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## Critical Analysis of Predominant Orientations in Contemporary Iranian Art Market towards Cultural Identity\*

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### Abstract

**Problem Statement:** In the global arena of contemporary art, which involves a range of interconnected events from biennales, Documenta, and international art fairs to art markets, the presence of Iranian artists in the “market” is more prominent. The contemporary Iranian art market flourished in 2006 with the collaboration of private galleries and Middle Eastern offices of major auction houses, giving rise to the most important arena to introduce the contemporary Iranian art to a global audience. The art market, which presents Iranian art as part of the regional art following its economic rules, was not a reliable source to introduce the Iranian art on its own. Works that were supplied to and traded in the market referred to signs of Iranian culture. How were these cultural elements manifested in these works?


**Purpose:** delineation and critique of the approach of the contemporary Iranian artists to cultural identity in the global market.

The authors aim to answer the question of what is the approach of market trends towards cultural identity in the contemporary Iranian art? It seems that the use of cultural identity components in the works of Iranian artists serves to neutralize and eventually commodify the cultural identity, rather than redefine it in a meaningful way through a critical or laudatory attitude.

**Methodology:** This study uses “Marxist Criticism” in a descriptive-analytical method.

**Conclusion:** Cultural identity of Iranian works has lost its historical meanings, turning into a commodity devoid of any real connection to the issues of contemporary life.

**Keywords:** *Contemporary Iranian art, Cultural identity, Art market, Late capitalism, Marxist Criticism, Commodification.*

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## Introduction and Problem Statement

The global arena of art as a whole with its range of different events from biennales of major cities of the world, 5-yearly Documenta in Germany, Skulptur Projekte Münster, and international art fairs to major art auctions and similar markets, is generally not a hub to host contemporary Iranian art. It is undeniable that all areas of the contemporary art are interconnected, and that the most glamorous art events are more or less tied to economic events. However, the manifestation of the “international” in Iran’s contemporary art is mostly limited to exhibitions, auction houses, and market events. The contemporary Iranian art has a very limited presence in independent events that showcase the most exquisite artistic expression achievements to a global audience. The reasons for this phenomenon can be the subject of future studies along with the question that for shortage of decent artworks, how much are the governments and official authorities responsible and what problems have the external factors created. However, the “marketability” of contemporary Iranian art calls for close examination of the approach of Iranian artists.

Artworks that have found their way to auctions are generally associated with signs of Iranian culture, which sets them apart from similar works. How are components such as traditional art motifs, Iranian/Arabic calligraphy, social events and incidents of the Iranian society, and other elements associated with the Iranian cultural identity<sup>1</sup> reflected in these works? Does their involvement in contemporary works indicate a reflexive interpretation and attitude, relating to contemporary issues, or do they have other functions? Most of the contemporary Iranian artworks that are traded in Middle East markets include paintings and after that sculpting works. Therefore, the commodification of these works is initially aggravated by the Middle East financial market policy, which continues to focus on the classical media<sup>2</sup> of artistic expression or objects that sell better<sup>3</sup>. The most prominent works in this market often represent the elements of cultural

identity under the influence of formal and expired modernist trends or fruitless postmodernist strategies and compositions. The Iranian artworks seem to have lost the dynamism that the contemporary time deserves. “The word “contemporary” has always meant more than just the plain and passing present. [...] We would see, then, that contemporaneity consists precisely in the constant experience of radical disjuncture of perception, mismatching ways of seeing and valuing the same world, in the actual coincidence of asynchronous temporalities, in the jostling contingency of various cultural and social multiplicities, all thrown together in ways that highlight the fast-growing inequalities within and between them. [...] In contemporaneity periodization is impossible. This suggests that the only potentially permanent thing about this state of affairs is that its impermanence may last forever.” (Smith, 2006). More so than being an effective expression of serious concerns, or reflecting this time and life’s unsustainable features, contemporaneity for Iranian artists is “fixed” and limited to experimenting with different forms, motifs, letters, mixed styles, and finally presentation of a plain image of social issues; It seems that these are in fact the qualities that makes them highly marketable and reinforces their status in the market.

This study aims to delineate the approach of prominent artists in the market toward cultural identity by analyzing and critiquing their works. Therefore, the study population includes works produced by top artists involved in the contemporary Iranian art market. The data sourced from Christie’s auction house, as a major part (institution) of international art market, provided the basis for selection of artworks<sup>4</sup>. “The contemporary art market can be classified as either primary or secondary market. The primary market is where buyers, collectors, or dealers purchase works of art directly from artists or certain people, whereas in the secondary market, works are traded through auction. Each market represents different characteristics, however, in general, moving from the primary to the secondary

market, the “artist’s reputation and the economic value” of the artworks increase simultaneously” (Zorloni, 2016: 69).

According to the query result using the three filters of “21st Century” (2000s), “Iran” and “contemporary” on Christie’s website, 291 Iranian works were found from 67 artists. Top artists included: 1. Farhad Moshiri (33 works), 2. Reza Derakshani (18 works) 3. Afshin Pirhashemi (10 works) 4. Parviz Tanavoli (9 works) 5. Mohammed Ehsai (8 works) 6. Ali Banisadr (7 works) 7. Rokni Haerizadeh (7 works) 8. Koorosh Shishegaran (7 works) 9. Nasrollah Afjehei (7 works) 10. Golnaz Fathi (6 works) 11. Abbas Kiarostami (6 works) 12. Shirazeh Houshiary<sup>5</sup> (5 works) 13. Shadi Ghadirian (5 works) 14. Sara Rahbar (5 works) 15. Shirin Neshat (5 works). Meanwhile, the most expensive works belonged to: Tanavoli, Moshiri, Ehsai, Pirhashemi, and Banisadr. These artists have secured a large part of the contemporary Iranian market for themselves, and other artists generally have fewer and less expensive works, who either follow the style of great artists or their different approach plays no significant role in the market position and orientation. Furthermore, the presence of great names such as Kiarostami, who is well-known in the world of cinema, shows the profitable intentions of this market and making money off of personal reputation. Regardless of the unique characteristics of the works of different artists, their approach can be efficiently analyzed through description and classification of their works into specific artistic expression orientations. From among diverse orientations that make up the contemporary Iranian art identity, formalism, pop, and attention to socio-political topics are more serious and widespread in the market.

