Sassan and Maria Behnam-Bakhtiar in their Saint Jean Cap Ferrat home in France; Painting, to the right: Nicky Nodjoumi. *Invasive Personality*. 2015. 165x216cm; Painting, centre: Farideh Lashai. *White Branches*. Oil on canvas. 2008. 55x55cm; Painting, above: Rokni Haerizadeh. *We Will Join Hands in Love and Rebuild our Country*. 2010. Watercolour and Gesso on paper. 120x216cm.

a dialogue of BEAUTY

The extensive private collection of **Sassan and Maria Behnam-Bakhtiar** *juxtaposes 20th-century Iranian art with leading names from international contemporary art. Rebecca Anne Proctor speaks to the couple about the importance of creating an East-West dialogue through art*

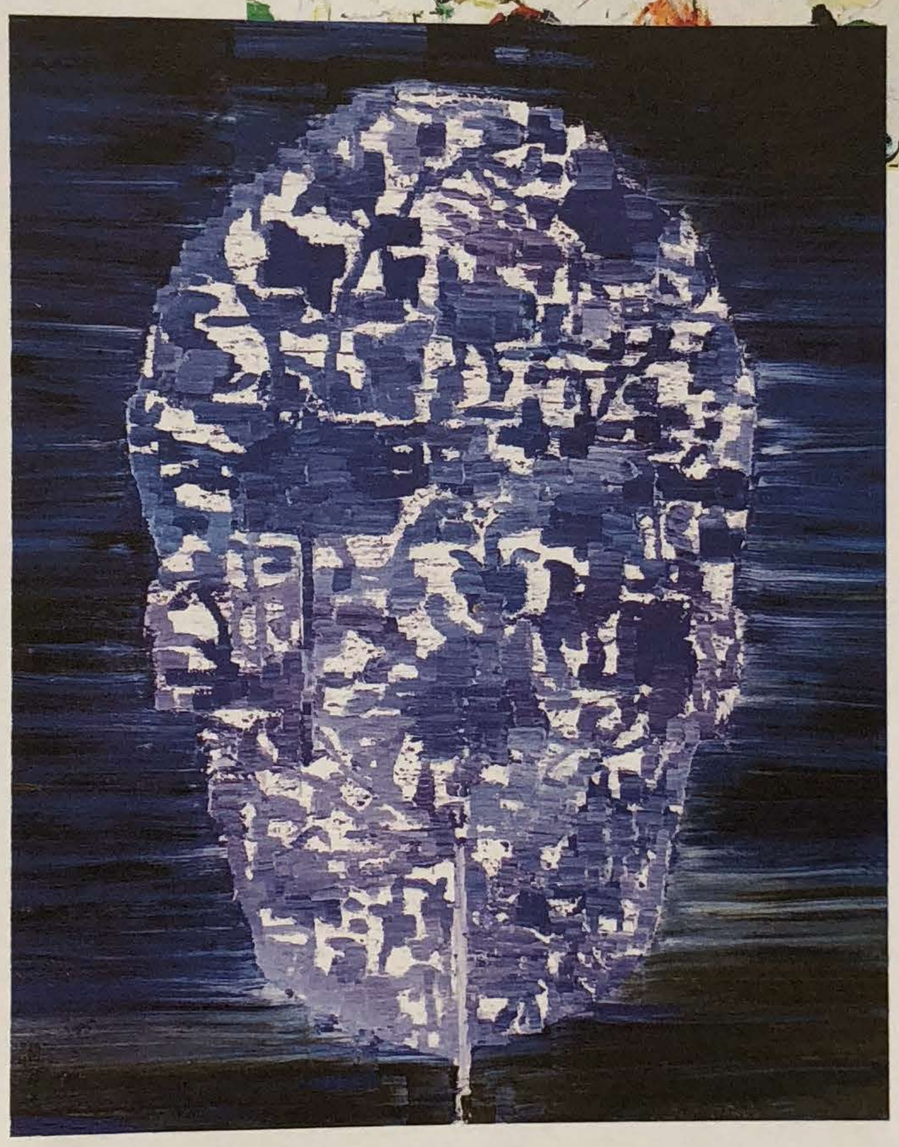
It's the day after the opening of Sassan Behnam-Bakhtiar's *Oneness-Wholeness* exhibition at the Saatchi Gallery. Running from 15-27 May, the exhibition of the Cap Ferrat-based artist of Iranian heritage presents gleaming, transcendental, large-scale abstract canvases that offer a meditative pause from the chaos of modern life. Marking a shift in the artist's *oeuvre*, these new works reveal Sassan in a new light. In these canvases, a mature relationship with abstraction, colour and subtle cues to his heritage result in breathtaking visual moments. Relaxing at The Connaught in Mayfair with his wife Maria, Sassan discusses the importance not only of his artistic practice, but also the promotion of Iranian artists through the Fondation Behnam Bakhtiar and his private collection. Art is very much a part of their everyday life and it is something they wish to share not just with each other, but with the public. They've also just opened an art gallery in Monaco and whispers have it that another one will open soon somewhere in Europe.

