

# An Exclusive Step Inside Farhad Bakhtiar's Collection of Iranian and African Masterpieces

BY [REBECCA ANNE PROCTOR](#) / APR 28 2019 / 14:02 PM

**Iranian Dubai-based collector Farhad Bakhtiar's home in Jumeirah and warehouse in Al Quoz reveals his treasure chest of modern and contemporary art from Iran and Africa**



Courtesy of Fritz Asuro and Yuylia Petrovich  
Collector Farhad Bakhtiar inside his warehouse in Al Quoz.

Classical music emanates from the doorway of a tall white villa in [Jumeirah](#). Nestled away off the street and shrouded in greenery, a step inside will have you hooked on contemporary art forever. Large sculptures, paintings, wall and floor installations decorate the space exhibiting the names of some of the Middle East and Africa's foremost artists. There's a [Reza Aramesh](#) photograph on one wall, a Kamrooz Aram painting above the staircase, Shahpour Pouyan sculptures on the coffee table, and a Hassan Hajjaj lamp near the kitchen, among countless other artworks. As you go up the stairs you'll spot one of Timo Nasseri's Muqarnas or star sculptures over a work made in metal and resembling a piece of fabric by Kenyan artist Dickens Otieno and below, one of Iranian Mounir Farmanfarmian's mirrored mosaics. It's all been curated by the revered Iranian artist, curator and writer Feryedoun Ave.



*Bakhtiar next to a work of art he has created from old FT papers*



“Africa is the future of contemporary art,” says Farhad Bakhtiar over lunch. We’re seated outside an Italian restaurant in [Downtown Dubai](#) and he has just lit one of his cigars. “There’s a boom taking place and needs to also continue to take place in Africa. I hope the sharks and the predators will not put their hands in this African journey because African people are so pure and so innocent.” A copy of Georgina Adam’s *Dark Side of the Boom: The Excesses of the Art Market in the 21st Century* lies on the table. It has many answers according to Bakhtiar. “I have been in love with Africa for over 35 years,” says the entrepreneur and banker who has been doing business on the continent for decades.



*Reza Aramesh. Action 117. Black and white photography*

“I think you are born as collector,” says Bakhtiar. “I’ve had many collections that I have given away and also lost. After the Iranian Revolution of 1979 I never went back to my country. I was always looking to collect and visual art was my favourite one but I realised that if you don’t have time it is not worth it to begin to collect because the golden rule of a collector is time. It’s not about money. Money is just a means to achieve your goals.” Since coming to Dubai 20 years ago, Bakhtiar has decided not to work anymore. However, his African obsession never went away and he now travels to the continent, predominantly Uganda, where he also supports a wildlife conservation programme, on a nearly bi-weekly basis.

“If you are making money in a certain country it is vital that you give back to the community some of the money that you make,” says Bakhtiar. “The people then have more purchasing power and they can do more business with you and it will turn into a win-win situation.” He takes another puff on his cigar. “I began my collection 20 years ago and this is the first time I am revealing it to the press,” he pauses. “Before it was just for family, close friends and a few other collectors that Art Dubai would bring.” Why? Dear friends of his convinced him over the summer that to share his collection with the public

and the beauty he has created through art would be greatly beneficial to the regional and international art community. “Art must be shared with other people,” he says. Clearly, art can serve as a document of a specific place and time. It is the heritage, as Bakhtiar says, that belongs to all and that we can learn from.

“The artists teach us through their work,” he smiles. “I always get to know the artist and he or she becomes my friend,” he says. “Fereydoun Ave and Reza Aramesh and so many more were all artists that became friends. In my warehouse in Al Quoz I dedicated a projection room to the late Farideh Lashai. She was a great friend and I dedicated this room the year that she left us.”

