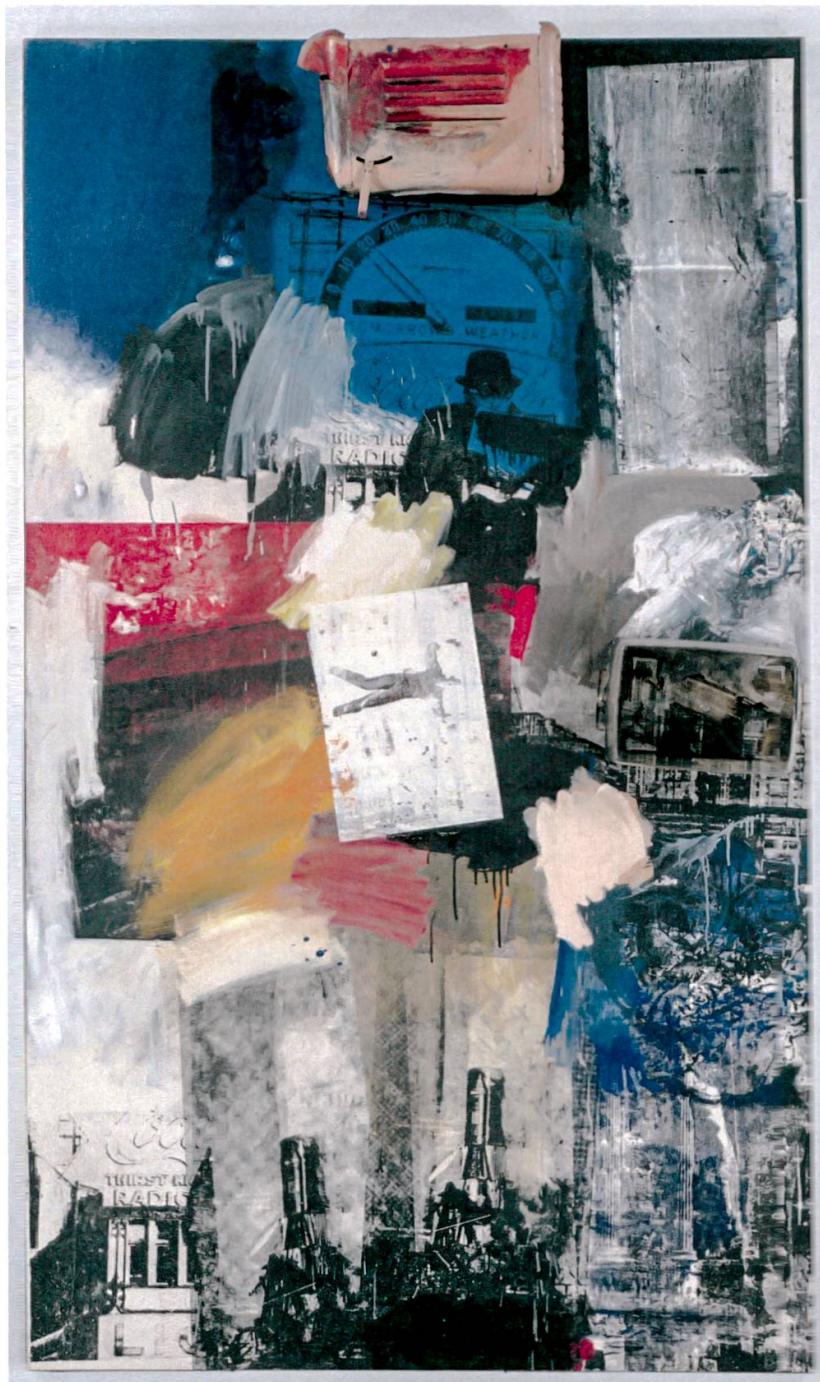


Figure 8: Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled*, 1963.

Oil, silkscreened ink, metal, and plastic on canvas, $82 \times 48 \times 6 \frac{1}{4}$ inches
($208.3 \times 121.9 \times 15.9$ cm). Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York Purchased with funds contributed by Elaine and Werner Dannheisser and The Dannheisser Foundation, 1982. Accession No. 82.2912. Art © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

The *Arzhang* series sheds light on essential features of Iranian Modernism which fundamentally differentiated it from mainstream movements: the interest in history, memory and identity; the sense of incompleteness of the artistic process; and the accommodations reached – even on the eve of the 1979 revolution – between the goals of the avant-garde and those of the government. Although Nodjoumi was a social activist whose career received little or no government support, this project, commissioned by a reformed leftist turned government official, speaks to the complexity of the politics of Iranian modernism and its patronage. Its final significance is as an episode of globalism *avant la lettre* when an Iranian artist successfully negotiated the lessons learned from the 'New World' with the tradition and culture of the 'Old World'. It affords a rare opportunity to rethink the relationship between Iranian and global Modernism.

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