

LEILA HELLER.

Lorch, Danna. "A Brave Mythology." *AlserkalAvenue*. (March 28, 2019).

ART



A BRAVE NEW MYTHOLOGY

28 MARCH 2019 | DANNA LORCH



A strange scene takes place inside the artist Soraya Sharghi's childhood living room in Tehran. Her older brother poses, nymph-like, on the Persian carpet, shouldering a toy weapon, surrounded by mischievous hybrid creatures that have crawled out of a retro television box. An encroaching border of carnivorous plants gnash their teeth as if readying for an epic throw down inside the circle.

The work, *Out of Realm*, feels like the Creation Story set up to anchor a new mythology, one in which icons of Persian and Western literature reappear in fresh, contemporary parables. Sharghi explains, "In my works, it's not that I'm illustrating mythology, I'm using influences like the most famous Persian poem the *Shahnameh* (Battle of Kings), to provide a context for the battle that takes place inside."

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Soraya Sharghi, *Out of Realm*, 2017, acrylic on canvas, 137.16 x 137.16 cm

The first piece in an ongoing series, *Out of Realm* is also the name of her first solo show at Leila Heller Gallery in Dubai. As the viewer, we never know how the moment resolves, other than to feel that Sharghi is heavily present and in control, and what comes next is an imaginative, sometimes voyeuristic romp across her brilliantly manufactured universe.

When I push her to reveal if any or all of the large-scale, technicolour, figurative portraits encompassing *Out of Realm* are self-portraits, Sharghi retorts, “They are more than that.” With a little more prodding she concedes, “The main character is inside me, traveling through different works, in different forms, creating her own new mythology.” Sharghi’s subjects model a fierce brand of femininity.

Sure, there is visible skin barely covered in writhing serpents and shocks of neon here and there, but the figures are certainly not weaponising their bodies to attract the gaze. If anything, these paintings (made by an Iranian woman living in New York City) effectively subvert the long, outplayed tradition of Western Orientalist male artists exploiting Middle Eastern women’s desires, gazes, and forms with their paintbrushes.

Sharghi’s harem of women are not waiting to be rescued, but are in firm possession of their own femininity. They are highly capable of saving themselves—and probably a helpless man or two as well. She says, “I do not sexualise my characters. As a female, I do believe that we have lots of power and we are heroes of our own lives. Let the world see us as we truly are, with our ambition, power, and strength.”

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Eve appears and reappears, serialised at different points in a triumphant heroine's journey along the gallery walls, though here she is depicted as proud and unapologetic, rather than crippled with shame as the temptress who led to the downfall of Paradise. With her paintbrush, Sharghi calls to us, "Let's see the story in a new way." After all, she reasons, "Without Eve's choice of saying 'yes' to the serpent and eating the apple we would not even exist. This world and [these] adventures wouldn't exist. Life would be *heavenly boring*."



Soraya Sharghi, *Beauty of Ashes (Eve 4)*, 2019, acrylic on canvas, 198.12 x 114.3 cm

In fact, 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.

With *Standing Victoriously*, she successfully experimented with layering gold leaf over a background of Persian calligraphy in thick acrylic paint. The results are so sumptuous up close that it's tempting to break all the rules of gallery etiquette and sneakily graze one's finger across the sloping letters and florals.

The luxurious metallic luster and the unmistakable *anime* influence in pieces like this one can arguably be linked to Sharghi's previous experience working as an assistant to Japanese artist Takashi Murakami. However, the way that she chooses to use these materials and access the genre are entirely of her own wild invention. Her attraction to neon is decidedly rebellious, clashing with the relentless gray palette in Iranian contemporary art from others of her generation. "I place no limitations on colour in my work," she insists, explaining that she often spontaneously adds shades as she goes rather than arriving at the easel with a rigid paint by number plan.

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While working on the paintings comprising the show, Sharghi often pumped out classic rock anthems by Queen and Elvis Presley but admits, “I don’t hear the lyrics because I am so focused on the work.” What she did hear, however, was the banter between heroines, as she worked concurrently on batches of three or four paintings at a time, each propped against her New York City studio walls.

Soraya Sharghi’s *Out of Realm* runs at Leila Heller Gallery Dubai until 18 July 2019.