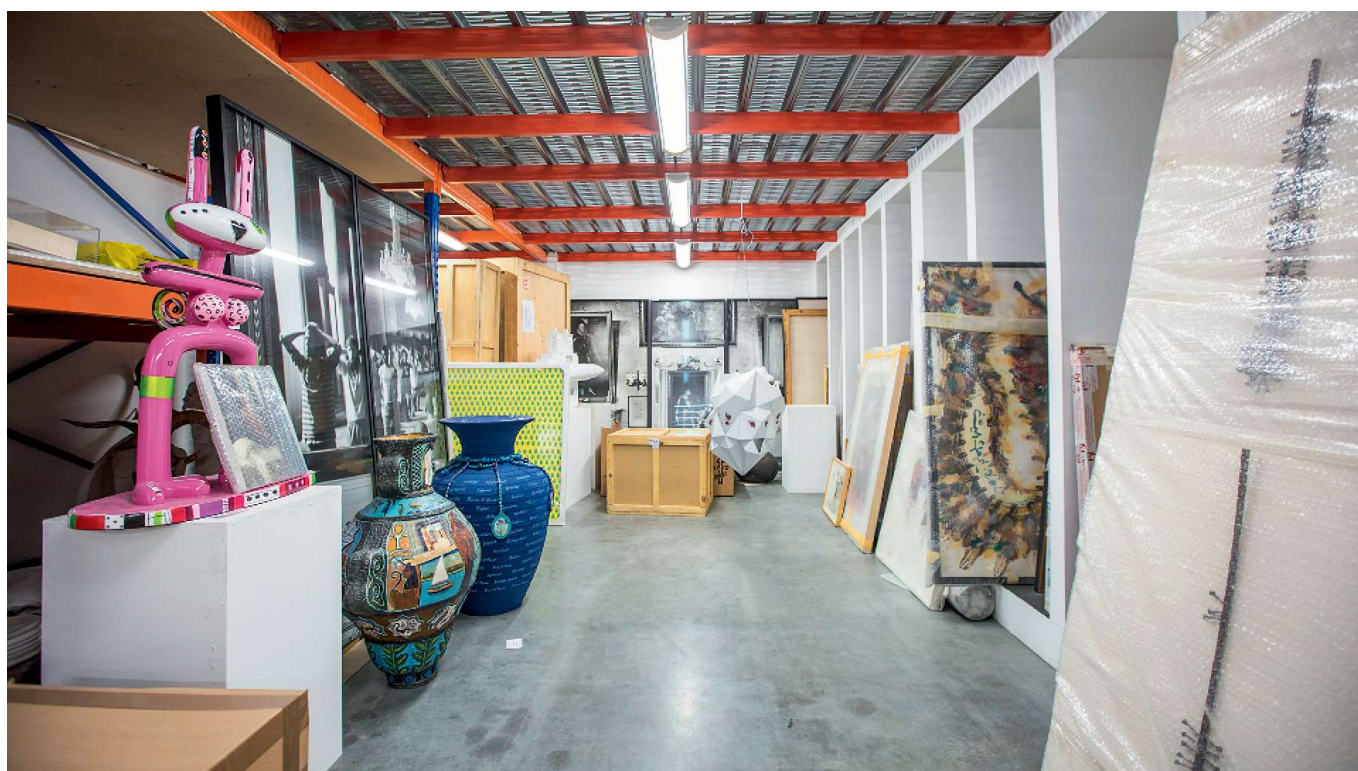


*A view inside Bakhtiar's living room featuring works by Pantea Rahmani (above); Kamrooz Aram (above); Farideh Lashai (underneath upper staircase); Mohamed Hamzeh (right); Fereydoun Ave; Shahpour Pouyan (on table); and Nasser Bakhshi (right above staircase), among others*



Bakhtiar's [Iranian collection](#) is also a way for him to be close to his country. "Today, with some distance I understand why I had this passion for Iranian contemporary art because of my sorrow and sadness that I cannot go back to my country," he says. "This is a very difficult situation for anyone who is sensitive and romantic and passionate. I was away from my country and I wanted to do something for my country." And so Bakhtiar turned to art. "The majority of Iranians wanted this regime and so we left," he says. "I was away from my country and I wanted to do something and so I went to help young Iranian artists and in turn I satisfied my longing for my country and also for my art and this is the result of my collection."

A walk around his home and warehouse will reveal many new names, even to one well-versed in modern and contemporary Iranian art history. There are the collage works of Afsoon, the abstract paintings of Shahriar Ahmadi, the mixed media canvases of Farhad Ahrarnia, photographs by the late Shirin Aliabadi, those of Samira Alikhanzadeh, paintings by Masoud Arabshai, Kamrooz Aram, Siah Armajani, Fereydoun Ave, Mahmoud Bakhshi Moakkar, Reza Derakshani, Mohammad Ehsaei, Parvaneh Etemadi, Mehdi Farhadian, Reza Aramesh, Monir Farmanfarmaian, Golnaz Fathi, Bita Fayyazi, Shadi Ghadirian, Amirali Ghasemi, Abbas Kiarostami, Parviz Tanavoli, Shahram Karimi and Shoja Azari, Pouran Jinchi, Nargess Hashemi and Khosrow Hassanzadeh, and the list goes on.



