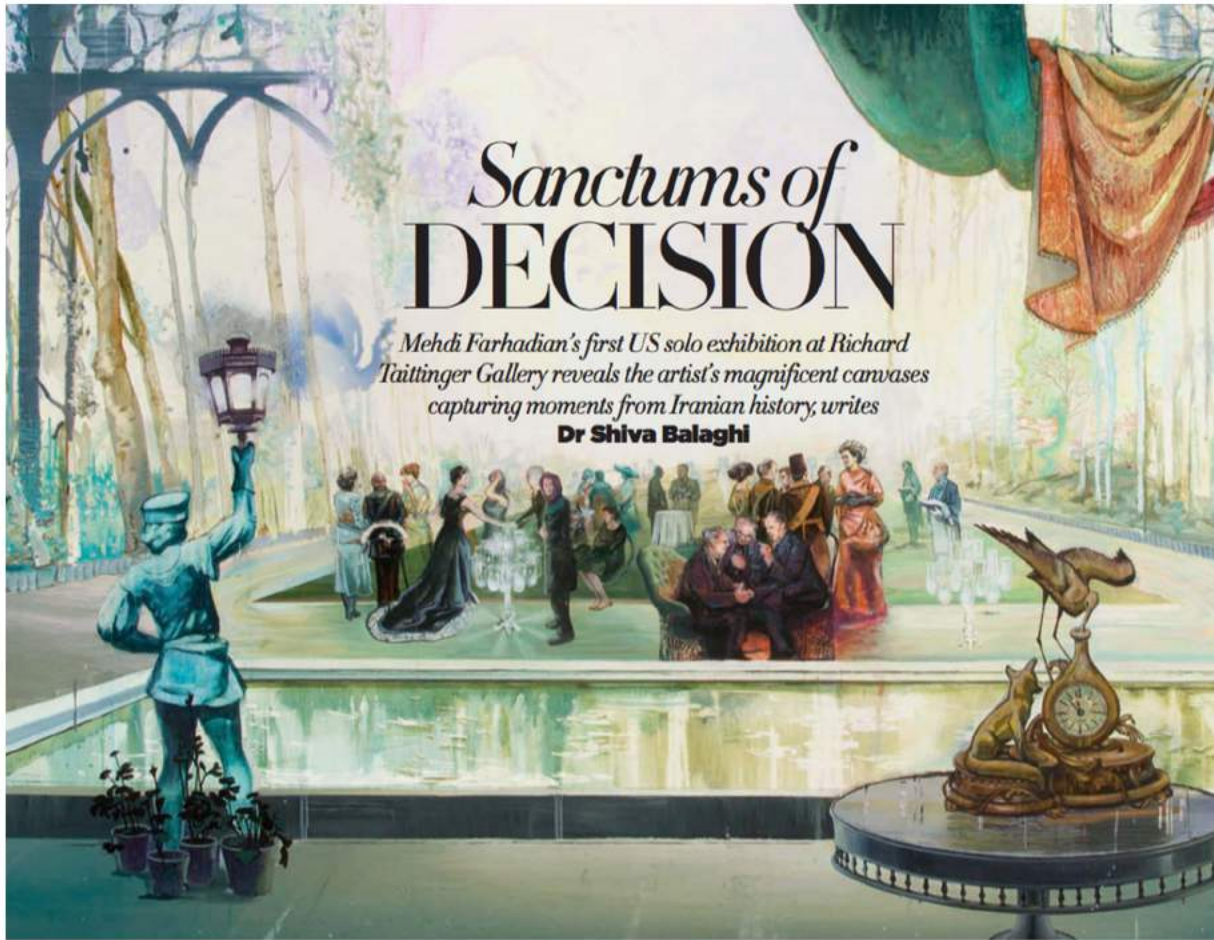


Winter 2016
Sanctums of DECISION

By Dr Shiva Balaghi



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Mehdi Farhadian's first US solo exhibition at Richard Taittinger Gallery reveals the artist's magnificent canvases capturing moments from Iranian history, writes
Dr Shiva Balaghi

Above: *Last minute*
Compromise, 2016.
Acrylic on canvas.
200 x 250 cm.

Some cities were meant to be painted. There is the London of JMW Turner, the Nice of Matisse, and the Delft of Vermeer. When thinking of painterly cities that have inspired iconic works of art, Tehran hardly comes to mind. But in Mehdi Farhadian's exhibition at Richard Taittinger Gallery in New York this fall, Tehran comes to life in vivid fashion on the canvas.

The long shadow of history hangs over the Tehran of Farhadian's artistic imagination. He creates landscape paintings of a particular sort, rendered from the architecture of memory. Farhadian excavates the history of his neighbourhood, home to Baharestan, Iran's first House of Parliament built in the Qajar era. Pouring over thousands of historical photographs in the archives of the Golestan Palace, Farhadian imagined the lives of past generations who once walked through the alleyways that surround his childhood home. "I would even have dreams about the history of this area," he says, recalling the intensity of his search into the past. "Nostalgia for the past is a typical Iranian tendency," he explains. "There is always a sense that the past was somehow better." Translating this imagined past into landscape paintings, Farhadian's aesthetics became one of escapism, of creating pictorial

images of memories. While the new paintings are a play on the lingering effects of the past, they are also stylistically strong, showing layers of painterly influence in Farhadian's development as an artist.

At first glance, Farhadian's paintings seem to reflect subdued and tranquil moments. But his art is layered with symbolism; each work carefully researched, thought through, planned. Those familiar with Iranian culture will recognise historic references and poetic allusions. The palaces, the hunting grounds, the decorations—all reflect particular moments and historical figures, often through a mere suggestion. Each painting retells a historical moment, an episode from the past. But the ambiguity is deliberate, because the intention of the painting is to convey a sensibility, a sense of the paradoxical ways that power has shaped the Iranian historical landscape.

His work shows a studied approach to painting, a layered absorption of multifarious influences. There is the photorealism of the great Qajar era painter, Kamal ol-Molk. There is the stylistic flair of John Singer Sargent's. There is the willingness to push the formal boundaries of Gerhard Richter. And there is the melding of the figural into landscape painting of Neo Rauch. Perhaps the greatest stylistic influence on Farhadian, however, is the Qajar era



Left: *To the health of the view*, 2016. Acrylic on canvas, 226.1 x 199.4 cm.
Below: *Seclusion*, 2016. Acrylic on canvas, 149.9 x 149.9 cm.

All images courtesy of Richard Taittinger Gallery

painter, Mahmud Khan Malik al-Sh' uara Saba, who painted impressionistic scenes of everyday life in Tehran. "I admire his art," Farhadian tells me. "His approach to architectural structures, his palette, and his use of symbolism all had a huge impact on me. But it was especially the way he employed emptiness on the canvas, almost as though it was a silence."
Although his country's art and history have informed Farhadian's art, there is nothing that is immediately recognisable as Iranian in his work. "I took a larger perspective," he says, "but beneath the layers, one can see Iranian themes and motifs." Unlike other artists who draw on the vernacular—calligraphy, folk art, miniature painting—Farhadian has carefully created a style that integrates Iranian elements but can be read universally.
Through painting, Farhadian makes sense of his corner of Tehran. In his new series, he connects the everyday with the historic. In exploring new modalities and thematics in Iranian art, he has created an artistic landscape that resonates more broadly. As a result, his canvases encompass beautiful depictions of lingering fears and desires that flow through time and space. ■

Sanctums of Decision ran until 2 October at Richard Taittinger Gallery in New York. richardtaittinger.com

