

NICKY NODJOURI: PAINTING AND POLITICS

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Nicky Nodjouri was born in 1942 in Kermanshah, Iran. Going to the United States for studies immediately after graduation from the undergraduate program at the Tehran University of Fine Arts in 1967, he obtained a master's degree in fine arts from the City College of New York in 1974. Following graduation, he returned to Teheran and worked as a lecturer at an art college. Taking part in the criticism of the ruling Pahlavi dynasty, which ignited amidst a revolutionary atmosphere centering on students in 1979, Nodjouri produced political posters, for which he was persecuted. Criticizing an oppressive situation that likewise was repeated even under the new political system established after the successful Iranian Revolution, he eventually had to seek refuge in the United States in 1981. Since then, the artist has continued to lead a politically active life, participating in the anti-war movement in America, and has boldly addressed very sensitive political issues regardless of whether or not they concern him directly. Because he has reflected such contentious political positions in his art as well, his works, at times, have been designated as "illegal" by religious leaders back in Iran, too. Nevertheless, Nodjouri has come to enjoy a very influential position in his native country. Indeed,

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Roger Sedarat, "The Rumpus Mini-interview Project #98: Nicky Nodjouri," *The Rumpus*, Aug. 24, 2017, <https://therumpus.net/2017/08/the-rumpus-mini-interview-project-98-nicky-nodjouri>: "...in his native Iran he has achieved the status of a rock star. In a recent national survey, he was voted the fifth most influential artist in the last eighty years. Since I first got to know him almost twenty years ago, he has increasingly gained considerable recognition in the Western art world as well."

in a recent nationwide survey, he was cited among the five most influential artists in Iran over the past 80 years.¹ Moreover, he has gained considerable recognition in the West and across the globe as well. Nodjouri's works are housed in major galleries around the world including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, British Museum, DePaul Art Museum in Chicago, National Museum of Fine Arts of Havana, and his entire oeuvre has received renewed attention since his recent, first solo exhibition in Europe. The artist's works have been evaluated as comprehensively addressing issues universally faced by humankind instead of being limited only to those linked to Iran.

For over 40 years, Nodjouri has built a very political and profound artistic world whose theme is the relationship between power and violence. The keywords of his artistic realm are "ambiguity" and "drama." Here, "ambiguity" refers not to the absence of a stance but to the possibility of observing and expanding objects with multilayered meanings. In his paintings, interconnected in dramatic scenes are current political news, past symbols, and everyday objects. The figures featured consist mainly of powerful politicians, participants indiscernible due to covered faces, animals symbolizing primal strength and purity, and objects summoned from the artist's experiences. In Nodjouri's works, incidents and scenes are staged in a way that stresses the sphere of interpretation and imagination through the intentional arrangement of disparate events instead of direct and

critical allusions to sociopolitical incidents reported in the news. The possibility of expansion through such multilayered arrangements is applied to the development of themes linked to the artist's identity as well. Nodjoumi has led a life that, in one sense, "drifts" between Iran, his native country, and the United States, where he has lived for nearly 40 years. Reflecting on his life of wandering in a strange land, the artist intentionally expands the scope of his pictorial narratives to universal human experiences. Binary oppositions such as the Orient/Occident, Iran/Western countries, and the Islamic/non-Islamic worlds are concealed or transformed through diverse combinations. Though clichés related to art history or Iranian cultural traditions are featured often, they are reconstructed to make their contexts nearly unidentifiable, thus leading to narratives where the understanding of the meanings is "delayed." Regarding such a working method, the artist states: "I took the photo and deformed it, to get the identity out of them, that way it becomes something else. It's not real anymore, they don't exist anymore in that situation. I don't think any Iranian would identify with them, or any American, in fact, it's just a kind of human being, but they have

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Alma Vescovi, "A Conversation with Artist Nicky Nodjoumi," *The American Reader*, n. d., <http://theamericanreader.com/a-conversation-with-artist-nicky-nodjoumi>.

a recognizable suit. Most of these paintings are critical of both societies, Iranian and Western."² While the dramatic stories staged in his paintings are all connected to events that he has undergone in his life, their purpose lies not in being limited to criticism of such incidents but in promoting viewers to proceed to more uncommon perspectives on new visual experiences and, furthermore, circumstances.

Nodjoumi's perspective on power is clear from the following remarks: "If I have one subject, it's power relationship. It can come in many forms: sometimes politics, sometimes between men and women,

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Laura Egerton, "Nicky Nodjoumi's Satirical Pieces on Display at Rare Exhibition in Dubai," *The National*, May 22, 2018, <https://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/art/nicky-nodjoumi-s-satirical-pieces-on-display-at-rare-exhibition-in-dubai-1.732700>.

sometimes between animals or a combination of all those things."³

In his works, power holders and their executors often wear masks or cover their faces. They can be anyone and likewise are capable of shifting into countless other identities. The objects surrounding these figures are dramatic devices whose meanings lie hidden:

"With a twist. The problem is people. When they come into power, no matter what, they do bad things. The paintings are generally about people in power, it doesn't matter what country. They are demagogues, they are hypocrites."⁴

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Ibid.

