

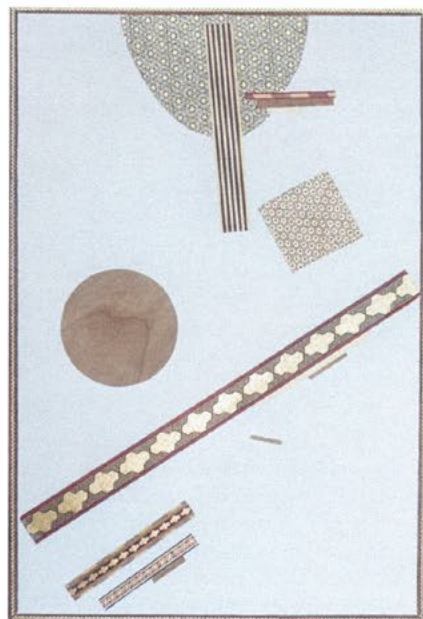
DANCING IN Shiraz

British-Iranian artist **Farhad Ahrarnia** is best known for his work combining images taken from the media, popular culture and art history with traditional embroidery techniques. During a visit to his studio in Shiraz, the artist speaks to *Lemma Shehadi* about his recent work and new directions

“Shiraz’s streets were once lined with tall trees,” says the artist Farhad Ahrarnia, as he walks me through his hometown. The city in the Southern desert of Iran was once the country’s capital and is known as the birthplace of the medieval Sufi poets Hafez and Saadi. Today, many aspects of its recent history, including modernist buildings built in the 1930s and 40s, a Pahlavi-era administration house are being torn down to make way for new buildings. Though Ahrarnia left Shiraz in the mid-80s, at the age of 14 to complete his schooling in the UK, his childhood memories of the city are sharp and photographic. Off Karim Khan Avenue on Maktabi Street, he pauses. “My grandmother lived not far from here. The street has changed, but I can still remember what it looks like.” Later, we pause outside a bookshop “before the revolution their windows displayed American comics.” While he is now based in Sheffield in Northern England, the artist has been increasingly working from Shiraz, a move which is shaping his recent work.

Originally trained as a documentary filmmaker, Ahrarnia began practising as an artist in 2001. After several solo shows in the UK with Impressions Gallery in Leeds and Rose Issa Projects in London, Dubai-based gallery Lawrie Shabibi held the artist’s first solo show in the Middle East in October 2015. He also participated in dOCUMENTA 2007 and the Pavilion of Iran at the 56th Venice Biennale. The artist’s work is also part of major public and private collections, including the British Museum in London. “He was confident and took chances,” says curator Rose Issa about her decision to work with the artist in his early career. “I thought he could defend his choices and direction conceptually, aesthetically and socially.” Ahrarnia is better known for using traditional embroidery techniques to adapt images taken from the media and cultural history, though today, he also works with marquetry and illuminations. He draws from a diverse range of media which includes photography, painting and newspaper cuttings. “I like to comment on what is already there,” he explains; “images have their own realities, which can be reinterpreted over again.”

While in his earlier work the artist responded to news-topical subjects such as the Iraq War of 2003, or the riots in Bradford, Northern England, in 2001,



The Inquisitive Man's Dream, 2015. Persian micro-mosaic. 54 x 37 x 3 cm.



The Delirium of Becoming a Moment Caught Between Myth and History, 2015. Digital print dyed onto cotton fabric, hand embroidered using silk, cotton and metallic thread, and needles. 147.5 x 113 x 2 cm.



Stage on Fire 5, 2012. Hand embroidery on digital photography on canvas, 131 x 102.4 cm.

"DANCE IS AN EXPRESSION OF MODERNITY. IT'S A LIBERATION FROM THE ROUTINES OF EVERYDAY MOVEMENT."

Farhad Ahrarnia



Left: Her Body, Her Nation, 2014-2015. Digital print heat transferred onto polyester aida, hand stitched using silk, cotton and metallic thread and needles. 33.3 x 27 x 1.5 cm.

Right: Farhad Ahrarnia, Stage on Fire 4, 2012. Hand embroidery on digital photography on canvas, silk, cotton thread, sequins and needles. 97.5 x 103 cm.

with string and coloured plastic gems, a reference to the Russian avant-garde painter Wassily Kandinsky. "He was influenced by dance and musical compositions, and explored the possibility of synaesthesia in his work," he says.

