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Young Artists to Watch

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East Meets West Meets East

Shirin Neshat envies the ease with which **Kamrooz Aram** mixes Iranian and American imagery in his drawings, paintings, and installations

BY SARAH H. BAYLISS

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WHEN ARTIST AND FILMMAKER Shirin Neshat was assembling the predominantly male cast for her 2003 film *The Last Word*, she let her expatriate friends know that she was “looking for any Iranian man to offer his time for two days”—no acting experience required. Kamrooz Aram, pursuing his M.F.A. at Columbia University at the time, was among those who answered Neshat’s call.

The film portrays the interrogation of an Iranian woman writer on trial after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. That historical event was a “turning point in my life,” says Neshat, who was born in 1957 in Qazvin, Iran, and came to the United States as an undergraduate art student at the University of Cali-



Shirin Neshat (left) and a still from her 2005 film *Zarin*.

fornia, Berkeley, in 1974. Following the revolution, Neshat went into exile and did not return to Iran until eleven years later, by which time the country had changed dramatically. Women were required to wear veils and were forbidden to speak or sing in public. Neshat, known for her poetic video

installations alluding to ritual and the role of women in Islamic culture, says that “the questions of religion, identity, taboo, and exile” remain central to her work.

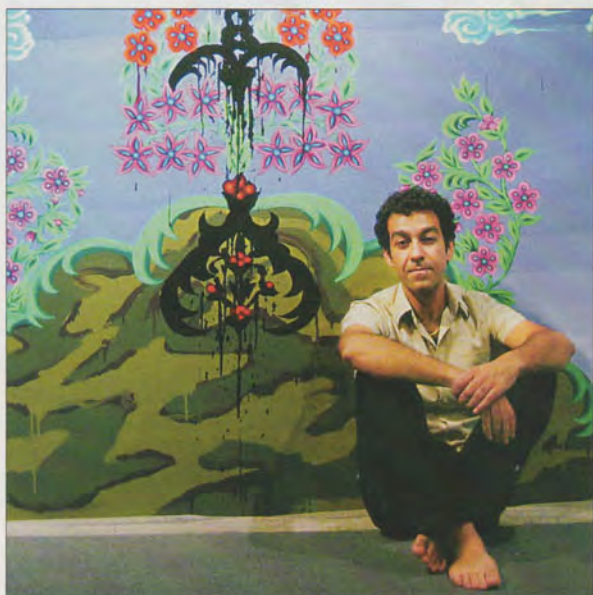
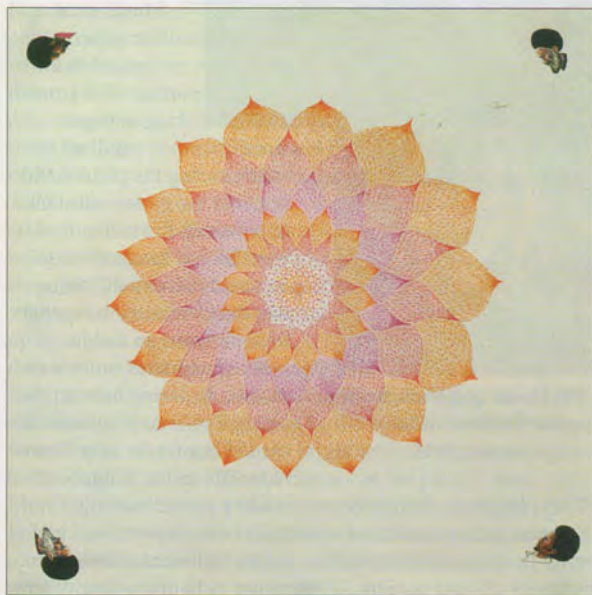
Although she has lived in New York for 23 years, Neshat finds herself unable to make work about American culture. She believes that younger Iranian American artists, like 28-year-old Aram, are at ease incorporating both cultures in their art because their relationship with Iran is less fraught.