As for the title of this exhibition, "Please Sit Down," there is an anecdote related to the artist's personal experience. During an interrogation in Iran for political reasons, he was asked by the investigator to take a seat. After thus requesting Nodjoumi to be seated, the examiner fell silent. This seemed like an implicit order to the artist so that, for a prolonged period even after the event, that moment,

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This episode was mentioned in a conversation with Nodjoumi held in London on October 4, 2018.

during which he had to remain seated in a fixed posture amidst silence, was as horrible and frightening as physical torture to him.⁵ Consequently, the title, "Please Sit Down," has a double meaning: violent oppression that hides true intentions as much as does a kind and gentle voice of solicitation. To be showcased at Barakat

Contemporary this time, the identically titled work, *Please Sit Down*, features two men and one sheep. These objects appear repeatedly in Nodjoumi's paintings, and what the masked man in a suit holds in his hand is the stick used in Iran to torture political criminals. The fact that a figure reminiscent of a politician or an entrepreneur is wearing a mask implies that his identity is dubious. The transformation of the surface of the suit pants into the motley pattern of traditional Western court jesters' costume (or Iran's traditional handicraft pattern) often featured in Pablo Picasso's paintings, too, makes it possible to surmise Nodjoumi's perspective on this suspicious figure. Wearing a red shirt and bending his upper body forward, the figure in front of the overturned vehicle in the background passes a chair with one hand, as if frightened, to the sheep standing on two feet next to the masked man. The lower body of the sheep has become as rigid as a rock so that the animal presumably can no longer sit on a chair. The power holder, his henchman, and their victim are depicted in close proximity, as if they were familiar with one another, yet, at the same time, they gaze at the unreasonableness of the relationships in which they have been placed.

The pool of dirty water under these figures' feet shows their positions in reverse. In other words, their respective positions have been turned upside down, as if these conspiratorial relationships will be endlessly cyclical. The painting is titled *Please Sit Down* perhaps because premonitions of anonymity and unavoidable violence are inverted, like a gentle voice of placation. Taking up 1/5 or 1/6 of the screen, the pool of water or the ground at the bottom consistently appears in Nodjoumi's other works as well, and the setup that the truth behind all incidents reveals itself under the earth to which all living beings will eventually return can be seen as a dramatic device for multilayered readings of the narratives. His works are full of anonymity, ambiguity, and irony because reality itself is beyond words. Everything related to power is distorted by duality or multiplicity in not only artworks but also reality.

Among elements repeated in Nodjoumi's paintings are geometric lines. Presented in the form of bindings at times and of structures at other times, these lines are closely related to the bodies of the figures featured in his works. These lines recall the lines of stigmata linking the hands of angels and saints in Giotto's paintings and the contours of transparent cages, inside which figures scream, in Francis Bacon's paintings. While representing tasks that seem rational, logical, and important, at the same time, these straight lines seem like meaningless play as well. Next to them are animals such as frogs and monkeys, collapsed men, and naked women. Faced with primal instincts and impulses, the figures desperately concentrate on geometric shapes that contain nothing.

With plants as its subject matter, works in the *Environmental Series* portray gigantic plants growing in the wilderness. Again, found at the roots of these plants are men in suits holding sticks, the backsides of naked and crouching women, or coiled snakes. In another painting titled *Field Report*, Nodjoumi depicts plants, metaphorically representing nature or the Earth, bound by the same men. A criticism of politicians'

irresponsible decisions regarding nature upon the United States' withdrawal from the Paris Agreement on climate change due to President Donald Trump, this work showcases the overwhelming presence of plants placed in the center of the canvas in accordance with the artist's intentions. Likewise, what plants undoubtedly symbolize in the *Environmental Series* are Nodjoumi's awe and respect for the cosmos and nature, the danger in which they have been placed, humans' selfishness, and zeal for their ability to heal and regenerate the world. Occupying the center of the canvas on a monumental scale, the wild plants also seem like humans who, as a part of nature, raise themselves and grow.

As a whole, Nodjoumi's paintings constitute one immense narrative. This narrative presents a profound perspective on both the world and humans. As such, to what extent can his works be seen as translations of the political reality? In a contribution to *Al Jazeera*, Hamid Dabashi thus reports: "a commentator suggested, 'Nodjoumi's artwork walks a fine line between art and politics'—in response to which he muses, 'I don't have a clear idea. I play with ideas and put them together'. That fine line, if we were to follow that appropriate metaphor, is the fact that the politics of our contemporary realities occasions (not influences)

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Hamid Dabashi, "Politics on Canvas: Nicky Nodjoumi and the New York Enclave," *Al Jazeera*, Oct. 24, 2013, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/10/politics-canvas-nicky-nodjoumi-new-york-enclave-2013102061833355112.html>.

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Ibid.

Nodjoumi's aesthetics."⁶ Likewise, Holland Cotter of the *New York Times* thus explains the essence of the politics in the artist's works: "The new paintings at Taymour Grahne are political too, but the tone is different. Visually the work is light, even airy, and filled with absurdist, mocking incident. Men in suits and mullahs in robes share space with horses, apes and apparitional figures from classical Persian paintings. Almost nothing feels grounded or organic: figures are composed of mismatched legs, torsos and heads, and seem unbound by perspective or gravity. Only in a series of magisterial black-and-white ink drawings does the mood tense up."⁷ The general consensus is that Nodjoumi's artistic world consists of paintings that are full of imagination, play, and inspiration, transcending the boundary of predictable and meaningful realistic narratives. South Korean viewers, too, will be moved by this exhibition of his works precisely because of such pictorial fullness.