

Me, myself and identity

Four women open a window into their inner selves through self-portraits

BY JYOTI KALSI
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Self Portraits and Portraits is an exhibition that offers a rare glimpse into the inner world of a woman. The show features self-portraits by four female artists, Soodeh Bagheri, Shideh Tami, Ahoo Hamed and Shahla Hussaini Barzi, all based in Tehran. But despite the restrictions faced by women in the Iranian society, they have bared not only their faces but also their souls in the paintings, to express not only their innermost thoughts and emotions but also to explore the many layers of their inner self in the voyage of self-discovery.

The four women belong to different generations. Tami and Barzi are established artists in their fifties while Hamed and Bagheri are in their early thirties. Their work reflects their very different experiences and perspectives on life. But, together, the paintings present a collage of the many facets of a woman and her world. What emerges from these diverse artworks is a portrait of a woman's soul that every woman can identify with.

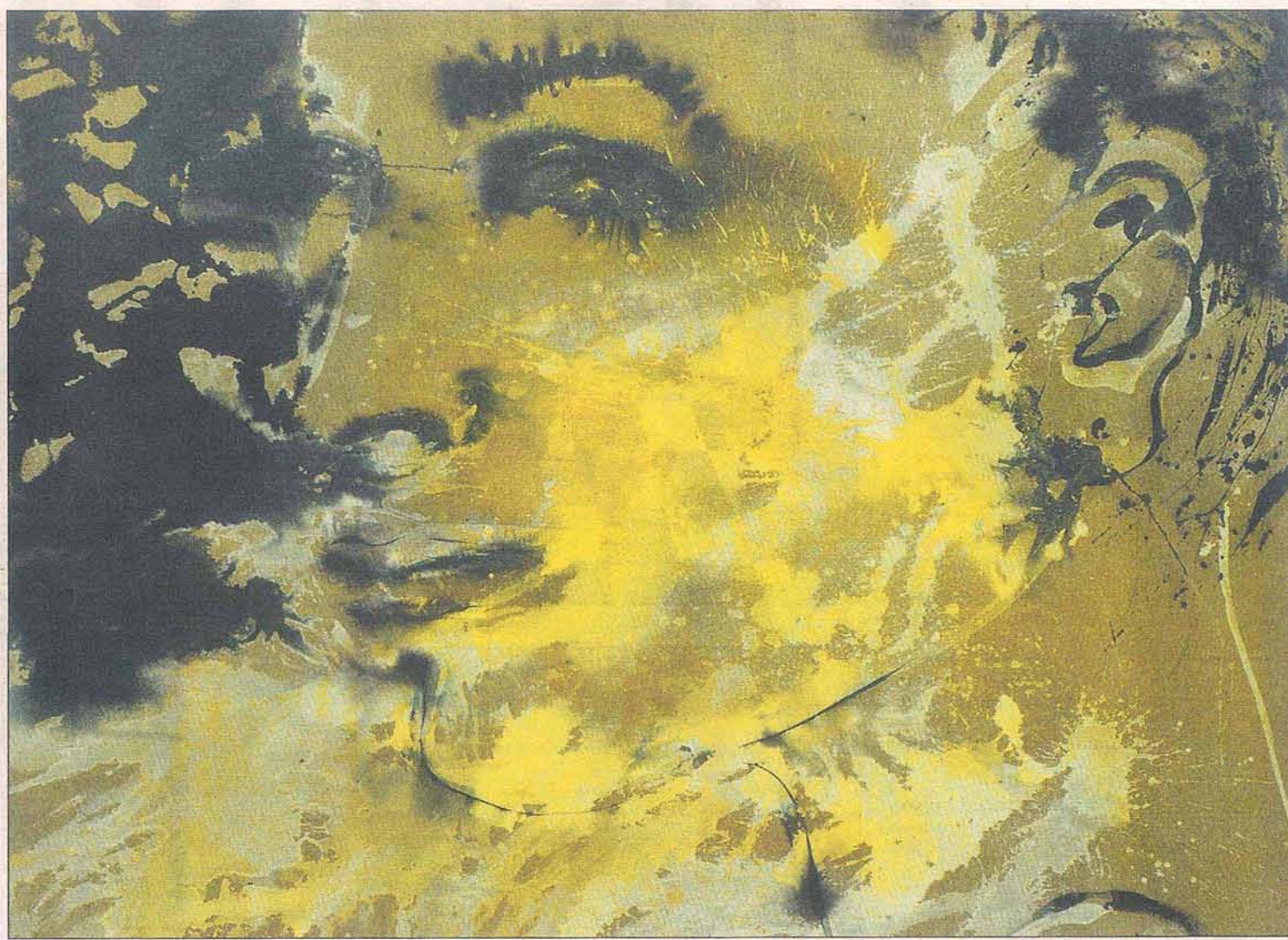
'Eyes never lie'

