

# Ramin Haerizadeh, Rokni Haerizadeh & Hesam Rahmanian

TEXT BY ISABELLA E. HUGHES, PHOTOGRAPHS BY FARAH AL-QASIMI

**A chaotic clash of color and pattern belies the peaceful, communal lifestyle of three Iranian artists in their shared studio in Dubai**



(From left to right) Ramin Haerizadeh, Rokni Haerizadeh and Hesam Rahmanian in the pattern-splashed living room of their live-in studio in Dubai's al-Barsha neighborhood.

Located on a sleepy, residential street in the al-Barsha neighborhood in Dubai, the tan-colored villa that houses the living and working spaces of Hesam Rahmanian and brothers Ramin and Rokni Haerizadeh—long-time friends since their childhood in Iran—appears unassuming. Once inside, however, it becomes apparent that this understated exterior is the literal and proverbial entryway into the fascinating life of three illustrious yet private artists, who have called the city their home for the last five years.

Welcoming the visitor at the main entrance is a small pedestal on which rests a fantastical, white-colored statue of a female body, draped in a classical Greek-style flowing toga, but topped with an elephant's head. Propped on the left is a yellow construction sign that says "Men at Work." I'm met

first by the artists' slightly chubby dog, then Rahmanian greets me, joined almost immediately by the Haerizadeh brothers. The foyer opens into the living room, where an overwhelming amalgam of colors and patterns washes over the surfaces. Lush, red flowers, in no particular arrangement, are painted directly onto the floor, while the various walls are styled differently by the three artists, with a repetitive pattern of black and white triangles on one and teal and pink polka dots on the opposite wall.

Complete with projector and screen, the living room doubles as a cinema—they are all big movie buffs—and its walls are densely adorned with artworks that reach up toward the ceiling, all part of an unexpectedly rich collection that includes work by Robert Mapplethorpe, the Guerrilla Girls, Hassan Sharif and James Clar, as

well as framed letters from Robert Rauschenberg. "A lot of these works are by other artists, and everything else, like the sculptures in the garden and this one [gesturing to another, rather macabre hybrid statue], is a collaboration between the three of us," says Rahmanian.

The artists lead me to the kitchen and offer me plates overflowing with fruit and chilled cucumbers. With a canary chirping in the background, we talk about their studio-home life here in Dubai and about their collaboration.

The Haerizadeh brothers arrived in 2009, after one of their works came to the attention of the Iranian government for its critical nature while being exhibited at the Saatchi Gallery's "Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East" exhibition in London. That same year, during a visit to Dubai, family members and friends warned them not to return to Iran, and they have lived here ever since. Six months after their arrival, childhood friend Rahmanian joined the brothers. Back in Iran, the three had attended private tutorials with the influential painter Ahmad Amin Nazar, where they sketched, painted, held readings and discussed movies and current affairs, expanding their appetites for knowledge, which remain rapacious to this day.

At first they lived in the loft of a Dubai high-rise, before moving to their current house in 2011. When queried about their multifaceted live-work space, Rokni explains: "In Tehran, people place a great deal of focus on their lives indoors, so we designed our house in Iran and started a collection to surround ourselves with artworks. We have also done this here in Dubai, arranging and decorating this house together." Everything in their home, from the floor and flowerpots to curtains and walls, has been carefully curated and artistically adorned. There is no

boundary between art and life: they are truly living life as vividly and imaginatively as their own practices. Two recent shows at Dubai-based Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde—"I Put It There You Name It" (2012) and "The Exquisite Corpse Shall Drink the New Wine" (2014)—transported the spirit of their home into the gallery.

Alongside displays of recent work by each of them, the gallery was transformed on both occasions to resemble their living space, complete with furniture and painted and patterned floors and walls, suggesting that only by viewing the works and lifestyle together can the full Haerizadeh-Rahmanian experience be understood.

Rokni, the most talkative of the three, describes their working and living conditions "as a presence of true equality," elaborating on their decision to collaborate: "In the art world, we are practicing to make a space, an ambiance for this equality to thrive—we have artworks by other artists, ordinary objects and then our own artworks." Espousing the merits of such collaboration, Rokni states definitively: "It's about finding a new idea, a new arrangement . . . if we as human beings can deal with our ego, and if we can erase the question of

money and spend time together, then we can move beyond the ego." Rahmanian interjects, "Whatever we earn from art, we put back into art, but it is not to invest—we just go out and buy because we like the work." Their collection therefore acts as a sort of diary. "It's inspiring for us to be surrounded by all these artists," says Ramin.

