

in

# HAIFA WEHBE



*"Reliving  
Legends!"*

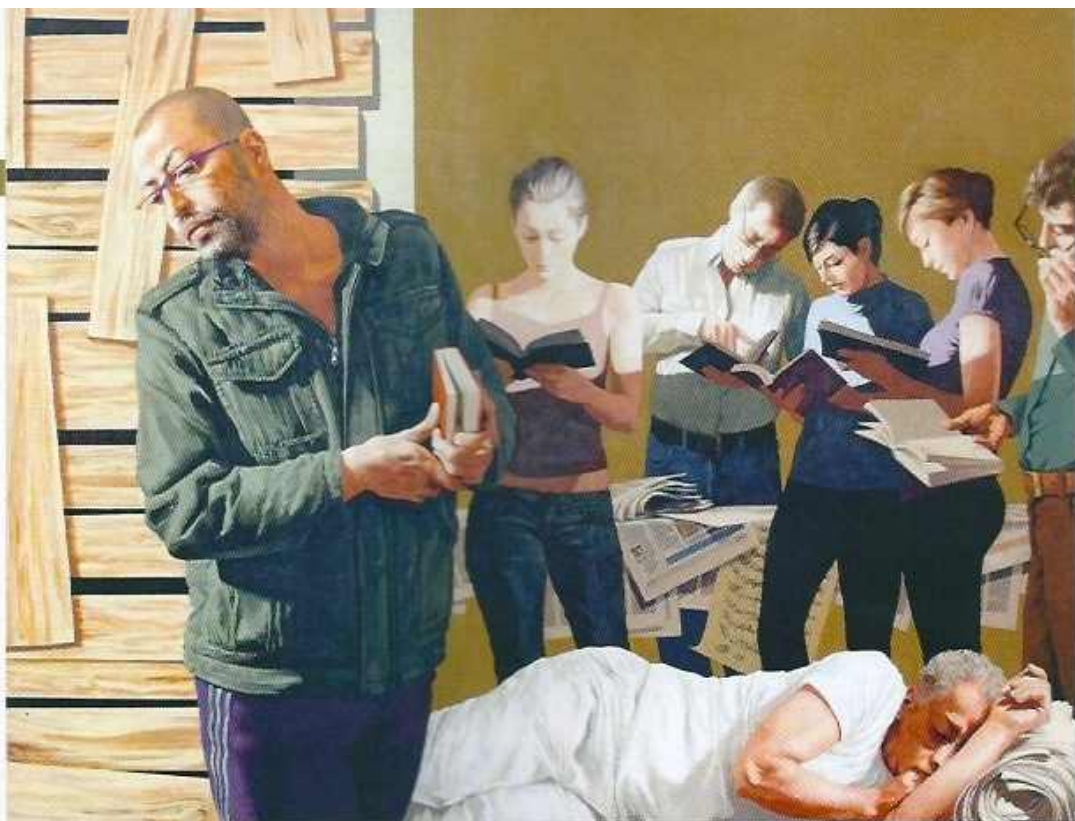
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The Others

## BEARING WITNESS

### AN INTRODUCTION TO THE ART OF MEHRDAD MOHEBALI AND HAZEM HARB

Words by **Jareh Das**

To bear witness means quite simply, giving evidence. It can also be viewed as a way to declare, state emphatically and authoritatively. Throughout history, artists bear witness to the conditions of everyday life, which at times are hard to articulate due to censorship and conflicts. Today, in a rapidly globalising world, it is at times difficult to articulate these continually evolving changes in society. The artist becomes a storyteller and through art, bears witness to these events.

Iranian artist **Mehrdad Moheballi** is a painter of modern day life. Akin to genre paintings popular in the seventeenth century, the artist focuses mainly on capturing scenes of everyday life of his immediate surroundings in his native Iran. Moheballi has been depicting these

scenes for over twenty years as he feels it is important for an artist to document the world he lives in, to bear witness and through art share these experiences. For Moheballi, the canvas becomes a means of recording and documenting the world for generations to come.

Moheballi's beginnings as a painter, started at a young age. He observed cultural conflicts of Western and traditional values which, as a young child became difficult to articulate and understand, which he began to document through drawing and sketching. In his early twenties, Moheballi had a powerful dream, which cemented his future career as an artist, as he was instructed to become the voice of the people and a voice for modern Iran.



The Last Supper



The Curtain



Mohebali is a firm believer in 'telling the truth' through art. He makes works that are imbued in telling things as they are, in other words, he documents his immediate context of Iran. Consider Mehrdad Mohebali's *The Last Supper* (2011), similar in style to historic master painters, who depicted the iconic image of Christ at his last supper with his disciples.

The diptych, is a contemporary interpretation of this familiar biblical scene. In this case Mohebali takes centre place, like Christ in the historical version, the difference being that none of the other characters are looking at him. The artist appears a serene figure, whilst most of the characters are reading books, which are a predominant feature of the painting. Their gaze is directed away from the central figure and they are all oblivious to each other, as if entranced by the books and whatever subject they are reading and taking in.

There are two characters in the picture that don't conform to the melancholic and apathetic manner, the figure who is lying down, half undressed and seemingly uninterested in the people reading and the artist, who is a central figure, with crossed arms and lost in a distant gaze.

*The Last Supper I* could be interpreted as a commentary on today's individual versus collective identity. Its as if, these two characters are breaking away from the norm, focusing on their own interests.

*Behind the curtain* (2011), is set in a hospital ward, there are a several characters in a familiar setting, an examination room. There is a physical examination taking place of a female, and another of an undressed female behind a curtain. In this work, Mohebali is presenting a scene that really is about a hospital examination room, but due to our cultural conditioning, we immediately view this scene as having sexual connotations.

Mohebali's *Shadowy Life*, 2011, depicts a scene where there are a group of women, with their gaze directed away from the viewer. There is a shadow that runs across half of the picture and the women are standing behind it. Mohebali describes them as living in shadows with no connection to each other, a result of living in a state of fear and mistrust. This painting is a symbolic representation of the condition of repressed individuals. When a person has a lack of freedom to express themselves, they soon adapt a suppressed or passive state, as characterised by every individual in this image. The man in the painting, is asleep, representing sleep as one's only option in such a situation.

Mehrdad Mohebali's artistic career can be summarised as a documentation of the conditions of living in current Tehran. Through his art, he is able to articulate the on going issues of traditional versus modern, young versus old, West versus East and the effects these conflicting views have on the individual. These conflicts, in his opinion are a result of internal politics of a place, in this case, Iran.

**Mehrdad Mohebali | BIO**

Born in Tehran, Iran in 1960 where Mehrdad Mohebali currently lives and works. He studied painting at The University of Tehran and is a member of The Society of Iranian Painters. Mohebali has exhibited in numerous group and solo exhibitions for the over thirty years in Iran, Japan, Canada and USA.

Mehrdad Mohebali's figurative paintings tell stories about human interaction and the mundane nature of daily life, which he captures in a

timeless manner, similar to Dutch master paintings. He explores a variety of topics, a common depiction places Iranian prime minister Mossadegh, a figure seen by many as progressive and someone who implemented social reforms for the country.

Mohebali's revered piece *The Last Supper I*, a contemporary interpretation of the biblical scene was presented and sold at Christies Modern and Contemporary Arab, Iranian and Turkish Art auction sale in Dubai in 2011.



Shadowy Life



Don't Worry About - The Oath of the Horatii