

Janet Rady

In June Janet Rady inaugurated her own exhibition space at La Ruche Projects, a rough-and-ready studio complex in Buckle Street, Whitechapel. Opening with a series of new works by Iranian artist Fereydoun Ave, Janet has joined the growing number of London galleries trading in contemporary Middle Eastern art. **Christa Paula** went to find out how she got there

JR: I've always known that I wanted to work with art. As a child, I was fascinated with my grandmother's photos from her grand tour, particularly those from Pompeii. Then, at the age of 13, in 1974 I went on an exchange to Tehran for one year and fell in love with Iran. When I came back, I did my A levels in Persian and art history at Millfield, with a project on Isfahan. Then I went on to do my undergraduate degree in Persian and Islamic art history at SOAS. Right after, in 1983 I got a job as a nanny with a British diplomat's family and went with them back to Tehran.

CP: Tell me about that.

JR: We were quite sheltered. But I became fascinated with revolutionary art. Martyrs and murals – although, what sticks most in my mind is a huge mural of the cartoon characters Popeye and Olive, which seemed perfectly acceptable then. In retrospect, and contrary to the perception of this era, it seems hugely Westernised.

CP: How long did you stay?

JR: We left when the bombing started in Tehran in 1984. I came back to London and married my husband Mostafa Rady. Soon after, we left for Melbourne, where he had been accepted for his PhD. I enrolled to do a Masters on 13th-century Islamic metal work.

CP: Not contemporary?

JR: No, at the time I thought I would eventually deal in Islamic antiquities. My main goal, however, was to understand the commercial side of the art world. In 1987 I

took a job with Sotheby's Australia which was still run by Robert Bleakley then. He had great knowledge of Aboriginal and African art and was the first to develop the indigenous market there. I learned a lot about emerging markets from him. From there I moved to Sotheby's London in 1989. First, they put me in Education, which I didn't want. I wanted to be in the auction house. But eventually, I ended up in the legal department and loved it.

CP: You seem particularly drawn to the commercial aspect of the art world.

JR: Yes. Everything in the art world boils down to money! One could say that there is no art without capitalism. Whether it is tax regimes supporting healthy philanthropy, or nominally non-commercial ventures – all are connected to wealth. This has been so since the Renaissance, and this is why I don't have a problem with Saadiyat Island and Abu Dhabi's growing sponsorship of international art galleries and museums. Their reasons are not so different and equally valid to those of the Medicis.

CP: What about hands-on objects?

JR: In 1997 I went to work for Thomas Gibson. He was at Bond Street at the time. Although I worked on the financial management side, I had the privilege of seeing and handling works by many modern masters: Giacometti, Bacon, Maillol. We had Van Gogh's 'Sunflowers' sitting in the storage space. It was thrilling. But my real leap in understanding came in 2004, when I moved over to the Lisson as gallery manager. My stint at Lisson was very important to me. Not only did I have close contact with the art objects, but also with the artists. Shirazeh Houshiary



was there and Anish Kapoor; John Laythem did his 'God is Great' and Santiago Sierra sprayed polyurethane on the backs of workers and paid them to face the wall during the exhibition. Very conceptual.

CP: Who were you particularly drawn to?

JR: Shirazeh Houshiary was the first Middle Eastern artist I got to know intimately.

CP: How did you react to her work?

JR: I thought it was sublime – the way she could transport the Sufi concept of breath and make it material, visual. And I understood it. It connected to my knowledge of Islamic art history; there was a deep resonance.

CP: This was the first time you'd worked with contemporary art?

JR: Yes. In many ways, Lisson fit in with my professional development. I was meeting the upper echelon of the contemporary art world. It took away the myths and, instead, taught me the relevance of discussing a work of art with its creator. This discourse became very important and exciting to me. It added another dimension to my experience of the art world so far.

CP: Was that the point when you decided to focus on Middle Eastern contemporary art?

JR: No, I was still playing with the idea of Islamic antiquities. My turning point came in 2006 when the British Museum opened their seminal exhibition *Word into Art*. I saw Maliheh Afnan's work and fell in love with it and subsequently tried to find a piece to buy. I couldn't find one in London. This was an epiphany for me. I decided right then and there that this was it: I would start dealing in Middle Eastern art. It just came to me and I didn't let it rest.



I was practically living in the BM for the duration of the exhibition, going to every talk and presentation.

CP: There have been major changes in the scene over the last four years; tell me about London in 2006.

JR: There is no comparison. Of course, there was Venetia (Porter); there was the October Gallery; Dale Egee focused on contemporary Muslim art and dealt mainly abroad; the Kufa Gallery was all but defunct and Rose (Issa) hadn't had her gallery yet. Reza Aramesh' performances, a (Farhad) Moshiri show at Leighton House – those kinds of events were sporadic. There were the Barbican shows in 1995 and 2001 and the *Strokes of Genius* exhibition showcasing Iraqi artists in 2000. But none had elicited as much interest as *Word into Art*. Significantly, there had been no London auctions of Middle Eastern art. It was not considered profitable. The focus here was on Islamic antiquities. Sotheby's was in the Middle East, but it was a love / hate relationship. (John) Carswell wanted to promote Indian contemporary art and it fell on deaf ears.

CP: You saw an opening for yourself?

JR: Yes, but I had limited funding. And most of all, I needed to learn. I decided first to promote artists through a website. In December I went to Cairo with the Art School Palestine project manager and curator Samar Martha. There I met the artists Khaled Hafez, Susan Hefuna, Amal Kenawy and Wael Shakwy. I was introduced to William Wells at the Townhouse Gallery, who was brilliant – very liberal with information and images. So I started collecting artists in Egypt. I attended the second Christies auction in Dubai and stayed at the XVA Gallery. The director, Mona (Hauser), was also very generous and we have since become close friends. She is now considered as one of the gallery pioneers in Dubai and very approachable. Mona introduced me to Fereydoun Ave, and through him I started meeting many Iranian artists. The fact that I speak Farsi helps, and I enjoyed being drawn back into the Iranian world. It all made sense.

CP: Choosing Fereydoun Ave for your debut show has a special significance then.

JR: I wanted to show a major artist who was already well known and had a body of work which was affordable so I could target a younger audience. I've known Fereydoun for a few years now. He is proudly Iranian, had a good, solid concept. His new Rostam series ticked the boxes.

CP: Successful?

JR: Very!

CP: What's your main aspiration?

JR: Own a major West End gallery representing Middle Eastern artists in London.

Dr Christa Paula has written numerous articles on modern and contemporary art from the Islamic world and currently works with Bonhams

Radioactive Rostam' by Fereydoun Ave, 2010 (left)