

Woman, Life, Freedom

Shahrbanoo Hamzeh's curatorial statement for the "Woman Life Freedom" exhibition at Woman Made Gallery, May 6 to June 3, 2023.

I am Shahrbanoo Hamzeh, an Iranian woman artist and curator doing my best for my people and homeland in this crucial time. The people and land that I was forced to leave.

Putting together this exhibition is personal to me, it is about who I am, where I am from, and what is happening in my country, my home these days. *Woman, Life, Freedom* has its roots in a previous iteration held in January 2022, at Joe McCauley Gallery, Normal, Illinois. Starting as gallery coordinator there, the very first show I curated was about being a woman in Iran. Women who are leading the revolution these days. That exhibition was born for the very same reason the current revolution started, women's rights.

I also had the chance to put together an iteration of that show 3 months into the revolution, December 10th, 2022 to January 7th, 2023, at The MAC Gallery, Dallas, Texas, and bring some elements of the revolution into the exhibition. Elements like scarves, burnt scarves, social media, and graffiti. We also had a few video art pieces that use videos of the protests, graffiti, and other acts of the revolution happening. With these additions and the involvement and help of the Iranian diaspora and art community of Dallas, the show evolved to be more in line with the revolutionary atmosphere of Iran. The power and unity that we felt working together to better express the Iranian women's experience were incredible.

On the same note, this exhibition is created based on an open call from Woman Made Gallery and I am excited to include new voices who understand, feel, and stand with Iranian women. People whose stories elevate and add on to Iranian women's stories. This show tries to hold space for our shared concerns for people fighting for civil rights worldwide. I am looking forward to the learnings, and shared moments and am grateful for the continued dedication to this effort to raise awareness.

When I was putting the initial exhibition together, I had no idea what the future held for us. Inspired by the lack of awareness surrounding the more than four decades of state-sanctioned violence perpetuated by the Islamic Republic against the Iranian people, I hoped I could help gradually change the situation for women in my homeland through art.

Something I was not considering at the time was that many others like me, both inside and outside of Iran, have been doing their part for freedom. Around eighty-five million people inside Iran and eight million more across the Iranian diaspora have personally fought for freedom and human rights, just like me. This and the endless brutality of the regime triggered a big demand for change. Today more people know about Iran but at the cost of the blood of many Iranians.

On September 16th, 2022, a 22-year-old Iranian, Kurdish woman, Mahsa Zhina Amini, was murdered by the Iranian morality police. *Amini's death was the last straw*. Across Iran, people flooded the streets chanting "Woman, Life, Freedom". During protests, many, including children, have been arrested, killed, tortured, and raped by the regime's forces. Outside of Iran, the Iranian

diaspora has taken up the fight for their homeland, human rights, and freedom. They have become the voice of the people in Iran.

When protests began, mainstream media outside of Iran remained silent. This is a consistent pattern when covering events in Iran. This media blackout lasted for more than a week, after which, reports were inundated with misinformation and underreporting. Normally that would have been all the information provided outside the country, but this time the involvement of social media changed the outcome. Overwhelming reports on social media forced the media to begin covering the events occurring in Iran. Despite both the regime shutting down the internet and *Meta* blocking information coming out of Iran, social media users were able to circumvent restrictions via the creative use of social media platforms and VPNs.

Curating and participating in art exhibitions, showcasing the experience of Iranian women, is my way of contributing to the cause. *Woman, Life Freedom* brings together information, conversation, and visual elements surrounding this enormous fight for human rights. Some Iranian women artists from the exhibition's previous iteration will show their work at WMG.

We are inviting everyone to do something and get involved. To see the crimes against humanity that Iran's ruling regime commits daily and how the problem is everyone's issue, and it is closer than it looks. If enough people care, change is not out of reach.

Since Masha Amini's death, Iranian people have been shedding blood, sweat, and tears for freedom. They are in the street fighting with their bare hands, and they need support from outside the country. Today it is important to me, more than ever, to speak about human rights violations in Iran, especially toward women. I am more of a fighter than an artist these days. I want to make sure the bravery of high school girls in my country can be seen, so it is not in vain.

Teenagers are at the forefront of this war, and they are paying in blood for it, but this is all they can do in my country given all the regime's limitations and oppressions. I want to see them free and thriving, not tortured, sexually abused, and dying by the regime's forces (Basij and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)), just for wanting their basic human rights and bodily autonomy back. *A girl is not even allowed to exist under the gender apartheid* of the regime. They must fight tooth and nail for the simplest things. They are denied a normal life by the government. Under these oppressive circumstances, their fight is incredibly powerful to see. With this show, we are hoping to add on to their voice.

The life of women in Iran is a living hell. In the eyes of the law, woman's value is half that of man's. For countering a man, two women should speak out in court. The compensation for killing a woman in an accident is half of a man. Women are not allowed to sing. Women are not allowed to leave the country, get divorced, obtain an education, have a job, or even stay at a hotel without the permission of their husbands or, if unmarried, their fathers'. Women must wear whatever the government wants them to wear from the age of 7, irrespective of their family's religious beliefs. Many women serve lengthy prison sentences for opposing the mandatory hijab laws.