### Theoretical Framework

In its critical analysis of market trends or orientations for contemporary Iranian art, this study focuses on criticism of capitalism following the Marxist critical tradition. “The neo-Marxists were keen to demonstrate how the forces of capitalism were at the

heart of contemporary cultural shifts” (Smith, 2004: 351). Frederic Jameson is one of the most prominent figures in this critical approach. “Jameson’s critical theory, similar to Adorno, is based on rejection of: First, the late capitalist system that is becoming increasingly totalitarian, and, second, postmodern ideologies that legitimize this system [...] the key in Jameson’s idea is his emphasis on “globalization” and “commodification” (Milner & Browitt, 2015). Jameson, however, repeatedly reminds us that by postmodernism his focus is mostly “historical” rather than stylistic (Roberts, 2007: 183). Accordingly, postmodernism is neither a distinct style, nor a specific set of themes, rather a kind of special social relation between art and capitalism. In a nutshell, postmodernism is the selfsame modernism devoid of its liberating and avant-garde roles (Milner & Browitt, 2015).

“What has happened is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally: the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods, at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation.” (Jameson, 2007: 7).

Jameson points to awareness of ‘reification’ and ‘commodification’, which dominate our culture today, as a key condition for proper understanding of our surrounding world (Roberts, 2007). Reification operates in two ways: one is the way in which capitalism defines everything in commodity terms because everything has an exchange value, an amount of money for which it can be bought or sold. Here, an object, i.e. money, is of prime importance (including human beings and the quality of their existence), and, according to Jameson’s interpretation, this process involves “the substitution for human relations of thing-like ones” such as money (Ibid: 55-56). [Therefore] the factor protecting the postmodern late capitalism is, ultimately, not culture in terms of normative value system, but a market (Milner & Browitt, 2015) In this situation, art works,

similar to other cultural products, finds a commodity and thing-like property, and targets the market, rather than exerting influential social effects.

In the situation where late capitalism transforms everything into commodities, what are the functions of artworks with different national or cultural streaks? Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, contemporary Marxist theorists, focus on the critical keyword of “difference”, and its role in the structure of new global market.

They argue that the ideology of the world market has always been the anti-foundational and anti-essentialist discourse par excellence. Circulation, mobility, diversity, and mixture are its very conditions of possibility. Trade brings differences together and the more the merrier! Differences (of commodities, populations, cultures, and so forth) seem to multiply infinitely in the world (Negri & Hardt, 2012: 24). We certainly agree with those contemporary theorists, such as David Harvey and Fredric Jameson, who see postmodernity as a new phase of capitalist accumulation and commodification that accompanies the contemporary realization of the world market. The global politics of difference established by the world market is defined not by free play and equality, but by the imposition of new hierarchies, or really by a constant process of hierarchization. Postmodernist and postcolonialist theories are really sentinels that signal this passage in course, and in this regard are indispensable. (Ibid: 228-229).

Therefore, “cultural difference” in artistic production provides an opportunity to create a new market with its own customers. For auction houses such as Christie’s (headquartered in London) and Sotheby’s (headquartered in New York), the current phase of globalization has opened up dazzling business prospects. Today, each of these two mega-scale actors has 85–90 offices in about 40 countries and nearly every continent (Sevänen, 2018: 25; Alexander & Bowler, 2014: 6). Christie’s in 2006, Sotheby’s in 2007 and Bonhams in 2008, launched their first Middle East sales in central Dubai, the richest and most money-making city in the region,

which was received warmly and the prices were higher than estimated (Eshghi, 2011). “The boom in the Middle Eastern sales [...] was the ideal time for Western auction houses to invest in the country where wealthiest people in the world live and get them involved in the art world. [...] Even though high prices decreased after the booming period, demand for this market rapidly increased and locals also started collecting artworks more than ever” (Foroutani, 2015: 3-4). A part of the customers see buying artworks merely as a mean to secure their capital, which is a usual practice in art market transactions around the world. Kangsan Lee, refers to the Far East art market (China and Korea) and stresses that “neoliberal marketization attracted a new group of art buyers who did not necessarily know or value the conventional aesthetic or cultural standards but were heavily depended on market valuation. In other words, marketization not only increased general attention on new markets with resources, but it also attracted new buyers with little or no experience” (Lee, 2018: 80).

It seems that the top works of contemporary Iranian artists in the Middle East market are no exception to the principle of demonstrating cultural differences. Assuming that cultural identity in Iranian works is in line with commodification, this study attempts to analyze the approaches and methods of artistic expression in these works that have contributed to the process of commodification. Accordingly, the critical approach to the analysis of selected works is derived from Marxist criticism (for critique of commodification). “Marxist criticism analyses literature in terms of the historical conditions which produce it; and it needs, similarly, to be aware of its own historical conditions” (Eagleton, 2004: 21). Therefore, dominant contemporary Iranian art trends are also evaluated in terms of their historical status and function in their contemporaneity.

### Literature Review

most of critical scholars consider who consider commodification as one of the most complicated

and enduring issues of contemporary culture. In “Culturalization of the Economy and the Artistic Qualities of Contemporary Capitalism”, Juhana Venäläinen argues that the unknown fate of art and culture against contemporary pressure from capitalism is a recurring concern in both academic and public discussions. The term “creative economy” marks the beginning of a process wherein art and culture increasingly surrender to the logic of economy.

