

## BEHJAT SADR: DUSTED WATERS

*Behjat Sadr (1924-2009)* was one of Iran's most important artists. Under-recognised in her lifetime, this is the first UK solo presentation of her work.

Sadr was a painter and a rebel. She was a pioneer in the male-dominated Iranian art world, where she struggled to achieve full recognition. *Dusted Waters* reveals a visual diary of the artist's dramatic fusion of work and life. It examines her complex relationship to the landscape, and to notions of 'home' and 'abroad', as an artist who moved between her country of birth and Europe throughout her adult life.

The exhibition contextualises Sadr's work within the decentred modernities that emerged after the end of World War II. Artists of her generation navigated the circulation of aesthetic trends between Western art capitals and Tehran. It sites her work in the context of Iranian modernity, which developed at a time of civil unrest (leading to the 1979 revolution) and was mainly rooted in the boom of the oil economy and the exploitation of natural resources by colonial powers.

The exhibition is presented in three parts, moving through the three cities that had a formative influence on her life. These are Rome in the 1950s, where Sadr completed her training as an artist; Tehran in the 1960 and 1970s; and Paris from 1980 onwards, where she moved following the Iranian revolution.

The systems of symbols and plays on texture in her works are diverse and unexpected. What transcends her various periods is Sadr's repeated depiction of vertiginous vortexes comprised of twisted lines, powerful brushstrokes and woven structures. The colour black remains a fixation throughout, impenetrable as the night and the thick oil seeping through the pipelines of Bandar Abbas, Southern Iran, which she visited and photographed in the 1970s. Her dazzling patterns of organic shapes – playing with earth, wind, fire and water – are like traces of an elemental journey, symbolising a nascent cosmopolitan modernity.

A rare selection of major works by the artist are brought together in this exhibition, from her early debate in the 1950s with Art Informel and gestural painting in Italy, to her take on geometric abstraction and Islamic architecture upon return to Tehran in the 1960s. It was here that she developed her kinetic works in the form of her 'blind paintings' – painted surfaces combined with venetian blinds. Later in the 1970s she moved to her signature black paintings and oil landscapes. Finally, the exhibition presents her collage years (she called them 'photopaintings') and her experimentations with photography – a medium Sadr used from the 1950s to frame and archive her own narrative of modernity.

Presented here and throughout the gallery, the painter's quotations and poems from her diary attest to her attitudes, moods and intimate struggles. They underline her friendship with the famous Iranian woman poet and filmmaker Forough Farrokhzad, with whom she spent time travelling between Rome and Tehran. Each of them experimented with 'blackness' in painting and in poetry, as part of their mutually reflective relationship. Sadr's artistic friendships continued throughout her life, with writer Simin Daneshvar, and more recently with filmmaker Mitra Farahani, whose documentary about the painter (*Behjat Sadr: Suspended Time*, 2006), included in this exhibition, operates as a provocative testament to Sadr as an artist.

Sadr is all about frenetic encounters and motions in a cosmos of chemical and elemental matter, and political disorder. *Dusted Waters*, a phrase taken from her poems, acts as a metaphor for this passionate and anguished relationship with the elements. It also works as a poetic referral to the natural threats and ecological disasters of the twenty-first century, and their relationship to a cultural economy: the oil in the slicks that lap the shores of Galicia and Greece, is the same that fuelled the development of modern visual arts in Iran.



Behjat Sadr posing with one of her canvases, 1963-1964

**BEHJAT SADR (1924-2009)** was one of the freest and most independent spirits of the visual arts scene in Iran, and was one of the first women artists and professors to appear on the international biennale scene as early as the 1950s. As a painter, Sadr blended luxuriant nature and organic forms with the sharp-edged industrial world, in works that spanned the second half of the twentieth century. After completing her studies in Italy, at the Accademia in Rome and in Naples (where she collaborated with influential art critics Giulio Carlo Argan, Roberto Melli and Emilio Villa) she returned to Tehran. Here she became harshly critical of nationalistic art trends and of the Shah's attempt to establish a soft power out of the arts, finally moving to Paris following the 1979 Revolution. In Paris she gained the respect of major critics including Michel Ragon and Pierre Restany. Her work maintained strong links with ideas of automatism and performance, identifying with the mechanical and electronic devices that she found fascinating.

