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Brushstrokes of defiance: How Nicky Nodjoumi's art endures revolutions and exile

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Installation view of "Nicky Nodjoumi: Someone is coming with a flower" at Barakat Contemporary in central Seoul
/ Courtesy of Barakat Contemporary

To fully appreciate 82-year-old Iranian-born American painter Nicky Nodjoumi's latest solo show, "Someone is coming with a flower," at Barakat Contemporary in Seoul, a brief dive into Iran's modern political history is essential.

In 1969, a young Nodjoumi found himself in New York City — a pivotal moment in time when the Iranian diaspora across the U.S. and Western Europe was rallying against the authoritarian Pahlavi regime back home.

Drawn to the fervor of activism, he soon became involved with the Iranian Student Association, channeling his creativity into producing striking, politically charged protest posters that championed the cause of freedom fighters.

By the 1970s, as unrest in Tehran intensified, Nodjoumi felt an unshakable pull to return to his homeland to confront the regime from within.

His homecoming, however, came at a price. Under the watchful eye of SAVAK, the secret state police, he was subject to constant surveillance and hours of interrogation. Barred from teaching at Tehran University and partaking in public activities, he was allowed only one outlet: the opportunity to quietly exhibit his paintings and drawings once a year.



Installation view of "Nicky Nodjoumi: Someone is coming with a flower" at Barakat Contemporary in Seoul
/ Courtesy of Barakat Contemporary

That all changed on Feb. 11, 1979, when the Iranian Revolution overthrew the monarchy, paving the way for the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Ruhollah Khomeini, a prominent religious cleric, assumed power as the nation's new supreme leader.

In the wake of this seismic political shift, the artist was invited to display over 120 of his paintings, drawings and monotypes at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art. The grand exhibition was intended to celebrate the revolutionary spirit, with many of his pieces criticizing the ousted Pahlavi regime.

What the organizers failed to anticipate, however, was that Nodjoumi's art wasn't just a critique of the overthrown monarchy — it cast an equally piercing eye on the new postrevolutionary government. The Islamic Republic, far from liberating its citizens, quickly revealed itself to be just as oppressive, if not more so, silencing dissent with unjust imprisonments and executions.



Nicky Nodjourni's monotype "Someone Is Coming with a Flower" (1976) / Courtesy of Barakat Contemporary

So, what happened when his retrospective finally opened in August 1980?

The backlash was swift and unforgiving. The Jomhuri Eslami newspaper lambasted his works as “bold vulgarity,” condemning them as “conceptual attacks and mental filth” aimed at Khomeini’s rule. The museum hastily pulled some of his pieces from display, but it couldn’t prevent an angry crowd from storming the show. A concerned friend called to deliver a stark warning: “Get out of the country as soon as possible.”

On the morning of Sept. 22, 1980, with no other option, he fled his homeland. By a cruel twist of fate, that same afternoon, the airport he used to escape was bombed by Iraq, igniting the eight-year Iran-Iraq War.

Forced into exile, he returned to the U.S., where he rebuilt his life and continued his artistic journey. To this day, he has never been able to see the works he left behind at the Tehran museum. His quest for those lost pieces was the subject of the recent HBO documentary, “A Revolution on Canvas,” co-directed by his daughter, Sara Nodjourni, and Till Schauder.



Installation view of "Nicky Nodjourni: Someone is coming with a flower" at Barakat Contemporary in Seoul
/ Courtesy of Barakat Contemporary

Against such a backdrop, Nodjourni's Seoul exhibition holds unique significance. It not only features three rare pre-Iranian Revolution paintings, but also unveils, for the first time ever, over 60 monotypes on paper created shortly after his brief exile to Miami in 1981.

In his protest paintings, men in suits and Muslim leaders in flowing robes float freely alongside horses, plants and mythical figures inspired by ancient Persian art. These allegorical canvases hum with layers of political symbolism and intrigue.

And in his monotypes, a different kind of energy radiates — raw, spontaneous and feverish. Created by applying oil paint directly onto a metal plate and pressing paper to produce a one-of-a-kind print, these pieces showcase a more immediate, visceral transfer of his emotions.



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Bursting with bold primary colors and brisk brushstrokes, the 1981 monotypes carry the haunting specters of revolution alongside the new antagonists of Iran's postrevolutionary regime. His family members also frequently emerge within the imagery, as do Miami's sunlit landscapes. Here, the personal and the political meld seamlessly, dissolving boundaries into a vivid, chaotic harmony.

"I think the aesthetics of art are good on one side, but for us as Middle Eastern artists, with the situations that we face, we have to raise our voices — not only aesthetically but politically — and say no to injustice," he reflected at the gallery.

"Someone is coming with a flower" runs through Jan. 12, 2025 at Barakat Contemporary.