In his 2018 study “The Neoliberal Marketization of Global Contemporary Visual Art Worlds: Changes in Valuation and the Scope of Local and Global Markets”, Kangsan Lee relies on two economic indicators, i.e. commensuration and financialization, to argue how the globalized art is deeply influenced by the norms and activities of the global capitalist economy or, overall, the neoliberal marketization forces. In her 2018 study “Art, Markets, and Society: Insights and Reflections on Contemporary Art”, Ilaria Riccioni asks such questions as: “To which extent do the markets influence art production and creativity in art? Is it true that art is nowadays merely the result of a managed cultural project? Can the artist really become a “worker” inside the capitalist cultural machine, or is there still a difference between artistic creation and the industrial–capitalist creation of art? The author points out that the current marketization of art worlds has led to a growing alienation of artists from their own works.”

Commodification of ethnicity or cultural identity has been discussed in critical tourism studies, anthropology, and postcolonial studies. “Ethnicity, Inc” by Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff is a rich resource on the subject that points to boundlessness of commodification, asking the pressing question: Wherein lies the future of ethnicity? Roberts Shepherd’s 2002 “Commodification, Culture and Tourism” argues that an acceptance of a cause and effect relationship between tourism and cultural commodification requires an acceptance of the problematic notion of ‘authenticity’; A concept that post-colonial theorists, including Homi Bhabha, have

been struggling to oppose through an alternative: “hybridity”.

Jean Fisher, a post-colonial art critic, in “The Syncretic Turn, Cross-cultural Practices in the Age of Multiculturalism” criticizes the unequal or prearranged presence of non-Western artists, for reasons of artistic and economic survival, have had to acquiesce to promotion through the commodified signs of ethnicity, which renders them complicit with the western desire for the exotic other, which it can measure its own superiority (Fisher, 2005: 235).

Exoticism, which refers to aestheticizing the perception of the “other” (foreign/alien) “people-objects-places different from subjectively familiar reference systems, which renders them strange and, simultaneously, domesticates them” (Berdychevsky, 2015; Huggan, 2001) is a critical topic in post-colonial studies. “The Question of Identity vis-a-vis Exoticism in Contemporary Iranian Art” by Hamid Keshmirshakan regards concepts of identity and exoticism as essential and interconnected issues of contemporary Iranian art that have given rise to certain challenges regarding the notions of “self”, “other”, and [viewer/foreign critic] expectations. He emphasizes that the insistence of Iranian artists on presenting a distinct cultural identity has entangled them in exoticism. Keshmirshakan also points to “given” identities as a serious challenge for contemporary artists in his book “Contemporary Iranian Art: Roots and New Perspectives”. “The need to distinguish between Western and other art based on visual difference” (Keshmirshakan, 2015: 321). The present study agrees with certain achievements of post-colonial studies on criticism of commodification of cultural identity, however, the inability of post-colonialism to provide a historical alternative that can withstand capitalism calls for further reflection.

### Methodology

This was a theoretical-fundamental study, and the data was collected from both primary and secondary sources such as library, websites and observation. The data was analyzed through both quantitative



and qualitative methods, and interpreted through a Descriptive-analytical method derived from Marxist criticism.

## Findings

This article attempts to analyze and highlight the approach of prominent artists in the contemporary Iranian art market, who are generally well-known international artists; in their use of cultural signs, while warning about the dangers of commodification of cultural identity. In the analysis of artworks, especially contemporary Iranian art, critical approaches such as Marxist criticism have generally been neglected by Iranian scholars. The findings of this study adds to the discourse on critique of art in its analysis of artistic expression approaches and the artists' use of Iranian cultural signs wherein the function of works is mostly reduced to a "different cultural commodity".

## Predominant Orientations in Contemporary Iranian Art Market

### • Formalism

Some of the top market names belong to great artists who mark the beginning of a new era, representing the modern Iranian art history. "Parviz Tanavoli was a pioneer in modern Iranian sculpting and a central figure in the Saqqakhana Movement, which had a deep influence on late modernist art movements" (Keshmirshakan, 2015). Mohammad Ehsai and Nasrallah Afjei are known as pioneers of calligram (Naghashi-khat), and Kourosh Shishegaran has had a prolific, diverse, and pluralist artistic life. Meanwhile, other distinguished artists such as Reza Derakhshani, along with Golnaz Fathi and Ali Banisadr from the younger generation, have also been present in the market. What features in the works of these artists bring them under the formalism category? Exploration of form aesthetics in the elements of traditional Iranian culture and art, and its integration with stylistic aspects of modern Western art.

Here, formalism does not necessarily mean 'form without meaning' or Abstraction, rather it refers to

the artist's emphasis on formal aspects compared to the content that works can express. "A term used in the discussion of the arts to describe an approach in which the means of representation are regarded as of greater significance than what is represented" (Chilvers & Glaves-Smith, 2009: 672).

Formalism is a viewpoint intertwined with the history of artistic modernism. The hybrid sculptures of Parviz Tanavoli in the 60s and 70s are successful examples of an exhaustive effort on the part of modernist artists of that era to rethink the aesthetic aspects of traditional Iranian arts and handicrafts from a modern perspective. "The pioneers of modern Iranian art, especially Saqqakhana Movement, were trying to achieve a certain degree of convergence with modern Western art (especially abstract art) to reach a synthesis between the modern and the traditional. [...] However in general, these artists' use of tradition was more of an "artificial" reference to tradition, rather than a representative notion or conceptual content; a quality that is more prominent in the abstract orientation of this movement. In other words, their focus is on visual traditions (including shapes, themes, colors, etc.), which can together create a comprehensible link with traditional, and sometimes religious, subjects, rather than referring to a specific content" (Keshmirshakan, 2015: 107-109). Tanavoli's "Contemporary" sculpting is not significantly different from his established style in the previous stage of his activity, and the artist has continued to reproduce himself in the 21st century; works that no longer relate to the complexities of contemporary period (Fig. 1 & 2).