Ahrarnia's recent approach looks to the past. Through cultural history, the artist brings to light the conflicting ideologies of the 20th century, and the spheres of influence which stretched across the world, from Russia to Central Asia, to America and Iran. In a series of works that are peppered across his studio, he reproduced the motifs and designs of Russian constructivist Aleksandr Rodchenko, among other artists, using a marquetry technique that is traditional to Shiraz, known as *khatam*. "Our geographical closeness to Russia, as well as its involvement in Iran in the 20th century meant its culture and artistic movements were also influential here." In recent exhibitions, the artist has explored the role of Orientalism on the Ballet Russes, the so-called Egyptomania in Hollywood, and cultural dialogues between Iran and America through the Shiraz Arts Festival, hosted annually in the 60s and 70s by the Empress Farah of Iran, at the ancient ruins of Persepolis. Ahrarnia insists he is not being nostalgic or preservative about the different pasts that he portrays in his works. Rather, he opens them up for present speculation. "In Iran, the revolution led to a break in history," he says. "So the question of what might have been is always pending."

Dance and spectacle persist in Ahrarnia's recent work and form part of his interest in the utopian ideals and modernist movements of the 20th century. "Dance is an expression of modernity. It's a liberation from the routines of everyday movement; it tests the limits of the body, and defies what we believe is physically possible," he explains. Pinned to the wall of his studio, is a photograph of the exotic dancer and WWII spy Josephine Baker. "She was a controversial figure, an African-American celebrity of the 1920s who adopted seven children from different ethnic groups as a symbol of unity. Her vision was entirely utopian," he says. Elsewhere, I find him working on a series on ballet in Uzbekistan. This Islamic country which came under Russian and Soviet control in the 20th century, is of interest to the artist, and he undertook a residency in the capital of Tashkent in 2011. "The culture of ballet in Uzbekistan is one of the legacies of the Soviet era. It shows how the Uzbeks engaged with the Soviet modernist project," he explains. In a photograph printed on tapestry canvas, a ballerina sways dramatically into an arabesque. A series of geometrical shapes have been layered into the photograph and also embroidered

On the other hand, Ahrarnia's embroidery works are laboured and contemplative. Some take up to five years to complete. "I like to sit with them, look at them and amend them slowly." He often collaborates with local craftsmen to develop different patterns and embroidery styles. Yet a new series of work by Ahrarnia takes on a radically different nature: it begins outside of the studio, on the streets of Shiraz. In the past four years, the artist has been collecting cardboard boxes, used for delivering goods to local businesses. "I'm embarrassed to say that they're used boxes," he says, "found on the street or taken from local shop vendors." The artist moves from a practice that is introspective and research-led to one that is full of action, based on his walks across the city. Taking these boxes apart and folding them neatly, Ahrarnia then works with a local artist to paint circular-shaped gilded illuminations, known as *tazhib*, around a selected part of the box. "The *tazhib* often had text inside intended as a prayer or reflection. I have asked the artist to paint around specific parts of the box, so as to illuminate what is inside." Ahrarnia reads these boxes through their brands and logos, but also their individual journeys. "I love the gestures you find on these used boxes," he says, pointing to the worn edges, and a large tear across the side of a box belonging to the Esfahan sweet-manufacturer Kerman Gaz "the folds remind me of the grid of Modernist spatial configurations."

As sanctions are lifted after 36 years of embargo on Iran, the country's manufacturing history is now brought to light. Whereas the recent work outlined above turned towards cultural influences, now the artist explores new possibilities of soft power through trade and commerce. Found amidst his collection, is a box for Shima Shoes, the largest shoe manufacturer in Iran, which recently signed a trading deal with Italian distributors. "Few people outside of Iran know about our manufacturing industries. Shima Shoes has been running since the 1960s," says Ahrarnia. But the series is also a reflection of the artist's personal engagement with the street and market life of Shiraz. Walking with him across the city, he appears thoroughly embedded in its teeming activity. "Often I ask local dealers that I know to plant a tree outside their shop," he says. He smiles when I ask about his successes so far. "Today, I told off two shop vendors for not keeping their promise." ■