



Ramin Haerizadeh, Rokni Haerizadeh, Hesam Rahmanian, Mandana Mohit and Sohrab Mahdavi. *The Maids* 2017-2018, installation view. Locks of hair and roses collected by the artists. 2017. Image courtesy of Han Nefkens Foundation and the artists. MACBA, Barcelona. Photography by Roberto Ruiz

Thus a handful of roses stood along one side of the gallery space, a lock of hair symbolically placed above each bloom. “This was their tribute,” Rahmanian continued, “because they couldn’t be here.” A forlorn image, the roses rested close to the women’s moving texts about their fears of puberty, marriage, sex and failure, all inscribed on the same wall.

The narrative thread continued with *Unfaithful poems*, another collaboration, but this time with writers and translators, and an ongoing project the collective has been working on for several years. They used an epically long poem, *Chavoshi* by Mehdi Akhavan Sales, reinterpreted from Farsi – *chavoshi* is a genre of musical poetry in Iran read to people before they go on pilgrimage. “Although it was written 70 years ago for another time and space, we interpreted it in light of the crises we are facing today. The main idea was to move away from the literal translation and create something that is more faithful to the theme that runs through it – in this case, immigration – rather than to the original poem. The experience described in both the original and the final text is the embracing of the journey into the unknown.” Rahmanian’s words resonate with the poetic fragments that the artists chose to display: “Let’s set out and make waves far

away from here/Let’s pick up our possessions and step in the path that never ends/Where to?/To the place where they say/A bright city has blossomed like a flower from the sea...”

Linked to this theme is *From Sea to Dawn*, a video or “moving painting,” that confronts the refugee crisis in Europe in a poetic animated assemblage of illustrated stills. Painterly lines mark the ceaseless ebb and flow of hundreds of migrants floating on boats and marching through streets. “It’s a video narrating the story of how state structures can cause such movement,” Rahmanian explained. “We gathered and edited media footage in 6,000 frames, downloading each one and then painting over and scanning them as collages.” It’s a creative approach to both obscuring and uncovering the realities.

The artists brought their own bodies to the screen in two performative video works, one of which, *The Maids*, has them dressing up, and down, with various props and absurd outfits that include everything from oversized jewellery to toilet paper. This baroque caricature of tragicomic skits evokes Jean-Paul Sartre’s original introduction to Genet’s play, where he cites a character in Genet’s novel *Our Lady of the Flowers*, remarking that if he had a play written for women he’d have cast adolescent boys for the roles.



Portrait of Han Nefkens in his Barcelona home. Photography by Roberto Ruiz

THE AWARD & HAN NEFKENS

As the exhibition circled back to the artists as central figures on the stage of storytelling, my own walk through it on the last day led me to the man behind the foundation that had made it happen. As part of his aim to lend a platform to emerging and mid-career artists who aren’t yet recognised internationally, this isn’t the first time that Han Nefkens has given recognition to an artist based in – or coming from – the Middle East. In 2015, the very first award went to Egyptian artist Iman Issa, who delved into a reimagining of museological histories in her work, *Heritage Studies*.

As someone who has a great deal of curiosity about the world, it’s not unexpected that Nefkens has turned towards non-European art practices. “Art is for me a window into a culture,” he said to me. “I’m 63 now and five decades ago, we didn’t know what was going on in the rest of the world. But I always thought about faraway places, even though I had no idea what they were like. In the way that some people feel they were born in the wrong body, I have never felt at home in Holland. I left at 19, the day after my high school finals. I went to Egypt in 1974 and loved it.” The reasons became clearer as he continued. “In the Middle East, I sense an incredible urgency to

make art. People really have something to say and they risk a lot by doing it. We are so spoiled and privileged in the West – where artists have to think about what they are going to do, the same urgency doesn’t exist. And I don’t feel that Western culture is the criterion by which we should uphold or compare everything else.”

Although the award may seem inextricably linked to his personal fascination with the Middle Eastern region, Nefkens stressed that there is a more objective selection process. “The foundation has ten scouts in different countries, each of whom proposes three candidates. We then shortlist six or seven.” The jury comprises Nefkens, the director of the institution (MACBA in this case) and three outsiders, which in previous years have included Beirut-based art critic Kaelen Wilson-Goldie and Hou Hanru, artistic director of Rome’s MAXXI. “In theory we all have 20 per cent of the vote, but the way things work in practice, is that we discuss it first. For example, we may agree that some artists are well-known already and don’t really need the award, while others aren’t quite there, their work needing to mature a little.”

The award is a €50,000 production grant aimed towards an exhibition after a two-year development process. “During that time,

Ramin Haerizadeh, Rokni Haerizadeh, Hesam Rahmanian. *From Sea to Dawn*. 2016-2017. Still from video, colour, no sound. 6 min, 21 sec. Image courtesy of the artists



we get to know each other well. We visit the artists a few times in their home country, which is one of the greatest pleasures of my work... to sit around a table with the artists and share their experiences – Ramin, Rokni and Hesam are very special people, extremely open and willing to collaborate. And there is complete artistic freedom,” Nefkens added effusively. He comes across as someone who is incredibly devoted to being part of the artistic process.

The story of his entry into the art world could have been one with an entirely different, speculation-oriented angle, given that it all began as an idea in New York in 1999. The stock market had begun to show signs of slowing down and Nefkens decided to sell his stocks. “I was sitting in a Japanese restaurant with one of my oldest friends, who knows me better than I know myself, and there were all these people from Wall Street with long faces. I was talking about investments and my friend asked me, ‘Why don’t you collect art instead?’ And that’s what I did. It was liberating to invest in things that give an emotional and psychological dividend, rather than a financial one. The reward is far greater.”