The same is true for other important modernist Iranian artists such as Ehsai, Afjei and Shishegaran. Artists of the calligram movement, including the Saqqakhana Movement followers, attempted to transcend the rules of traditional calligraphy and test the visual beauty of text with color and brush and more complicated or, in other words, "painterly" compositions. These efforts culminated in exquisite paintings that, with a formalist approach, redefined the art of calligraphy in the visual pleasure resulting

from the pure structure of letters and words. For these artists, the readability and meaning of the



Fig 1. Parviz Tanavoli. Poet, Cage and Nightingale. 1970. Height: 92 cm. Source: Keshmirshakan, 2015: 111.



Fig 2. Parviz Tanavoli. Poet and Cage, 2008. Bronze. Dimensions: 151 x 50 x 50 cm. Source: <http://www.artnet.com>

writings, or their direct connection to religious and literary texts was not very significant. Ehsai and Afjei continued creating written compositions in a different, yet still formal, shape (Fig. 3 to 6). Shishegaran, the modernist artist of the decade before and after the Islamic Revolution of Iran, experimented with different painting and graphic arts, which sometimes required a socio-political and sometimes an abstract approach, and eventually established a special abstract style inspired by Persian calligraphy, graffiti and pop painting. “Hamid Dabashi<sup>6</sup> who follows Shishegaran’s progress from modernism to his current theories and practices of abstract line drawings (khat-khati in Persian) inspired by Persian tradition of the calligraphic arts, says: I think of it as a form of linear abstract expressionism (Nakjavani, 2017); (Fig. 7 & 8).

Although the formal use of calligraphy in the works of Golnaz Fathi, involving sharp colors and strong strokes, makes an expressionistic expression, it ultimately does not present anything beyond the allure of an abstract painting (Fig. 9). For these artists, contemporaneity is not beyond the date of their work’s premiere in the 21st century. The technical features, recognition of the “visual” potentials of traditional themes, and the impressive use of the visual allure of calligraphy in these works are undeniable, however, the dominance of form and lack of content relating to actual exterior and social phenomena, cannot characterize them as “representatives of contemporary art”. Marxist criticism has traditionally been opposed to literary [-artistic] formalism, “attacking that inbred attention to sheer technical properties which robs literature of historical significance and reduces it to an aesthetic game” (Eagleton, 2004: 45). Iranian formalism employs special cultural signs to determine the regional fabric; Given that formalism requires content to be marginalized or deleted, cultural identity is transformed into a superficial literary device that changes the cultural/ethnic identity of the “commodity” as a distinguishing extension.



Fig 3. Mohammad Ehsai. Banquet. 2009. Oil on canvas. 260 x 564cm  
Source: <https://www.christies.com>

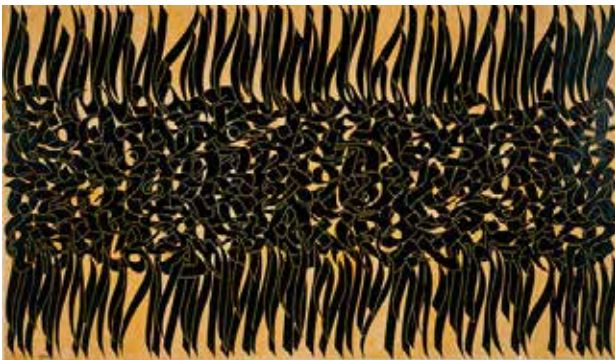


Fig 4. Mohammad Ehsai. The Echo of the Word. 1990. 160 x 310 cm oil on canvas. Source: Keshmirshakan, 2015: 159.



Fig 5. Nasrollah Afjehei. Love. 2010. acrylic on canvas. 200 x 200cm  
Source: <https://www.christies.com>

Newer formalist trends are incapable of creating a real transformation in the nature of plural components that shape the structure of the images, even using a postmodernist approach. Representatives of this



Fig 6. Nasrollah Afjehei. Love, 1984. Oil on canvas, 150 x 50 cm.  
Source: <http://www.artnet.com>



Fig 7. Koorosh Shishegaran. Samavar (still life). 1986. 133 x 133 cm.  
acrylic on canvas. Source: <http://www.artnet.com>



Fig 8. Koorosh Shishegaran. Figure. 2014. acrylic on canvas. 160 x 200cm. Source: <https://www.christies.com>



approach are largely known for “deconstructing” Eastern and Western identities in their works. In his detailed and visually striking paintings, Reza Derakhshani portrays subjects derived from traditional Iranian literature and paintings (e.g. hunting scenes, pomegranates, Persian garden, calligraphy, etc.) through abstract expressionism (Fig. 10). A similar approach can be seen in Ali Banisadr’s “Swarming figures, occupied spaces divided into various levels, bringing to mind both Persian miniatures (even though these were large format pieces) and Hieronymus Bosch [15th century European artist] “ (Millet, 2016); (Fig. 11).

Deconstruction in the works of these artists is nothing more than mixing the images of East and West. The East/West integration trend is also pursued by spiritualist artists such as Aydin Aghdashlou and many younger artists who have transcended formalist concerns. This integration is an example of Homi Bhabha’s hybridity, which, Fischer believes, has been “the most popularly cited model of intercultural expression in recent years” (Fisher, 2005: 237). Hybridity in postcolonial studies refers to the [revolutionary] mixing of races (miscegenation) and cultures so that new forms of culture are produced. [...] Homi Bhabha sees hybridity as an empowering condition where both cultural purity and [special and customized] cultural diversity [which carries an exotic appeal] are rejected [...]. Hybridity thus creates plural identities in the intercultural space (Third Space), which becomes a means of resisting a unitary identity (Nayar, 2015). What Bhabha suggested as an effective resistance to hegemonic identification, in practice, transformed into a decorative theory that paradoxically resulted in newer forms of exoticism. How can cultural/ethnic signs that are separated from their conventional content and context, and their implication is limited to formal and superficial interactions, actually deconstruct the assumptions of “other”?

