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MONACO MAVEN

How Maria Behnam-Bakhtiar is remaking Monte-Carlo's art scene

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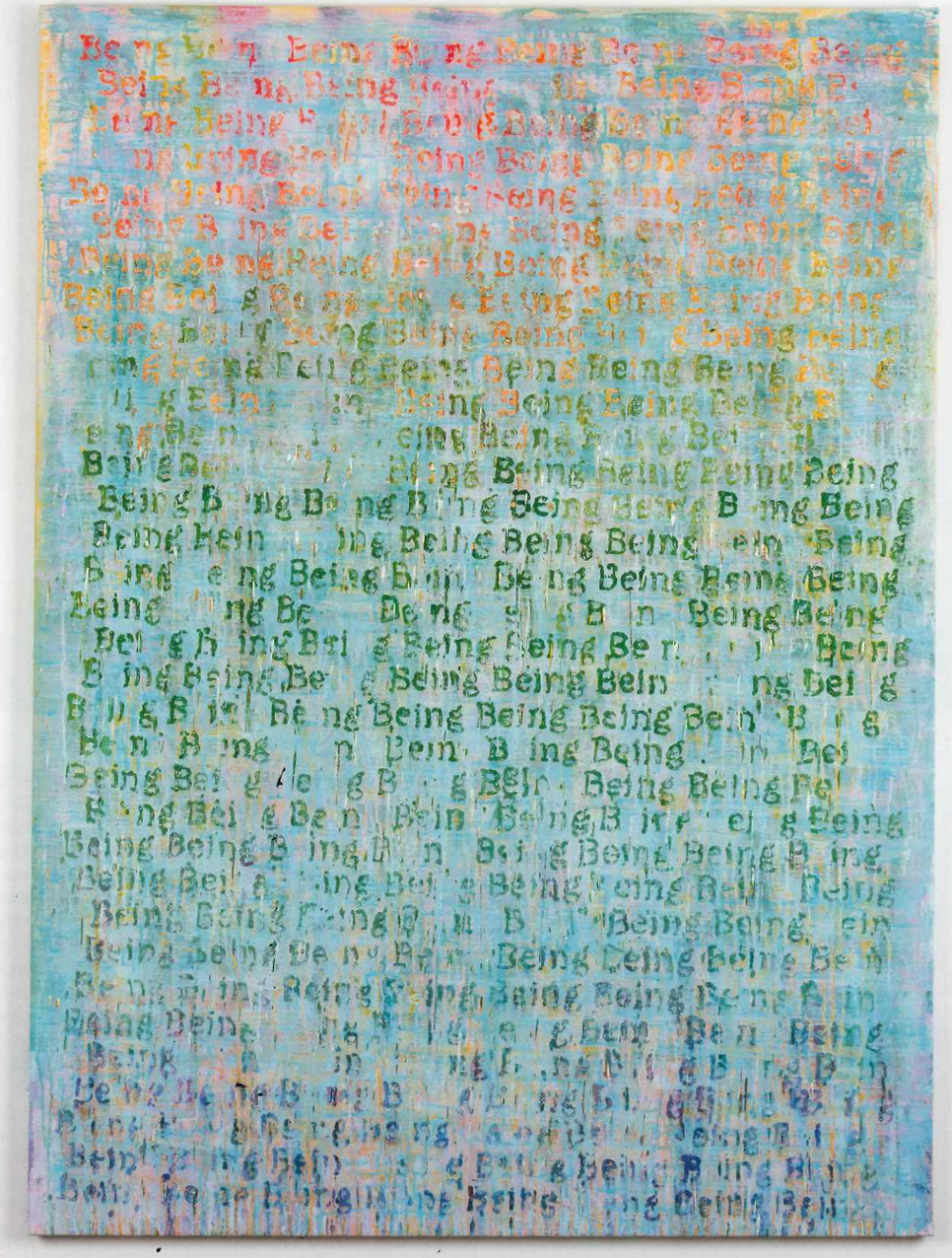
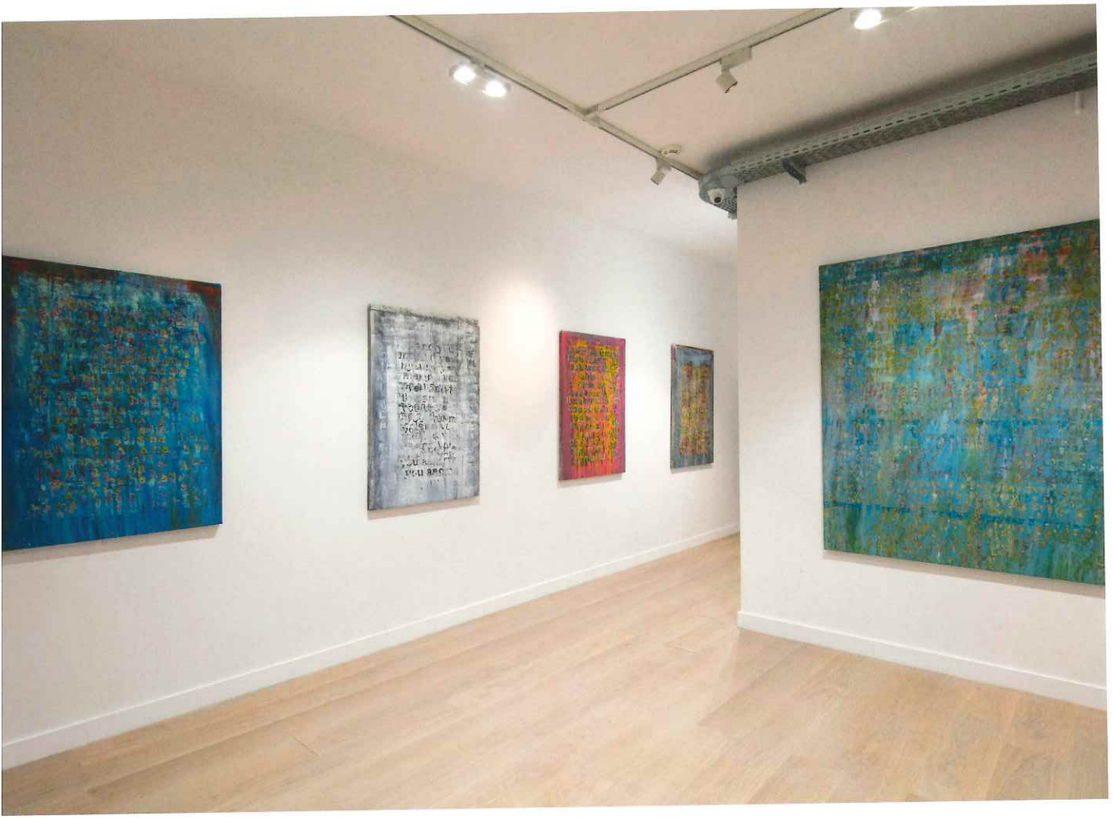


