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Bright lights and a bidet chandelier: Iran gets a blast of shocking colour

How will British 'colour activist' David Batchelor go down in a country where vibrant hues are all but banned? Will his lavatorial light land him in trouble?

Haleh Anvari

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In the early 1990s, visitors to Iran would have been struck by the country's lack of vibrant colour. Eight years of war, on top of a revolutionary ideology that regarded individual expression as frivolous, had obliterated it from the streets. The palette of the public space was dominated by dark shades of brown, grey and navy blue, interspersed with the prominent black chadors of the women.

'I always look for the least valued object' ... Batchelor at the Tehran gallery. Photograph: Courtesy: Ab-Anbar Gallery

In most religions, white is the colour of purity, cleanliness and virtue. But in Iran, it was black that symbolised righteousness. This was especially ironic given that, before the revolution, devout Iranian women would wear light, flowery chadors to step out of their homes. Where did the colour go in Iran? And where did black come from?

These questions motivated my own staged photographs of unusually colourful chadors in 2005, as I sought to investigate the demise of the flowery ones worn by my aunt and grandmother as I was growing up in pre-revolution Iran.

I found some answers in David Batchelor's book Chromophobia, in which the British artist traces the trajectory of highbrow hostility to colour in western thought. Colour, he writes, is regarded either as the "property of some foreign body, usually the feminine, the oriental, the primitive, the infantile, the vulgar, the queer or the pathological ... or relegated to the superficial, the supplementary, the inessential or the cosmetic".

Take out the oriental and the primitive and this could easily be a manifesto for revolutionary Islamic Iran in its early years, where the only colour in the country was found in the murals memorialising revolutionary heroes and martyrs of the war with neighbouring Iraq.

So I was thrilled to hear about Batchelor's solo show in Tehran's Ab-Anbar Gallery, a stone's throw from Revolution Avenue. Spanning the past 20 years, 120 works offer Tehranis a taste of his fascination with colour. First, there were what he calls his doodles: an installation of 90 drawings, creating a wild collage of colours.

In a room opposite, Batchelor's "poured" paintings show how the doodles develop into larger pieces. Between these and his glowsticks - digitally tuned colour LEDs held in geometric steel frames - he plays around with rigid ideas of two and three dimensions. His paintings all include a black rectangle at the bottom channelling a plinth, while his light installations are hung flat to be looked at as canvasses.

The poured paintings can take six months to dry, resulting in a wonder of random texturing as the surface of the thick paint contracts. The resulting patterns are a vibrant testament to the existence of underlying order in chaos.

Curator Leyla Fakhr had two things in mind when she decided to bring Batchelor's work here: "Tehran is devoid of colour during the day, with pollution and dust everywhere, but at night it is brought to life with an increasing amount of synthetic colours." She is pointing to the recent craze for neon lights decorating the streets and buildings of Tehran. "I also felt an exhibition that was purely concerned with colour and abstraction would be interesting in a place accustomed to imbuing meaning to everything."

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Between the four rooms of art, a chandelier hangs in the stairwell. It was made in situ using a local found object, the *aftabeh*, a plastic pitcher used for personal hygiene in Iranian toilets. a number of them have been strung upside-down together, their spouts and handles lit up from within, providing a cascade of translucent pinks and blues.

In the cafe upstairs, a prominent Iranian artist and an art critic are debating this chandelier. Was it exhibiting orientalist, or at least touristic, tendencies? Given the cultural connotations of this object for the Iranian viewer, can it exist purely as form without any meaning being attached? Found object yes, but why a foul object? Or does such a reaction merely highlight the sensitivities of Iranians, pained at being seen as backward? One could almost hear the subliminal question: which is more modern - a washed arse or a wiped arse?

Tipping point ... the bidet chandelier. Photograph: Courtesy: Ab-Anbar Gallery

In fact Batchelor, who calls himself a "colour activist", didn't know what an aftabeh was for when he spotted one in the Isfahan bazaar on his research trip last year. But once he found out, he took pleasure in using it so humorously. "I always look for the least valued elements," he says. "I think one of the purposes of art throughout the 20th century was to draw attention to that which is overlooked." His choice of colours were limited to what was available. "I wanted yellows and greens but the supplier said pinks and blues were this year's colours."

The truth is that little is ever stripped of wider meaning in Iran. Iranians are programmed to read between the lines, to find coded meaning in the nooks and crannies of life. This is, after all, the land of Hafez and Rumi, the mystic poets revered as seers because of their mastery of multi-layered conceits. The feverish fondness for conceptual art in recent decades in Iran reflects the need to pose oblique questions, in many instances by drawing attention to what is disregarded. In this, Iranians feel their art to be as modern as any on offer.

Batchelor, on the other hand, is clear where his preoccupation with colour comes from: it's a reaction to its absence in the aftermath of conceptual art in the west, which he thinks favours form above all else. The 61-year-old Dundonian believes there's a longstanding aversion towards colour that is manifested in the reverence for, and the supremacy of, white in western modernist writings.

"There is a kind of white that repels everything that is inferior to it," he says, "and that is almost everything. There is a kind of white that is not created by bleach but that itself is bleach." As an Iranian, I find it hard not to see this as a metaphor for what is happening in western politics today. And its parallel here at home, in the venerated superiority of black.

Shattered ... a 'concreto' sculpture. Photograph: Courtesy: Ab-Anbar Gallery

Could this suspicion of colour have permeated Iranian lives through our exposure to the west? Beneath the hijab, the Iranian woman is an ardent follower of the diktats of western fashion forecasters. Wearing colour is left to the women of the diminishing nomadic tribes unless it is sashayed on a catwalk in Paris. The urbane and the modern would rather not be associated with their rich heritage of colour, neither in attire nor in their décor choices.

The western aversion to colour can be attributed to a post-Enlightenment need for reason and secular agency in societies that eventually came to champion the freedom apparently signified by white. In Iran, black became the colour for dissolving impulses of individuality in the group. If lack of colour is an affectation of western modernity, how did it become emblematic of rejecting western values here in Iran?

Batchelor is aware of the complex relationship western religions have with colour, from Catholicism's love of it to puritanical rejection. But he consciously avoids commenting on social issues, which he feels are articulated more elegantly elsewhere. How will Iranian audiences react to his work? I hear a young visitor looking at the bidet chandelier in glee and saying: "I never realised the aftabeh could be so classy."

● Chromatology is at Ab-Anbar Gallery, Tehran, until 3 March

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