

# TAKE TWO: AHRARNIA

**A profound and thought-provoking work touches on the many strands of a complex and eventful life in the limelight.**

TEXT BY ROSE ISSA

IMAGE COURTESY OF ROSE ISSA PROJECTS

Farhad Ahrarnia creates his startling pieces by hand-stitching and embroidering images taken from his personal archive of press cuttings and which he digitally prints onto canvas. This piece, *Flirtation with Surrender*, is a detail from a larger image of the last official visit of the former Empress of Iran, Farah Pahlavi, to Washington DC – just one year before the Islamic Revolution of 1979. It is a multi-layered work, encompassing Ahrarnia's recurring themes of history, betrayal and memory.

Ahrarnia's use of photography, canvas and thread gives his work many dimensions. He literally and metaphorically pulls out meanings hidden beneath the imagery. His sharp needles pierce, enter and exit the image, lending a sense of suspense, secrecy, tension and potential violence. Paradoxically, this also implies a sense of redemption, rejuvenation and of being remembered, healed and repaired.

Each of Ahrarnia's 'stitched' images reflects different aspects of current affairs in the Middle East. In *Flirtation with Surrender*, he transforms a familiar, politically charged image – that of an Empress at the height of her reign – with unnervingly rigorous stitches. This act of stitching has ritual connotations:

repetition enables meditation, focuses thought and emotional energy. Here, stitch by stitch, the artist reinstates his country's collective memory for himself and his peers.

Ahrarnia's choice of subject matter and technique reflects the complexity of experience in today's fragmented and diverse Middle East, where tradition, the modern and post-modern all intermingle with unpredictable, paradoxical and at times volatile consequences.

By adding embroidery, Ahrarnia brings substance and texture to otherwise one-dimensional images. The stitches create fields of colour and accent the images, giving them a real, tactile presence that is charged with energy. He leaves traces of his working process clearly visible, with tense or loose threads crossing the canvas and needles puncturing the surface.

For Ahrarnia, his work is a way to heal past wrongs through art. He salvages historical images of forgotten or even forbidden icons, mostly women. He attaches himself to a popular memory of their former power and legendary beauty. In the case of Empress Farah Pahlavi, it is not necessarily the memory of her reign but the sense that 'she belonged to us', which prevails – in her time she was the public's icon until she was un-made and 'stitched up'. 

It is not necessarily  
the memory of [Her  
Majesty's] reign  
but the sense that  
'she belonged to  
us', which prevails.

Farhad Ahrarnia.  
*Farah Flirtation With  
Surrender*. 2008.  
Photograph on cotton  
aida and embroidery.  
108 x 120 cm.

