





# persian revival

## **the leila taghinia-milani heller gallery**

Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller possesses an infectious energy and zeal for Contemporary art that is immediately obvious. As she recounts her fulfilling career, which began with Andy Warhol's reign over the New York art scene in the 1980s, this dynamic woman's eyes and expressive hands make it clear that the secrets of her success are her tenacity and passion – qualities that have driven her for decades.

Previous pages: Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller in front of Georg Gerster's photograph, *Mount Damavand, Iran 1978*. Printed 2009. Fujicolor crystal archive gloss paper, edition of five plus two artist proofs. 119.4 x 180 cm. © Georg Gerster, Courtesy Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller (LTMH) Gallery, NY.

Below: Martin Saar. *Barack Obama*. 2008. Watercolour on paper. 55.9 x 36.8 cm. © Martin Saar, Courtesy Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller (LTMH) Gallery, NY.

Facing page: Installation view of Arnaud Rivieren's *Stream of Consciousness* in his April 2009 solo exhibition at the gallery.

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COURTESY OF THE GALLERY

Born in Iran, Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller pursued an undergraduate degree in art history and French literature at Brown University in the USA before completing the Sotheby's master's degree programme in London in 1976. She then returned to the USA to attend George Washington University, completing a second master's degree, this time in art history and museum management. Her career in the art world began at the Guggenheim Museum as a volunteer. "It was during the [Iranian Islamic] revolution," she explains, "and I didn't have my papers. The Securities Group investment bank hired me as curator and sponsored me, so I got my Green Card." For two years, Heller curated the now-defunct firm's corporate collection, as well as their clients' and managing directors' personal collections. Such a big job at such a young age gave Heller the confidence to open her own gallery just a few years later. In 1982, the Leila Taghinia-Milani Gallery opened its doors on Madison Avenue at 82nd Street in New York's chic Upper East Side. For 10 years, Heller worked with young artists in the nascent stages of their careers, brokering deals with clients and attracting burgeoning dealers and artists that would later become A-list names in the art world.

## Cultivating a Movement

One specific event that contributed to her becoming a bold-faced name in the New York art arena was the exhibition, *Calligraffiti*. In May 1984, Heller and Jeffrey Deitch (of Deitch

Projects, who co-curated the exhibition) opened *Calligraffiti* to much fanfare. The show featured 120 artists, approximately half of whom were American graffiti artists that belonged to a movement that was starting to come off the streets and into galleries. Heller and Deitch juxtaposed these edgy street artists with major calligraphy artists such as Iranian Charles-Hossein Zenderoudi and artists who incorporate calligraphy in their work, as seen in American Cy Twombly and Uruguayan



Joaquín Torres-García. At the opening, about 1000 people mingled at the now legendary New York nightclub, Area. "Warhol came. And all the graffiti artists were there, blasting their boom boxes. It was hysterical to see the combination of all these artists together in one room," recounts Heller. Indeed, her desire to represent artists who are talented in their own right and not dependent on their cultural background has largely defined her philosophy towards art dealing, and this is evident in the way in which she integrated Middle Eastern, European, Latin American and American artists in *Calligraffiti*. From the beginning of her career, Heller has

represented Contemporary art with a focus on artists of the Middle East, specifically from Iran.

She gave the Iranian painter YZ Kami (see *Canvas* Volume 5, Issue 3) his first show in 1984, and also organised solo exhibitions for other Iranian artists, including Massoud Arabshahi, Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian (see *Canvas* Volume 4, Issue 5), Malekeh Nayiny, Nicky Nodjourni (see *Canvas* Volume 5, Issue 3) and Charles Hossein Zenderoudi.



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“It was very difficult to sell Iranian Contemporary art at that time, but I had a passion for it. These artists had a hard time showing at other galleries so I felt that if I, as an Iranian, did not show them, who would?” While her initial motivation may have been derived from a sense of kindred culture, Heller is clear in her intent to represent artists who transcend cultural pigeonholing and are universally talented. Her hard work paid off, since Kami, for instance, is now an internationally recognised artist represented by the Gagolian Gallery. In the 1980s, works by most of these artists were selling for under \$5000. Farmanfarmaian and Zenderoudi’s works are now selling for hundreds of thousands of dollars.

#### Cultural Evolution

In 1992, Heller closed her gallery to raise her two sons, Alexander Mamady, now 17, and Philip Salar, now 15. For nine years, she operated as a private art consultant for corporations, institutions and private clients in addition to participating in international art fairs. In 2003, she reopened her gallery under her married name, Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller (LTMH), located on 78th Street and Madison Avenue. Her gallery’s newest incarnation specialises in Contemporary art with a focus on Arab and Iranian art, while works by the likes of Jean-Michel Basquiat, Ed Ruscha, Tom Wesselman, Twombly and Warhol feature in the secondary market. Heller is

the first to recognise how much the Contemporary art market, specifically the Contemporary Middle Eastern art market, has changed since she first opened her gallery in 1982. “Each decade has new players in the [art] market, but I feel that, in the 1980s there were true collectors; [art] was not acquired for a quick profit,” she says. “Over the past few years, New York has been dominated by hedge funders and their fast money. They had huge lofts with big empty walls and they all went for Contemporary art.” Now that the New York art market has nearly flatlined, the mood is quite dire. However, Heller is optimistic, since her business has a broad international outlook.

