

Art & Culture

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Me, myself and I

A group exhibition showing at Total Arts at the Courtyard presents the self-portraits of four Tehran-based female artists from varying generations. *Jenny Hewett* meets the women to take a glimpse inside their heads

Self portraits are one of the most vulnerable and challenging art forms to tackle as an artist. Not only is your figurative form and face on display to the world, but your own perception of yourself – your current mood and personality – and all the complex insecurities that come along with that are also laid bare on canvas for viewers to dissect.

Running this month at Total Arts at the Courtyard, an exhibition entitled 'Self Portraits and Portraits' exposes the personal works of four Tehran-based women. Here, we meet them and take a closer look at their work to find out how it's created, and the emotions behind it.



Shideh Tami ▲
49, from Lavasan, Iran

Can you explain the process of painting a self-portrait?

Portraits and the human body have always attracted me as a subject for my paintings. I think it has a lot to do with the emotional and intellectual state of the artist.

Do you work from photos, or from your own perception of yourself?

It's been a while since I stopped looking at myself in the mirror. But generally I work from my own perception of myself.

What was the most important part of yourself that you wanted to convey?

I usually start composing images revolving around eyes. That's the most important part – our eyes don't lie.

What materials did you use?

Mainly acrylic, but lately I've started



using ink, watercolour and oil and, in days of depression and melancholy, sometimes pencil and charcoal.

As a woman based in Tehran, what is the most important strength you possess?

The answer to this question has to do with the whole universe and our livelihood, being in this world and being a woman with all the complexity, fears and beauties. What is obvious is that the world has toughened me and taught me how to survive in a world of uncertainty.

Soodeh Bagheri ▶
29, from Tehran

Can you explain the process of painting a self-portrait?

People and their real character have always been the subject of my interest. I started self-exploration five years ago with questions such as 'Who am I? Which is the real me

among all the different characters I envisage every day? How does it form under the influence of my family, the society, or the past?'

What is the most difficult part about painting a self-portrait?

When I'm painting self-portraits and figures in a series, the most challenging part is to avoid repetition and to be able to put new, fresh feelings and emotions in each and every one of them to separate them from one another.

Do you work from photos of yourself, or from your own perception of yourself?

I work from my photos.

Do you do other paintings besides portraits?

Yes, I paint dolls, alongside self-portraits and figures – the reason is



that I don't see them as separate from humans. Someone who plays with a doll builds an imaginary life for them. The doll is the essence of a fact and an emphasis on it.

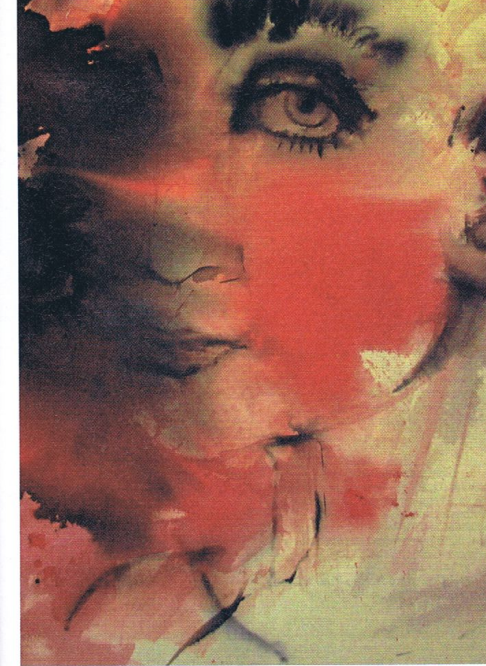
As a woman based in Tehran, what is the most important strength you possess?

The society in which I live and the things that go on around me will naturally affect me, but my paintings are mainly the result of my personal life and my inner feelings.

Ahoo Hamedi ▼
30, from Tehran

What was the most difficult part about painting the self-portraits?

The most important part is how to see myself, because I believe we have



different faces and I'm not sure which one is my genuine one.

In this portrait, did you work from photos of yourself or your own perception of yourself?

I don't work from photos. I've painted myself so many times using a mirror, but for paintings in this exhibition, I just painted from my imagination. My face is fixed in my memory.

What was the most important part of yourself or your personality that you wanted to convey?

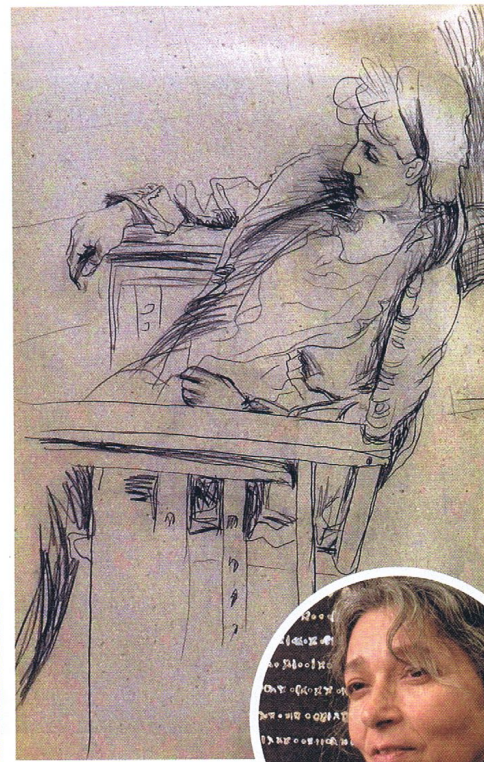
These paintings are part of a series entitled 'Silence'. Silence is what we all share in our own unique way – we experience silence with words in our mind and this contradiction is very attractive to me.

How did you choose which colours to use?

I choose colour gradually as my work appears on canvas. The form and feeling determine the colours and vice versa.

As a woman based in Tehran, what is the most important strength you possess?

There is no difference where you are based – wherever you live, there are some issues you don't like. The best way to overcome these issues is acting and thinking in the way you like and believe.



Shahla Hosseini Barzi ▶
55, from Tehran

Can you explain the process of painting a self-portrait?

I make live self-portrait drawings. I start by drawing my eyes, so that I become closer to myself. It's a matter of discovering and embodying what you know in yourself.

What is the most difficult part about painting a self-portrait?

The most difficult part is to see yourself. Your real self, not the preferred image of yourself that may be more beautiful, stronger and more glorious.

For this piece, did you work from photos of yourself or your own perception of yourself?

I don't like photo-portraits. To me, discovering a new communication with the inner layers of 'self' is attractive, and this kind of discovery connects me with live moments of present time. It's very different from photo-portrait painting, in which you have the choice to regulate the time or even postpone the work – you can't capture the spontaneous flow of light and intuitive moments.

What materials did you use?

I usually use black pencil as a medium in my portrait drawings. Sometimes I use grey and cream-coloured papers.

As a woman based in Tehran, what is the most important strength you possess?

I want to keep my independence without being isolated. As a professional who can't live without painting, I attempt to keep that delicate balance, and not to deviate from the principles I live with.

THE LOWDOWN
Exhibition: 'Self Portraits and Portraits', until January 10 at Total Arts at the Courtyard, Street 4b, Al Quoz 1 (04 347 5050)
Artists: Soodeh Bagheri, Shideh Tami, Ahoo Hamedi and Shahla Hosseini Barzi
Price range of works: Dhs9,000 to Dhs25,000