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# Iranian trio courts chaos in first US museum solo show at ICA

By **Cate McQuaid** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT DECEMBER 20, 2015

When brothers Ramin and Rokni Haerizadeh and their friend and collaborator Hesam Rahmanian planned their new exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art, they made a detailed map of what would go where.

Two weeks ago, with several days of installation to go for “Ramin Haerizadeh, Rokni Haerizadeh, and Hesam Rahmanian: The Birthday Party,” their first solo show in an American museum, Ruth Erickson, the ICA’s assistant curator, pulled out the map. Nearly everything had moved.

The three Iranian artists were in the thick of it, brainstorming. Erickson, who organized the exhibition with curatorial assistant Jeffrey De Blois, kept a worried eye on the clock. She generously called the artists’ process “an amazing democracy of choices.”



LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

**From left: Ramin Haerizadeh, Hesam Rahmanian, and Rokni Haerizadeh at the Institute of Contemporary Art.**

“People come in and start to install,” Rahmanian said as he surveyed the chaos. “Our show starts from that moment.”

“This is the most joyful part of the exhibition,” he added. “The sad part is opening night.”

There’s a lot to corral in a Haerizadeh/Rahmanian show, which sprouts from the loamy ground of their life in Dubai. The artists live and work together in a house stuffed with art — their own, which puckishly blurs cultural and gender boundaries, and their collection.

Other artists’ works not only inform their exhibitions, they’re part of them. “The Birthday Party” includes pieces from their collection and the museum’s, by artists such as Louise Bourgeois and Hassan Sharif, integrated among collages, videos, sculptures, and more by the Iranian trio.

An open-ended, collaborative process drives their work.

“After a while, you become a creature with six eyes,” said Rokni Haerizadeh.

More like six hands, when they painted the installation’s floor during a performance in Dubai last August. The artists donned costumes of women’s prayer robes (garnished with plastic lettuce) that covered their heads and obscured their vision. They started painting by kicking over cups of paint, and built a sculpture collaboratively through touch. A video of the performance is on view.

The sculpture is also here: A pelican's head, its beak hilariously extended by a plastic hero sandwich, and on top, sundry items such as birthday candles and a mucus extractor.

Rokni described the aesthetic: "Accumulating things one on top of another instead of refusing or reducing something."

It's how you put it all together that matters. Erickson sees the group as a sort of 21st-century Isabella Stewart Gardner. "They're interested in organization and display, in the qualities of the collection, and in how they place the art draws things out," she said.

At the same time, the Haerizadehs and Rahmanian have all but abandoned Gardner's prima donna stature with their all-hands-on-deck approach.

"With the Internet and Wikipedia we have a whole model of aggregate creation, which is very much of our moment," Erickson said.

Rahmanian, who was born in Tennessee but grew up in Iran, met the Haerizadehs in the 1990s, when they were teenagers in private art classes in Tehran. Their teacher was a classical draughtsman, Ahmad Amin Nazar.

"Most of the art tutors, we call them the lost generation," Rokni said. "Just when they started to be fruitful, the Revolution happened. They were shut down, so they started these classes."

For the students, art was an outlet. "There was no Internet, no satellite," said Rahmanian. "It was our only excuse to get together, have fun, draw and paint. Gatherings like those were the best thing for us."

In time, the group opened their own underground space, staging rock music, poetry readings, and art shows.

“Women and men mixed. There was alcohol, films that are illegal, activities that were illegal,” said Rahmanian.

As artists, their careers were developing. They made provocative conceptual work that challenged the official Iranian aesthetic. In 2009, while the Haerizadehs were visiting Dubai, family and friends, sensing heat from the government, warned them not to come home. They stayed, and Rahmanian joined them.

They brought the spirit of their underground curation with them: challenge authority, work with friends, blur boundaries, and see what springs up.

“The Birthday Party” takes its name from the Harold Pinter play, a surreal dark comedy in which two strangers try to convince a man to sit down. The artists say they recognize the fractious mood Pinter evokes.

“We live together and we argue about small, stupid things,” Rokni said. “It reminds us of Pinter’s ‘The Homecoming.’ But sometimes it’s a Beckett play. One of us says somebody should take the dog out . . .”

“It’s repeated, and repeated,” said Ramin, finishing his brother’s sentence. “We say the words, but nobody takes the action.”

At the ICA last week, two days before the opening, they had taken plenty of action in less than a week. The completed installation dynamically pulls the viewer through the gallery, looking up, down, and around.

Their artists’ book sits on a pedestal: A publication celebrating Queen Elizabeth’s Diamond Jubilee, which they had painted over at night, transforming it into a comic, slightly nightmarish meditation on the

trappings of power. Viewers are invited to flip through it — usually a taboo in museums. This, too, is part of the trio's aesthetic of communal participation.

Erickson said she sees the Haerizadehs and Rahmanian in a series of concentric circles: the three alone at the center, then their community, then the artists they collect. But there's an outer circle: the viewers. The art may begin when the installers arrive, but it isn't complete until the public does.

## **RAMIN HAERIZADEH, ROKNI HAERIZADEH, AND HESAM RAHMANIAN: The Birthday Party**

At Institute of Contemporary Art, 100 Northern Ave., through

March 27. 617-478-3100, [www.icaboston.org](http://www.icaboston.org)

*Cate McQuaid can be reached at [catemcquaid@gmail.com](mailto:catemcquaid@gmail.com). Follow her on Twitter [@cmcq](https://twitter.com/cmcq).*

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