

**Crimson Ark**  
**14-23 December 2012**  
**At the Vanishing Point Contemporary Art Gallery**  
**565 King Street Newtown**

***Monir Rowshan Co-Curator and Exhibition Coordinator***

I was delighted when my friend Mehrzad Mumtahan called me in August of this year and asked me to coordinate and curate an exhibition with a number of Sydney based Iranian artists from the Baha'i community. I have known some of them for a long time. I was particularly intrigued to learn that Shadi Eshragi, a lawyer, was now creating art works, and that Leila Barbaro who has a background in fashion and design, was collaborating on a photographic piece with Maryam Master, a writer.

The purpose of this exhibition in the words of Mehrzad was *"to bring attention to the situation of the Baha'is living in Iran who are facing an intense and sustained campaign of persecution. Of particular concern are the Baha'is who have been imprisoned in horrifying conditions for no reason other than their beliefs"*.

In my previous work as an artist I have explored concepts of Displacement, Diaspora and Migration. In my 1997 Public Art works for Wollongong Council, titled *The Four Pillars of Understanding*, a series of mosaic pillars, I explored the journeys associated with displacement, settlement, acceptance and recognition.

All of my artwork relates to memories of the past, of symbols, verses and poems that I heard or read when I was a child. Past memories that hidden and not hidden are very evident in my work.

In the last 12 years in my work as a Cultural Planner, Community Cultural Development Worker, and Public Art Manager and advisor and an artist in the Western Sydney area, I have met so many people who have fled their countries through persecution caused by civil wars, revolutions and discourse. All with amazing stories.

The subject matter of this exhibition and the range of ideas and diversity of the artists intrigued me and I become very involved with the development of the exhibition. After securing a venue for the exhibition my dialogue with the artist began.

I was moved by the process of the works created by each artist and by the commitment and enthusiasm that each artist displayed during this period.

Shadi Eshragi and I worked very closely together and have had long conversations related to the exhibition. Some of Shadi's work relates directly to the true stories of Baha'i prisoners she has encountered, the memories of childhood humiliation she and other Baha'i students have faced at school, and her sense of devastation and

loss when the *Golestan Javid (the Eternal Garden)* where her relatives were buried was demolished by the members of the Iranian regime.

Shadi does not express her bitter experiences through violence or hatred. Instead she creates works that are gentle, peaceful and filled with love.

The other part of Shadi's art works come from her deep connection to her fellow community members and to the sacred writings which are poetically interpreted in her calligraphy and installation works.

Mehrzad's work entitled '*Turquoise Feet*' expresses the many journeys that feet have travelled. They relate to many of us- those of us who have walked through the borders and deserts, jungles and rivers to flee to the other side. Mehrzad's work '*Untitled*' expresses a sense of deep commitment to belief and the sacrifices made in relationship to belief.

Leila's photographic work titled as *Cell Block 8 in collaboration with Maryam's text* is intriguing. I found Leila's interpretation of Persian symbolism mixed with her Italian heritage in her photographic images of the story of a Baha'i woman who gives birth to her child in a cold prison cell delightful and uplifting.

She references in her statement the Diaspora and the displacement of her family and friends.

The works created by all these artists tell the story of many individuals around the world. They are universal stories but uniquely presented with love, dignity, forbearance and peace.

### ***Shadi Eshragi- Artist and Co-Curator***

Since I was a very young girl living in Iran, I always had the sense that there was something different about me.

I could sense it in the way my teachers looked at me. In the way my parents spoke in hushed and worried tones to relatives over the phone.

Then, one day, during school assembly, the Principal of my primary school walked up to me and asked me what religion I belonged to. I thought about it carefully, and said "I am a Baha'i". As I said those words, the Principal flinched. As if I had slapped her. She expelled me from school there and then, in front of everyone. I was six years old.

Now, living in Sydney and creating work for this exhibition, I finally feel free to be myself.

This is me, the essence of who I am. I am an artist, a lawyer, daughter, wife and mother. But most of all- most important of all, I am a Baha'i.

### ***About the Exhibition***

Crimson is the colour of sacrifice, the colour of blood, the colour of power and courage.

'Crimson Ark' takes its title from mystical scriptural references to the Baha'i Faith.

The idea for the exhibition came about in collaboration with Mehrzad Mumtahan. We'd both witnessed first-hand what fate awaited even the brightest and most popular of Baha'i students. We'd both had relatives who had been imprisoned purely because of their beliefs. In fact, Mehrzad's uncle is still imprisoned, more than four years and counting.

We wanted to draw attention to what was happening in Iran, but didn't want to go about it in the way these things are usually done. The people who we knew were suffering but they were not helpless, passive victims. They made a choice every single day to be true to themselves and to their beliefs. We wanted to share their stories through a medium that would allow the observer to feel the horror of what they were going through and yet be uplifted.

So for me, this exhibition is not ultimately about persecution. It is about love, faith, transcendence and nobility.

