

FIRST NIGHT | VISUAL ART

Soheila Sokhanvari: Rebel Rebel review — fabulous women of old Iran

Barbican

Laura Freeman


Thursday October 06 2022, 5.00pm, The Times

Iran



Eve (Portrait of Katayoun (Amir Ebrahimi)), 2021 and Tobeh (Portrait of Zari Khoshkam), 2020 by Soheila Sokhanvari

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★★★★☆

Short skirts, big hair, black boots, red nails. Here come

the Iranian girls. Soheila Sokhanvari's *Rebel Rebel* takes the prize for most beautiful exhibition installation of the year. The Barbican's Curve gallery — a tricky space, like the back corridor of an auditorium — has been transformed by hand-painted murals patterned like a zenana screen. A great, glittering monolith marks the entrance, set with 27,000 tessellated pieces of glass. Sokhanvari applied the sparkles herself. She is nothing if not painstaking. A single painting might take her eight to twelve weeks.

There are 28 of Sokhanvari's modern Persian miniatures on the walls of the Curve. She paints with egg tempera on vellum in the tradition of manuscript illumination. Sokhanvari likens herself to a medieval monk, at her happiest grinding pigments. Her technique is exquisite. The surfaces are more like cloisonné than paint. Their tininess invites you in. We are tête-à-tête with each of Sokhanvari's subjects: female film stars, cabaret artists, novelists, academics, poets, musicians and singers before the 1978 revolution curtailed female freedoms. As painted by Sokhanvari they are brassily fabulous. If this exhibition had a scent, it would be Elnett Extra Strong Hold.

Sokhanvari was born in Shiraz to a father who made western clothes inspired by trips to the cinema and a mother who modelled them. She studied cytogenetics (a branch of genetics) at Cambridge before switching to fine art at Chelsea, then Goldsmiths. The Islamic passion for pattern and what Sokhanvari calls “over-beautification” is reflected not just in the walls and the floor but in the crazy-paving layering of her sitters' backgrounds and outfits. Rattan chair, chequered tiles, polka-dot dressing gown (Shohreh Aghdashloo); leopard print, trippy swirls, op art stripes (Katayoun); snake

scales, jacquard weave, acanthus leaves (Jaleh Sam). Bare-footed Pouran Shapoori matches turquoise toenails to birds-of-paradise wallpaper. Zari Khoshkam clashes a traditional Persian carpet with an acid lemon polo dress. The Curve ends with a star-shaped cinema screening sequences from Iranian films. Pull up a pink velour beanbag.

Sokhanvari's "temple" to the women of Iran is timely. The contrast between pre-revolutionary Iran and the present violence of the country's morality police is chilling. Since the [death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini](#) in police custody in Tehran on September 16 after her arrest for wearing "improper clothing", [Iranians have protested in the streets](#), cut off their ponytails in public and burnt their hijabs on TikTok. You may have seen the photograph last week of the unveiled Donya Rad (brunette bun) and a friend (beach-blonde, yellow hairclip) eating breakfast in Tehran. Rad was arrested, and their brunch went round the world.

Sokhanvari's rebels, with their kiss curls and shingle bob haircuts, could be grandmothers to these girls. Their portraits stretch out of sight round the Curve, and you hope that one day soon their freedom comes full circle. **October 7 to February 26, [barbican.org.uk](https://www.barbican.org.uk)**