How can you not take advantage of the new image, which is transformed only in appearance, for hegemonic purposes? How will the new image truly



Fig 9. Golnaz Fathi. Untitled. acrylic on canvas. 160 x 200cm. Source: <https://www.christies.com>



Fig 10. Reza Derakhshani. Bloody Hunt. 2016, oil on canvas. 183 x 244 cm. Source: <https://www.christies.com>

change the unequal status of the marginality and center? When a remarkable and beautiful object that is created through mixing of (formerly contradictory) Eastern and Western identities has a permanent customer base as the contemporary regional art, without effectively challenging the prejudices, it is destined to become a commodity that serves capitalism. Formalism can disarm and neutralize any kind of cultural resistance, and ultimately, tailor artistic production to suit the business and trade processes through commodification.

#### • **Pop and Kitsch**

Iranian postmodernism is more prominent in pop-like



Fig 11. Ali Banisadr. The Light. 2010. oil on canvas. <https://www.christies.com>

market trends and works that are concerned with the vernacular culture. Pop art is based on images of mass consumer culture [...] Comic books, advertisements, packaging, and images from television and the cinema were all part of the iconography of the movement (Chilvers & Graves-Smith, 2009: 1552). The visual pop culture was characterized by flamboyance, vulgarity, banality, or generally its so-called “kitsch” quality, being contrasted to the high elite culture. As the most representative form of postmodernist artistic expression (in its approach to popular culture and kitsch taste), pop art intended to ridicule the seriousness of high art; however, due to the weakness of its critical expression, eventually, it surrendered

to capitalism and (paradoxically) found a special market value in the art market<sup>7</sup> Farhad Moshiri, the superstar of the Middle East art market, has turned into an icon in this field. He single-handedly holds a significant part of the Iranian market. Pop approaches and playing with the elements of mass culture or commercial-promotional images are popular subjects among well-known Iranian artists such as Afsoon and Khosrow Hassanzadeh, who are still far away from the exceptional position of Moshiri in the market. Moshiri juxtaposes vernacular expressions with glamorous jewelry in unrelated situations; He presents elements of traditional art (pots, carpets, etc.) using newer techniques such as large texture





Fig 12. Farhad Moshiri. Love. 2007. Swarovski crystals and glitter on canvas with acrylic, mounted on mdf. 76.5 x 91.5cm . Source: <https://www.christies.com>



Fig 13. Farhad Moshiri. Love. 2003. Oil and acrylic on canvas. 271 x 181cm. Source: <https://www.christies.com>

painting or installation, and sometimes employs techniques that are unusual for high art, such as traditional Iranian embroidery (Fig. 12 & 13).

In his artwork “Love”, hundreds of brilliant pieces, including expensive Swarovski<sup>8</sup> crystals, are used to create the word “love” in Nastaliq script. It is possible that the usual conception of the elite’s high art has come under question. Moshiri’s ironic investigations of the thin (and intangible) line between consumerism<sup>9</sup> and art as an object of consumption have won him enormous international acclaim (Babaie, 2011: 142), and his sensitivity to the contradictions in the world of art is remarkable; However, when this work was sold at the Bonhams<sup>10</sup> auction for \$1,048,000, making Moshiri the first artist with a one-plus million dollar artwork in the Middle East, only the type or rather the category of goods sold was changed. If previously the trade of certain artworks as “high art” was criticized, condemned, and excluded from the independent art sphere, now works from the opposite side (even if produced consciously and critically) have seized the market. Meanwhile the sanctity brought about by the label “the most expensive Middle Eastern artwork” (at the time) included luxury brand of Swarovski and was not deprived of the credibility of high art. Using less complicated expressions, Khosrow Hasanzadeh and Afsoon base their works on a foundation inspired by pop aesthetics (Fig. 14 & 15). They use pop techniques such as printing (especially silk-screen), photography, photo-painting, collage, and even using editing software, such as Photoshop, they created quasi-media (news/advertising/commerce) images staring key political, historical, fictional, etc. figures, while failing to signify the essential difference of their work (as artworks) from the main source of inspiration (mass culture) in terms of an acceptable artistic expression. The ironic and mostly unclear references to contradictions, gaps, and socio-cultural inequalities in these works are a futile attempt to incorporate a critical and self-conscious glance to works that look carefree and lousy.

#### • Socio-political

A wide range of contemporary Iranian artists focus on social and political events as subjects of interest,



Fig 14. Khosrow Hassanzadeh. Mother and Sister (from the Terrorist series). Silk screen with acrylic on canvas. 2003. 176 x 155 x 8 cm. <http://www.artnet.com>



Fig 15. Afsoon. The Shah and his Three Queens (from the Fairytale Icons Series). 2009. printed photocollage on paper. 164 x 58cm. Source: <https://www.christies.com>

trying to pursue a more critical approach. Some of the most well-known Iranian artists in this approach are Shirin Neshat, Afshin Pirhashmi, Rokni Haerizadeh, Shadi Ghadirian and Sara Rahbar. “It seems that Shirin Neshat, who has been living and working in New York since 1974, is the most well-known Iranian artist in the West. Most of her works are based on such themes as the binary oppositions between men and women, the holy and the unholy, and immigration and belonging. Neshat has also drawn great attention because of her clear and explicit dealing with the issue of “gender relations” (Keshmirshekan, 2015: 395). Using photographs and videos, she was one of the few artists who came up with an effective media approach to address issues that are fundamentally social. Her 1990s artworks drew great attention and praise, however, whether in the past or in the recent years that Neshat has repeated her previous positions with little change, her half-real/imaginary storytelling and narratives hardly relate to the lived experience of Iranian women (in the large scale). The influence and expressive power of a documentary-like media naturally provides the viewers with a different, more tangible experience, but the excessive concentration of Neshat on symbolic elements with a personal meanings keeps the typical audience, which can be as large as the society involved with women’s issues, out of touch.

