

## Whip of a Foe

In his new body of work entitled *Whip of a Foe*, Rokni Haerizadeh reveals a sacred world of macabre human savagery and human suffering organised around five triptychs. Each painted panel is in the shape of a pointed arch – a further affirmation of religious iconography. In his characteristic fluid style, and his reference to social, historical and cultural ‘realities’ Haerizadeh depicts a deprived underworld. Confronting the new series is like entering a kind of Dantean world of hell. In his five ‘Circles of Hell’ Haerizadeh creates a descent into a vortex of degradation and humiliation, a distinct group of works converging along a trajectory of power and abuse.

In one triptych, Haerizadeh depicts a soldier in camouflage gear, sleeves rolled up, carefully inserting an empty drinks bottle into the rectum of a screaming naked woman bent over on a tiled floor like a bathroom’s or a butcher’s shop, exposing her naked rear. Whether forced or compliant the deep red coloured figure expels a ferocious energy both painful and defiant, her legs either amputated at the knee or otherwise uncomfortably bent backwards. Her scraggly hair spells lock of hair upside down, a reference to a verse in the poem from which the title *Whip of a Foe* is derived.

The poem by the revered modern Persian poet Shamlou describes the gruesome reality of those “who will carve whips out of their own brother’s bones, weave whip lashes from the locks of their own sister’s hair, and set rings with teeth pulled from their own father’s mouth”. In faithful celebration of the verses of the poem, Haerizadeh paints and repaints scenes of the torturer’s not-so-hidden bunker incorporating the calligraphic verses into the composition. In the artist’s own words, the verses give rise to the images. Indeed there is a symbiotic relationship between the calligraphic and figurative components. The script is jagged and angular, aggressive, upside down or illegible. Here the idea of the illuminated manuscript has been severely distorted and perverted, a direct result perhaps of the perversion and distortion depicted in the subject. The distortions are part of the physicality of the paintings and the perversion of the action seems to distort the text.

The central panel in the same triptych depicts a haloed, bearded man posing next to a strapped and hanging inverted body in front of a backlit panel of crosses an amalgamation of a monochromatic stained glass church window and a traditional Iranian window shutter. The suspended body is of a man with ankles in shackles, hanging on an upside down cross from a thick chain, which disappears beyond the top of the canvas, his arms spread across the cold, white tiled floor with his wrists in chains. In a final

violating act expression of power the haloed man grabs the naked crotch of his enchained victim, an Abu Ghraib kind of gesture. The violent image is a re-working of a Mapplethorpe image of a consensual sado-masochistic relationship between two men as well as a reference to Francis Bacon's inverted crucifix in *Three Studies for a Crucifixion*. In David Sylvester's words, relating to Bacon's *Three Studies for a Crucifixion*, "manipulating the charge that pulsates in an image...fascinates and unsettles" and acts as provocation.<sup>1</sup> In Francis Bacon's own words the crucifixion is "a magnificent armature on which you can hang all types of feeling and sensation [regardless of being religious as artist or spectator...] and a most successful subject for covering certain areas of human feeling and behaviour." Slaughterhouses and dead meat "belong to the whole thing of the crucifixion... The crucifixion, for religious people, for Christians has a totally different significance but as a non-believer, it becomes 'just an act of man's behaviour, a way of behaviour to another'".<sup>2</sup>

In the interlocking of crucifixion imagery with that of the torturer's chamber the artist makes an ode to Bacon's fascination with (the beauty of) decomposing meat, and in Haerizadeh's own case, the degradation of one man at the hand of another. In the final panel a central figure screams while held by uniformed soldiers, one of whom is extracting his teeth. The victim's hands are erotically close to the crotches of his aggressors. Within this complex relationship, Haerizadeh blurs the boundary of pain and pleasure, responsibility and victimhood.

In another triptych, a man with severed limbs - a living torso, as it were - twists in pain as he is subjected to an inspection of the rectum by a polymorphic creature with human arms and a turkey head. Above his head the words *your brother's bones* is interrupted by a splash of red paint. The central panel depicts an enraged woman whose hair is being cut by a dark bearded man while another inserts a coke bottle into her vagina; her resistance is futile. In the final panel a bespectacled man meticulously sets teeth as ivory decoratively into the handle of a whip. His worktable is quaintly draped in a paisley design throw and in the foreground is an arrangement of discarded skulls. The skull and the torso make references to both the classical world and to European still lives.

In a third triptych, an oversized muscular torso with butchered hands hangs from the ceiling against a tiled wall. Three men lurk in front in a morbid torture chamber: one at work preparing a whip at a long table; another inspecting a phallically-charged severed arm - albeit a woman's - while the third in military outfit cuts down long locks of hair dripping in blood in preparation for weaving whip lashes. Across the hanging torso is

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<sup>1</sup> Sylvester, David, *Interviews with Francis Bacon*, (Alden Press: Oxford, 1987), p. 23

<sup>2</sup> Bacon, Francis in *Interviews with Francis Bacon* by David Sylvester, (Alden Press: Oxford, 1987), p. 23

written your brother's bones. In the panel on the left a turbaned mullah with a hearing aid eyes a skull whose shadow forms the profile of a child. In the panel to the right, a man is seen in a niche with a whip in his anus, a re-working in paint of the famous Mapplethorpe photographic self-portrait. A long, lone penis hangs from the edge of the niche as it does in Mapplethorpe's famous photograph Polyester Suit. A female bust observes.

