

Cultural Daily

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Art Doesn't Have to Be Political to Bring Us Together

Natalie Lemle · Wednesday, August 30th, 2017

Let me begin with a series of truisms that have been said so often they've lost their meaning: art brings communities together; art is truth; the arts empower. To be fair, they're truisms because there is truth to them – and these sayings are consistent with the deluge of political and socially responsive art that we have seen in this past year, especially from American artists.

I recently befriended the Safarani Sisters, Iranian artists Bahareh and Farzaneh Safarani, who just gained residency in the United States through a O-1B petition, otherwise known as the visa for artists of extraordinary ability. Their work is not explicitly political, but in getting to know them, I have come to believe that their presence in this country, along with other international artists living and producing work in the States, can be a stronger driver for social change than a literal American artistic response to it.



Pause, Safarani Sisters, 2017. This painting is overlaid with a subtle video projection – rain on the window pane and fabrics moving in the breeze – which compels the viewer to spend more time with the piece. Image courtesy of the artists.

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When you first observe their work, the western influence on their training is undeniable. They paint Vermeer-like interiors and figures that recall Goya portraits. Then you realize: when there are figures in their works, they are always women. Women that are uncovered. Holding a hijab, but not always wearing it. Their identity as Iranian, non-western women slowly emerges from initially familiar compositions, thereby enabling the viewer to relate to the artists with her guard down, an experience that provokes empathy.

I should insert here that I am not a highly political person – I have always preferred to escape reality through art or novels. I acknowledge that this makes me privileged. Being an educated, American white woman who was empowered by her parents to pursue the arts has allowed me to live a largely non-political existence. Of course I care about social issues – I work with companies to connect to their communities through art for a living – but in the wake of Charlottesville, I have a heightened awareness that the stakes are low for me.

The stakes are not low for the Safarani Sisters. In Iran, public display of their artwork is illegal. Iran's strict censorship rules on the appearance of women, and on topics that are permitted to be

discussed openly, are not friendly to paintings of uncovered women (especially produced by female artists) and are not authorized by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic guidance.

Even outside of Iran, it's a risk to create this kind of work. When they talk about their paintings, they describe the identity of their subjects as contradictory. The woman in the painting, which is usually a portrait of either Bahareh or Farzaneh, is always depicted in the privacy of an interior space, yet she is still choosing to hold her black veil. "It represents the authenticity that she carries with her," they told me.

Lately the sisters have been producing paintings layered with video projections. The video projections are subtle – a window curtain blowing gently from a breeze, a moving shadow reflected in a mirror. Rain on a window pane. This movement compels the viewer to spend more time in front of the work, which enables her to truly consider what she's looking at and how it makes her feel. When you spend time with this work, it becomes clear that there is a depth of experience and meaning that is indicative of "extraordinary ability." It would be a shame to censor this art, not only because it's moving, but because we see ourselves in it.

Self-identity is part of the human experience, regardless of nationality. It's something that we can all relate to, and on a subliminal level, the viewer of the paintings senses this. That's what initially drew me to their work; then I became curious about the artists behind it. Even if we're not conscious of it, we want to find ways to relate to each other. If we see ourselves in a work of art, we like it more. If the art happens to have been created by an Iranian artist, or any non-American artist, a bridge has been built, even if it's tenuous.

Ultimately, the most compelling art right now is compelling because it's human. Protest art, this year's controversial Whitney Biennial, all of the anti-Trump work coming out of the art world – it all speaks to the experience that we're having as humans. More specifically, American humans. And don't get me wrong – I love seeing art serve a higher purpose; art that drives social change is more relevant than ever. But art doesn't have to be explicitly political in order to affect change. If it can provoke empathy for another person or another culture, it has served a higher purpose. This is one of the reasons why it's so valuable to have artists from other countries and cultures living in the United States.

Art doesn't need to be headline-grabbing art to have an impact. In some ways, art that is less polarizing can be more effective, because the viewer's guard is down. And this is something that is true about art – regardless of race, religion, economic background, gender, nationality – if it was produced by a human, it is human. Our similarities bring us together. Empathy for each other brings us together. The Safarani Sisters' art is a reminder of that.

Top image: Absence, Safarani Sisters, 2015. The interior spaces in the sisters' paintings recalls the western influences on their work. This piece recently sold in an exhibition supported by The Peabody Essex Museum. Image courtesy of the artists.

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