

Interview between Haleh Jamali and Sara Dehghan for Voice of America (VOA), October 2010

SARA DEHGAN: Tonight our guest is Haleh Jamali, a young and active artist in Figurative art. She graduated from the college of Fine art, University of Tehran with a BA in Painting. In 2007 (2005) she moved to the UK to further her studies and at the moment she lives and works in Scotland.

Most of Haleh's works focus on identity and the influence of surroundings in people's identity. She is also involved in working with people with learning difficulties and disabilities.

Hello Haleh! Thank you for accepting our invitation and flying from Edinburgh to London to be in our programme.

HALEH JAMALI: Hello to you Sara and your viewers.

SD: Could you tell us briefly what led you to become interested in Art? Why did you study Art? And why you moved to the UK to continue your education?

HJ: I reckon this is mainly because of being brought up in a family interested in art. They encouraged me a lot to experience art and then I felt a desire inside me to utilise the art to depict my feelings and imagination. When I finished my studies in Iran, I was very keen to study a postgraduate course but unfortunately the course I was interested in; that is, something to deal with both fine art and video was not available in Iran. Therefore I decided to move to the UK. Technically the subjects of postgraduate courses were so limited in this area of art at the time.

SD: When I look at your works and website, firstly I feel that you have a very personal approach and secondly you are trying to express your feelings and revealing the paradoxes as well as inner conflicts of humans. Also your subjects are mainly women. Do you think your own experience as a young woman living in Iran has influenced your works? And if yes could you tell me what is that influence?

HJ: Actually, I started my work with self-portrait. By doing this I became quite interested in woman as a subject and I felt this is the subject I would like to explore more. I think I would like to continue working on this as long as I discover new things in it. Having said that, more recently, I have started to paint men's portraits too.

There is no doubt that living in Iran has influenced my work. Basically the core of my practice was shaped in Iran. I studied in Iran, I had my first exhibition in Iran and more importantly I think the situation and everything in Iran was influenced my work immensely.

SD: So you are trying to show women's issues and problems and as you mentioned, you mainly portray women and indeed you are influenced by women. But now after immigration, your work changed in a way and in fact, a new chapter has opened in your career. I was wondering how you evaluate the influence of immigration on your work and how you showed it in your artwork.

HJ: I believe immigration had a great impact on my works. When I came to London, I encountered a multi-cultural society. People were from different nationalities with different cultures. It was quite a new environment for me. On the other hand I had this opportunity to have contact with both Iranian and non-Iranian artists and see their works. Also studying the postgraduate course was important. They all opened new doors for me and eventually I changed the form of presenting my ideas.

SD: Now I am going to ask my colleague to show some shots of one of your installations, which you described as a turning point of your career. The title of this work is "*Someone who is not like anyone*"

(Video)

SD: My impression is someone's identity is changing and turned into various different ones but I would love to hear more about this from you.

HJ: First let me to talk about the form of presentation of this work. In this work I utilised different media including painting, video and audio to convey my message. As you saw in the video, it was in a room made of semi-transparent fabric where audience could decide how to interact with work, through the fabric surrounding the installation or through the slashed surface of painting. When the audience entered the installation they encountered the changing projected photographic portrait of me where I tried to have a very static face with no emotion. However my clothes changed constantly.

Also the audience were confronted with a glass bin, which held a reflection of both slideshow and the audience. The idea behind this was providing an environment where audience can think about their own identity by identifying the changing portrait image as 'the Other'. Moreover I intended to concentrate on how identity can be made fluid by different types of clothing.

SD: Where did you first exhibit this installation?

HJ: It was in London at La Viande gallery.

SD: Was it your intention to relate the reason of this change of clothing to immigration saying when people are in new places and society their identity can shift or were you trying to say even by being in a single place someone's identity can change based on circumstances and they can turn to different people?

HJ: I guess changing of identity can happen in both situations. But what happened was, when I first came to the UK, I was an immigrant too and this became one of the things consuming me for a while. I believe when you enter

a new society sometimes you need to change perhaps your way of thinking or the way you dress in order to integrate into that society. This may lead to change of identity. But I think this is not only because of immigration, this can be experienced in both situations in different times and places.

SD: So far you had three (four) exhibition outside Iran. What was your experience in showing your works to non-Iranians? And how do you think you can use this to present issues and problems of Iranian woman to the non-Iranian audience?

HJ: I think having the experience of exhibiting my work outside Iran was quite precious because now I have broader audiences, both Iranians and non-Iranians. They can interact with my work based on their own experiences and background and perhaps interpret it in a different way. I was always fascinated by providing an environment where the audiences are able to choose the way they like to communicate with the work. Indeed having the opportunity of showing my work here, gave me the opportunity to get different response from audience.

But about the second part of your question, I should say, I would like to have a wide range of audiences from different cultures and not being limited to a certain nationality or gender. I would prefer to invite audiences to see the world from my point of view. As a result I would like to create a work, which is understandable for people from all different backgrounds.

SD: So now you have an international audience and this is not limited to Iranian ones.

HJ: I think this could have been the case in Iran as well. But there was less opportunity to show my work to non-Iranians.

SD: Your most recent works are large-scale portraits? Have you changed your style? What is the hidden meaning behind these portraits? What were you trying to say? Why did you decide to change your style?

HJ: One of my recent works is an installation entitled 'Maral', which is a series of three almost identical portraits of one of my friends. They all convey different emotions. By having them installed next to each other, I intended to create a new environment where the audience and subject experience a mutual replacement.

When you look at a portrait, it's you as a viewer who tries to find out what dwells behind the gaze of the portrait image. On the contrary in this work my intention was to reverse this by implying that the portrait is looking at the viewers and observing them.

In terms of size, my work changed quite a lot and become bigger or smaller over a period of time. But I think, I would like to pursue my initial concerns but maybe with a different form of presentations.

Some of my recent works are smaller now. One of them is called 'Mirage', part of a new series, which all are small square works and I am trying to re-

introduce the narrative elements in these works. Some of them had a story or implication of a story for the viewer, to narrow down their interpretation. I have a feeling that I would like to go back to this issue with a slight change; that is, in the past I depicted mainly interior spaces as a backdrop of my painting and now on the contrary am creating work with a backdrop of open spaces.

SD: We have a picture of *Mirage* and I would like to ask my colleagues to show it. I think it is hard to get that strong feeling from your works without seeing them closely and being there.

(Image)

HJ: I think in my works this is always the case that you need to be there to be confronted. I think an image of the work can't really have the same impact on you.

SD: Thanks Haleh for coming to our programme, "Shabahangh". Our audiences can check your website which was on the screen to get to know your works better. Wish you all the best.

HJ: Thanks for having me.

Interview taken from:

Interview with the artist and Sara Dehghan October 2010

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wb3Mk3SYI0Y&feature=related>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qd68LMTBAqo&feature=related>