Another triptych voyeuristically peeks across the domestic intimacies of the torturer's daily life - catching him unawares, as it were - reflected in his bathroom mirror while squatting in his bath, organising his friends around a generous, all-male luncheon, and finally busy at work in his torture bunker. Omnipotent and one arm outstretched, he is always commanding. The bath scene in the panel on the right depicts a vulnerable, soft aspect showing the pale-skinned, haloed torturer amongst his rubber duckies, his Donald Duck toothbrush mug, his antique console and bowls filled with summer fruits. The force of his command has spurred his veil-clad wife into action, depicted in slow motion in the background. One of the drinks bottles from the lunch has turned blood red in the panel on the left where it has been used as an object of torture. Here the 'hero's' halo is flaming and smoking - as those of prophets did in Iranian miniatures and medieval paintings - whilst mutilations, interrogations and erotic humiliations go on in the fore and backgrounds.

Characteristically, Haerizadeh's series Whip of a Foe is a visceral tumult of action, emotion and colour. Tension is emphasised by thick applications of aggressive paint - sometimes applied by the bare hand - contrasting the subject's pain against a background of thin paint. Haerizadeh uses paint like the torturer abuses his victim. His expressionistic urban fairytales here become a kind of Artaudian Théâtre de la Cruauté, designed to "shatter the false reality that lies like a shroud over our perceptions" shaking us "out of complacency and our delusion of security".<sup>3</sup> The debauchery inherent in the subjects' performances captured in paint are directly the result of his own physically furious relationship to the canvas. The free-associated and fluid style emphasises a tension between the real and the intuitive. This acts as a Brechtian distancing device (*Verfremdungseffekt*) between the characters' (and his own) performances on canvas and the spectator. To alienate the audience - "by making obvious the manipulative contrivances and 'fictive' qualities of the medium" - serves to intensify the work's emotional resonance and the spectator's intellectual and emotional empathy. Like Artaud and Brecht, Haerizadeh's social and political goal as an artist

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<sup>3</sup> Calder, John, in Postface to Antonin Artaud, "Production and Metaphysics" in *The Theatre and its Double*, p.104

becomes the driving force behind his creation. In this context, the enmeshed calligraphy equally assumes a distancing role, demanding the spectator to actively engage in 'deciphering the truth'.

In the context of Iran, by making permanent in paint the scars wrought on society, Haerizadeh puts painting back into the political discourse. These 'emblems of suffering', to borrow from Susan Sontag, "become 'memento mori', as objects of contemplation to deepen one's sense of reality; as secular icons, if you will." <sup>4</sup> The self-contained exhibition of *Whip of a Foe* as planned in Paris outside the gallery space resonates with Sontag's belief that certain works (in her case photographic records of other people's pain in war and death) would seem exploited in an art gallery and "demand the equivalent of a sacred or meditative space"<sup>5</sup> for viewing.

Viewing as a phenomenon is confronted on several layers, where there are subjects within subjects to whom things are done under the gaze. The (passive) voyeurism inherent in and integral to the current body of work questions both the artist's and the spectator's relationship to intimate acts/scenes of violence and our relationship to power and (in the context of Iran, unflinching political) authority, especially at work in inhumane and abusive ways. The work is a comment on the act of watching, of peering, spying at an accepting distance – "proximity at no risk"<sup>6</sup> - bringing to the fore the problematic question of complicity on both the personal and collective levels.

Despite any numbing through exposure, as Sontag claims, "remembering is an ethical act"<sup>7</sup>, and in the series *Whip of a Foe* Haerizadeh 'remembers not only the poet's poem but the whole tragic and suppressive reality of the Iranian context. With the fury of his brush Haerizadeh distinguishes between what Harold Pinter called "the search for truth in art and the avoidance of truth in politics"<sup>8</sup>, exposing political reality such that there is no possibility for pretensions of normalcy.

When Leonardo da Vinci instructed the painting of a battle, he suggested that the artist's gaze be, quite literally pitiless, to show reality in all its ghastliness:

"Make the conquered and beaten pale, with brows raised and knit, and the skin above their brows furrowed with pain, and their teeth apart as with crying out in lamentation.

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<sup>4</sup> Sontag, Susan, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, (Penguin Books: New York, 2004), p. 107

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, p. 107

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, p. 99

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, p. 103

<sup>8</sup> Pinter, Harold, *Art, Truth & Politics*, The Nobel Peace Prize for Literature, 2005

[...] Others in the death agony grinding their teeth, rolling their eyes, with their fists clenched against their bodies, and the legs distorted."<sup>9</sup>

In the 'terribilita' of that appalling image lies a challenging kind of beauty.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Da Vinci, Leonardo, as cited in Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, (Penguin Books: New York, 2004), p. 67

<sup>10</sup> Sontag, Susan, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, (Penguin Books: New York, 2004), p. 67