

A trip through history and legend

A show that highlights relevance of Shahnameh, the literary masterpiece, in our times

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Dubai: *The Shahnameh* or *The Book of Kings*, written by Persian poet Ferdowsi in the late 10th century is a seminal masterpiece of Persian literature and culture.

The epic poem chronicles the history of the Persian Empire from primordial times to the Arab conquest of Iran in the seventh century through mythical tales about the creation of Persia and stories about legendary heroes and historical kings.

Although the epic was written centuries ago, its profound verses about the rise and fall of individuals and nations are still relevant.

The latest exhibition at Total Arts at the Courtyard, Dubai, titled Visual Dialogues: The Book of Kings, highlights the relevance of the Shahnameh in our times as well as its enduring influence on contemporary Iranian artists.

The show is part of the gallery's Visual Dialogues series curated by Fereydoun Ave, prominent Iranian artist, curator, collector and mentor to the younger generation of Iranian artists. It sets up a conversation between Ave and award-winning filmmaker and artist Shirin Neshat by presenting works from their independently created series titled The Book of Kings.

Each artist has looked at the ancient epic from different perspectives, referencing its characters and situations in their work, to comment on contemporary issues as well as to explore the many layers of their own identities.

Neshat was born in Iran in 1957 and went to the US to study in the 1970s. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 forced her to stay away from her country and family for more than a decade.

Artistic expression

As an activist who expresses her political opinions through her art, she is still lives in New York.

She draws on her personal experiences as a Muslim woman in exile to create photographic works, videos, films and performances that explore the role of women in Islamic societies, the political structures that have shaped the history of Iran and the Middle East, and the relationship between the past and the present.

Her photographic series, *The Book of Kings*, created in 2011-12, was inspired by the Green Revolution in Iran in June 2009 that brought thousands of Iranians on to the streets to protest against the regime and the political uprisings across the Arab world in 2011 known as the Arab Spring.

It weaves together history and politics, poetry and philosophy, narratives from the Shahnameh and the writings of contemporary Iranian poets and activists to commemorate the unknown heroes who raised their voices and sacrificed their lives for justice and freedom.

The series comprises three groups of black-and-white portraits titled, Masses, Patriots and Villains.

Masses celebrates the ordinary men and women who were out on the streets in Iran and Egypt. The Villains features images of older men seated on chairs, their body language indicating power.

The Patriots depicts young people staring defiantly and with pride into the camera with their hands on their hearts as a gesture of pledging loyalty to their nation.

Neshat has decorated the bodies of the Masses and Patriots with poems in Farsi by contemporary Iranian poets and texts from the prison diaries of political prisoners in Iran written by hand in a traditional calligraphic style; and she has covered the bare torsos of the Villains with illustrations of wounded soldiers and other battle scenes from the Shahnameh.

The portraits convey a gamut of emotions from hope, aspiration and determination to anxiety, uncertainty and anger.

“Despite living in the US, I was very involved in the Green Movement and the election in Iran in 2009. There was an incredible energy that invigorated all Iranians. We realised that the Arab Spring and the course of those events was not distant from us and that changes in Iran would affect our lives too. I went to Tahrir Square in Cairo and immersed myself in the energy of the Egyptian youth fighting for freedom, justice and change,” recalled Neshat in a public talk.

Speaking about the concept behind this series, she said, “I wanted to create a body of work that would capture the anxiety, dignity, energy, devotion, patriotism and pride that I sensed in every man and woman protesting, as well as the brutality and violence of those in power. The idea was to intersect these contemporary faces and writings with illustrations from an ancient book that also brings together ideas of patriotism, passion, brutality and violence to document the Islamic conquest of Iran.”

Ave, who has studios in Teheran, Paris and Greece, is a multi-media artist and began working on his series, *The Book of Kings in 1998* as a way to reconnect with his country and heritage after the Iranian revolution of 1979.

He continued creating new editions of this ongoing series to reflect global issues, the socio-political situation in Iran, as well as his own state of mind, concerns and emotions at different points in time.

The central character in his mixed media collages is the mythological hero Rustom from the famous story of Rustom and Sohrab in the Shahnameh. Ave has used images of contemporary Iranian wrestlers in the ring to represent the struggles and triumphs of the brave warrior who was tragically killed by his father.

Exploring

“This series is about exploring the idea of masculinity in the Iranian cultural context and the role of men in contemporary Iranian society. I focused on Rustom because he is a symbol of masculinity. He is known as the ‘champion of champions’ in Iran and is the stereotypical hero who lives by a moral code of conduct.

“I used images of contemporary wrestlers appropriated from sports magazines to depict Rustom because wrestling is the national sport of Iran and these men embody the mystique of the macho Iranian male. Like Rustom, they follow a set of rules and a strict code of chivalry which makes their power honourable,” Ave says.

The artist has placed his Rustom in different situations, environments and moods projecting through him the struggles of every man as he battles through life. Rustom in Late Summer shows the hero surrounded by colourful flowers and passion fruit. Rustom in Dense Pollution depicts a barely visible Rustom trapped in the physical, mental, psychological pollution of modern life.

Also included in the show is a collection of photographs, sketches and studies made by both artists for their Book of Kings series, offering insights into their individual creative processes and highlighting the unique and common elements in their work.

Jyoti Kalsi is an arts enthusiast based in Dubai.