Shym, October 2016. Real-time generative audiovisual installation. In memory of Yasaman Pirbastami

OPINION

THE PERSIAN DIGITAL

A look at artists working in digital media through the art of Ali Panahi explores a new genre that is taking the contemporary art in Iran by storm, writes
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Isolated piano notes resonate as a corridor of self-replicating mirrors opens under the projection of abstract motion graphics on a cement ground in a space under construction in Tehran. Lost in an engineered space of infinite boundaries—a "no-man's land" as described by its maker, Ali Panahi known as "Ali Phi"—the audience has come to honour the memory of a young deceased artist through *Shym*, a digitally-created immersive installation.

A decade ago, new media art was a marginal concept in Iran, with few obvious cross-references to indigenous artistry. Paintings, drawings and sculptures made up the bulk of what the public at large commonly accepted as art in its own right, and computer-generated work using digital technology was rarely worthy of consideration from an aesthetic point of view. Change came around 2009 with the coming of age of the digital-born generation. The first user group for everything tech throughout their entire lives, they were the youngest hands and brains to handle VHS cassettes and VCRs, hold the Atari joystick, navigate Nintendo PlayStation, connect to WiFi using dial-up, adopt cell phones and understand that smartphones were designed for more than calls and Selfies. To these kids advanced visual development software became an integrated tool to experience and connect with life.

The story has it that around 2009/10, a group of Abbas Abad and Ghouri park skateboarders, hipsters, rock band members and other tech freaks experimenting freely with all forms of interactive design began formally connecting their artistic vision to their computers, anchoring the noun "art" into a new adjective: "digital." Parking Gallery and Mohsen Gallery, under a series of events called *"Sar-o-Seda"* (Noise), proved two crucial sponsors of these independent artists in the making. "It was all very experimental," says Panahi. A self-imposed recluse yet hailed figurehead of this small but passionate community, Ali Phi admits that, until well into his twenties, he knew nothing of Jethro Tull nor that there were such things as art galleries, much less that they were willing to show his new media art. Slowly, digital art, computer animation, audiovisual installations and interactive light and sound design—all unique creations and often performed on site and in real time—began brushing shoulders with and making forays into parallel industries, catching the public's interest. Theatres, concert halls, cultural festivals and the private sector began calling on this new community to design interactive experiences, light and sound installations and stage designs. In 2011, with the support of Mohsen Gallery and a handful of private patrons, the Sar-o-Seda sessions were formally merged into the Tehran Annual Digital Art Exhibition or TADAEX, first platform of its kind to support the presentation and promulgation of Iranian new media art. Today in its seventh edition, TADAEX incorporates international curators and several international exchange programmes. "In many ways, 2011 was early for TADAEX," says Panahi, but acknowledges that this sudden officialisation of a new art form also got actors to tighten their game. Panahi himself was called to develop TADAEX 2011, directed TADAEX 2016 and supervised the stage design and visuals of the 2015 Fajr Music Festival.

Handling the tools of the craft and getting shown in a gallery is no measure of the success of any artist however. For Amirali Navaee, film director, music producer and mixed media artist, whose first work showed in 2004, original works with localised content remain few and far between. "When form takes precedence over content, I'm not sure we're talking about art. It's not enough to be an expert with say, handling a camera, it's the why that is crucial, what motivates an artist to work," he comments. Navaee views Iran's nascent media art scene as "fundamentally a good thing" but is concerned with global cultural impoverishment. "How can you create any work of art if you cannot read Persian poetry? A media artist must go beyond the tools of the trade in order to create." For him as for Sohrab Kashani, a celebrated artist/curator and founder of the non-profit organization Sazmanab Platform for Contemporary Arts, museums and art institutions have a critically important role to play in guiding the development of the country's art community—new media included.

With countless exhibitions, performances and commercial collaborations to date, Panahi—who also founded the technology-driven art lab Nullsight, directs the new media course at Tehran's Institute of Technology and is a regular lecturer at Tehran's Islamic Azad University—remains humble about why people connect to his work. "New media art can be just light and sound and moving images. Finding a voice as a new media artist means you have something to share, more than something to say. Immersive installations become magical when they connect people to something— whether themselves or a concept or a feeling." That "something to share" Panahi finds it all around him, sometimes immersing himself in solitude for long periods of time in his country "of deserts and carpets and four different seasons and Islamic geometry and indigenous music unlike anywhere else in the world."

Back on site, *Shym* is almost over. The audience has transitioned from a state of excited surprise to one of solitary reflection. Some are seated on the floor, others stand motionless as waves of light and geometrical patterns wash over them, distorting time and space, allowing for time and space to be realised in the flash of an instant. In an age when computers seem to have turned our identities into mere numbers, there is a humanness in the work of Ali Phi, a connecting softness showing us that art is, always, a language that supersedes the era of its birth. ∎