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Months of Unrest in Iran Have Made It Even Harder for Artists and Galleries to Thrive. Here's How They Are Still Fighting for Ideas

The protests have brought new hurdles but Iranians are determined to keep the art scene alive.

Rebecca Anne Proctor (<https://news.artnet.com/about/rebecca-anne-proctor-1060>), April 14, 2023



A protestor holds a photo of Kurdish Iranian woman Mahsa Amini as another waves Iran's former flag during a demonstration against the Iranian regime and in support of Iranian women in October. Photo by Bulent Kilic/AFP via Getty Images.

On November 4 in Tehran, O Gallery owner Orkideh Daroodi bravely reopened her gallery's doors after one and a half months of intense protests and upheaval following the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini in police custody.

Reopening the gallery and staging exhibitions was risky during a moment of unrest and violent crackdown from the Iranian government. It was also socially risky. Galleries and many other businesses initially shuttered in solidarity with the protests. When Daroodi announced her reopening on Instagram, she immediately faced backlash from some members of the art scene, who saw the return to business as lacking in solidarity with the protests. Several other galleries that reopened in November without making public announcements faced a similar situation. On the morning of the gallery's reopening, someone splattered red paint all over the gallery door and steps. The message was clear.

"They accused us of opening at the wrong time. But when is the right time?" Daroodi told Artnet News. "Our opening coincided with the day that many people were on the streets, being killed and imprisoned, and we were cursed endlessly saying that we didn't care about the lives of the citizens and that all we cared about was money. But in fact by being open we were showing resistance and actually living the woman, life, freedom slogan."

While Daroodi and other Iranian gallerists have resumed staging exhibitions and selling art, some remain reluctant to hold solo exhibitions due to safety concerns, afraid of provoking the wrath of the protesters as much as attracting the attention of the oppressive Islamic regime.



Zahra Shahcheraghi's solo show "Swan's Death" staged at O Gallery from January 20 through February 7. The artist covered the entire space in black fabric to symbolize the state of mourning.

Indeed, the protesters are far from the only concern facing galleries in Iran. Aside from the fact that the businesses need to reopen to remain afloat financially, Daroodi and others believe that art also has a role to play in the crisis—and that it makes for a more powerful statement when gallery doors are kept open.

"We've always had issues trying to keep our doors open, fighting censorship and always fighting for freedom," Daroodi said.

Another female gallery owner spoke to Artnet News on condition of anonymity out of concern for her security. During the peak of the protests, she used her gallery to provide shelter for protesters. Afterwards, she received repeated calls from the government threatening to close down her space. The threats have since subsided. "For now, it seems they [the Iranian state] don't want too much noise," she said. "However, they are now fostering submission through fear."

Other artists and gallerists repeated her assessment that situation is calmer now, with fewer protests, but with recent incidents such as the gas poisoning of [several hundred schoolgirls \(https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-64797957\)](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-64797957), many believe that further unrest is on the horizon.



Installation view, "For Life" at Aaran Gallery in Tehran.

Back to Business Amid Fear

Most galleries in Tehran, which number around 50, are now open for business. (Assar Gallery, among several others remain closed). But what sort of business can be done?

For Dastan's Basement, the focus is on doing business abroad. Hormoz Hematian, the gallery's owner and director, is making the art fair circuit, most recently, showing at Frieze L.A. and Art Dubai. The gallery back home remains open but is not staging exhibitions.

For those who are fully reopening, there is clearly an appetite for art. When Tehran-based Aaran Gallery staged its first exhibition on February 24, titled "For Life" after the now famous "baraye" protest slogan, hundreds attended the opening. Gallery owner Nazila Noebashari told Artnet News that it sold works from the show in the range of \$5,000.

For many, business is conducted only within Iran, as finding ways to make payments and sending money to the country remains as difficult to foreigners as it has been since the first sanctions were imposed in 1979. Thankfully, "Iranians are buying again," said O Gallery's Daroodi. While sales and attendance have not yet recovered to the levels they were enjoying before the protests, she said "it is picking up." Her gallery is currently selling art in the range of 5 million to 1,200,000,000 Iranian rials which is approximately \$100 to \$30,000 due to current exchange rates and spiraling inflation.



Mohammed Eskandi, *U Turn* (2023). Installation view, "For Life" at Aaran Gallery in Tehran.

The Dilemma Facing Iranian Artists

The situation for artists is different. For those who continue to actively protest and create art about the challenges around them, safety is a concern, and galleries are also wary of showing the work out of fear of government reprisal.

For many, living and creating art means contending with constant fear and uncertainty. One female Tehran-based artist told Artnet News that for the first two months of the protests, she couldn't make any art.

"After two months, to calm myself down and pass this difficult and strange period, I made a fabric artist book, which cannot be presented inside Iran under these conditions, because it has the names of those killed and the slogan 'Women, Life, Freedom' on it," she said.

Even for those whose work is not overtly political, the upheaval has meant they have lost time and opportunities to show their work at home. The escalating cost of living, of rent on studio space, and materials, has also become prohibitive for many. "The price for art materials has now increased 10 times," said one artist based in Tehran on

condition of anonymity. "For young artists it is very difficult. More established artists are now offering younger artists private classes in their studios."



A protester holds up a note reading "Woman, Life, Freedom, #MahsaAmini" while marching down a street on October 1, 2022 in Tehran, Iran. Photo by Getty Images.

Many artists are now seeking to exhibit their work outside of the country, and Iranian work was a notable presence at the recent Art Dubai fair.

Tehran-based artist Behrang Samadzadegan recently applied for a Golden Visa, a special long-term residence granted to foreign talents to live and work in the UAE. Samadzadegan, who recently had a solo exhibition at Leila Heller Gallery in the Emirate, plans to work between Tehran and Dubai. "It's very expensive for Iranians to live in Dubai due to our economic situation and our failing currency. But Iranians are going where there is more opportunity," he said, adding that many Iranians who work in IT and engineering are applying for jobs in Germany.

Others have been turning to digital art, creating NFTs to earn money and gain collectors from abroad. "Collectors inside the country aren't buying much art and to sell artwork to collectors overseas is difficult due to sanctions," said another artist who asked to remain anonymous. "All the artists around me are thinking about leaving."

Still, the battle wages on within the country and abroad for liberty and justice, particularly over the hijab which the Iranian regime remains determined to enforce. (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-65147339>) Art, as the Iranian scene demonstrates, has become itself an act of defiance, resilience and survival.

"It is through artistic creations that Iran reveals her true self and this many believe constitutes the country's most precious legacy," Aaran Gallery's Noebashari told Artnet News. Persian history, even prior to 1979, has endured continuous turmoil, she added: "No historical shock has been able to break our belief in art."

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