

Monochromatic Minds: Pre Recorded Artist Talks
Jennifer with Morteza Zahedi and Randall Morris
July 2020

Jennifer: I'm Jennifer from the Jennifer Lauren Gallery and I am here with Morteza and Randall and today we are going to be talking about the work of Davood Koochaki who recently passed away. So Morteza if I start with you, how did you first come across the work of Davood.

Morteza: In fact nine years ago I was a writer for an art magazine in Tehran and one day Davood's son-in-law called me for a project I was interviewing someone. And when he came to my studio, after the interview he saw some art brut artworks on the wall and he asked me what is your point about these works and I told him. Well Davood's son-in-law is a very famous painter, and a very famous painter here and he had a project about children's workshops and I had an interview with him. After the interview he asked me can you tell me about the works on your studio wall. I told to him about my story and university and about outsider art, art brut and non-mainstream artists. He told me would I like to become to familiar with an artist I know and I told to him yes. He showed me on a laptop some artworks of a new face and these works were very amazing for me. I asked of him is he an Iranian artist or no? He told me please forget about his name and forget about his story and if you like I can bring you to his home next Friday. So I said I was very happy if he lives in Tehran and very interested to meet with him.

J: Yep

M: So the next Friday we go to Davood Koochaki's home. And in the home I understand this man I met is Davood Koochaki's son-in-law. It was my first meeting with Davood koochaki nine years ago.

J: And who nicknamed him the pencil man?

M: Actually I don't know. I think when he had a show in the Christian Berst Gallery in Paris around eight-nine years ago they wrote in the catalogue this nickname for Davood Koochaki. I think.

J: Oh okay. And can you tell us a little bit about his life and when he was born?

M: He was born in the north of Iran in Rasht - a charming and important city because Rasht is very close to Russia and this city has many contacts with Europe people and modern art and painting in Iran began in Rasht. So this city is very important in the art scene in Iran. Davood was born into a poor family and had a very bad and strange life. When he was a child he came out of home and came into Tehran for taking a job and he worked here in many jobs. He was a doorman, he bought cigarettes in the streets, he worked in retail in a farmer. Around 60 years ago he was going to a garage for working and after when his master said he was talented at his job he said please stay

in here you can be a mechanic for cars. But Davood was living more north than Tehran in (?) and yes.

J: So he started drawing, was it about 40 years ago?

M: No, not 40 years ago. He started painting when he was a child, but he didn't have any good people or family. And when his son-in-law married his daughter he promoted and had a good atmosphere for Davood Koochaki. So 20 years ago his work was shown to some commercial galleries in Tehran, but they are not strong galleries or famous galleries, just very normal pure galleries. But when I showed Davood in a project of outsider art in Iran nine years ago, I put some Davood Koochaki works and some of my other artist works in Facebook. And one day Nico came to my page and wrote a comment for me and told me Morteza I am Nico and I am an ex-gallerist of Davood in the Hamerie Gallery in Amsterdam. And I lost Davood's work two years ago as one of Davood's daughters was living in Gothenburg, Sweden and she had bought Davood Koochaki works to Europe. Many years ago I must tell you one filmmaker made a film about an Iranian outsider artist and she was very interested to work with these kinds of artists. And after the revolution in Iran ten years ago the filmmaker had some problems with our government and when she go out of Iran she promoted Davood's works in the Hammer Gallery. So she went to Nico's Gallery and told him that we have some artists in Iran that I can call and chat to them and they can send these artists works to Europe and I can bring you. So she should some artworks to Nico and Nico said to the filmmaker he was very interested in Davood's works. So can you bring some of his works to me and I will show in the Gallery. So by Davood's daughter his works came to Europe and Nico promoted his works for the first time eight-nine years ago. After Davood and Christian Berst had a collaboration together and Nico sent Davood koochaki works to Paris and they made a book and a solo show for him.

J: Do people in Iran like his work when you show it in your gallery?