*A view inside Bakhtiar's warehouse in Al Quoz*

Bakhtiar does not buy to sell. "I have never bought an artwork with the idea of later reselling it," he states. "A collector should never look at the visual arts as commodity. You buy an artwork with your heart and not with your mind and that was my approach to my Iranian contemporary collection." Every now and again, Bakhtiar will have someone visit him asking him to buy one of the works for five times the price of what he paid. "I say 'thank you very much, but I am not an art dealer. I am an art

collector,” he says. “We must make a distinction between all the players in the art world. There’s the artist, the gallerist, the collectors, the art dealers and the auction houses.” But how does Bakhtiar buy? “When I began I was completely ignorant about Iranian art but I was passionate and the only way of success is to be passionate but to be passionate and precise,” he says. “To be drunken but sober, these are the teachings of Rumi,” he laughs. “If you are not passionate you cannot be successful, but if you are too passionate you will collapse.” Advice in the form is usual for Bakhtiar. He will often cite his favourite poets in his attempt to offer guidance or experience in life or business. Everything for him seems to be boiled down to a matter of philosophy. “Fereydoun is my master. Look at his experience in Iranian modern and contemporary art. He’s an artist. Fereydoun began as an artist, gallerist, art critic and curator and even interior designer and the list goes on,” he says. “Today he is helping contemporary Iranian artists with unbelievable energy without looking at the financial side of his labors.” Instead, says Bakhtiar, Fereydoun does what he does out of passionate and a desire to help other artists. “He always has gone for the beauty and purity of the art and artist,” he adds.