In Neshat’s emotional works, a deep emotional expression has been used for subjects and stories that have no definite or suitable historical position and/or meaning. Neshat’s description of women, the typical image that she makes for them, and the symbols that she attaches to them are, more than anything else, reminiscent of orientalist<sup>11</sup> stereotypes that portray the mysterious oriental woman from the perspective of an outsider (Fig. 16 & 17).

The popular and market genre “chador art” is probably the result of Neshat’s influence on younger artists. Artist and curator Amiral Ghasemi employs this term to describe visual representations of Iranian women in contemporary works of art, where chador [and generally hijab] is employed as a symbolic marker of Iranian female identity (Khatib, 2013: 100). This visual genre turned into a permanent stereotype for identification of Middle Eastern art in a short period of time. For instance, Afshin Pirhashmi, one of the most successful artists in the market, tries to portrait “women from men’s viewpoint” through photorealist paintings, to examine the issues and complexities of contemporary life in the Iranian society. Despite his strong and expressive painting of figures, Pirhashmi has limited himself to the frozen arrangement of symbolic signs on the canvas. More than anything, it can be argued that Pirhashmi’s silent medium (painting), along with that of many





Fig 16. Shirin Neshat. Guardians of Revolution 1994. (from the 'Women of Allah' series). ink on gelatin silver print. 110 x 99.7cm. Source: <https://www.christies.com>



Fig 17. Shirin Neshat. Munis and Revolutionary Man (from the Women Without Men series). 2008. C-print and ink. 138.4 x 243.8cm Source: <https://www.christies.com>

other young artists, fundamentally lacks the ability to address controversial social subjects in contemporary life. Moreover, when approaching the female subject, he does not rely on a creative and personal approach, and his image of the mysterious or seductive woman in the modern-semi-traditional Middle Eastern societies looks like updated oriental stereotypes (Fig. 18). The artist's innovation is limited to displacement of scenes and backgrounds, introduction of the signs of modern life in contrast to tradition, and reliance on the symbolic meaning of objects. Changes at this level may be intriguing in visual and aesthetic terms, however, hoping for a more extensive social outcome, such as confronting or challenging a viewer's perspective, who encounters the people from the East with a mind

full of prejudices, is beyond the capability of such an approach to art. Ironically, the critical weakness allows the subjects of criticism to resurface in newer and more charming stereotypes.

With photography at home or studio, Shadi Ghadirian



Fig 18. Afshin Pirhashemi. Seduction. 2010. oil on canvas. 200 x 298cm. Source: <https://www.christies.com>

attempts to highlight the social constraints faced by Iranian women and the tensions ensuing the confrontation of tradition and modernity, through a much weaker approach based on a rudimentary formula including juxtaposition of women and conflicting symbolic objects (Fig. 19).

Rokni Haerizadeh is a prominent figure in terms of his position on socio-political issues. His works frequently address the cultural discontinuity of the Iranian society, including the fundamental tensions between tradition and modernity, gender roles, foreign culture influence, and contemporary political events in Iran. Haerizadeh focuses on these issues through caricature-like drawings, casting a cursory glance at various social, cultural, and artistic texts, and highlighting the subject merely by creating loose, literal links and relying on what may be memorized in the minds of the viewers (Fig. 20 & 21).

In the "Fictionville" series, one of Haerizadeh's most well-known works, the artist focuses on political events in Iran with painted news photos and simultaneous reference to stories and allegories. Haerizadeh's media imagery and his intertextual approach to a meaningful storyline is not an example of critical and effective parody<sup>12</sup>, rather it ultimately is a postmodernist pastiche<sup>13</sup> that has become a



Fig 19. Shadi Ghadirian. *Like EveryDay#1*. 2000. C-Print. 50 x 50 cm. Source: <http://www.artnet.com>

dominant model for many young Iranian artists. But according to Jameson, under postmodernism parody ceases to be a potent cultural force; it ‘finds itself without a vocation’ whilst ‘that strange new thing pastiche slowly comes to take its place. Pastiche is a parody emptied out of content. It is a neutral practice of mimicry, without any of parody’s ulterior motives. (Roberts, 2007; Jameson, 1998).

In her installations that consist of various materials, Sara Rahbar combines symbolic and meaningful elements such as flags and traditional hand-woven fabrics with other objects such as cartridge and military uniforms and parts, and sometimes adds meaningful inscriptions to open up different horizons of interpretation and meaning in the viewer’s mind (Fig. 22). The objects that she produces recreate the popular symbolism of critical artists merely on a different material level. The approach to symbols and meanings in these particular instances is disconnected from the main context, and ultimately serves the aesthetic requirements within the work’s visual composition. The selection of a particular object

may reflect the artist’s intentions and engagement with particular content, but the weakness or lack of an explicit interpretation or stance on the part of the artist, result in the work being open to any interpretive orientation, or, gravitate toward reification due to a diminishing semantic aspect. This semantic freedom and respect for the “free audience interpretation” may appear democratic, but not so when different groups have unequal powers. The issue of interpretation is always intertwined with power, and what is an “acceptable” meaning for an artwork is usually shaped and established within the discourse of the dominant power.

As it was noted earlier, another shortcoming in the works of Iranian critical artists is the mismatch between the expressive media and the intended content. Or the media is not a suitable channel for effective transfer the content, or the content is too superficial to be effective in the new media. Finally, well-known Iranian artists create not a progressive and critical art, but a safe “political art” that complements various market options



Fig 20. Rokni Haerizadeh. Shomal (Beach at the Caspian). 2008. oil on canvas in two parts. 200 x 300cm. source: <https://www.christies.com>



Fig 21. Rokni Haerizadeh. Cyrus Cylinder Coming Back Home. 2011. Gesso watercolor, and ink on printed paper. 21 x 30 cm. Source: Farzin, 2014, 12.