Over the past few decades, Heller’s clients have changed, reflecting shifts in the Contemporary Middle Eastern art market. In the 1980s, her collectors were mostly Iranian and Arab or employees of American oil companies. Many were consultants for architecture and decorating firms working on office buildings in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

In the past few years, the emerging Contemporary Middle Eastern art market has experienced a boom, with an influx of galleries across the region and the establishment of auction houses in Dubai,



Facing page: Charles Hossein Zenderoudi. (Detail) Untitled. 1972. Oil on canvas. 120.6 x 90.2 cm. © Charles Hossein Zenderoudi, Courtesy Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller (LTMH) Gallery, NY.

Above: Shiva Ahmadi. *Oil Barrel #4*. 2009. Oil on steel. 87.6 x 59.7 x 59.7 cm. © Shiva Ahmadi, Courtesy Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller (LTMH) Gallery, NY.



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museums planned in a number of Gulf states and increased media coverage. As a result, an international client base has sat up and noticed. “[Now], my clients are based all over,” says Heller, “Doha, Geneva, Los Angeles, Shanghai, Tehran, the list goes on.” While many complain that this young market has developed too quickly for its infrastructure to withstand, one positive result is that more people are aware of what is

happening in the region. This has led to a more diversified group of collectors. An integral part of sustaining this growing market is for regional artists to master their craft and learn about the art business. With these two tools at their fingertips, artists are equipped to transcend cultural boundaries.

“Most artists of the region do not want to be labelled as ‘Middle Eastern’ artists but simply as artists,” says Heller, who appeals to Middle Eastern artists to avoid flooding the market with their work. She cites Iranians Shirazeh Houshiary and Shirin Neshat as examples of artists that have worked hard, in tandem with their galleries, to build a sustainable client base

Above: Shirin Neshat. *Untitled (Hands)*. 2005. Digital inkjet print, edition 18/100. 44.8 x 30 cm.  
© Shirin Neshat, Courtesy Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller (LTMH) Gallery, NY.

Facing page: Reza Derakshani. From the *Persian Serenade* series. 2007. Mixed media on canvas.  
219.7 x 100 cm. © Reza Derakshani, Courtesy Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller (LTMH) Gallery, NY.

that will not collapse should a dip in the international art market occur. The slow and steady construction of an artist's clientele also helps in appealing to a wider audience. "Houshiary's appeal has nothing to do with her being Iranian. Her collectors are mainly European and American, and Neshat is a universal artist." With this in mind, Heller sees a fresh crop of emerging Iranian artists who show promise of integrating craft and intelligent commerce in their careers, including Negar Ahkami, Shiva Ahmadi, Nazanin Pouyandeh and Dariush Yektai, to name but a few.


#### Nurturing the Advancement

Between gallery exhibitions, book launches and museum shows, Heller has quite a busy year ahead of her. In April, LTMH hosted *Paradise Lost: Persia from Above*, an exhibition by German photographer Georg Gerster in conjunction with Maryam Sachs, consisting of aerial shots of Iran commissioned by Her Majesty Farah Pahlavi in 1977; Dubai-based Belgian sculptor Arnaud Rivieren's *The Hatching* in May and *Iranian Superstars: Who's Who in Contemporary Iranian Art*. LTMH is currently hosting *Selseleh/Zelseleh: Movers and Shakers in Contemporary Iranian Art*, curated by Dr Layla Diba and coinciding with the book launch of *Different Sames: New Perspectives in Contemporary Iranian Art*, featuring 114 Contemporary Iranian artists, many of whom are represented by LTMH. Furthermore, in June, the Chelsea Art Museum in New York opened *Iran Inside Out* as part of their East West Project 2008–9.

The series is dedicated to promoting cultural understanding through three exhibitions, with *Iran Inside Out* being the second show. Heller has worked closely with the museum's

curators to include a diverse group of Iranian artists living across the globe. The show will travel to London for display at Sotheby's in September and then onto Dubai in time for Art Dubai's fourth edition in March 2010. Afterwards, the exhibition will tour several major American cities.

Heller is especially excited about the Chelsea Art Museum exhibition as she sees it as a sign of the times. "In America, [promoting Contemporary Middle Eastern art] has been tough because of politics, but that is going to change immensely [with President Obama]." American art institutions are beginning to pay closer attention to what is happening in Middle Eastern art. "It is a bit premature right now, but I foresee curators in Contemporary Middle Eastern art at museums like the Guggenheim," says Heller. An important impetus in securing Contemporary Middle Eastern art's place in art history is to integrate it within a discussion of Contemporary art and not relegate it to a regional discussion – something Heller has already done with her own

private collection: she began collecting in the 1980s and now owns works by Damien Hirst, Kami, Warhol and Zenderoudi. "My collection is very international," she explains. It is perhaps this broad international outlook that is the key to her success. 

**For more information visit [www.ltmhgallery.com](http://www.ltmhgallery.com)**

