



Paris-based Iranian LGBTQ+ artist excluded by major Parisian art fair

18 October 2021, Paris, France - A new artwork celebrating the Iranian LGBTQ+ community by Paris-based Iranian LGBTQ+ artist Alireza Shojaian has been cancelled by the organizers of the ASIA NOW contemporary art fair (21-24 October 2021). Despite having approached and formally invited the artist, the AsiaNow organizers have revoked their invitation just days before the major art fair was set to start. Their decision comes following pressure from Tehran-based galleries who refused to be exhibited alongside Alireza Shojaian's pro-LGBTQ+ artwork. In addition to the exclusion, the organizers of the fair have attempted to silence Alireza and his art through threats of legal actions.

Alireza Shojaian was forced to leave his home country in 2017 due to the Iranian state's brutal homophobic and discriminatory policies. Alireza found refuge in Paris through a residency with the Académie des Beaux Arts. In Iran it is impossible to create art focusing on LGBTQ+ themes, but Alireza has used his base in France to create art that challenges these prejudices. Following the launch of his latest artwork, the PaykanArtCar, Alireza was approached by the major Parisian art fair AsiaNow and invited to exhibit his work at their fair.

The PaykanArtCar, a non-profit, was launched earlier this year after the purchase at auction of the famous Iranian-made Paykan car, once owned by the Shah of Iran and later by Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu. The founders of the PaykanArtCar have turned this storied car into a canvas for talented, marginalized Iranian artists so that they can highlight human rights issues in Iran. Alireza Shojaian is the PaykanArtCar's first collaboration.

In this endeavour Alireza has borrowed the characters of Sohrab and Shaban from the paintings of Hossein Qollar- Aghasi (1902-1966 Tehran), to narrate a contemporary story by turning the battle between these two national warriors into a romantic moment on the front of the car which takes place in a Persian garden under the starry sky of Shiraz, as immortalized in so many Persian miniatures. On the two sides we have the scene of their death as the results of their forbidden love. On the left, the death scene of Sohrab referring to the article 233-234 of penal codes of the Islamic Republic of Iran (possible death penalty for same sex relationship between men). On the right, the figure of Shaban refers to the story of Alireza Fazeli, a 21 year old gay man, beheaded by the men of his family in 2021 in Ahwaz, Iran. Sadly, there are hundreds of similar stories that no one hears about.

The aim is to cast light on the dilemma of LGBTQ+ rights in Iran. The topic which repeatedly has been denied by the government and neglected by the Iranian society both inside and outside of Iran.

Commenting on the project, Executive Director and Co-Founder of PaykanArtCar, **Dr. Hiva Feizi**: said "*We are immensely proud of what Alireza has done with the car - it is a beautiful story of romance and tragedy. I'm shocked that the Iranian regime that drove him from his home country has now found another way to silence him and his pro-LGBTQ art in France, supposedly a bastion of free speech and liberalism. The PaykanArtCar will not stop*



advocating for the rights of those oppressed inside Iran and we will continue to display this car.”

PaykanArtCar contacted AsiaNow numerous times imploring them to reconsider their decision which they refused so far, claiming that our political criticism of the Iranian’s regime was too extreme.

Any pro LGBTQ+ initiative would by essence be seen as extreme for the Iranian government, adding to the PaykanArtCar and the artist’s incomprehension and feeling of injustice generated by the AsiaNow’s decision to revoke its invitation to the fair.

PaykanArtCar Co-Founder, **Ambassador Mark Wallace** stated *“It is a tragic result that the AsiaNow fair refuses to rise above the political pressure and instead resorted to excluding Alireza from the fair. Simply put AsiaNow made the wrong choice. Choosing to display galleries in a French Art fair, either approved by Iran’s regime or censored by Iran’s regime to the exclusion of Alireza was the wrong choice. Alireza speaks powerfully for the rights of the LGBTQ+ community inside Iran and out. We will continue to stand in support of Alireza.”*

PaykanArtCar in collaboration with 3.19.27.(2) foundation is organising a pop-up exhibition to stand against censorship and in honour of the Salon des Refusés.

For more information on the PaykanArtCar, visit the website <https://paykanartcar.com> or contact Stephen Furlong at stephen.furlong@thisisredflag.com