Tami, who is a painter and a sculptor, has always focused on self-portraits. For the paintings in this show she has used various media, colours and textures to capture her many moods. She does not use photographs or a mirror to create her self-portraits. And the most prominent feature in her paintings is her eyes.

"The human body and portraits have always attracted me as subjects, because through them I can express my emotional and intellectual state. I always work from my own perception of myself, and I always begin with the eyes. All my compositions revolve around the eyes because they never lie and are a true reflection of the soul within. Each portrait reveals a different facet of my personality. Some emerge from my feelings of loneliness and fear while others portray the brave and defiant person within me," she says.

"The process of creating these self-portraits is extremely emotional. But ultimately, I want people to see that life has made me tough and taught me how to survive and keep going in a world of uncertainty. In my country, a woman's life is difficult, but I am happy with what I have — I am happy to be in this world and to be a woman with all the complexity, fears and beauty that comes with it."

Barzi's attitude is quite different, however. She finds it relaxing to make self-portraits and portraits of her friends. Her



Self-portraits by Ahoo Hamed (above) and Shideh Tami (below)

spontaneous pencil drawings on paper capture moments spent with friends and quiet moments of introspection.

She always uses a mirror to create self-portraits. "Looking at myself closely in the mirror allows me to communicate with the inner layers of 'self'. And the process of live painting allows me to capture ephemeral moments in the present. I do not like to paint from a photograph because the time gap creates a distance from the moment and mood, which prevents you from capturing the spontaneous flow of intuitive emotions. For me, making a self-portrait is a matter of discovering what you know is within you. I always start with the eyes, which brings me closer to myself. The most difficult part is to see yourself — your real self and not the preferred image of yourself that may be stronger, more beautiful and more glorious. In fact, it is a process that occurs between what you are and what you want to be, and the final work is a combination of both," she says.

Barzi also sees the act of sketching her



friends as a way of communicating with them. "It strengthens my relationships with them. But my friends are not necessarily good models, so I rarely have much time to do these portraits. That is why I have to use a dark pencil and paper. If they could sit still for a longer time, I would use colourful chalk pastels, but that rarely happens. So the strength of my work is in the lines rather than the colours. I try to embody the character of my model through the quick strokes, flu-

ent boundaries and interweaving of lines in my drawings," she says.

Hamed, too, uses a mirror for her self-portraits. For this exhibition, however, she has painted from her imagination. "I have painted myself so many times using a mirror that my face is etched in my memory. But the physical manifestation is not at all important to me. For me doing a self-portrait is about figuring out how to see my real self, because we have so many different faces and I am not sure which one is genuine," she says.

The artist's latest series, *Silence*, is painted on textured fabric and raw canvas; and she has used ink and acrylic running into water to give her colourful paintings a watercolour-like transparency and fragility. "I have tried to convey the vulnerability of women through my brush strokes and mixed-media techniques. I called this series *Silence* because silence is what we all share in our unique way. We experience silence with words in our mind, and I find this contradiction very interesting," Hamed says.