What is very exciting for me as one of the curators of this exhibition is that almost all of the artwork in the exhibition has been created especially for this exhibition and none of the works has been exhibited before. The artists have created work in a diversity of media yet the pieces sit beautifully side by side, reflecting the artists' common motivation and unity of vision.

### ***About my Artwork***

As an artist, my first love is calligraphy and painting. Growing up in the middle-east the traditions of geometric design and calligraphic embellishment seeped into my consciousness. Everyday objects were beautiful, from the carpets my grandmother had woven by hand, to the blue glazed tiles in the court yard. Those vivid colours often find their way into my dreams and artwork.

I also love to create art on my computer, beginning by taking photographs, creating layers and colour variations in the photographs digitally and then printing them on canvas. I can then mix the digital work with calligraphy or paint/draw with acrylic, oils and chalk. The freedom that digital media offer, accompanied by the hands on textural physicality of traditional media are an inspiration for me.

I am also inspired by mystical Persian poetry such as Rumi and the writings of Baha'u'llah. The titles of my works and my calligraphy reference those inspirations.

**Seven (2012) Mixed media digital print and chalk on canvas 90cm x 75cm**

A group of seven beloved religious leaders are abducted, imprisoned, subjected to an unfair "trial", and held in prison for more than four years in appalling conditions. They remain in jail.

The number of chalk marks on the canvas represents the number of weeks the Yaran have been imprisoned. This work is interactive. The artist or others can continue to mark each week the Yaran are imprisoned.

**Eternal Garden (2012) Mixed media digital print, acrylic, oil, ink and chalk on canvas 90cm x 75cm**

What peace is left for the living when their dead cannot rest in peace? This work is dedicated to all the Baha'is who have suffered the horror of the having the graves of their loved ones dug up and vandalised. It was inspired by a phone call the artist received from her mother, telling her that a Baha'i cemetery in Shiraz, the city where her grandmother was buried, had been desecrated.

**Fire of Separation (2012) Mixed media digital print, acrylic, ink and chalk on canvas 90cm x 75cm**

A quiet and unassuming family man is abducted, imprisoned and tortured. A breast-feeding mother and her husband are jailed and their newborn baby left in the care of an elderly relative. This work explores the personal connection and ties of love that bind families to the prisoner. The theme is one of human transcendence above pain and of a love that sustains through the dark night of despair.

**Heavens and Earth (2012) Mixed media digital print, acrylic, oil and ink on canvas 90cm x 75cm**

Butterflies are suspended in the sky. An ominous storm is building in the background threatening to engulf everything in its path. The butterflies are fragile, beautiful and ethereal.

**'Companions of the Crimson Ark' Mixed Media installation - wooden glazed Ark with candles 70 x 12 x 9cm**

Seven candles aboard the Crimson Ark. They weep their life away, drop by drop. A metaphor for pain, sacrifice and transcendence above the material world.

## **Mehrzad Mumtahan- Artist and Co-curator**

The two pieces that I have selected for this exhibition are from a series of works about persecution which I produced some years ago.

Turquoise Feet explores the nobility and bravery of Baha'i prisoners, the cruelty of torture, and references the bastinado or "falak" in Persian which has traditionally been a favourite method of torture used by Iranian authorities. Although extremely painful this cruel method of corporal punishment leaves few physical marks.

The founder of the Baha'i Faith himself, Baha'u'llah was subjected to whipping of the feet in 1825.

Using turquoise, which symbolises heaven on earth in Persian and porcelain which is associated with purity and strength this piece honours the suffering and pain that many Iranian Baha'i prisoners have endured for their faith.

The second work includes four figures in clay portraying crucifixion which for centuries has been a powerful symbol of religious persecution. This piece also a reference to torture and suffering of Iran's largest religious minority is a metaphor for steadfastness, devotion, faith and triumph.

## **Leila Barbaro- Artist**

*My inspirations in creating Cell Block 8*

This piece is the result of my collaboration with Maryam Master. We had been discussing the trauma of displacement suffered by many of our family and friends, some of whom had even been imprisoned because of their beliefs. We wanted to explore this issue by combining the written word with imagery.

Maryam interviewed Zhilah and distilled from that conversation the emotion and strength that Zhilah had found in her darkest hours. I then created a series of digital artworks, blending digital photography with photo manipulation, as a visual response to Maryam's written piece.

Traditional Persian patterns are woven throughout the piece, as well as rose petals, a reference both to Persian culture and the Baha'is. Roses appear often in the Baha'i writings as a metaphor for the beauty of the human spirit, and I wanted to incorporate this to highlight the source of Zhilah's strength. The red of the roses in this piece also signifies the blood spilt in the prison. We wanted to express that even though Zhilah was terrified and in pain, she found resilience by turning to her faith. The two opposing sides of each panel explore these ideas – the brutality and the strength that coexist in such a harsh and traumatic situation.