She exhibited at the Tehran Biennales of 1962 and 1964, the 1962 Venice Biennale and at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris in 1963. The Tehran Museum of Contemporary Arts held a retrospective exhibition in 2004 and her work was presented from a new perspective for the exhibition *Behjat Sadr: Trace Through the Black*, Ab-Anbar and Aria galleries, Tehran, 2016. She died in France in 2009. Behjat Sadr's works are held in the collections of Tehran's Museum of Contemporary Art; UNESCO; Grey Art Collection at New York University; Centre Pompidou in Paris, and Tate Modern in London.

The Mosaic Rooms is proud to present this exhibition, the second in a three part series curated by Morad Montazami, entitled *Cosmic Roads: Relocating Modernism*. The series presents important Modernist artists from three countries: Egypt, Iran and Morocco.

### Credits:

With thanks to Morad Montazami, curator; Chloe Bonnie More, assistant curator; and Pooya Abbasian, video production.

All works and archives are exhibited courtesy of the artist's estate and Mitra Goberville-Hananeh, except where specified.

### Exhibition series supported by

Maria Sukkar, Driss and Heli Ben Brahim and a number of generous supporters who wish to remain anonymous.

### Exhibition supported by



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## DUSTED WATERS PUBLIC PROGRAMME

### FAMILY FUN

#### Yalla, Let's Play

Saturday 29 September, 2pm  
**FREE**

Take part in an afternoon of group games, folk songs, dances and stories led by Palestinian play and drama specialist Elias Matar.

### LATE OPENING

#### Frieze London

Friday 5 October, 6-9pm  
**FREE**

If you are visiting Frieze Art Fair, come by afterwards for a chance to visit the exhibition during this late opening.

### CURATOR TOUR

#### Dusted Waters Exhibition Tour

Saturday 6 October, 2pm  
**FREE**

Curator Morad Montazami leads this tour and explores how the works on display illuminate the art and personal life of Behjat Sadr.

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### FAMILY FUN

#### Aleph

Saturday 27 October, 2pm  
**FREE**

Draw and talk together! Children and their families will illustrate their own bilingual alphabet in Arabic and English with Lebanese graphic designer Marwan Kaabour.

### FILM

#### The Cow

Saturday 3 November, 7:30pm  
**£6.50**

A villager's beloved cow dies while he is away on a trip to the city in this 1969 Iranian classic film. Presented in collaboration with the London Iranian Film Festival.

### FILM & POETRY

#### The House is Black

Thursday 8 November, 7pm  
**FREE**

This tribute to poet and filmmaker Forough Farrokhzad features a screening of her acclaimed film *The House is Black* with readings of her poetry in English and Farsi.

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### TALK

#### An Iranian Art Plot: 'Westoxication'

Thursday 15 November, 7pm  
**FREE**

Curator Morad Montazami looks at the emergence and character of Iranian Modernism in conversation with art historians Sussan Babaie and David Hodge.

### FRIDAY LATE

#### Cyrus Goberville

Friday 16 November, 7:30pm  
**FREE**

Sound artist Cyrus Goberville, grandson of the artist Behjat Sadr, stages a musical performance in response to the exhibition at this special late.

### TOUR

#### Interactions

Thursday 22 November, 7pm  
**FREE**

Artist and curator Azadeh Fatehrad joins curator Rose Lejeune for a conversational tour of the exhibition.

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### FAMILY FUN

#### Stories in Cities

Saturday 24 November, 2pm  
**FREE**

Inspired by tales from two cities, families will make artworks together by crafting different stories side by side. With artist Dia Batal and director Elias Matar.

### MUSIC

#### Taqasim Music School

#### Maqām Moods

Thursday 29 November, 7pm  
**FREE**

Oud master Ahmed Mukhtar journeys through the history of maqāms exploring the origins of these melodies, how they can mark times of day and the emotions they evoke. With percussionist Walid Kamil.

### TALK

#### Nawal El Saadawi

Thursday 6 December, 7pm  
**FREE**

Famed author and feminist campaigner Nawal El Saadawi leads a panel discussion on feminist movements in the Arab world and Iran from the 1950s onwards.

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#BehjatSadr



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FOUNDATION PROJECT



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The blackness of lines lying in water  
Blackness and lines standing in glass  
On glass one instant  
On glass standing a moment  
On water longer moments  
The changes on glass the changes on water  
Moments and lines in transformation  
Glass turned to copper  
And water covered in dust  
Glass and water on the stillness of paper

Behjat Sadr poem, edited by Forough  
Farrokhzad, 1960s

I have introduced the third dimension into my kinetic works. Instead of the Venetian blind, I could use vertical or horizontal lines, but by introducing a third dimension I brought a convenient additional meaning. I prefer these bright-coloured three-dimensional shutters to an antique door I once bought by chance and that I could have used in my work to introduce the third dimension. Salvaging the remains of the dead in order to dance with them, which is such a widespread practice nowadays, is of no interest to me. I like producing new things with today's materials. Today I am more attracted to optical or engine-induced motion. I need motion to drive my own individual path.