Born in Shiraz, Iran, in 1979, Aram emigrated to the United States with his family when he was eight years old. His precisely crafted paintings mix imagery from East and West and contain references to Persian miniatures and rugs, video games, early Renaissance painting, military iconography, and contemporary Shiite religious posters that portray imams “like glam-rock people from the 1980s,” says Aram. Now a Brooklyn resident, Aram has exhibited at such venues as the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams, the Wilkinson Gallery in London, and Oliver Kamm/5BE Gallery in New York, where his drawings sell for \$1,300 to \$2,500 and his paintings for \$2,500 to \$12,500. He also created a meditation-and-prayer room for the Busan Biennale in South Korea, which runs through the 25th of this month. The room’s design combines elements of airport prayer rooms, cathedrals, and mosques with motifs from his paintings.

Aram’s vivid scenes feature brilliant blue skies punctuated by round gold stickers applied to the canvas. He says his main inspiration for these skies is the dazzling ceiling in Giotto’s 14th-century Arena Chapel in Padua. While the stickers are reminiscent of the radiant stars and halos in the Italian frescoes, they also refer to the gold used so liberally in Middle Eastern decoration. “He is using iconographies from hundreds of years ago in Iran,” says Neshat, “but they find themselves in a new language of painting.” Aram’s drawings are often rendered in ink on writing paper. Some refer to revolutionary ideologies, from radical Islam to black nationalism to American counterculture. They are, Neshat says, “so beautiful, subtle, and timid, yet so powerful.”

Aram recalls how, after his family settled in Cincinnati, “making visual art, writing, or playing music were the only things I wanted to do. I never decided to be an artist; I just sort of ended up that way.” He attended the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore before enrolling at Columbia. His early paintings leaned toward geometric abstraction, and pattern and decoration remain integral to his work. As an undergraduate, Aram read Edward Said’s pivotal 1978 book *Orientalism*, exploring how the West has historically perceived Arabic cultures. “A door opened to me,” says Aram. “A lot of my work even now has to do with Orientalism and exoticism.”

Though he grew up immersed in American culture, Aram says he has “been exposed to a lot of revolutionary ideology”—as a young child in Iran; in Cincinnati, where he would frequently play music with local black musicians, some of



Last Gleaming, 2006 (top); a drawing from the 2006 series "Revolutionary Dreams" (bottom left); and their creator, 28-year-old Kamrooz Aram.

whom had been involved in black nationalism; and in college, when he got to know a group of Rastafarians.

His 2006 series of drawings, "Revolutionary Dreams," which takes its title from a song by the reggae musician Pablo Moses, is at once "very personal and very social," says Aram. Many drawings feature tiny heads breathing weblike patterns of color across the paper. One shows a woman with a large Afro; another shows a man with a gray beard and turban.

In experimenting with the drawings, Aram says, "I drew the mullah with a turban and a Black Panther with an Afro, and I was struck by how they looked similar formally. Aside from the Afro and the turban, these are two revolutionary ideologies

fueled by Islam—very different, but both for the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed."

In his latest series of paintings, Aram has been exploring the symbolism of light. "I'm interested in the use of light as a form of idealization and glorification—the sublime—but something that references fear and destruction as well," he says. Illumination has been associated with holiness in Western art for thousands of years, and in



Aram's Celebration/Desert Station (III), 2005.

the Islamic sect of Sufism, Aram points out, "fire is a form of divine inspiration and unification, but there's also the idea of fire as destruction."

His painting *The Gleam of the Morning's First Beam* (2005) features a massive, blazing sun in the center, flanked by two falcons perched on stylized clouds. Below, geometric flowers sprout from the camouflage-patterned earth. The work takes its title from a line in "The Star-Spangled Banner," as do other recent paintings. The poetic descriptions of light and rocket fire in this anthem "romanticize violence," says Aram, who remembers the sounds of gunfire during the Iran-Iraq war when he was a boy in Iran.

For Neshat, the Islamic Revolution gave rise to a "suffocating feeling that does not leave me," she says. By contrast, she points out, "nothing suffocating overrules Kamrooz's work. He can go in and out of subjects relating to Iran with a certain amount of freedom that I envy." ■