Woman on a Mission

Galerie Maria Behnam-Bakhtiar, a new gallery in the heart of Monaco, celebrates its opening with an exhibition of works by Iranian-American artist Farzad Kohan, but it is no ordinary commercial enterprise, as Rebecca Anne Proctor discovers



A visit to Monte Carlo is like stepping inside a gallery filled with glistening works of art. The picturesque town, with its expansive sea views, its numerous neatly landscaped gardens, countless restaurants, luxury boutiques and cultural institutions, continues to fuse its regal past with its new contemporary character.

Entering this mix of glamour and culture is a new art gallery, Galerie Maria Behnam-Bakhtiar, which opened its doors in December 2019. Named after its founder, the art collector and wife of artist Sassan Behnam-Bakhtiar, the gallery is dedicated to contemporary and modern art and highlighting works by established and emerging international artists.

While the Behnam-Bakhtiars are known for their support of the Iranian art scene, particularly through the Fondation Behnam-Bakhtiar, where Maria holds the role of curator of the permanent collection, Galerie Maria Behnam-Bakhtiar will not limit its exhibitions or roster of artists to any particular culture or nationality. "The nationality of an artist is not what is important; what is crucial is the art and what the artist is trying to say. My mission is to show established and emerging artists from all over the world," Maria says. The art and objects on show will be specially curated and exclusive to the gallery.

