

HAMZIANPOUR & KIA

Hossein Edalatkhah

Tales of New York

October 28 - November 21, 2023

Opening reception: Saturday, October 28, 4:00 - 8:00 pm

Hamzianpour & Kia is thrilled to present *Tales of New York*, a solo show by the artist Hossein Edalatkhah. *Tales of New York* consists of seven large-scale works in oil and acrylic on canvas. All the pieces were created between 2016 and 2018 and are being shown for the first time. This is Edalatkhah's second solo show in Los Angeles; his first was also presented by Hamzianpour & Kia. The current exhibition is being mounted in conjunction with Edalatkhah's show *Quarantine Orchids*, running concurrently at Sahar K. Boluki Art Gallery in Toronto, Canada.

Tales of New York is a visual diary of a seminal phase in Edalatkhah's personal journey. Born in Iran, he moved to New York City in 2016, and the process of documenting that experience culminated in this series of paintings. Wandering the streets of his new home city, Edalatkhah felt compelled to paint what he saw and express his feelings about it all. But more than just a very personal expression, this series speaks to a universal experience – of leaving the familiar and entering and assimilating into any new environment. Fittingly, Edalatkhah turns to mythology to help tap into the collective subconscious and bring the universal into the personal. Many of the figures in the paintings are amalgams of various animals and humans; and Edalatkhah renders them at a scale that suggests the larger-than-life monumentality of mythical creatures. Yet these figures are not immediately identifiable as characters from any specific mythos – it is as though Edalatkhah is creating his own new mythologies to help narrate his personal-universal tale – and inviting us to do the same as we 'narrate' our own take on each of the works.

In "A House Built on Water," a two-headed character wears a paper boat as a hat and stares out with multiple eyes against a bright blue sky. The painting immediately speaks to the many paradoxes inherent in the immigrant experience. The character is fragmented, split literally in two, as though unsure of its own identity; its many eyes imply an immigrant's eagerness to take in everything offered by the new cultural landscape while at the same time conveying a sense of cautious apprehension and even fear. It stands tall and exposes its body to the viewer and the world; but it is unclear whether this posture stems from a sense of pride or a desire to be seen (perhaps both?). Bright blue skies and wispy clouds imply an optimism that is belied by the protagonist's fractured appearance. The title itself is a paradox, suggesting both a sense of security and one of deep insecurity – reminding us that all the constructs we create to contain and protect us are ultimately temporary and transient.

As the show's title suggests, the works in this collection are centered on and inspired by New York, with different paintings representing different corners and/or subcultures of Edalatkah's newly adopted city. At the same time, recurring motifs like flowers, horses, demons and angels unify the pieces not only with each other but with the artists' larger body of work. Indeed, the paintings in the concurrent show *Quarantine Orchids* highlight another of his common motifs – flowers which, in this case, were among the artists' main sources of comfort during the period of the pandemic. Edalatkah has said that ultimately all the characters in his paintings are different manifestations of one entity, presenting, expressing, and facing itself in different guises, dimensions, spaces and time-frames.

Eyes are another ever-present motif in the paintings. They are often shown in multiples, sometimes bulging out of the heads, but always gazing directly at the viewer. Even when faces are shown in profile, the eyes are staring directly out of the canvas. The ubiquitous eyes reflect Edalatkah's own eagerness to take in all the bright and dark wonders each new locale has to offer. Further, the eyes also interrogate the very notion of the gaze and ultimately make viewers conscious of their own gaze as they stand before the paintings. The figures stare back at us, asking us to question what we are looking at, who is doing the looking, and what are the personal filters through which we see and interpret art (and more broadly, the world around us). The bulging eyes also evoke a sense of strangulation, suggesting the pressures Edalatkah felt both as a queer artist in Iran's repressive atmosphere, and as an immigrant trying to survive and retain a sense of self in an unfamiliar and sometimes hostile new world.

"Dancing Shadows" and "The Chinatown" feature figures that fill the entire space of the canvas, engaging with each other in ways that force their bodies to arc, bend, fold and ultimately meld into one another. This sense of enmeshment speaks both to past and present – it reflects the inevitable and sometimes destructive ways that members of Edalatkah's native Iranian society are entangled in each other's lives with general disregard for any notion of boundaries; at the same time it captures Edalatkah's yearning to integrate into new surroundings and create a close-knit community for himself. The blending of classical and contemporary elements and the incorporation of diverse characters, including mythorealist beings and gender-ambiguous figures, signify the multiplicity of perspectives and identities that make up New York society in general and the LGBTQ+ community in particular.

Growing up in Iran, Edalatkah did not begin to speak until he was five years old. To compensate, he turned to drawing to help him express and process his thoughts and emotions. Later on in art classes he was continually chastised for the lascivious and 'vulgar' content of his creations. While sexual and violent images continue to be present in his work (as with the characters wearing fetish gear in "Ashoor"), Edalatkah maintains that sex and violence are not his subjects – rather, they are deployed to draw viewers into the work and point them toward the larger tropes that are the true subject matter of the paintings.

In the same manner, while the ostensible subject of the concurrent show *Quarantine Orchids* is flowers – specifically, the artist’s own magnificent orchids potted in hand-painted porcelain – the true subject of the works is much broader and more grand. Created during the time of the pandemic, the paintings are imbued with a warmth and glow that speak to the resilience of the human spirit, and serve as reminders that even in the darkest times, hope and beauty can still flourish.

Hossein Edalatkah (b. 1979, Tehran, Iran) is a trailblazing New York based Iranian/American artist and the first openly gay artist to live and exhibit in Iran starting in late 90’s. His revolutionary gay rights activism through his art led to his exile in 2010, and he continues to push boundaries by using his art to advocate for the rights of the LGBTQ+ community. His work often explores themes of identity, gender, and sexuality, and he has been recognized as a pioneer in the movement for LGBTQ+ rights in Iran. Edalatkah has challenged traditional Iranian cultural norms and opened up important conversations about acceptance, diversity, and equality. Exploring gender through organic/biomorphic abstraction, he depicts traditional Persian symbols, materials, and figures that often melt into each other in phallic forms. These symbolize the cultural and political “erection” Edalatkah is concerned with. His work has received international acclaim and has been exhibited in galleries and important art fairs around the world.

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