Bahar Behbahani: The Chronicle of Her Innocence

In a world that is really upside down, the true is a moment of the false.
Guy Debord, The Society of Spectacle, 1967

Growing up in Iran, I learned early on that truth could be fabricated. Clearly differentiating public from private behavior and manipulating linguistic nuances were (and still are) essential to navigating everyday life under that contradictory, unpredictable regime. Now an artist living in the U.S., I revisit my birth country’s psychogeographic landscape. The confusion and denial of memories I associate with violence and repression register at many levels in my work.

The dark, muddled palette that cloaks symbolic figures and objects in these paintings represents an uncertain and chaotic atmosphere quite familiar to me. Scripted in Farsi, the cryptic ciphers that appear on each canvas are loaded with meaning to those who know the language. Examining the fraught relationship between word and image reveals how the same signifiers that shape public opinion and control behavior can be applied to cultural critique.

The three masculine women depicted in “Mahbood” (Beloved) operate as satiric subversives. They wield their fans as weapons, taking the stance of political leaders in a way that completely contradicts the text overhead—a book title that reads: Beloved One Well Known for Her Laughter and Her Glow. Donkeys mating in “Parvin,” have their own agenda. Passive aggressive, they shamelessly mount each other in the presence of Parvin, a famous Iranian female poet. The paradoxical proverb overshadowing this scene opines that those who do good will be rewarded by God.

The Chronicle of Her Innocence, though saturated in ambivalence, is a diary of my quest for truth in a land of subterfuge. On a subliminal level, bowls of fruit, paisleys, red tulips and teapots that seem simple enough as signifiers of fecundity are, in fact, elements of ceremonial posturing, male tyranny and sacrificial blood. Text that insinuates its way into these scenarios reflects the altering of collective memory. “From the Blood of Martyrs Bloom Tulips” are pervasive words, appearing on political posters and murals—even surfacing in songs on the radio ever since I was a child. Ironically, the expression appropriated to validate the loss of life in Iran’s war with Iraq misuses a once lyric call for youthful resistance to an oppressive Persian monarchy in the Qajar era.

Whether contemplative or performative, my art reveals that my sense of place is subjective. The video project Saffron Tea is transparently autobiographic, representing a sense of displacement and longing. Isolating myself inside a glass tank filled with water, not far from the comforting ritual of a domestic tea ceremony, I struggle with a new awareness that my conceptual dialogue with memory and loss has just begun.