

Parviz Tanavoli

The Poet Exhibition

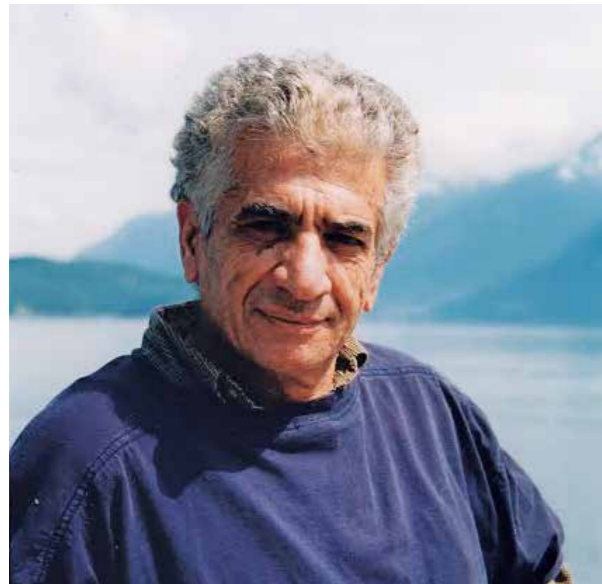


Figure 1-Poet, 1961
Copper, 190 x 92 x 92
Manijeh Collection

Parviz Tanavoli is the major figure of Iranian Contemporary Art on the International scene, sustaining himself on its avant-garde for five decades. He is an artist who has studied in depth western sculpture, African art and Persian culture. Although he received academic training in Italy and the US, he was never keen on following the western trends of sculpture, but rather wanted to develop a style of his own, away from the main currents of sculpture in the west. In a documentary film made on Parviz Tanavoli by Leila Naghdipari in 2005, Tanavoli says that he was influenced by his master, Marino Marini in terms of technique, but never in terms of content. Because of his deep knowledge of western and Persian art, he was able to reach a synthesis of both and be one of the precursors of the Iranian Modern style. He is the only Iranian artist who also has a deep knowledge of African art which is of course the essence of primitive art – also a very influential source in Picasso’s works -- and this primitive energy, I am almost inclined to say “naturalistic” influence, is perceptible in all of his works.

So much has been written about Parviz Tanavoli (see the appended bibliography), and I am sure the retrospective he recently had at the Davis Museum in Wellesley College -- February to June 2015 – will steadily increase the amount of ink poured over him and his works; instead I would like to concentrate on his latest exhibition in Tehran, at the Etamad Gallery, which he entitled “POET” and for which a new work written by him with the same title, was published.

There is a Japanese proverb which says that “The emptiness of the gate is more important than the gate itself.” For decades now, western artists have been fascinated by Zen Buddhism and Persian Sufism, eastern mysticisms which Parviz Tanavoli has also been attracted to. In his POET book, Tanavoli writes: ‘The concept of carving space (nothingness) out of a mountain was like the essence of all poems... The work of Farhad was just empty space, a monument to nothingness and did not represent any subject... He just wanted to make the impossible possible.’ (1) These remarks could as well be applied to Tanavoli himself and most of his sculptures. Tanavoli used to go strolling in the Tehran and Shah Abdol Azim bazaars, looking for attractive popular and religious objects which would take his fancy. This is why Siah Armajani calls the “Saqakhaneh” style “Shah Abdol Azim” art movement. In his trips to the copper bazaar, Tanavoli would buy pots and pans and other odd objects to assemble his first sculptures, very similar to what Jhazeh Tabatabai was also doing, except that the latter would use car parts and machinery pieces whereas Tanavoli preferred to use more common utensils. Tanavoli created more naturalistic, more minimal and raw sculptures compared to those of Jhazeh which had so many details, and although the parts in Jhazeh’s sculptures could be qualified as being “industrial”, Tanavoli achieved a more Modern style. After 1960 Parviz Tanavoli hired a coppersmith, Gholam Hossein, to work with him, although he had been trained to manufacture traditional utensils, Tanavoli asked him to reach beyond his limits to create the forms he envisaged for his sculptures.

