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Tiburon artist and Iranian native helps share her culture in Sausalito exhibit

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As an artist, Jaleh Etemad doesn't normally showcase symbols from Iran, where she was born and lived until she moved to England as a teenager for school.

But, when she watched the current struggle for women's rights and social justice unfold in her home country, inspiration came flowing out of her.

From her home studio in Tiburon, she created "Tears of Iran," a mixed-media work featuring a map of Iran, old emblems of strength, red paint drops to represent bloody tears and broken glass — a substance that she's used in other works.

"The women want a say," she says. "They are humans and they have their own opinions. If they want to wear something on their head, it's their choice, that is the



This personal piece will be one of her artworks displayed as part of “Breaking Barriers: The Art of Iran,” a group exhibit that opens this week at the Sausalito Center for the Arts. Her other pieces are older oil paintings of women, and although they “aren’t necessarily Persian women” they bring to it a feeling of freedom that is timely, she says.

‘Complex’ artwork

“I work with a lot of symbols” other than Iranian symbols, she says. “I go for new, innovative things that not everybody does. So, my work becomes complex. Often in shows, people pass by and then they come back again, like, hey, what was that?”

The exhibit was the brainchild of Iranian-born [Shiva Pakdel](#), who saw a need to celebrate and highlight the cultural side of Iran and its distinctive art and imagery from the past and present. The exhibit of more than 200 works of art, textiles, artifacts, ceramics and photographs will include art by Marin’s Pakdel, pieces from her 30 years of collecting Persian art, as well as works by contemporary Iranian artists living in the United States and Iran.

“This is the catalyst for why I am doing these kind of shows. In 1977, I was very young and I wanted to go to art school,” Pakdel says. “I read in a book that ‘manifestation of Iranian art and culture may come to be a duty of every Iranian.’ That’s really touched me. And then we went through years of dark ages for Iran and now everything is happening, and this notion is more important than ever for all of us to try to share a spotlight on the art and culture and who we are. Things are so ripe for people to think about Iran and have conversations about Iran. I jumped at the opportunity.”

This is the second official exhibit to be shown at the new Sausalito Center for the Arts – an honor that doesn’t go unnoticed by Pakdel, who curated the show.

Both longstanding artists in the community, Pakdel and Etemad are longtime friends, having shown together in the Dominican University of California exhibit, “Timeless Themes of the Persian Perspective,” in 2019 and worked together during Etemad’s time as [Tiburon artist laureate](#) from 2012 to 2016.

“Jaleh has been here in Marin forever, and she is involved on art boards. Everyone knows her,” Pakdel says. “She is a fabulous painter. She is very creative. If there are any art shows, not just Iranian, her work is always included.”

Etemad, who has shown throughout the county and beyond, most recently hung her Egyptian series in the lobby of Mill Valley's Marin Theatre Company, where her daughter, [Nakissa](#), serves as associate artistic director, during the theater company's performances of "Hotter than Egypt."

Her way to art

Although she spent her childhood painting, Etemad didn't always want to be an artist.

"I used to play the violin," she says. "I loved the violin and loved music, but those days, my parents didn't consider being a musician for their daughter. They thought, you can't be a musician, you have to be a doctor or something. So, they wouldn't allow me to get into the conservatory, which made me very sad because I really loved music a lot. I decided to go into laboratory technology, and I got very interested in electron microscopy, something that you work in for cancer research."

After graduating from the Northampton College of Advanced Technology in 1964, she went back to Iran, where she spent the next few years working at the Cancer Institute of Tehran.

While she never saw herself visiting America — not knowing anyone there and feeling it too far — things changed when she met her husband, Galen Etemad, in Iran. An aerospace engineer who helped Apollo 11 complete its mission to the moon, the two quickly fell in love.

"I don't know what happened," she says and laughs. "I put everything aside and I came to the United States."

But it wasn't long before she felt something was missing.

"When I was here, I was lonely. I was very depressed," says Etemad, a Marin Museum of Contemporary Art member. "My mother used to be a fantastic painter, and it must have been in the back of my head, because after a year, I went to a class. We were about 10 to 12 women in this class and the teacher gave us some oil paints and said, 'Use it for each other and paint.' When I painted two or three portraits, everyone was wowing, and I thought, oh, I must have something there."

With the encouragement of her husband, she started taking more classes and got her

“I do my work because I want to do it,” she says. “It’s from me, and each one has a meaning.”

IF YOU GO

What: “Breaking Barriers”

When: April 7 through 23; 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesdays through Sundays

Where: Sausalito Center for the Arts, 750 Bridgeway, Sausalito

Admission: Free

Information: sausalitocenterforthearts.org/breaking

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