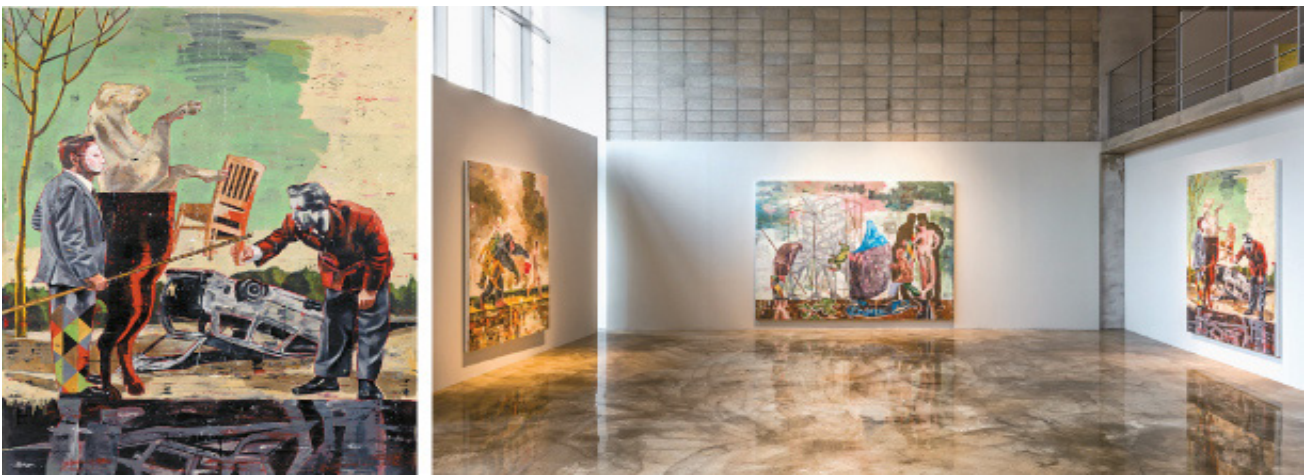


Nicky Nodjoui challenges power with art

Tuesday
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Iranian-American artist Nicky Nodjoui's painting, on the left, and his solo show now running at Barakat Contemporary, are both titled "Please, Sit Down." It symbolizes the violence and oppression by those in power, including state powers. [BARAKAT CONTEMPORARY]

Currently at the Barakat Contemporary - a new space near the Blue House in central Seoul opened by the Barakat Gallery Seoul - hang large-scale paintings that are simultaneously interesting and puzzling.

The figurative paintings seem to show certain theatrical scenes, but it is hard to guess a narrative given they feature men in suits and masks with a chair or sticks, chimera-like animals in the air and more. They are like scenes from some Theatres of the Absurd: ridiculous and ominous.

The paintings are from Iranian-American artist Nicky Nodjoui, famous for symbolic paintings depicting power and violence based on his own experiences. This is his first-ever solo show in East Asia.

One of the paintings on display shares the exhibition's title, "Please Sit Down." The words may sound kind, but they are actually scary as they are the words the artist heard from his interrogator when he was taken to the Iranian public security authorities.

When he returned to Iran after obtaining his Master's degree in Fine Arts from the City College of New York in 1974, he was taken to the authorities every day for three months. The interrogator said, "Please, sit down" and nothing else. Sitting in silence, Nodjoumi said it felt just like torture. "It was silent oppression and violence [...] that's why a chair appears in many of my paintings," the artist told the press during a preview at the galley last month.

At that time, Nodjoumi joined in with people's criticism of the Shah's regime, and helped design political posters. But after the 1978-79 Iranian Revolution, state oppression didn't disappear, but instead evolved into a different style and he was finally exiled to the United States. Continuing his political engagement through his work, he is regarded as an influential modern artist in Iran.

"The keywords of his artistic realm are 'ambiguity' and 'drama,'" Barakat says on its website. "Here, 'ambiguity' refers not to the absence of a stance but to the possibility of observing and expanding objects with multi-layered meanings [...] Reflecting on his life of wandering in a strange land, the artist intentionally expands the scope of his pictorial narratives to universal human experiences."

Nodjoumi's works are in the permanent collections of prestigious institutions such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the British Museum in London, the Guggenheim Museum in Abu Dhabi, the Salsali Private Museum in Dubai and the National Museum of Cuba.

The exhibition runs through Jan. 13. Admission is free. The gallery is closed on Monday. For more information, visit www.barakat.kr or call (02) 730-1949.

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