In the “Poet and Cage” chapter of the POET book, Tanavoli writes: “Two areas of Iranian art held special appeal to me: poetry and architecture.”(2) He wanted to merge the two arts by using geometry and words, and thus he created his cages. All Persian poetry is about longing for an absent lover, and in our most common religious rituals we visit the mausoleums of our Imams and clutch to the intricate shrines, or moucharabieh enclosures built around their tombs – the zarih, which are mostly golden because they are made of gold or other gold-plated metals and sometimes of silver. These shrines usually have a very intricate lattice work and only supernatural beings, our imams or their offsprings rest – or we might say “dwell” – in them. Tanavoli draws on the deepest layers of Shiite rites and beliefs to give supernatural, or we might say “magical powers” to his sculptures. The mutation of Imams into poets into sculptors – Farhad and Tanavoli himself – is thus very subtly operated. The use of talismans or other shamanistic relics, objects he has been collecting for decades, also gives this magical aspect to all of Tanavoli’s sculptures, making them similar to idols to be venerated by the believers.



Figure 2-Prophet III, 1963
Bronze, 76 x 40 x 18 cm
Museum of Modern Art, New York

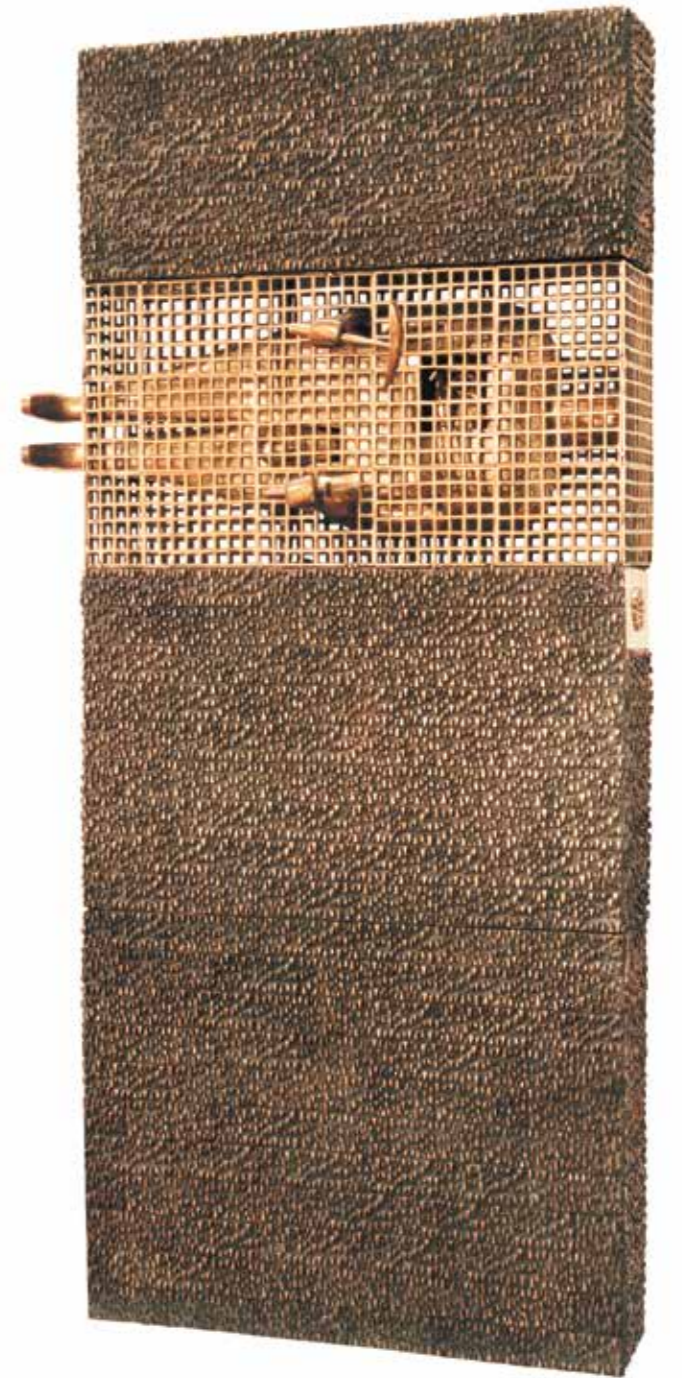


Figure 3- Monument for Farhad, the Mountain Carver, 1976
Bronze, 196 x 45 x 33 cm
Parviz Tanavoli Museum, Tehran

