

Soheila Sokhanvari, British Passport, 2016, © Soheila Sokhanvari

Soheila Sokhanvari in conversation with Marketa Vasickova

AN INTERVIEW WITH SOHEILA SOKHANVARI

Soheila Sokhanvari is an Iranian-born, multimedia artist and human rights activist currently living and working in Cambridge. Her work addresses the contemporary political landscape, particularly focusing on pre-revolutionary Iran of 1979 and Iranian politics. Exploring collective historical narratives through the lens of the individual, her work reflects on and questions various systems of power including citizenship, nationality and gender and aims to foster empathy and critical dialogue. Her artistic practice materialises in egg tempera paintings, symbolism and poetry as well as using found objects to create sculptural works.

Most recently, in 2023, she has exhibited "We Could be Heroes" at the Heong Gallery in Cambridge, depicting portraits of Iranian women silenced by the 1979 Revolution, including that of singer Ezat Roohbakhsh and actor Shoorangiz Tabatabaee. These paintings are made using egg tempera on vellum, following the Iranian tradition of miniature painting. Another strand of the exhibition reflects on the role the discovery of crude oil in Iranian politics, embodied in paintings that layer crude oil to reveal snapshots from popular culture in pre-1979 Iran and family photographs. The exhibition negotiates between the personal and the collective, the national and the global, depicting Iranian muses as well as Soheila's own family and friends, tackling overarching themes such as womanhood, democracy and individuality.

In this interview, Marketa Vasickova talks to Soheila about resistance, citizenship and the intersection of science and art. We discuss her most recent exhibition as well as "Passports", an artwork that directly tackles hierarchies of nationality and belonging.



We Could be Heroes, Courtesy of Soheila Sokhanvari

Marketa Vasickova: How do you conceptualise 'systems' in your work and do they serve as points of reference?

Soheila Sokhanvari: I think of systems as specific structures that surround us all – at a political as well as a social level. Some of these systems were embedded centuries ago and continue to determine how we organise our lives. We therefore might not have full control over them. They often choose us and, in that way, they also influence the kinds of narratives we tell and abide by. To this extent, they influence my work at a very macro level. As an artist, the art world as a system determines which rules I have to consider, and simultaneously, what I come to question or how I attempt to resist certain structures.

MV: It is clear that resistance acts as a thread throughout your work. Your portraits of significant Iranian female figures in particular, evoke a strong sense of 'everyday resistance'. How do you, personally, conceive of resistance and how is this reflected in your work?

SS: I believe resistance consists of a broad spectrum of actions. Your rebellion may lie in what you eat, how you dress, and more generally in how you decide to live your life. Such everyday instances of rebellion are often the beginnings of major social and political movements. My work aims to reflect that in a country like Iran, the everyday rebellion has the potential to become fruitful for future generations and to result in something quite monumental.

To be an artist or to be creative in Iran has been, and continues to be, an act of rebellion in itself. Iranian women have historically had to negotiate tensions at multiple levels – the political, as well as the social. Oftentimes, they had to negotiate existing in conservative families, or precarious backgrounds and their rebellion very much lay in how they presented themselves, but also the creativity they expressed. The portraits showcase women who stepped out of the mould and often rebelled against their own families in order to become singers, dancers or performers. Women have always been at the forefront of rebellion and I believe to some extent, that rebellious inclination has been quite an organic development.

MV: When observing the 'We Could Be Heroes' exhibition at the Heong Gallery, the viewer may notice that your portrayal of Iranian women and their femininity is one that markedly differs from the way Iranian women are represented in Western media. Was the intention behind this collection to illuminate such inconsistencies and gaps in narrative?

SS: Definitely, the attempt to illuminate gaps in historical narratives, or to highlight the alternative viewpoint, is a thread that runs through my work more broadly. With this series, I tried to showcase the real story of individual Iranian women – one very different to that presented by Western media. Western media has a tendency to stereotype Iranian women, inherently constructing us into the image of the 'Other', disabling its audience to feel empathy or



Soheila Sokhanvari, *Bang (Portrait of Franak)*, We Could be Heroes Series, 2019, egg tempera, © Soheila Sokhanvari



Soheila Sokhanvari, *Rebel (Portrait of Zinat Moadab)*, 2022, Screenprint Systems

sisterhood, instead allowing for the materialisation of oppression and discrimination. In the series, I attempted to show that these women are no different to any other women. Through giving them back their sexiness, sassiness and beauty, I wanted to rebuild the empathy and relationality that is lost in mainstream Western media discourse.

MV: One of your works in the series is particularly intriguing as its true colours are only illuminated if the viewer interacts with it by reversing the colours of their phone display through the 'Invert' function. What space does this occupy in the series as a whole?