M: Actually no. Right now yes, after Davood's passing many people calling me morteza we would like to take Davood's works so I should sell his work. But not everybody likes Davood's works and they told me his work is very dangerous and very dark and we can't have his works for decoration. So we don't have a very good market for him in Iran. But in Europe, in France, In Marsielle, when I started my job in this field I sold some work to some collectors and I had a collaboration with a gallery two years ago with a gallery in Marsielle, but we didn't have a good collaboration together. So I can sell some of his works to Europe but you know about Iran's situation in this period. I can take money but I always have to take money from my budget and my budget is not very big. But two years ago I started to collaborate with Randall. Randall said to me he would like to collaborate on Davood and another artist, so I used some of my budget to send Davood's work on and he was happy about this.

J: So Randall let's come on to you. How did you first hear about koochaki's work and what first drew you to his work?

Randall: I first saw his work when Bruno had his exhibition at Maison Rouge and I was walking and I just saw two of his drawings on the wall and they just knocked me out because it seemed like it was everything that I personally like about it – you know it had mystery and it had size, and it had this thing that even though they were mysterious, Davood was a storyteller and I sensed that even if I didn't know the stories the drawings were powerful enough to give me the sense of there being a story and I really appreciated just his way of looking like – there's no other artist in the world that looks like them. And that appealed to me immediately also. But he was celestial and of the earth and very nitty gritty and beautiful. I didn't see them as dark and I didn't see them as dangerous, I just saw them as mysteriously strange and powerful. Almost like spiritual drawings drawn on a wall. You know, they were like wall paintings to me.

J: So when you show his art work what do you think draws the buyers to it?

R: The unusualness, you know, I think that when people really look at this and look at this art they are going to see that it is the artists that don't look like anything else that are ultimately going to be the most important. And Davood is completely self-sufficient and completely fully formed. His work is always like it looks and it will always be the way it looks you know, it is his forms, he owns the way they look. And I consider that really important that he is full developed in that way.

J: And so you included his work in an exhibition in your gallery Cavin Morris earlier this year called the Timeless place alongside two other artists, can you tell us about that?

R: Right well it was sort of a pun on the word timeless in a sense because for me great art is timeless and it is sort of like when you hear contemporary African music or a sitar could sound the same 1,000 years ago, 500 years ago or sound the same right now – it is still the same thing – it changes as the times around it changes – and so to me that is timeless and that was Davood Koochaki is – a great story. You know I mean I am looking at this drawing and I've looked at it 1,000 times and I just saw two things in it that I've never saw before. They look simple and they are not simple and that's timeless also and they just continue to change and get better over time. And we included two other artists that we felt were the same. You know this global genre that we have been called global art brut for over 10 years, and there's this thing where I think it expands the definitions of art brut. You know. Art brut has to open up and allow this work in otherwise it is going to be its own field and he was the perfect poster boy for that.

J: And what do you think is going to happen to his work now that he has passed away, do you think his popularity is going to rise in America?

R: Oh no question. I don't think it's the fact that he passed away, I don't think that will make much of a difference to people, I think that our field works with people becoming familiar with it. And the more we put those images out there

and the more people who see it, the more people who see that serious collectors and dealers and writers take it seriously, then they take it seriously also. And it just builds that way, it is not about whether he is alive or dead. You know, he is always alive and the work is alive.

J: So finally, what do you think is important about his work and him as a person that you want to share with everyone else, that you might not have said yet?

R: I think that timelessness. I think the fact that he represents something. Also the fact that there's this thing going on in Iran. Iran is this amazing cultural place and there are these artists there and Morteza is like one of the only people who takes it seriously there in that sense and there's this body of work that I just find more amazing every day. And koochaki, well we don't have anything like it, I mean, Koochaki is closer to some of the best African American artists than he is to the more obsessive say Wolfli type or something like that. Koochaki is an artist of the people. And I think originally that is what Dubuffet wanted and he saw the work as being the work coming from the people and it is universal. Koochaki doesn't only speak about himself, his work is community work and he is talking about where he grew up and who he grew up with, what their stories are and what their fantasies are – all of that, so it is not only about himself. He uses himself as a vehicle to talk about the world and that's another part of the timeless quality.

J: Great, well thank you both for chatting with me today.