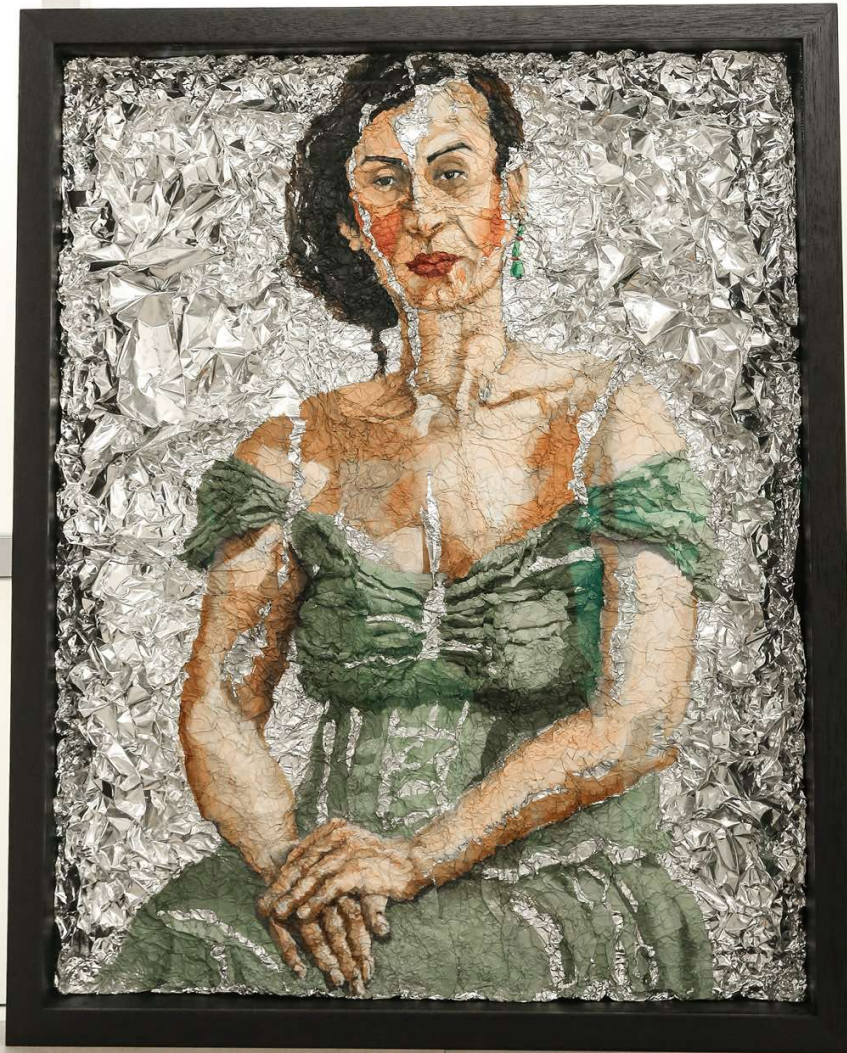


*Bakhtiar inside his Al Quoz warehouse*

When building his collection it was crucial for it to coincide with major aspects of contemporary Iranian art history. “I didn’t go after big names even if I do have them,” he says. “I have all of them but I didn’t go only for them. I went also for the artists that were completely unknown with prices ranging from \$500 to \$1000.” These artists need support and that is what Bakhtiar intends to do through his collecting. “The Iranian collection is in the bottom of my heart and the African collection is on the second layer,” he smiles. “I love Africa and I believe also that African art was also inspiration to much of the modernists and contemporary artists from Europe. Just look at Picasso. Where did he get his figurines for his cubist period?” Bakhtiar tells how during his recent trip to Kampala, Uganda, he

purchased several African masks from the Congo. “You see immediately the resemblance,” he says. “Also, I believe that we must do something for Africa. We must create a path for these artists.” Yet art needs a home. It can’t just stay in an artist’s studio or in a gallery. It’s for this reason that Bakhtiar created his warehouse in Al Quoz. Amidst several white walled gallery spaces there are also countless racks of artworks and sculptural and installation works positioned throughout. It’s a dream to walk through. One will always discover something new. “We have around 800 artworks in the warehouse, among which are 200 African artworks. My house in Jumeirah was chosen precisely because it would be a good place to display my art. Fereydoun came and placed everything accordingly.” Last March, Fereydoun curated the exhibition Iran/Africa: Visual Dialogue, a show at Alserkal Avenue that used the artworks in Bakhtiar’s collection to stage new dialogues between African and Iranian works. Each year during Art Dubai, Fereydoun curates the entrance of Bakhtiar’s warehouse, preparing it for countless visitors and museum curators.





*Mohammad Hamzeh. Katayoon. 2016. Acrylic on aluminium paper. 120X96cm*

Works by Middle Eastern artists pepper Bakhtiar's collection. However, they aren't the focal point. "I don't want to say Arab artists but Middle Eastern artists," he explains. "We are all proud of our region but when you say Arab, this includes Saudi, North Africa, the Levant, the UAE, Bahrain, Oman etc... and this distinction is not very clear. You cannot mix the North African with the Africa—they are a totally different ethnicity and people and heritage and culture than when you got to Central and Sub Saharan Africa." He smiles again and asks me: "What are the Lebanese? They are Phoenicians!" And I reply, "Really? I am not sure." Bakhtiar takes another puff and says, "But yes, even if they speak Arabic!" One could speak forever about the cultural, religious and historical innuendos that divide and define the Middle East—the debate could go on forever depending on your historical points of view. What matters however here is the art. "Baya Mahieddine, the Algerian who lived in Paris and influenced Picasso, is an artist I am greatly intrigued by," says Bakhtiar, who has a few works of hers at home. "I have Hassan Hajjaj also—I loved visiting his Riad in Marrakech." There are plenty more "Arab" names alongside a few European ones, but it's the African and Iranian that stay closest to Bakhtiar's heart.

It's empire that Bakhtiar has collected. Now the question, and one that torments so many big collectors today: what does one do with all of this art? "I want to create a museum of contemporary art in Kampala, Uganda," says the collector. "I want to create a real biennial in Uganda with heavyweight supporters in order to bring the rest of the world to the country. We are going to create a cultural centre and a foundation for the culture and art and we are going to create a national library and a music hall. These are my dreams and as I am a day dreamer I will make it happen." He laughs again. Another daydream that will become a reality is the establishment of a residency in [Greece](#) on the island of Patmos at one of Bakhtiar's summer houses for Iranian artists. This summer will see six artists attend. "While the whole world is placing sanctions on Iranian people, we are trying to give them the possibility to travel throughout the world and to become inspired for their art," he says.

We are on dessert now and our espressos have just arrived. "There is a distinction between a night dreamer and a day dreamer," he says. "The day dreamers are ambitious people and they make things happen." Certainly, Bakhtiar is just that and so much more.