"We started collecting when I was 22 years old and Maria was 20," he says. "It began with a lot of photography works and then sculptural works—like a small Parviz Tanavoli *Heech*, which was one of the first works we bought." The very first piece they purchased together was a photograph by Babak Kazemi, also the recipient of the Behnam Bakhtiar Award in 2017. Kazemi's surrealist images explore the history of the province of Khuzestan in which he grew up, often focusing on the impact of oil production on the region. Other early works the couple acquired were photographs by Shadi Ghadirian, known for her images capturing the pushes and pulls between tradition and modernity for women living in Iran. "Very quickly after we ended up having around 50-60 works in our house. We got into it and couldn't stop," says Sassan. Art collecting then became a passion as well as a life journey. "You get into it and learn about this artist and that artist and start to explore their work and you find your favourites and you see them up close and fall in love and you just know you have to have it," says Maria passionately. "It's a very addictive game to play."

Maria Behnam-Bakhtiar in her France home; Background: Reza Derakshani. *Spring Hunt*. 2015

Each time a new work arrives the couple celebrates with an intimate event at home. "We always talk our our art parties," smiles Maria as she describes the times when the couple is at home, puts on music, and starts moving around their collection to redecorate in a new and creative way. "Whenever we have the works delivered to our house we make sure that everyone is out of the house, all the maids and all the staff, and this is when we start opening the works with a nice meal and drinks. We think to ourselves 'Where should we put this one and that one?' And we have so much fun. It's a nice ritual to have."

While Iranian modern and contemporary art is their focus, international art also makes up a large part of their collection. "After collecting contemporary Iranian art for a long time we quickly got into African art," says Sassan. "One of the first few works we boutght was by Hassan Hajjaj and then Lalla Essaydi, among others. And then we began collecting international artists like Peter Doig, Andy Warhol, George Condo, Bansky and Keith Haring." But the concentration of the Behnam-Bakhtiar's collection will always remain Iranian. This is their passion. "I grew up in the Middle East and I lived in Dubai since I was 10 years old," says Maria. "I used to go to various galleries and check things out. And even way before I met Sassan, it was the Iranian artists that attracted me. The intricacy of their work spoke to me—like Farideh Lashai's projected rabbits which moved me." In Behnam-Bakhtiar's family home in Cap-Ferrat hangs one of Farideh's works titled *Peeing on Mossadegh's Lap*. Depicted in the artist's powerful expressionist style, there's a fierce determination in the position of the figure and the brushstrokes—similar to what one finds in the work of younger Iranian artists today. Other modern Iranian masters that make up the Behnam-Bakhtiar collection include works by prominent modernists such as Charles Hossein Zenderoudi, Sohrab Sepeheri and Reza Derakshani, among others.



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The question of whether to share publically one's private art collection runs through the mind of many a collector. "I think it is important for people to know that a certain artist is collected," says Sassan. "And also, that that artist is loved and appreciated," adds Maria. "It's a nice thing for a younger generation to see how collecting can enrich your life. When you surround yourself with beautiful things you start having stories with certain pieces." The artworks start to communicate with the home, the collectors and themselves. "They create a special energy," adds Maria.

Besides the art parties Maria and Sassan stage, they rotate the works in their collection on regular basis. "We always try to keep most of our work in our property but we also have a warehouse in Monaco as some works cannot be moved all the time," explains Sassan. "We need to make sure that they are maintained properly." Continuously acquiring and still quite young—Sassan is 34 and Maria is 32—buying is always a personal pastime. They buy from galleries, from auction (mostly online)—both recall the time they bid from the Maldives—and also from fairs, mostly in Europe.

It's about artistic beauty. Yet does that artwork need to be beautiful for it to be acquired? "For me, yes," states Sassan. "It's very rare that we buy a work for investment. We must fall in love with the work, the message behind it, and ensure that it falls in line with everything that we are doing." It's also about integrating a work of art into their lifestyle. "We need to ensure that the energy a work brings gives us is a good positive feeling—the right energy," says Maria. And Sassan's new works certainly endow his audience with wondrous, positive energy. There's a soothing affect to his art and it's easy to imagine how the works he and Maria give off the same vibe. "One of our recent favourites is *Crowns and Skulls* by Reza Derakshani," says Sassan. Maria was originally against the work as she wasn't a fan of skulls. But when she went to see it and stand next to it, she had an entirely different perception. "It was so beautiful and I fell in love with it," she says. "It pulled me to it." And that's the key. There needs to be some charisma, some allure in a work of art for it to be cherished and acquired. Sassan and Maria certainly have the eye and the heart to share their collection—not just with the public at large but with Iranian artists who more than ever need a voice abroad. ■

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From left: Reza Darakshani. *Crowns and Skulls*. 2016. Oil on canvas. 183x152cm; Shahriar Ahmadi. *Moon in Scorpio No.3*. 2015. Acrylic on canvas. 187x265cm