



Out From the Shadows

By SOPHIE GROVE

IN RAMIN HAERIZADEH'S PHOTO montage "Men of Allah," bearded figures pout and lounge languidly among intricate Persian patterns. The series of sensuous, sexually ambiguous semi-nudes, created in secret in Tehran, is a bold critique of gender roles in Iranian society, representing what the artist has called "closet queens." In London, the cavorting, hairy limbs are considered risqué. In a society with few civil liberties, and where homosexuality is vehemently denied, these rich, sumptuous images are rudely subversive.

Haerizadeh has plenty of competition for the mantle of most provocative work in "Unveiled: New Art From the Middle East," now on display at Charles Saatchi's London gallery (through May 9). Featuring 21 new artists from Lebanon, Syria,

In London, Charles Saatchi unveils bold and biting new works by Middle Eastern artists.

Iraq, Iran and the Palestinian territories, the show reveals a hidden art scene in Islamic capitals like Tehran, and a thriving community of young artists in the Middle Eastern diaspora. "It became very clear that some of the most exciting work being made in the world was being made by these artists," says Rebecca Wilson, the head of development for Saatchi, who has been collecting their works for years. The region's contemporary art market is still in the "very early stages," says Wilson, but has been gaining ground in the past few years as commercial interest intensifies and as

cultural centers like Dubai host art shows.

With "Unveiled," Saatchi certainly lives up to his reputation as modern art's most audacious provocateur. While his previous collections have pioneered the introspective, self-indulgent work of *enfants terrible* like Tracy Emin, this show is fiercely political. The artists set their gaze on such issues as Islamism, occupation, war and women with a fresh and fearless approach. French-Algerian Kader Attia's installation "Ghost" is a congregation of female worshipers fashioned out of husks of tinfoil. The fragile figures are, on closer inspection, empty scepterlike vessels—a controversial comment on women's status in the mosque.

It's easy to understand why some of the artists go straight to the topical. Halim Al-Karim's work is informed by a three-year period during Saddam Hussein's regime when the artist hid in the desert, in a hole in the ground covered by a pile of rocks. A



Bedouin woman brought him food and water. His mysterious black-and-white triptychs of distorted female faces draw on this traumatic time. Similarly, his use of oblique materials like silk to screen his subjects is a reference to his visits to Abu Ghraib Prison during Saddam's rule, when relatives and friends were interned behind glass as political prisoners. The artist, who left Iraq in 1991, has not given up on his homeland. "One day I will go back to Baghdad and work again" he says.

Iran is another unlikely wellspring of talent. Both male and female artists excoriate the treatment of women. Shadi Ghadirian's photographs of chador-clad figures obscured by rubber gloves, colanders and meat hatchets are both humorous and haunting puns on the perceptions of women as domestic objects. (It's telling that these anonymous images were given the go-ahead to export, while others bound for the show were stopped for revealing too much female hair, according to one agent.) Tala Madani, 28, an Iranian who now lives in Amsterdam, uses a hot-pink palette and a swift, painterly style to depict shrewd parables of life in Tehran.

Her scenes of hairdressers' salons, crowds of men in *hammams* and groups of impotent suicide bombers are satiric critiques of Iranian society. Shirin Fakhim's melon-breasted sculptures wearing cheap, ill-fitting lingerie are crude representations of Tehran's prostitutes, who number around 100,000, according to the program notes.

The artists do not seek to solve the problems of the region, only question, probe and criticize. Marwan Rechmaoui's blueprint map of Beirut made from rubber offers a refreshingly new perspective on the conflict-ridden urban sprawl. The city is laid out like a Scalextric, each street and quarter delineated dispassionately. Another work is a replica of the artist's former apartment block abandoned during the 2006 hostilities. "We are not politicians, we are artists. We don't have a solution," says Wafa Hourani, 30, a Palestinian artist who depicts the West Bank as a cardboard toytown dystopia set in 2067, where a behemoth concrete wall dominates. "[Art] presents possibility for the Palestinian people. Art is my revolution."

While the works often deal in violence, some are also quite beautiful. The Iraqi

THE BODY POLITIC: (Clockwise from top left) Haerizadeh, Nadia Ayari, Madani, Attia

painter Ahmed Alsoudani turns the disturbing, familiar scenes from Abu Ghraib Prison into esthetic compositions, with hooded figures and their captors presented like a monumental tableau, entwined by intricate barbed wire. Alsoudani's abstract canvas is reminiscent of Picasso's "Guernica," which was famously covered with a curtain during Colin Powell's presentation to the U.N. in 2003, on the eve of the Iraqi war. Like Picasso's mural, Alsoudani's "We Die Out of Hand" (2007) is a product of conflict and a reminder of the human cost of war. But, like many of the anti-fascist modernists—and the majority of artists represented in this exhibition—Alsoudani had to leave his home country. While Saatchi and others galvanize a new generation of contemporary artists from the Middle East, the question remains whether countries like Iran will ever fully accommodate their native creative force. Or whether the West will inherit the talent rejected by despots, to the lasting detriment of their own societies. ■