“Political criticism has become a sellingpoint for foreign galleries and collectors. The resulting pitfall is the creation of art about politics rather than political art” (Mosquera, 2001: 13). In one of his most important articles, “The Author as Producer” (1934), Walter Benjamin stresses that the revolutionary [= political] artist should not uncritically accept the existing forces of artistic production, but should develop and revolutionize those forces. [...] his/her task is to develop these new media, as well as to transform the older modes of artistic production. It is not just a question of pushing a revolutionary ‘message’ through existing media; it is a question of revolutionizing the media themselves [...] The truly revolutionary artist, then, is never concerned with the art-object alone, but with the means of its production. ‘Commitment’ is more than just a matter of presenting correct

political opinions in one’s art; it reveals itself in how far the artist reconstructs the artistic forms at his disposal, turning authors, readers and spectators into collaborators (Eagleton, 2004: 92-91).

What is commodified in the works of Iranian artists is symbols and significant signs or actual political and social events that refer to the tensions and turmoil of the contemporary Iranian society. The artist’s ineffective expressive approach wastes the expressive capacities of meaningful and valuable resources, making it difficult to take advantage of them in other structure and collections once they are fixed in the Inappropriate semantic structure and turned into stereotypes.

### Conclusion

The contemporary Iranian art has been most successful in its own market compared to any other global arena. This is partly due to the endless greed of late capitalism and its attempts to turn everything into commodities, from which art is no exception. The global market operates based on the calls for production of new goods for its special customers, and the necessary artistic diversity is here provided by cultural differences. The commodity holds onto cultural identity to prove its difference in type and nature, even though ultimately they are all commodities exchanged in special markets in the same value of money. How does cultural identity contribute to the process of art’s commodification? In other





Fig 22. Sara Rahbar. Flag #15. 2008. installation from textile, leather belt, carpet, tassels, coins and metalstars. 203 x 100cm. Source: <https://www.christies.com>

words, the reception or loss of which qualities make cultural identity suitable for a lucrative and safe commodity exchange in the area of art? Through analysis of the prevailing orientations in the contemporary Iranian art market toward cultural identity, this study concluded that cultural identity has been vulnerable to commodification more than anything else due to its separation from historical meaning, and, subsequently, failure to gain significance and a positive function in the contemporary time. By emptying cultural signs from their previous content and introducing them into the aesthetic play of form, color, and texture, Formalist movements turn cultural identity into nothing more than a layer for embellishment of the artistic commodity. Artists subscribing to a more progressive approach intended to deconstruct the East-West identity, but their mere formal combination of the visual languages of the two cultures yielded nothing, except production of a more appealing product for the

market. Rebellion against an identity that defined the weak against the strong was not possible with a weapon of form, especially through a safe medium such as painting.

Even the Iranian pop art could not transform the cultural identity into a meaningful and effective factor within an artistic approach that capitalism had not only already made it paralyzed and ineffective, but had also ironically assigned the highest market place to it, making pop art its own special symbol. The Iranian artist was neither able to criticize the consumerist culture, nor could undermine the reification of high art, nor express its critical position in terms of popular culture. As a result, it reproduced the popular market commodity with an “Iranian” look.

Artists who were hoping to express their social sensitivities remained unaware of the capabilities of the influential media. Traditional media that are generally silent and dependent on flat images cannot create an effective movement against the complexities of our contemporaneity. Focus on political/social events as subjects in the limited space of the image, reliance on the symbolic meaning of cultural codes, use of scattered and uncontrolled references to various texts, and gravitation of parody toward a confusing pastiche of various cultural resources are not always capable of ushering the audience’s mind in accordance with the artist’s wish. If elements that are separated from the original text fail to find a strong meaningful footing in the new composition parallel to the actual (and exterior) conditions attracting the artist’s attention, they will be suspended and ineffective, and eventually their meaning will be determined by more powerful discourses. Unless one sees through the artists’ sense of judgment, it cannot be known for certain whether their complicity in helping the commodification of Iranian art and capitalism was done consciously or not. The art world is not safe from the threat of capitalism. An art that is incapable of effectively questioning capitalist relations cannot survive.



Table 1. Critical Analysis of Dominant Orientations in Contemporary Iranian Art Market. Source: authors.