Located close to the Nouveau Musée National de Monaco at the Villa Sauber and to the Grimaldi Forum (which hosts the annual artmonte-carlo art fair), the gallery has placed itself at the heart of the city's art centre. "Monaco is such a great place for art and culture," says Maria. "Moreover, here in Monaco we have a wonderful group of collectors, some based locally and others who return regularly. We aim to add a new and exciting dimension to the Monaco art scene with our diverse programming."

Monaco offers a particular segment to the European art market. "It boasts highly influential residents and visitors who provide the perfect platform and exposure for our artists," adds Maria. "And, for generations, the Prince's family in addition to the government of Monaco have been great supporters of the arts." Anyone who knows the city will be familiar with its buzzing social life, its numerous galas, operas, ballets and art exhibitions. "It's wonderful that we will now be a part of this exciting agenda," adds Maria. "It's a place where you can really foster connections."

Maria has been on the international art scene since 2009, firstly through the Fondation Behnam-Bakhtiar, established to promote emerging and established Iranian artists, and secondly as a collector. "I have been collecting art and supporting artists for a long time and this gallery is a way for me to further solidify my love of art," says Maria, who has also hosted multiple non-profit functions in support of the

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arts in Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat. "I do what I do out of love," she adds. "A gallery, like an artwork, is born of passion and dedication."

The gallery will stage five to six exhibitions per year with, she says, "no specific geographic focus". The gallery's inaugural exhibition is 'Human Being, Being Human', by Los Angeles-based Iranian-American artist Farzad Kohan. The works on show, with their vibrant palette and meticulously drawn abstract lines, explore a segment of human experience, one marked by positive affirmations. "Farzad's work was so important for us to start with because of the universal themes he addresses," states Maria. "His paintings go beyond national and cultural boundaries. He speaks about love, kindness and humanity – themes that touch everyone from all walks of life."

The works exhibited in 'Human Being, Being Human' are being seen for the first time at the gallery. In one painting, replete with numerous thin lines, Kohan has written in his signature style the phrase "I have the power". While at first this might appear boastful, when the viewer looks at the title of the work, *To Change*, they might think otherwise. "The way one perceives Farzad's paintings is left up to the viewer's own perspective," Maria explains. In another painting. the word "everyday" is repeated, prompting the beholder to focus on the meaning of each instance. Then, as in the former work, one can see the title of the painting: *Thankful*. Indeed, gratitude for the everyday and for everything in life is a vital component to living a more compassionate existence. "I am a big fan of positive thinking and energy and I think it's so wonderful to have a work in your home that offers positivity through beauty," notes Maria.

Kohan's work places an emphasis on form and material allowing for a reflection on the accumulation of various parts that make up a whole. For Kohan, art creation is akin to the diasporic experience, with which the artist, born in Tehran and now living in LA, is familiar. All stages, materials and processes, like all chapters in life, are part of a larger work and greater vision for the artist. In addition to his paintings, Kohan also makes installations and works on paper, particularly ink drawings.

"He has developed signature techniques which he applies so skilfully to his multi-layered paintings," says Maria. "I really connected to his 'Human Being, Being Human' series, where each painting is poetic, sentimental and beautiful not only visually but above all in its message. To me these works are brilliant because they incorporate various affirmations in the shape of an artwork."

Another facet of Galerie Maria Behnam-Bakhtiar's activity is publishing. "Being a true bibliophile, one of the most exciting aspects of launching the gallery is the fact that we will run our own publishing house to produce books and catalogues to accompany our exhibitions." This, in turn, Maria hopes, will open the door for dialogues between the gallery, its artists, curators, writers and of course, readers and visitors.

The goal of the gallery, as Maria states, is to give back to the larger community. "I want the gallery to serve as a platform that inspires change and highlights the importance of social responsibility," says Maria. "For every exhibition, we donate a portion of the proceeds to a selected organisation that makes this world a better place."

While the gallery is in essence commercial, its aims are higher. "One of the main reasons I love art is for its educational side. I appreciate surprising angles, different views and the diversity that art offers in its subjects and many explorations," she adds. Galerie Maria Behnam-Bakhtiar, like the artworks it chooses to exhibit, offers an artistic and peaceful space in the heart of busy Monaco – a brief escape through art from the chaos of modern life. ◆

'Human Being, Being Human' by Farzad Kohan runs from 5 December 2019 to 4 March 2020

mariabehnambakhtiar.com