

Facing page: *Ali* from the *Invincible* series. 2016. Luster Photo Paper. 90 x 138 cm. Edition of five. Below: *Joobin* from the *Invincible* series. 2016. Luster Photo Paper. 92 x 140 cm. Edition of five.

Courtesy of Sassan Behnam Bakhtiar



What do Abyaneh and Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat have in common? How can you relate Kashan's Fin Garden to Paloma beach? Sassan Behnam Bakhtiar has been trying to examine this overlap. He rejects any confinements and occupies different spaces via the assemblage of diverse shapes and the variety of colourful Persian motifs.

In the photographs he chose for *The Real Me* series, the portrait of the artist is absent from the historical sites. However, the vivid coloured patches in rigid shapes continue to exist in the second part of the same series in which the artist himself is the lead character. In his most recent work, this presence has been shifted from self-portraits into the images of his protagonists. The Persian patterns still have an expansive engagement in Bakhtiar's latest series *Invincible* but the cutouts are shaped in favour of creating a character, now reappear as mythical attire, symbolic weapons and armour.

Sassan tells me that the moment he started using Persian motifs he was advised against it. The reason? The elements, he was told, had been overused and had become somewhat of a *cliché*. This was two years ago and today the same patterns have become his signature style. "I knew that people would love them because I was highly confident of what I was doing," he says. "When people confront these patterns they understand that this has something to do with Iran. So I already put them on the hook. Now I can break the ideology that has been created around us and I used and even abused these patterns till the point that people got it. I had a mission and I achieved it." Even fashion editorials, including the reputable *Business of Fashion*, caught up with this aspect and have been featuring the artist's works ever since.

While Sassan was born in Paris, he spent his formative years in Tehran, Iran, a time which he considers to be the best years of his life. Being born into a family of creatives, he was introduced to the art world since an early age. In 2009 he participated in Magic of Persia with a sculpture entitled *Mitra*. His presence has been prolific ever since. While Sassan tries to address the wide range of his audience, his work is deeply rooted in Iran and its

THE REAL ME

Merging Persian historical references with contemporary culture, the work of Sassan Behnam Bakhtiar offers mythical enactments of the present day. Shaida Ghomashchi speaks with the artist and learns about his vibrant renderings

socio-historical context. Bakhtiar is constantly trying to use the collage patches to reveal the notion he considered as "truth" which he intends to convey to his audience. "They called me the self-purveyor of the truth due to the fact that simply, I'm not scared of showing to my audience what I think has to be shown," says Sassan.

It was in 2015 that the artist started working on his new series entitled *Invincible* in Iran. In this new body of work, Iranians have a significant presence. In these works, Sassan focuses directly on the nation and represents each and every one of his subjects as warriors, heroes, angels and modern gladiators. More than 120 people have already taken part in the *Invincible* project. "I sat face to face with my subjects. Everyone had his or her own slot and they shared their stories with me," explains Sassan. "I told them: 'Listen, just talk to me. Talk to me about your problems, or what



makes you happy, as you please. Whatever it is, just let it go...’ and from there we started to do the shooting and while doing it I asked them to be natural. I’m not a control freak, I didn’t tell them what to do. Once the shooting was done, based on our conversation I chose how to proceed.” Sassan uses diverse patterns to create luminous, coloured and detailed collages.” There is a bit of everything in it. A lot of it comes from my own mind and is fictional. The rest of it is literally how I see that person in my head and try to recreate it.”

Sassan’s *oeuvre* is also greatly inspired by Persian mythology, specifically the *Shahnameh* (*The book of kings*). An unlikely source of inspiration for *Invincible* was Mr. Ahmadian, the artist’s Farsi literature teacher in middle school when he was 11 years old and living in Tehran. To teach his class, Ahmadian decided to use a book written and illustrated by himself instead of using the

standardised Farsi literature textbook. In his book, he appropriated famous literary characters from classic Persian Literature such as Rostam and Sohrab. “He even made illustrations of them in his own particular style,” adds Sassan.

“Inspired to actually put a custom on my subjects, I found out that I could give a lot of vibes and feelings to them,” says the artist. Due to the high demand of the people wanting to be involved with the *Invincible* series, Sassan decided to make it ongoing. “I’ll probably be doing it till the remaining days of my life,” says the artist. *Invincible*, it holds something for all of us. ■

The Invincible series will be featured at the Contemporary Istanbul art fair from November 3rd to 6th 2016 with Janet Rady Fine Art. Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery in London will hold a solo show of Sassan Behnam Bakhtiar’s Invincible series opening in January 2017. sassanbehnambakhtiar.com