Behjat Sadr, 'On Kinetic Works', c. 1967



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If it is meant to be, I will also paint today. It will be abstract again. It will be obscure again [...] I see a slice of red in black, a distorted arcade, and dried-up trees. The colour green will materialise, but once again, the wind and the chill of winter and the storms will take hopes of greenery away. And then only the black on black background will remain.

Behjat Sadr,  
personal diary, 1970s



8

I accept this sin. Yes, I was an abstract painter, but for God's sake overlook my fault and accept my repentance. I swear to God, I draw a flower like a flower, and mix mud with fertilizer and smother your heads with it so that your lungs can be filled with it.

Behjat Sadr,  
personal diary, 1970s

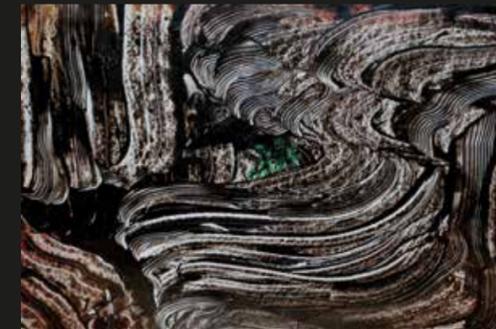


9

Murder of colour  
Weapon of murder: Spatula  
Violence  
Scratchings and shavings  
Backlits

They don't understand the synchronisation of emotions and instincts, the sparks and the motion

Behjat Sadr, poems, 1980s



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12

I did not profit from international exhibitions organised thanks to oil money. And when a gallery owner proposed coinciding my opening with the visit of Empress Farah Diba, I was annoyed. Was it sincerity or foolishness? I did not use calligraphy or Iranian motifs in my canvas to stimulate national pride among my compatriots or the curiosity of strangers. This was the cause of my downfall, but I don't mind. I did not seek the protection of a man to advance and achieve success.

Behjat Sadr, personal diary, 1990s



13

I am the progeny of my century. I feel this century's anxiety. I have been affected by every place I went to. So my paintings are not 'local'. They could be entitled: the alluring fragments of nature have not been curbed by the darkness of the time. I can feel the imprint left by my feet upon the sands of my barren birthplace beyond the high, black wall. The weight of a black stone and its shadow, or a stone inside the door.

Behjat Sadr, personal diary, 1990s



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1. Behjat Sadr in Naples, c. 1957-1958.
2. Behjat Sadr and Forough Farrokhzad in the artist's studio, Tehran, mid-1960s.
3. Behjat Sadr in Piazza San Marco, Venice, 1962.
4. Behjat Sadr in her studio, Tehran, 1967.
5. Untitled, 1967. Oil on aluminium foil on Venetian blinds, 170 x 90 cm. Image courtesy the Behjat Sadr estate.
6. Behjat Sadr producing a kinetic work in her studio, Tehran, 1967.
7. Untitled, 1974. Oil on paper pasted on hardboard, 92 x 140 cm. Image courtesy the Behjat Sadr estate.
8. Photograph by Behjat Sadr of a street demonstration in the Iranian revolution c. 1979.
9. Untitled, 1974. Oil on zinc, 54 x 77 cm. Image courtesy the Behjat Sadr estate.
10. Untitled, c. 1969. Oil on paper on canvas, 67 x 95 cm. Image courtesy Salman Matinfar collection.
11. Untitled, 1988. Oil on paper and photograph, 70 x 100 cm. Image courtesy the Behjat Sadr estate.
12. Untitled, c. 1975. Oil on canvas, 80 x 128 cm. Image courtesy the Behjat Sadr estate.
13. Behjat Sadr in Bandar Abbas, Southern Iran, to visit the oil rigs.
14. Behjat Sadr (far left) at an exhibition during a visit by Empress Farah Diba, Tehran University of Fine Arts, 1960s.

Cover

Untitled, 1974 (detail). Oil on aluminium, 61 x 102 cm. Image courtesy the Behjat Sadr estate.

# BEHJAT SADR

## DUSTED WATERS

28/09/18 - 08/12/18

the  
mosaic  
rooms

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FREE