



art and iran

One of the main roles of artist Sassan Behnam Bakhtiar's work is to show the world the true nature of Iran. Here he talks to Reorient's Joobin Bekhrad

WHO IS SASSAN BEHNAM BAKHTIAR? WHAT DOES HE BELIEVE IN? WHO IS THIS 'MAN ON A MISSION' EVERYONE'S BEEN TALKING ABOUT RECENTLY?

I have often been called a self-styled purveyor of the truth by different major organisations and players in the contemporary art world during the past two years, which is due to the nature of my work – from my portraiture and art films, to installations and photographs such as those of the *A Reason to Fight* and *The Real Me* series – as well as my background. As an artist, one of my objectives is to show the world what the true nature of my country – Iran – and its culture, heritage, and people is. It has been too long that the majority of international media outlets have portrayed my fellow nationals, country, and heritage as something that is clearly false, and I think it is long overdue to start showing the truth and factual realities of Iran instead of all this negative propaganda circulating everywhere.

HOW WOULD YOU, IN YOUR OWN WORDS, DESCRIBE IRAN TO AN

OUTSIDER? WHAT IS IT REALLY LIKE?

A truly beautiful country with kind-hearted people you can count on, alongside an extremely rich heritage and culture with probably the best food I have ever had. True hospitality is part of everyone's daily lives and you will always find someone who is willing to help you out in any scenario. The country itself is filled with so many historical treasures and hidden gems that you feel you have jumped back in history when visiting. There are also great ski resorts, beaches, different natural environments, the four seasons and so much more. You are never alone in Iran, since you will always be at *dor-e hamis* (gatherings) with friends and family. Family values and true friendships are a big part of social life in Iran and there is always an adventure waiting for you around every corner.

I AM FASCINATED BY YOUR BACKGROUND. YOU ARE OF BAKHTIARI ORIGIN, FROM A FAMILY WITH TIES TO THE LATE SORAYA ESFANDIARY-BAKHTIARI, AND GREW UP IN SOUTHERN FRANCE, WHERE YOU ARE STILL

BASED. WHERE DOES YOUR PASSION FOR IRAN STEM FROM?

I was born in Paris and spent the first 10 years of my life between the capital and the south of France before moving to Tehran. My passion and love for Iran come from different things. My personal character and immediate family played a huge role, as well as the eight years I spent in Tehran from the age of 10 onwards. I am a proud Iranian, and after spending much time in Tehran and learning about my country, people, and culture, fell in love with it all, and wanted to show how great Iran is. As my grandfather used to tell me prior to his passing, always know your roots and be proud of your heritage, no matter how weird this world gets. I was young at the time, but soon came to understand the true meaning and depth of his words.

TELL ME A LITTLE BIT ABOUT THE *A REASON TO FIGHT* SERIES. I FIND IT REALLY INTERESTING THAT, NOT HAVING GROWN UP IN IRAN – LIKE ME – YOU HAVE CHOSEN THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR AS YOUR FOCUS HERE.

During the years I spent in Iran, I saw how people were always split on the Iran-Iraq War. However, what is important to highlight here is that it does not matter for what reason the people defended their country, but that they went to war and were able to defend it during the eight-year long war regarded as the longest conventional war of the 20th century, and the most violent conflict after the Second World War.

A Reason to Fight is linked to the struggles of Iran against the Iraqi occupation and each work in this series is my representation of the strength and courage of each Iranian involved in the war. Our country, with all its complicated history, is present today, and that is due to all those courageous Iranians, young and old, who took on the responsibility of the war and defended our land no matter what the cost and the situation at the time. Let us think for a second that we had lost the war – where would we be today? Each person had their own reasons for fighting, but that is not what this series of work is about.

DO YOU STILL GO BACK TO IRAN? IF SO, WHAT DO YOU MAKE OF THE LOCAL ART SCENE THERE? THE ARTISTS AND GALLERIES THERE, AMONG OTHER THINGS, NEVER CEASE TO AMAZE ME.

Of course I travel to Iran. We have so many young and talented artists back home that every trip is like a creative adventure for me. And, knowing many of them on a personal level, I can say without a doubt that our artists back home and around the world truly deserve more recognition and support than they are currently getting. Even though there is a great local art scene with solid galleries in Tehran that are internationally-recognised, I still wish there were more opportunities in the contemporary art world for many creative minds still residing in Iran.

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