The "post-ego practice" that these three friends pursue is evident in their joint focus both on individual artworks and on their collaborations. At times this existence appears almost monastic—they spend most of their time at home and also profess an adoration and deep love for Dubai, particularly in the summer when the town boils over in heat and empties out, leaving them free from distractions.

After our group conversation in the kitchen, I go with each artist to visit his respective studio. Since his practice is often concerned with revisiting existing objects, Ramin's space—two rooms that open up onto the living room—takes the form of a cabinet of curiosities, with antiques, dime-store knickknacks, books, magazines, his handmade dolls and other creative paraphernalia strewn about. "I never close a series," he says. "I work or

reopen a series depending on my mood." He adds that he's recently started a collage installation, and shows me the work in progress, which uses trite Chinese oil replicas of popular paintings as its starting point.

Down the hall, in a different wing of the house, are Rahmanian's and Rokni's work spaces. Rahmanian, who works mostly in paint and mixed media, is the most orderly of the three. Displayed in the hallway outside his studio are several of his works incorporating neon and, on one long, white-painted wall, various objects, including bird's nests, glasses and a rake head, that have been systematically sketched and painted on, or otherwise adorned, exhibiting his tendency to play with ideas and objects that provoke his curiosity. The rest of the room is filled with canvases, some complete, others unfinished. At the back stands an easel, where he shows me the technique he is currently developing, in which he uses old, dry paint residue, reworking the hardened pigment and muddling it into new canvases.

When I visit Rokni's space, it feels a bit like stepping into a movie studio. In the center of the room, a long table is laden with various "stills" that have been



(Opposite page)  
An enticing bowl of fresh blueberries, offset perhaps only slightly by a nearby photograph of all three artists donning absurd costumes for their 2012–13 performance of French dramatist Jean Genet's *The Maids* (1947).

(This page, top)  
Emirati conceptual artist Hassan Sharif's mountain of shoes, displayed in the living room, stands out among the Haerizadeh brothers' private collection.

(This page, bottom)  
A collage by Ramin Haerizadeh hangs against a stark green wall in the artist's studio.



(Top)  
A grotesque minotaur-like figure obscures a photo of the British royal family in a work in progress that sits propped up in Rokni Haerizadeh's studio.

(Bottom)  
Hesam Rahmanian is currently revisiting some old works and creating new ones from the pre-existing canvases and materials.

downloaded from the internet, then reprinted and transformed with his deft, painterly technique. For the past year, he has been working on several protest-scene images taken from a Russian news channel. In images of the Femen protesters, the all-female antireligious group that recently lauded the rock band Pussy Riot, the "RT" logo of the news channel features prominently. Many of these pieces, which come from a series entertainingly titled "Subversive Salami in a Ragged Briefcase," show a semi-nude woman with obscenities written on her chest being hauled away by policemen. The stills have been printed on paper and are in the process of being transformed into therianthrope entities, with animal heads in place of human ones. Sitting on an easel in the back of the studio are works from another recent series, based on photographs of the British royal family taken during the wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton. The grotesque deconstruction of these iconic images causes a gut reaction, but also questions both the cultural

formalities and legitimacy of the institution that they represent.

My visit concludes with a tour of the trio's picture-perfect garden. The gurgling pool, surrounded by potted plants, trees and a large structure that houses an assortment of chickens, pigeons and other birds, is complemented by works on paper that adorn the exterior walls, weathering in the Arabian sun and dust. Graciously, the brothers and Rahmanian invite me to "come back anytime." Belying the hyperbolic and vivid nature of their works, the orderly lifestyle the three have achieved is something special. Visiting again is certainly an appealing thought.

See our website for Arabic and Chinese versions of this article.  
يمكنكم قراءة ترجمة عربية لهذه المقالة في موقعنا على الانترنت.  
欲阅读此文章的中文版本请登陆我们的网站