Shiite Imams’ shrines are the most constant forms Tanavoli uses in his architectural or wall sculptures. He writes “The poet carries the cage within himself, within his own breast where a bird is kept captive.”(3) And now he mixes very architectonic forms, the monolithic cage, with illegible words sculpted on it, so as to magically intertwine his two favorite art forms of Persian culture, architecture and poetry.

The Standing Poet he created in 2007 is an abstracted version of the Sanctified, sometimes also referred to as Shirin and Farhad, a sculpture he did in 1976 for the inauguration of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art and which has been standing on its lawn for 39 years and has aged quite well. The same arrow is now slung into the poet's heart



Figure 5- Standing Poet 6/6, 2007
Bronze, 290 x 80 x 58 cm

It is quite obvious that Tanavoli's artistic expression has moved from intricate details to more abstract and minimal forms, in other words he is slowly moving away from Persian iconography and is becoming more and more universal. This is why we see fewer and fewer locks in his recent works, because the lock represents "the yoke of obligation" as he himself puts it. I would say that he is liberating himself from all the formal imagery of the Persian culture which has always fascinated him, and is now extruding the deeper meanings of these images and only using, as it were, their essence. Tanavoli is an artist who is concerned with IDEA more than form, although the forms he achieves are quite subjugating, they all are metaphors for some deeper ideas. The bird and especially the nightingale, being the number one icon of Persian art in 7000 years, recur prolifically in his sculptures.

But again if we compare the Poet and Nightingale from 1974 to the Poet and Bird III dated 2009, we see how the bird's shape is abstracted and how the religious relics, including the locks, have been dropped. In a previous sculpture titled Poet and the Bird IV, and dated 2006, there is a Palm which is an intrinsic part of the Alam and Kotal, the decorative elements used during Ashoura's mourning ceremonies where the believers lacerate themselves with chains, but in the 2009 sculpture, the palm itself is dropped.



Figure 6- The Poet and Nightingale, 1974
Silk screen on paper, 70 x 50 cm



Figure 7- Poet and Bird IV, 2006
Bronze, 96 x 54 x 24



Figure 8- Poet and Bird III, 2009
Bronze, 115.5 x 49 x 31.5

In traditional Persian iconography, the bird has a transcendental function, it is the symbol of our ascension to the sky and our mystical participation with the higher spheres of Being, but in Tanavoli's works, the bird is often caged and a mere companion to the poet who himself is burdened by many locks. This is where and how Tanavoli's ontological Doubt is expressed. What if there is nothing beyond what we see? What if there is nothing but emptiness? This is the Zen Buddhist side of Tanavoli's philosophy where emptiness and nothingness are so important and omnipresent.

In A SEASON IN HELL Rimbaud writes "Un soir j'ai assis la Beauté sur mes genoux. -- Et je l'ai trouvée amère. -- Et je l'ai injuriée." (4) This verse applies so well to Tanavoli in all of his poet and chair sculptures. In all of these, the poet is waiting for "the beloved to show up," (5) but no one knows if she will, and most likely she never will rejoin the poet, because Persian Poetry is not about happy reunions of lovers, but their forlornness.

But mostly in all our poetry "the beloved" is not really a human person but an embodiment of God and in the case of Shiite belief, it is the twelfth Imam, Mehdi or imam-e zaman who is yet to make his appearance and for whom everyone is waiting...