Nefkens has a rather unusual approach as a collector – he doesn’t really hold onto the art he buys, save for “the 20 or so” artworks in his home. The H+F Collection, named after Han and his partner Felipe, includes approximately 500 pieces by Bill Viola, Jeff Wall, Shirin Neshat and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, among others, and is housed in museums. “My first acquisition was in 2001, a video installation by Pipilotti Rist in Art Basel. I knew right from the start that I wanted to collect – not for ownership, but to share with the world. At the time, very few museums around me were interested in working with a private collector; they had sufficient government money. A friend put me in contact with Sjarel Ex, then director of the Central Museum of Utrecht...” And the rest was history, as Nefkens began consigning works on long-term loan to a slew of such museums across Europe – “these are as a promised gift, meaning that they will be given to the institution after my death,” he added. After 2006, he stopped expanding the collection and began working on international commissions that would also be donated. “So in a sense, I have moved backwards, as it were, because I’m present when there isn’t

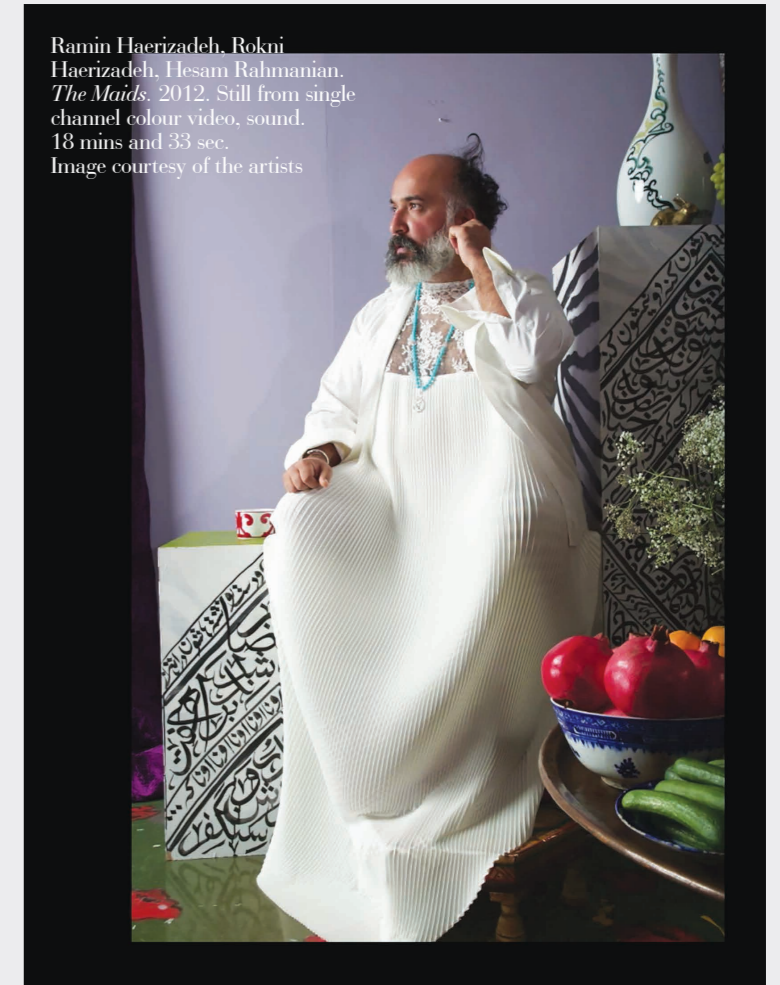
Ramin Haerizadeh, Rokni Haerizadeh, Hesam Rahmanian. *The Maids*. 2012. Still from single channel colour video, sound. 18 min and 33 sec. Image courtesy of the artists



even an idea about the work yet; I’m part of its making. These days I’ve been focusing on working with young international video artists, producing new work and finding institutions to show it.” He has moved from being a collector to a co-producer.

But there is a more intimate story of suffering that underscores this path towards art patronage. A trained journalist (with a degree in radio, TV and film from the US), Nefkens worked for 11 years in Mexico as a foreign correspondent, first for different Dutch radio stations and then for PBS. In 1987 he found out that he was HIV-positive. “It was like a death sentence. I couldn’t plan anything and, in the beginning, my time frame was totally different. Later, I was very lucky to have been able to get the medication I needed and now I’ve been living with this for 30 years,” he continued. “But it still feels like each new day is extra time – borrowed time. Then my brother died of AIDS in 1992 and I wrote about that.” In 1995 Nefkens penned *Bloedverwanten* (*Blood Brothers*), a semi-autobiographical novel about two brothers who were both infected with HIV, and followed up in 2005 with a collection of short stories, *Twee lege stoelen* (*Two Empty Chairs*). “I’ve been using

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a lot of my resources to fund HIV research, which I started doing in 1995,” he added, though he officially linked this work to the arts when his foundation ArtAids was established in 2006. “I’ve always had this ethical dilemma: how can I spend money on art when it can be used to save lives in certain places? But it’s me, I cannot give it up. So I did both for a long time and now I’m focusing more on the art part.”

And it’s doing a lot of good. Nefkens recalls how, “As a child, one of the games I would play with myself was to enter the head of someone else so I could, through their eyes, imagine what their living space was like and their movements. I had a very vivid imagination, and a desire to look at the world through the eyes of others.” The show he has helped put together at MACBA did just this by offering a lens through which to see the extraordinary stories and triumphs of individuals within the collective testimonies of the one and the many, the artist and the collaborator, the poet and the writer. In the grand theatre of our troubled times, it is a strong statement about the limits of authorship and ownership and the ways in which art cannot be separated from life. 