

# Shadi Rezaei

## The Silk Road

A Route to the Great Game of Progress

12<sup>th</sup> November – 16<sup>th</sup> December 2021



Francesca Fiumano and Andrés Clase are delighted to present a solo exhibition of a new body of work by Iranian artist Shadi Rezaei from the 12<sup>th</sup> November until the 16<sup>th</sup> December 2021. This is the artist's first solo exhibition with Fiumano Clase having been exhibited internationally by the gallery in Basel and Miami, and as part of the annual Discoveries exhibition held in their London space since 2018.

Rezaei's Persian roots form a key element of her identity as both a woman living in the West and an artist practicing in what continues to be very much a 'man's' world. While embracing her heritage Rezaei reaches beyond geographical and cultural boundaries, striving to explore and question themes of global and social significance.

"Silk Road: A Route to the Great Game of Progress" is an exhibition that examines several key themes across different media and artistic practice. The Silk Road was an ancient, storied network of roads, trading posts and oases that linked Asia and the Mediterranean basin. It was a vital route for trade, and as a consequence the exchange of ideas, religious and cultural practices and language. In a nod to the travelling merchants Rezaei has purposely used a wide variety of media. Different merchants would often travel together in groups and set up stalls selling their diverse wares along the road. The notion of progress as an ideal, the importance of the Silk Road, both historically and in contemporary trading models, the instability and uncertainty surrounding sexual politics and identity and finally the continued yet shifting tensions between major international powers, both political and economic are all examined

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by Rezaei. These themes run through various media encompassing painting, sculptural installation and video work. No singular piece seeks to ask questions of or provide solutions to specific issues, the viewer is invited to consider the complexities that are interconnected and inseparable from one-another.

A video projection opens with a sunrise on what at first appears to be a day like any other. Soldiers ready themselves for a ceremonial march but they are not quite how one would expect. Figures in pristine uniforms performing perfectly synchronised movements are transformed into iconic and somewhat unsettling figures recognisable as well-known American cartoon characters.

Razaei is making a playful critique of modern-day opposing world super-powers and referencing the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century '*Great Game*' between the British and the Russian empires who sought to control Afghanistan and its neighbouring territories. Both current and historical conflicts underline the fact that the *game* can never really be won, it merely continues with shifting protagonists and unstable outcomes. Rezaei is here clearly referring to the USA and China, two opposing super-powers who despite all of their posturing rely on each other for their own financial, political and military success. This is a critique of the West's dependence on China for the production of everyday goods and in turn the pervasiveness of American culture that is influencing younger generation of Chinese consumers.

A large floor based sculpture punctuates the space. Two upright objects, called *Meel's* in Persian, appear to float above a bed of goose feathers. These wooden clubs originate from a traditional Iranian sport known as *Pahlavani*, a ritualistic series of movements and practices accompanied by poetry, storytelling and the fast-paced drum beat of the *Zarb* instrument. The purpose of this activity is the elevation and re-enforcement of the athlete's superiority through acts loaded with symbolic chivalric and masculine traits. Rezaei has playfully subverted this masculine activity.

A ritual that is reserved exclusively for men is here '*pink washed*'. Unlike many corporations and regimes who use pink washing to distract attention from negative actions Rezaei is using it to highlight the ongoing inequality and segregation all over the world where not just women but many minorities are excluded from rituals and ceremonies reserved for those with power.

The interactive element of the piece, a bell suspended on a pink rope, adds to the artists attempt to be inclusive. Before and after each ritual performed by the men during *Pahlavani* is completed the bell is rung and poems or stories are recited. Rezaei has removed this restriction, we are free to ring this bell anytime. She has removed the stability and certainty from this ancient sport and in doing so has introduced visual instability and uncertainty, a concept that runs through the exhibition.

A suite of four miniatures taken from the ancient epic poems *Shahnameh*, or Persian Book of the Kings introduce a further element of subversion. Rezaei has selected illustrations from specific accounts of Iran's ancient history (at the time areas of modern day Afghanistan fell within the Persian Empire) that are relevant to the current political climate in the middle

east. She has manipulated the images, both digitally and by hand, adding and removing elements thus altering the messages of the original works.

*“Bahram Gur Hunting, Accompanied by his Slave Girls”* depicts Bahram Gur slaying a lion, above him in the clouds he is watched by women in Afghan Burqas. The original miniature depicted the women in traditional dress, jubilantly dancing, singing and playing musical instruments. Razaei has removed this joyful energy, instead we see subdued eyes and a king (symbol of power) who is oblivious to the new situation. To the left she has added a pink balloon floating off into the sky, symbolic of lost hope and aspirations. In recent months, with the re-capturing of Afghanistan by the Taliban, we have heard promises that women’s freedoms will be protected but sadly, as we have seen before, this is not the case, their cultural, societal and political liberties have been curtailed.

Rezaei’s practice has always used paradoxical ideas to explore themes fundamental to the human condition. Notions of beauty/ugliness, stability/instability, femininity/masculinity are often positioned at odds with each other, encouraging a fluid and shifting dialogue. *“The Silk Road: A Route to the Great Game of Progress”* is a culmination of over twelve months of studio- based practice. By bringing together seemingly disparate elements Razaei has attempted to create an exhibition that prompts the viewer to question the complex nature of contemporary geo-politics. How can we judge another regime when we have benefitted from hundreds of years of prosperous trade with it, only turning our back on it now there is an alternative ‘silk road’? How can we trade with and be so heavily dependant on a continent whom we openly criticize? How can we judge a culture that we don’t understand, and most importantly how can we make a change that will last?

#### Notes:

Exhibition Dates: 12<sup>th</sup> November – 16<sup>th</sup> December 2021

Artist in conversation Date TBC

Fiumano Clase,  
Unit 12, 21 Wren Street  
London WC1X 0HF

[www.fiumanoclase.com](http://www.fiumanoclase.com)

#### Opening hours:

Wednesday – Friday 12 noon – 6pm

Saturday – 12 noon – 4pm

All other times by appointment

#### About Fiumano Clase:

Fiumano Clase is one of the most exciting contemporary galleries on the London scene. As well as hosting regular exhibitions throughout the year at their London gallery, Francesca

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Fiumano and Andrés Clase normally exhibit regularly at art fairs internationally such as Untitled San Francisco and Volta Basel .

The central ethos of Fiumano Clase is to work collaboratively with artists, giving them the time, space and opportunity to develop their artistic practice unhindered by overbearing commercial pressure. Gallery Directors Francesca Fiumano and Andrés Clase, made the decision to merge galleries and form Fiumano Clase in November 2017 after a number of successful collaborations, pooling over thirty years of combined knowledge and experience.

Given his Swedish origins, Andrés Clase is naturally drawn to the work of Nordic artists. Though, the outlook of the gallery remains global. Francesca and Andrés work with a number of artists internationally, embracing a range of different practices from painting and sculpture, to photography, installation, video and performance art.

## About Shadie Rezaei

Shadi Rezaei is a London-based interdisciplinary artist. She received her BA in Graphic Design from the University of Art in Tehran and her MFA Fine Arts from UAL, Chelsea College of Arts and Design in London in 2017.

“I use recognisable and ordinary everyday elements and materials, that I then amplify or place out of context so that they appear odd, surreal yet familiar. In my moving image work, although the characters and stories are fictional, I do depict current social and political issues, *herstory* or trauma. Is the real world a source of fiction – a purely imaginary construct that probably cannot exist?”

Shadie Rezaei, October 2021