The empty chairs, the empty spaces, the nothingness are the important elements of Tanavoli's works. And thus we arrive at the series of Heech'es he has produced over five decades, so many that there is no point counting them. This is the fundamental and pivotal expression of his world

vision. In a BBC interview from a couple of years ago Tanavoli said that because he was tired of the reification of American culture, so many THINGS being produced and consumed, he wanted to make NO-THINGS, this was in 1964. I think there is much more to this mass-production of Nothingness that he admitted in this interview, and it goes back to the ontological doubt mentioned before.

His "nothings" have been mixed with many other elements of his sculptures and the body parts of the poet. I particularly like the one where the thumb is the letter ح of the heech. Hands are also an intrinsic part of many sculptures, because in Persian iconography the hand of Abolfazl and that of Fatemeh and the "Panj tan" (The five holy figures, the Prophet, Fatemeh, Imam Ali and Imam Hossein and Hassan) are also favorite religious relics. But of course the most important "hand" to Parviz Tanavoli is the hand of Farhad, the mountain carver, and he has many sculptures made up of a single hand, one of which he has used as the cover of his POET book, thus showing how important they are to him.



Figure 9- Poet and Chair I, 2009
Bronze, 135 x 75 x 58 cm



Figure 10-Standing Poet with Heech II, 1973
Bronze, 229 x 40 x 35 cm
Manijeh Collection

Of all the heech and poet sculptures, my favorite is the Standing Poet Turning into Heech, because it embodies so many different aspects of his aesthetics: it has architecture, the cylindrical body, it has poetry, the illegible script on the body of the cylinder, it has the “nothing” with two eyes and the two legs to make it anthropomorphic. And this is where we begin to glimpse at the way Tanavoli redeems himself from all this nothingness, if not nihilism: he makes fun of all these serious elements!

There is always a close relationship between dissent and avant-garde: Tanavoli uses the heech to protest, but instead of creating bitterness, he achieves sweetness! There is a mischievous playfulness in all of Tanavoli’s works which constitutes his primal energy and which turn his works into familiar and loveable person-objects. Combined with his inspiration from African art, which is often very naturalistic, he sometimes achieves more than playful mischievousness. Some of his sculptures are sometimes “naughty” enough to make us roar with laughter. And when a sculptor makes you laugh at the same time as you are admiring his aesthetic and conceptual degree of mastery, it is no small feat!

Faryar Javaherian



Figure 11-Poet Turning into Heech, 1973-2007
Bronze 228 x 70 x 58 cm
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

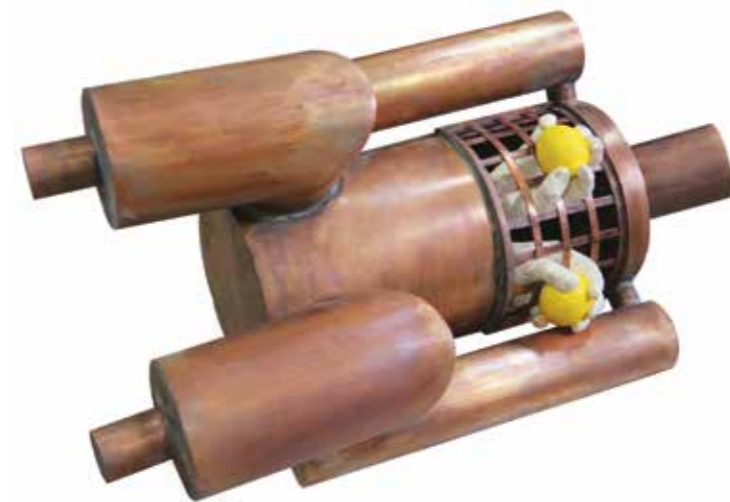


Figure 12-Poet Squeezing Lemons, 1963-2009
Copper and Gypsum, 45 x 85 x 44 cm

- (1)- POET, by Parviz Tanavoli, pp 16-17
- (2)-ibid, p.22
- (3)-ibid, p.23
- (4)- UNE SAISON EN ENFER, p. 93, Pleiade. “One night I sat Beauty on my lap. --And I found her bitter. --And I insulted her.” (Writer’s translation)
- (5)-POET, by Parviz Tanavoli, p.86

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