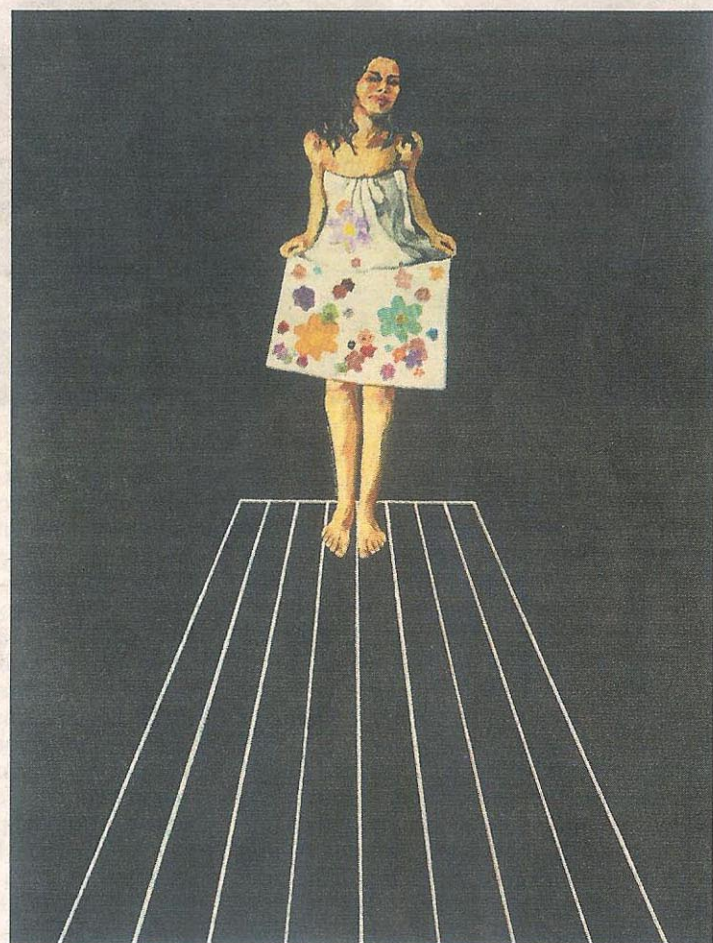
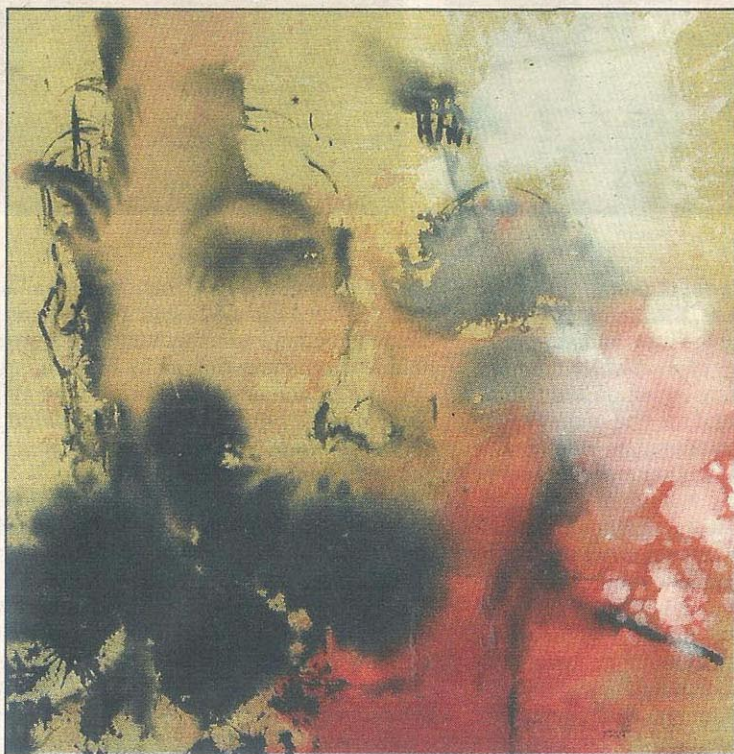
On the other hand, Bagheri's intense paintings express myriad emotions. They tell a moving story that is deeply personal, yet quite universal. The narrative includes a nostalgic look at her carefree childhood, the painful transition to womanhood and coping with the pressures of marriage and the expectations of society. It goes on to express her sense of isolation, helplessness and anger at being trapped in an unhappy marriage and stereotypical roles, the sadness that engulfed her after the annulment of the marriage and her determination to be strong and free.

