


## CULTURE

# Leila Heller Gallery, Dubai, presents artist Soraya Sharghi on global stage

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The works of British-Iraqi architect Zaha Hadid on display at Leila Heller Gallery.

Muhammad Yusuf, *Features Writer*

Leila Heller Gallery, Dubai and New York, is taking part in MENART Fair, Paris, with a solo booth of works by Soraya Sharghi (May 27 – 30). The venue is at Cornette de Saint Cyr, 6 av Hoche, 75008 Paris. MENART Fair is the first international modern and contemporary art fair dedicated to artists from the Middle East and North Africa.

Sharghi is an Iranian artist living and working in New York City, creating works in diverse media, such as painting and sculpture. Her aim is to present new myth and narratives, using ancient mythology, including Persian traditions, revolving around power. She does not see her process as emulating the scenery of these tales, but instead, moulds them to serve her purpose — creating extraordinary or supernatural beings in the bargain.

In her large-format paintings, Sharghi depicts a mythology of the 21st century. Young women are staged in the role of a new type of heroine, drawing from the visual worlds of ancient Europe and oriental tales. The traditional, male iconography, experiences re-figuration through the female body. The new heroines rewrite history and old heroes are replaced by new subjects. They transcend themselves and their surroundings, and rule their world in harmony with flora and fauna.

The motifs and detailed friezes depicted in the works are based on memories of Sharghi's childhood fairy tales, which she translates into her own universal language. Representations of Persian miniature painting, together with Japanese anime and contemporary literature, are also central to her inspiration. Sharghi has developed a very precise and highly topical painting technique, which she combines with screen printing, gold leaf, plastic elements on canvas and 'Khātam', the ancient Persian inlay technique.



Leila Heller, left, Soraya Sharghi.

She collaborates across the history and myth and connecting them with her personal imaginary world, creates new stories with her new characters, while reaching for a universal language that generates dialogues spanning different social and political contexts. As a Persian artist, her culture is of great import to her work – she proclaims with unwavering pride her passion for Iranian poetry, specifically the great epic poems one might liken to Homer's *The Iliad* or Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy*.

Yet poetry for Iran is far more significant than in the West, since it records history such as *The Shahnameh* or *The Book of Kings*, which details the creation of the world and establishment of Persian society. For Sharghi, these epic works provide creative fuel: for what poetry probably lacks is the ability to display what these mythological figures might have resembled all those years ago.

She explains: "In my works, it's not that I'm illustrating mythology; I'm using influences like the most famous Persian poem the *Shahnameh*, to provide a context for the battle that takes place inside." But the main character is herself, travelling through different works, in different forms, creating a new mythology. The viewer will encounter feminine icons, unashamed in their femininity, uninhibited in their colour and immense in size. They are powerful beings placed within technicolour environments.



Leila Heller Gallery view.

Her figures are delicately placed in the centre of the canvas, but are not overwhelmed by their vivid, immensely detailed backgrounds. Her canvases are happening places – something noted by art writer Danna Lorch. “In fact,” Lorch says, “boredom seems to be what Sharghi fears most as an artist. “She hustles like an extreme athlete in the studio, refusing to plateau even when something goes well and could easily just be repeated to the delight of collectors. “Instead, she stretches herself with new techniques which - millennial artist that she is - are then regularly documented in short clips on her Instagram channel.”

“The colours,” notes Alessandra Migliorini, writing for ARTE.it, Bulgari Hotel Dubai, “are vivacious and combined audaciously. Her sources of inspiration are numerous, from Iranian poetry to Pop Art, from mythology to comic books, from philosophy to Japanese art, particularly the works of Yayoi Kusama and Takashi Murakami.” “I place no limitations on colour in my work,” Sharghi says, explaining that she often spontaneously adds shades as she goes, rather than arriving at the easel with a rigid paint by number plan.

Through her work, she underlines the extent of how much we live with mythology even today. And one does not have to be Persian to understand it. Sharghi holds a BFA in painting from Soore Art University in Tehran, and an MFA from San Francisco Art Institute in San Francisco, California. (After she graduated, she began teaching in SFAI public education. She taught studio classes with the subject of personal mythology in Painting and Sculpture). She has received several awards and residences, including MFA Fellowship from San Francisco Art Institute, the Murphy & Cadogan Contemporary Art Award and the Graduate Fellowship Alternate Award from Headlands Center for the Arts.

Residencies include The Post Contemporary and Brush Creek foundation for the Arts as well as the New Hope Colony Artist Residency, Phillips Mill Association for the Arts in Pennsylvania. Her work has shown locally and internationally in places such as CICA Contemporary Museum (Czong Institute for Contemporary Art) in South Korea, Today Art Museum in China, MOAH Museum in Los Angeles, Columbus Museum of Art in Ohio, Andrea Schwartz Gallery and SOMArts in San Francisco, Aaran Gallery, Mah Gallery and Fajr International Film Festival in Tehran, Iran, Setareh Gallery in Dusseldorf, Germany and Zoomart in Paris, among others.