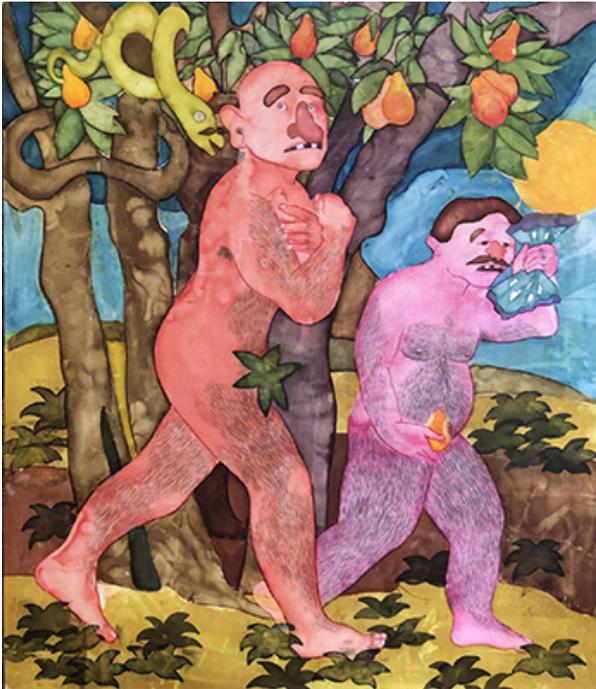


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Exploring Issues of Patriarchy

Orikdeh Torabi  
Give them all they want  
Richard Heller Gallery  
June 22 – August 3, 2019

by Jody Zellen



*Give them all they want* refers to men: the subject and objects of Orikdeh Torabi's gaze. Her colorful paintings, created by screening fabric dye onto cotton, explore issues of patriarchy, infusing this loaded topic with a wry sense of humor. Torabi is now Chicago-based, but was born in Iran during the revolution (1979). Her paintings depict Iranian men in domestic and nature settings where their portrayals are surprisingly intimate and vulnerable. Acutely aware of the limitations imposed on Iranian women, Torabi invents situations where she can position men in traditionally female roles. For example, in *He needs a change* (all works 2019), two men are seated on a patterned cushion against an abstracted blue swirling sea and cloud-filled sky. They are engaged in conversation as if they do not have a care in the world. One man has his arm draped over another man's shoulder. The second man is holding what appears to be a small child, but upon closer examination, the child is revealed to be a small man with a mustache, hairy legs and chest. In *A ball of fire*, a bearded man with an open blue robe and red and white striped pants holds a bouquet of red-toned flowers. He also has a yellow bird perched upon his shoulder. His exaggerated features— large nose and ears as well as buck teeth— make him more of a caricature than a believable subject.

Torabi states, *“I depict male figures as funny cartoonish figures in decorative colors. This representation aims to mock the complex and fragile masculinity of patriarchal societies in which men control every element of life.”* Her understanding of the limitations placed on women in a male dominated society and the contrasting freedoms the men enjoy allow her to make paintings from a particular perspective— the informed observer who can look from the outside in. She even includes a painting of the *“Garden of Eden,”* where Eve has been replaced by a man. Entitled, *You are always hungry*, this work features two naked men covered in hair (Torabi uses pencil lines on top of her dyed surface) passing by a pear tree (rather than apple). A leaf covers one figure’s genitals and a partially eaten pear obscures the other’s. A snake peers down from the tree as the two figures hurry across the landscape.

Torabi’s portrayals of Iranian men are neither flattering nor realistic: They are critical and cutting depictions. Although her paintings exclude women, they are about the repression of women in patriarchal societies. She uses representations of male figures, beautifully rendered in watercolor-like tonalities, going about activities that women are constrained from participating in public— enjoying leisure time, fraternizing with friends, walking, swimming, resting — as a way to claim that space for women. The works proclaim these men as fat and funny looking, with their oversized features, hairy bodies and insincere smiles. And although Iranian culture deems them dominant and powerful, they are really insecure, vulnerable, and pathetic beings.

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