A brave front for others

Bagheri's self-portraits are based on the many photographs she takes of herself in different moods and situations. "My interest in self-portraits goes back to a childhood incident that triggered my desire to discover my real self. I remember very clearly that I fell down the stairs, but I immediately stood up and smiled. Even though I was in pain, I tried to hide my real feelings till I could not hold back the tears any more. I often think about that incident and try to analyse why I did not reveal my feelings and had the desire to appear happy when I was not. It makes me wonder about how many times I have not been myself and just played a role for others. It also raises other questions in my mind, such as: Who am I? Does my inner self belong to me? Has it been made by me or created by the demands of society and my circumstances in life? How much of me is there in myself and how much is influenced by society, family and friends? When do I follow my inner impulses and ignore what people around me want?" she says.

These questions motivated her to give up other genres of painting to focus on self-portraits. "I hoped that making self-portraits would help me discover my inner mysteries. I felt that if I could find myself and get in touch with my inner self, I would be able to be myself. Although my work cannot remain unaffected by the society I live in and the things that happen around me, I have tried to keep myself away from the outside world so that my paintings truly reflect my inner feelings," Bagheri says.

Her paintings often feature a doll. In the series created during her marriage, the doll appears along with her as a symbolic reference to her changed role in society and the pressure on women to produce children. But in another piece, a huge triptych composed of 36 small canvases, the doll appears as a representation of the artist. "When children play with their toys they create imaginary situations and a fantasy world that is not meant to be shared with anybody else. I tried to recreate that by playing with a doll. And I realised that when I am playing with the doll I can be myself. There is no pretence or showing off or playing any roles or doing something that is expected of me. Hence, this interaction between me and the doll reveals my inner self. I see the doll as a human being, and every doll in my paintings represents an excerpt from my story and a fragment of my identity," she says.



The triptych was created at a time when Bagheri was depressed after the break-up of her marriage and struggling to find the strength to move on. Playing with her doll and painting it was part of the healing process. The 36 paintings in the triptych are based on photographs she took of the doll during this spontaneous playtime. Every canvas speaks volumes about what was going on in the artist's life, her heart and her mind. And the white-and-black palette echoes her frame of mind at the time. The doll appears in various poses and situations. Sometimes her body is twisted and broken or her head cut off; sometimes she is blindfolded, refusing to see the harsh reality around her; sometimes she fights with her own shadow in a desperate internal struggle; and sometimes she develops the wings to escape from her troubles.

"After my traumatic marriage and divorce, my world changed from white to black. And all I wanted to do was keep painting. Releasing my emotions through the doll and confronting them helped me find myself and my inner strength. It helped me overcome the situation and find colour in life again," Bagheri says.

"Essentially, my story is the story of all women. We are all alone in this world. Our traditions and our society set lots of limits and out lots of restrictions on us, but despite these tensions and stresses, we try to find peace, protection and freedom by delving deep inside our secret inner world, which is calm and strong," she adds.

Jyoti Kalsi is an arts enthusiast based in Dubai.

Self Portraits and Portraits is on at Total Arts at the Courtyard Annexe until January 10, 2012.

Clockwise from top right: Portraits by Shahla Hussaini Barzi, Soodeh Bagheri, Ahoo Hamedi and Bagheri. Though all of them are Iranian, their works reflect their different experiences and perspectives on life. But together the paintings present a collage of the many facets of a woman and her world