

THE SEISMIC SANCTUARY

Pantea Rahmani's No 7 self-portrait, is a grand-scale work (200cmx400cm) that suggests a culmination, bringing to the fore all the skills of self-portraiture that the artist has acquired over the last several years. The woman of number 7 lies on her side, spilled over a mirror on the floor that doubles her, like a reflection on a body of water. The image is not quite one of tranquility, but of repose that borders on exhaustion. The subject seems at the threshold of sinking into the liquid mirror, and in fact her mirror-self does appear sunken. There is a touch of parting of ways here – the direct gaze of the subject is only partly direct in its reflection. Why? Because there is no gaze that has not history behind it. And so the onlooker, finding themselves in the realm of the *Seismic Sanctuary* (the title of Rahmani's present show), now begins to follow the contours of the woman in question. The compelling, siren-like slope of the legs. The delicate, thinly worn upper body clothing. That striking, battle-hardened face. And the utterly persuasive hand that, indisputably, has known labor.

The painter's labor.

For each of the three works in the Seismic Sanctuary have taken an entire year. Three paintings, three years. Now Rahmani moves from one form of self-portraiture to another; it is her city, Tehran, that she paints in two more remarkable monumental pieces (160cmx500cm). The new works mirror one another, speak to each other and, like the city itself, are a geography of attraction and repulsion. In such epic-like topography even the titles seem to chase both canvases across a capital so vast that she, the city – this mother city – demands that the titles match her sense of infinitude of herself – *Tehran 1- The Longitudinal Hunt For The Lost Prayer At First Light; Tehran 2- The Day Waltzes Into Gray With Far Lights And Further Pavements*.

The mother city, like any woman, or man, has a lesser profile and a greater one. Yet the artist's bird's eye point of view (no 1 facing Tehran's southeast, no 2 facing southwest) transcends the city, then indulges her, and finally culls from her arteries the notion that the city is beyond beauty or ugliness; the maximum city is, simply, maximum.

Nevertheless, only gesso, ink and white paint, layered over and over with extremely fine brush, are the artist's sole material here. On the viewer's part, identifying the exhaustive technique against the extraordinary scale and craftsmanship of the canvas is a dizzying prospect. Better, then, to simply enter the city, and enter it with eyes that are resolutely questioning: Where, for example, one may ask, is the prison here? From which rooftop did a hopeless lover throw himself to his death? Inside which of these countless windows was hope born? And where was it extinguished forever?

There are no answers. The narrative has been flushed out. The canvas is purely an imminence, where the before and after have been quieted. Therefore, the title: The Seismic Sanctuary – a place of refuge that at any moment can cease to exist, so that the dawn that is captured in each picture can turn on us in an instant; dawn can become, simply put, catastrophe.

In Tehran 1, this sense of cataclysm and deluge is perhaps more apparent. Even the foliage suggests violence, and the trees of the city growing out of the bowels of the metropolis propose something of a Dantean nether region of ulcerous emergence. Nevertheless, in the same picture the exaggerated twinkle of distant lights intimates life also, while the very contours of the surrounding mountains remind the viewer of the sprawled curvatures of the artist herself in no 7, and the brushwork of the semi-lit sky appears like some elemental written language long disused but not forgotten.

This realm is one of in-betweens, the abstract and non-abstract vying for tribute. In Tehran 2, for example, where the city could almost be looked upon as a cemetery expressly purchased for a race of leviathans – with the swarms of tall buildings serving as colossal headstones and markers – a much recognized attraction like *Azadi Square* appears as no more than a waif of an edifice in the far distance, while the much closer and more recently built *Milad Tower* emerges like a spike into the balloon of time – everything, one imagines, is provisional here. And much like the constantly evolving city itself, everything is on the brink of annihilation. This sanctuary, after all, sits on a well-documented seismic fault line of world class proportions. The earthquake, in other words, waits; it bides its time. Yet if there is to be destruction from below, why not from above? The vantage point that the artist offers is also that of the pilot – and not just any pilot, but one reaching us from faraway and equipped with a feast of digital maps and reference points and ammunition, not to mention all the other sophisticated gadgetry needed to turn the maximum city into a graveyard of suspended time and half-finished constructions.

So we follow the mother city, down to its last alleyways and dead-ends and manholes and places of worship. We ‘hunt for the lost prayer’ near those ‘far lights and further pavements.’ We are so submerged now in the canvas that slowly the landscape turns into an early Mondrian-like wash of pure lines merging, as if the further we traveled within her, the more the city became something of a film-negative. Call it apocalypse documenting itself, apocalypse becoming. Or as Blanchot once wrote with concision, *When the disaster comes upon us, it does not come. The disaster is its imminence.*

There is elegance here, and quietude. A complete absence of tawdry image-making, of artificiality posing as political art, and of repetitious and jejune symbolism designed mainly to trap Western eyes. The sureness of hand, the integrity and mastery is in fact reminiscent of such a skilled, yet different, artist as Rothko, or Kiefer. No 7 watches over her creation, Tehran 1/Tehran 2. And the viewer, like a traveler come from afar, cannot help but be reminded, at last, of Calvino who famously observed, *Each city receives its form from the desert it opposes.* One might add to that, “... and the worthy, celestial, tired hand, now resting by a mirror, that painted that form and that opposition.”