

COMING HOME



*In his new solo exhibition of portraits of Iranian émigrés at Dubai's The Third Line gallery, Amir H. Fallah dwells on ideas of identity, belonging and feeling displaced from home. Here he talks to **Anna Brady** about why he feels delightfully invisible in Dubai*

The Clouds In My Eyes Are Filled With Dew. 2017. Amir H Fallah. Acrylic, coloured pencil and collage on panel. 76.2 x 76.2cm

When the Iranian American artists Amir H. Fallah first came to Dubai, he had an extraordinary feeling: for the first time ever, he felt invisible. “What I mean by that is, it was the first time in my life I felt like I blended in,” elaborates the Tehran born, LA based artist, “Because in America, I’ll always be dark skinned, I’ll always be Iranian. And no matter how long I stay there, I will be viewed as an immigrant. If I were to go to Iran I would also be seen as an outsider. Culturally I’m very American. So in Dubai for the first in time 30 years I felt like no one was taking a second look at me. I felt at home, even more so than in LA where I live. Which is bizarre because I’ve never lived in Dubai.”

It was this feeling of homecoming that inspired the title and theme of Amir’s new solo show, *Almost Home*, at The Third Line in Dubai. It features a series of landscapes and portraits of Iranian-American immigrants who have not returned to Iran since they left several decades ago, often not through their own volition. Here, the idea of home takes on a fluid, mutating and, crucially, transient meaning reflecting the mobility of modern day society. In each portrait, the subject’s identity is obscured by with pieces of clothing, jewellery or mementos that are somehow connected to their homeland. “Everything in the paintings is from their home; a cushion, an antique, a quilt passed down from generation to generation, a piece of heirloom jewellery,” says Amir. Each started with a visit to the subject in their home, where he photographed them surrounded by their belongings, images which then formed the basis for the portrait, as is the process for most of Amir’s figurative work.

Imbued with a strong sense of narrative, his multi-layered, collaged works play with the long tradition of iconographical portraiture, albeit here the objects are often mundane, everyday items that often tell us more about a person than possessions with greater monetary value. As Amir says, “It’s the debris of life that we all have around our homes that sometimes we don’t think twice about. But these objects are all embedded with histories and memories and meanings.”

For instance, one sitter had an embroidered cushion on her



Above: *Hold On To The Light*. 2017. Amir H. Fallah. Acrylic, coloured pencil and collage on canvas. 122cm in diameter

Below: *The Filmmakers Reflection*. 2017. Amir H. Fallah. Acrylic, coloured pencil and collage on paper mounted on canvas. 122 x 183 cm

sofa. “I asked her about it and she said ‘oh that’s my husband’s cushion, he won’t let me use it,’” recounts Amir, “Then she started telling me more about their relationship, how they met. And suddenly that mundane object told me way more about her than I would ever get from just painting her superficial likeness.”

Although Amir has been concentrating on portraits for the past five years, and identity and personal narrative have long been central to his work, this

show is somewhat of a departure. This is the first time he has looked specifically at the theme of home, or lack of it, and the first that he has used floral borders, which reference Persian aesthetic traditions. Around each highly-stylised portrait are borders intricately decorated with flowers and vines, inspired by those found on traditional Persian rugs and miniatures, playing again on the idea of homeland and memory. Most Iranian homes, says Amir, will contain ten to 20 Persian rugs, “My mother buys rugs and piles them on top of each other. Most Iranians don’t collect art but all of them collect rugs.” Given the controversy over US President Trump’s recent travel bans, affecting Muslim countries including Iran, the timing for such a show seems uncanny. But, says Amir, it is mere coincidence as “the idea for this show was planned before the election happened, but now it’s very timely with the whole immigrant situation and travel ban.”

The meticulous nature and slow process of Amir’s portraiture work is in contrast to his current installation at the new Molecule restaurant in Dubai Design District, which has collaborated with The Third Line to curate Molecule’s Gallery Wall. The site-specific installation, *Locals Only*, is inspired by the Souks and winding alleyways of Old Dubai and, says Amir, weaving together objects found on his wanderings around Dubai with a series of new landscape paintings that endeavour to depict something of the melting pot of cultures that is Dubai. Creating the installation was spontaneous – Amir flew in and worked swiftly, on the spot, a contrast to the slower process of his paintings, but he says, “I enjoyed it, it uses different parts of my brain.” The ceaseless building work in Dubai has struck Amir on every visit and the series of landscape paintings dotted across the installation play “with themes of constructing and deconstructing. You’re not sure if they’re raveling or unravelling. They represent this crazy city in the middle of the desert.”

A crazy city, but one that is a quasi-home for Amir and many others who feel out of place in so many countries. Both *Locals Only* and *Almost Home* meditate on the unique social environment of Dubai, on a sense of place, identity and on the meaning of ‘home’, which, as Amir says, “can be a domestic space, but also ‘home’ is a place or origin, where you are from, where you were born.”

Whatever the definition, above all home is a feeling, one of belonging, a sensation that Amir here attempts to capture in visual form for each of his subjects. Or at least, *almost*. ■

Almost Home: Amir H. Fallah runs from 24 May to 1 July at The Third Line, Dubai. For more details see thethirdline.com

