

ROLLING OUT A NEW VEHICLE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

For decades the Paykan has been a symbol of Iran's national pride, on wheels. Today, it's the vehicle that will speak for basic human rights for all Iranians who cannot speak for themselves in the face of oppression by Iran's Ayatollah.

On October 4 in Miami, at the Human Rights Foundation's annual Oslo Freedom Forum, a wrapper was whisked off a vintage model of the first automobile to be produced in Iran—the Paykan—to reveal the first PaykanArtCar. The PaykanArtCar's hood, sides, and trunk have been elaborately painted with images of legendary Persian heroes. Sohrab and Shaban, familiar to this day from tales in the late 10th century Shahnameh—The Book of Kings. They appear on the car in colorful, classic contours as symbols of Iranian society's intolerance and the Iranian regime's murderous persecution of LGBTQ+ people.

Artist, Alireza Shojaian, 33, knows the fear and brutality first-hand. Born and educated in Tehran, where he launched his career, he fled Iran in 2017, blocked from pursuing his own artistic path and in peril of his life. Now granted protection and living as an expatriate in France as a resident of the Académie des Beaux-Arts, he welcomed the opportunity to continue to speak for LGBTQ+ rights by becoming the first artist to paint the PaykanArtCar.

A Moving Canvas

Founded in 2021, PaykanArtCar is dedicated to using art and a beloved national symbol to promote the rights of all Iranians, no matter their race, religion, gender, or sexual orientation. To pursue its goal, the organization has acquired an historic Paykan Hillman Hunter limousine: the limousine that the Shah of Iran sent as a gift in 1974 to Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu. PaykanArtCar intends to offer the car regularly to dynamic Iranian artists, inviting them to use it as their canvas to address the systematic violation of human rights in Iran.



Why the Paykan? With manufacturing beginning in 1967 by the Iran National Company, it was the first domestically made Iranian automobile. The Paykan quickly became a symbol of Iranian industrial capacity, individual freedom, and independence. With slogans like “One Paykan for each Iranian,” it was an icon of modernity and possibility. Although the car went out of production in 2005, it remains widely visible today on the streets of Tehran. It also appears frequently in Iranian films, television programs, and advertisements.

And why art? Ambassador Mark D. Wallace, Co-Founder and Chief Executive Officer of PaykanArtCar, says, “[Art] has long been an effective tool of creative dissent—a way for people to unify and confront oppression, whether living under tyranny or from afar. The Paykan is such a powerful Iranian symbol. And adorned with the artwork of a passionate Iranian artist, it will speak for those Iranians who cannot speak for themselves.”

Dr. Hiva Feizi, Co-Founder and Executive Director of PaykanArtCar, worked with various artists who proposed concepts for the inaugural PaykanArtCar, focusing on the persecution of the LGBTQ+ community in Iran. While the response from the Iranian artists was powerful, Alireza Shojaian's talent, personal history, and use of vivid symbolism made him the obvious selection for the first PaykanArtCar.

A History of Violence

Shojaian speaks from personal experience and with a sense of horror about recent events. He recalls how just this year, a 21-year-old gay man who shares his first name, Alireza Fazeli Monfared, was beheaded by members of his own family in the provincial city of Ahvaz. Such “honor killings” take place in the context of official, state-mandated persecution.

As Amnesty International reported this year, “LGBTQ people in Iran face pervasive discrimination, live in the constant fear of harassment, arrest and criminal prosecution, and remain vulnerable to violence and persecution based on their real or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity. Under Iran's Islamic Penal Code consensual same-sex sexual conduct is criminalized and punished by penalties ranging from flogging to the death penalty.”

Hope in the Face of Terror

Shojaian's PaykanArtCar sends a strong message to Iranian society and the regime with paintings steeped in the great traditions of Persian culture.

"Living in a society that restricts its citizens from presenting their true, authentic selves, and even outright denies their existence, has caused many in our queer community in the Middle East to live in exile," he says. "Art is a medium to express myself and my essence, and also to engage others. With the PaykanArtCar, I hope to make visible the beauty and emotion of queer culture that has long been hidden in the region and, in doing so, pave the way for a world that is more open to acceptance and more tolerant."

Twice Erased

The PaykanArtCar by Paris-based queer artist Alireza Shojaian was supposed to be shown at the Asia Now 2021. At the last minute, the Asia Now organizers have cancelled the display of the PaykanArtCar at the behest of a few regime approved galleries from Tehran. PaykanArtCar has appointed counsel following legal threats from the art fair.

The PaykanArtCar will be in Paris for the next few weeks and are exploring opportunities to host a pop-up event, in collaboration with 3.19.27.(2) to stand against this censorship and in honour of the Salon des Refusés.

"We hope that the PaykanArtCar brings us just that bit closer to a day when the LGBTQ+ community is freed from hiding, and nevermore will a person's sexual orientation lead to their death by hanging from the end of a crane in Iran's public squares," says Ambassador Wallace.

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