SS: Producing this particular work in the series was really challenging - it was difficult to figure out exactly how to get the colour combinations right and how to manage the lighting. I was determined to bring it to life, however, as the idea behind it really encompassed the idea behind the whole series. It serves as a metaphor to the fact that these women were being viewed through the lens of the camera, on the television screen, yet their life encompassed so much more. In a similar way, it is revealed to the audience that there are multiple dimensions to the portrait when looked at from a different perspective, through a different lens. The audience, by having to take their phone out, has to actively engage with the artwork and in this way, the artwork becomes an almost performative exercise. Today, when many viewers spend less than seven seconds with an artwork, such interaction and performance potentially makes the artwork stick in the audience's mind for longer.

MV: Your *"Passport"* work, embodied in a sculpture that displays passports of various nationalities, similarly seems to tackle such systems of power and representation. How did this work begin, where is it heading and what are some of the themes the artwork tackles?

SS: I began the series in 2005, when I was given an old Nazi passport by a German friend of mine, who found it in his attic. I could never actually deal with that specific passport. It urged me to reflect on how the object of the passport can reveal so much intimate information, including one's political affiliation. I then started collecting and buying passports from friends, from antique markets or from Ebay and I now have about 200 passports from different countries around the world.

The work draws on another overarching theme of my art more broadly – telling the story of the collective through the lens of the individual. Once you allow people to understand the individual, they can begin to understand the collective experience as well. To me, passports not only represent an object of identification, but also a metric through which individuals get judged, alongside their skin or their personal identity. Through my possession of the Iranian passport, I get judged based on the actions of my government, rather than my own. In this way, nationality becomes one's second skin and the passport determines how that skin is viewed



Soheila Sokhanvari, *Love Atomic (Portrait of Googoosh)*, We Could be Heroes Series, 2023, egg tempera, © Soheila Sokhanvari

and presented to the world. As an object, the passport has the ability to restrict our movements as well as out rights. It therefore represents a multiplicity of systems of power including ethnicity, citizenship and state wealth.

In terms of the object itself, I am intrigued by how the passport as such is made and what that tells us not only about the nationality it represents, but also about its positionality within the world. For instance, the American passport is a beautifully crafted docu-



Soheila Sokhanvari, *Love Atomic (Portrait of Googoosh)*, We Could be Heroes Series, 2023, egg tempera, © Soheila Sokhanvari

ment – it has these watermarks, intricate emblems, the pages are made from thick and quality paper. On the other hand, the Persian passport for instance doesn't have such qualities. The difference between the countries of the Global North and Global South countries in terms of their wealth is therefore reflected in the passport as a material object. The only aspect that is standardised is the photograph – the dimensions of it are to an extent universal. I am interested in how people appear in this set composition and how these passport photographs can themselves become a sort of portrait exhibition if displayed together. The passports are therefore found objects that I do not necessarily have control over, I merely decide to display them.

MV: At first glance, the viewer may notice that you often write over certain passports and frequently work with language within this project. Can language be conceived of as a system of power in itself, particularly in its relation to citizenship and ethnicity?

SS: I regard language to be extremely important – it is tied in with notions of citizenship and is pregnant with meaning. For instance, there's this bit at the back of the British passport that denotes how holding one, you become the subject of the queen. There is an implication of hierarchy within that. We must question how this language inhibits or advances our rights – it is indicative of how we, to a certain extent, give up our autonomy to our government. Such language can also very quickly turn to be oppressive – it can come to dictate how we behave. To some extent, it also cannot be fought. As an artist, I aim to reflect on this and make people aware of it.

MV: You previously worked in cytogenics. Is there any aspect of your art that relates back to your career in science?

SS: That was a rebellion in itself. I've always been a very creative child and I've carried that childish desire within me to keep making art. Growing up I wanted to continue with my art practice, but I never actually understood what being an artist entailed, I wasn't aware of the fact that you can live a life as an artist. After my A-levels, I wasn't given the option to be an artist, as my family believed this would lead to a precarious life for me, and so I became a scientist, which I hated. Having said that, my knowledge of science informs my art practice – my knowledge of physics enables me to know what is possible in my sculptural work for instance. Similarly, my scientific knowledge of how pigments exist in the world and how they are made has informed how I develop my own colours and inks.

The choice to become an artist, later on in my life, therefore wasn't too difficult, but required a lot of work. I faced many challenges along the way, throughout education and in terms of fitting into the art world system as an older woman and a mother. I continued to focus on my art, which in the end got noticed, rather than me being noticed. My art was always my loudest voice.



Soheila Sokhanvari,
Saudi Passport, ©
Soheila Sokhanvari



Passports, Courtesy of Soheila Sokhanvari, Installation view: Crossroads Art Fair, 2016