Expressive Orientation	Medium/ Technique	Components of Cultural Identity	Approach to Cultural Components	Commodification criterion (outcome of artist's approach)	Well-known Artists
<b>Formalism</b>	Sculpting Painting	- Signs, motifs, and traditional and indigenous art handicrafts  - Miniature  - Persian and Arabic calligraphy	- Repetition of modernist approaches - Stylization of traditional forms - Decorative use of motifs - Composition or formal assembly of motifs, regardless of historical roots and close attention to visual and aesthetic compositions - Transcending traditional rules of calligraphy and experimenting with various forms of writing - Creating formal compositions of letters regardless of the semantic aspect of text - Mixing of calligraphy and painting - Abstraction of written composition - Exotic hybridization and postmodernist combination of visual styles of the East and the West, e.g. performing a Persian theme through Western techniques	- Separation of the form from content, and adoption of an independent evolution path  - Loss of historical meaning and decorativeness of the work of art  - Mismatch of subject, artistic expression and media with the necessities of contemporary time  - Reification of artworks	- Parviz Tanavoli  - Mohammad Ehsai  - Nasrallah Afjei  - Kouros Shishegaran  - Golnaz Fathi  - Reza Derakhshani  - Ali Banisadr
<b>Pop &amp; Kitsch</b>	Pluralist and mixed media including Painting, sculpting, photography, installation, collage, photo collage, silk-screen printing -Using decorative objects and popular Home art techniques, such as Embroidery	- Persian calligraphy - Traditional and native art objects and motifs - Handmade Iranian popular art - Mass media images (news/advertising/political/and social) - Vernacular literature - Iranian consumption culture - Pahlevani and zoorkhaneh rituals	- Basing art production on the "uncritical" non-artistic and layperson's taste  - Adjoining dispersed and basic signs of the Iranian pop culture without creating a clear semantic link and situation  - Comical yet purposeless use of pop literature and images of fictional/ political characters	- Undefined boundary between artworks and Kitsch objects, and re-orientation of artworks toward reification  - Complicity with business institutions, and undermining the independence of art  - Semantic confusion and getting lost the work's ironic concepts	- Farhad Moshiri  - Khosrow Hassanzadeh  - Afsoun
<b>Socio-political (Critical)</b>	Painting, installation, photography, video, mix media such as photo-painting and, etc.	- Collective memory and contemporary Iranian political history: 1979 Revolution, 8-year war, 2009 election protests  - Iran's cultural and social structure: gender roles and inequalities, gender relationship, lifestyle, and dress code  - Persian language and writing  - Political-cultural signs and symbols: flags, handicrafts, military hardware	- Confusing symbolism, using stereotypical signs, or emptying symbols and making them meaningless (due to the context) - Approach to the social issues of Iran using orientalist stereotypes - Changing and updating the form of lasting stereotypes - Mismatch of media power with critical content - Incoherent expression of social complexities through simple imagery formulas - Disconnected intertextuality and uncontrolled semantic relations - Transformation of parody into pastiche - Excessive emphasis on personal meaning when dealing with "social" issues	- Weakness of the critical approach and inability to change  - Loss of the artist's critical stance in semantic confusion - Loss of critical power because of falling the issue in pitfall of Stereotypes  - Creation of new Marketable stereotypes, and re-orientation of artworks toward reification	- Shirin Neshat  - Afshin Pirhashmi  - Shadi Ghadirian  - Rokni Haerizadeh  - Sara Rahbar

The power of capitalism and its solid structures is undeniable, but what is the artist's mission in this historical context and how can he/she play a more effective role? As emphasized by Jameson and other scholars, combating the existing form of commodification is primarily possible through knowledge and understanding of the complex and changing structures of globalizing capitalism. Through vigilance and a better understanding of the models of action, it is possible to adopt an alternative approach and restore the central role of art, i.e. making a difference and creating social change. In case contemporary Iranian artists intend to rely on the Iranian cultural identity for their presence in the global arena, they should give it a temporally suitable historical meaning, and define it in relation with individual identity and global identity. In the contemporary, speaking about cultural identity is meaningful only when the artworks simultaneously involve the artist's personal point of view (individual identity), as the holder of a special kind of knowledge of the world, and the ability to express it effectively. What an artist is willing to share and express is valuable when it is essential and worthwhile for the global community (global identity) regardless of geographical demarcation (Table1).

### Endnote

1. Cultural identity includes such components as language (written and spoken), faith (religion and denomination), cultural geography, history and cultural memory (material heritage [e.g. monuments and objects], spirituality [rituals and liturgy]), and social system (educational system, family system, economic system, cultural system, political and legal systems). (Ashna & Roohani, 2010: 159).
2. Four visual arts markets emerge, which are fundamental to the competitive, strategic and structural analysis of the system of contemporary art. These are the avant-garde market, the classical contemporary market, the alternative market, and the junk market (Zorloni, 2016: 28).
3. Painting remains the central part of contemporary art. This continuity and life can be measured based on the total revenue of auction houses. According to the Art Price Report (2009-2010), nearly 67 percent of the total revenue of the contemporary global art market is from painting. (Zorloni, 2016: 93).

4. Source: <https://www.christies.com/LotFinder/searchresults.aspx?searchtype=p&searchfrom=auctionresults&entry=iranian&sid=d75a3a15-91e7-47e8-ad7d-8db575545b1a&selectedids=30%7c8116%7c296&action=sort&sortby=ehigh> (Access date: 5/23/2018)
5. Houshiary is a spiritualist artists who draws her inspiration from Persian poetry, especially Rumi, to create minimalist paintings.
6. In a more critical stance, Chandler and Munday (2011) defines exoticism as romanticization, fetishization, and/or commodification of ethnic, racial, or cultural otherness, and stresses that ethnocentric stereotyping marks the "other" by "difference".
7. Contemporary political critic, journalist, sociologist and researcher in the field of Iranian-Islamic culture.
8. Some of the most prominent and, of course, most expensive market artists today, such as Jeff Koons, Takashi Murakami, and Damien Hirst are pop artists.
9. Swarovski is an Austrian company known for its glass and crystal ornaments, jewelry, and luxury accessories.
10. Moshiri attracted great attention for his humorous use of signs that pointed to the "flamboyant" life of the bourgeois or rather "nouveau riche" Iranian class, however, the extent of criticism to this condition in his work is open to discussion.
11. Bonhams is a privately owned international auction house established in 1793. After Christie's auction house, Bonhams is the world's largest and most prestigious auction house for trade of fine arts, antiques, cars, and jewelry.
12. Orientalism in Edward Said's colonial studies refers to stereotypical imagery that the West has created about the East as the "other" to stabilize its power and position.
13. Any adaptation of earlier art styles can be called parody, though in the strictest sense parody is a conscious, ironic, or sardonic evocation of another artistic model (Makaryk, 2012: 437).
14. Pastiche: 1. media product that is created in imitation of another similar one; 2. text that is constructed with cluttered or mixed forms, associated primarily with postmodernism, which stresses collective or shared expression through a blend of borrowed styles. (Danesi, 2009: 226-7).

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