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Having long served as doors of reflection for those keen about beauty and thought, mirrors were extensively used by artists in the late 14th century to popularize self-portraiture in a laborious effort to explore their own inner psyche. Soodeh Bagheri, Shideh Tami, Ahoo Hamed and Shahla Hosseini Barzi are four such women artists based in Tehran, spanning four successive generations, whose self portraits collection was exhibited recently at Total Arts at The Courtyard, Dubai. The exhibition, "Self Portraits and Portraits," was a true, raw and inspiring entry into the private, intimate recesses of these women's minds and emotions. Ahoo Hamed who uses the hand, body, or sometimes, the face as the subject of her portraits, employed various brush techniques and mixed media to add vulnerability to her paintings. The use of a merry color palette created a soft, feminine and defined collection of portraits. "We have different thoughts and feelings. We have different faces. The most difficult part is to see your real self, not your preferred image, which may be more beautiful, stronger and more glorious. It is a process between what you are and what you want to be," said Hamed. She said the reason behind indulging in self portraits is driven by the need to explore the inner self. The process of capturing and demonstrating emotions in her self portraits is a combination of recollections from the past and the present state of mind. "I have painted myself so many times using a mirror, but for this exhibition, I have painted from my imagination. My face is fixed in my memory. Physical manifestation is the least important to me," she said. Her future plans are to "work and leave my imagination to go further..." Shideh Tami, a poet, sculptor and painter uses humans as her only subject, both in her paintings and sculptures. Her collection of portraits at the exhibition was dominated with depictions of an elongated face and poignant, reflective features. She denied that the use of red, green and white colors that subtly hinted at a veil over the face in one of her portraits was a deliberate reference to the colors of the Iranian national flag. "Painting is like



the artwork is created," she said. The emotions usually expressed through self-portraits can reveal the intellectual and emotional state of the artist, which can be sourced from feelings of fear, bravery or a sense of loneliness. Tami says that she enjoys that process of expressing the most intimate feelings and this is why she indulges in the process of creating self portraits. The message of existentialism, of being a woman with all the complexities, fears and beauties is the message she expresses best through her work. Shahla Hosseini Barzi, who has evolved and matured as an artist over the years, initially started with oil paintings and portraits of women who modeled for her. During the Iran-Iraq war, when galleries were not very active, she found herself indulging in color-pencil landscape paintings. After the war, she started experimenting with white canvases and light-colored panels, which bordered more on simplicity in aesthetic value. At this exhibition, she presented a carbon-pencil sketched collection of self portraits that was produced between 1985-1995. The mood of her collection was contemplative, reflective and broody. "My motive today to do portraits is quite different. To me, discovering a new communication with the inner layers of self is attractive, and this kind of discovery connects me with ephemeral moments of the present time," said Barzi. Soodeh Bagheri is an illustrator, photographer and painter for whom the process of painting is a form of finding and recognizing what has passed within her inner self. She often accomplishes this by creating her own space of time and reality reflective in the ideas of her work. Bagheri was drawn to creating self portraits due to her fascination with the different shades of human nature. The most challenging aspect of self portraits, she explained, was avoiding repetition and the ability to represent emotions continually in different forms. "I started self-exploration five years ago and questioned things like: Who am I? What is the real me among all the different characters I play everyday? Am I influenced by my family, the society or past? How do external events affect my attitude toward others and myself?" She further explained that the emotional expressions in her portraits are influenced by the obstacles she encounters as a woman. She thinks of self portraits as a sort of personal diary in which she can pour her inner feelings and thoughts on life. Bagheri agrees that self portraits can serve as private vignettes of an artist, at complete risk of disclosure to the public, but it is a language she has chosen to communicate with. "I often think about why I don't show my feelings? Why I desire to be happy? How many times in my life I don't live? How many times I play roles for others? When do I follow my inner requests and ignore people who exist around me? These questions motivated me to paint myself so perhaps I can discover my own mysteries. I believed that if I became close to my inner-self then I could live with myself. In this way I attempted to keep far from society and experienced my own lonely life. I just want to say that whether good, bad, beautiful, ugly, strong or weak, it is me," she explained. Bagheri's work explores areas of a deep, dark interplay of good vs. bad, right vs. wrong and even angels vs. demons — personal figurations that are explicitly depicted in the back-drop of human struggles. On first sight, her involvement in the portraits can be misunderstood as self-obsessive but one can easily sense detachment and the almost desperate urge for self independence. "Essentially, my story is the story of all women. We are all alone in this world. Our traditions and society place lots of limits and restrictions on us, but despite these tensions and stresses, we try to find peace, protection and freedom by delving deep inside our secret inner world which is calm and strong." She said that some of the challenges of displaying her art in Iran include limitations imposed on the representation of certain elements pertaining to body parts and skin; limitations, she says, hinder an artist's true expression. "The women I paint must be free to choose their appearance but I find myself censoring unconsciously because I live in Iran. I want to paint without having to hide my feelings or my personality. I want to be myself and be brave for others without thinking of other people's judgments."

