

The video interview with Maryam Safajoo was conducted at the Green Acre Bahá'í Center in Eliot, Maine. Overshadowed by the photo of the founder of the Bahá'í Faith, Maryam relayed the details of her life in Iran, the imprisonment of her father, and the process of how she goes about creating her paintings, the messages she hopes to convey with the images reflected in her artwork.

Ironically, days after this interview, Maryam's sister, [Rouhie Safajoo](#) was arrested in Iran -- for no reason than wanting to be admitted to a local university to continue her higher education.

The following interview with Maryam Safajoo reflects on the continued persecution of the [Bahá'í Faith](#) followers that members of this community continue to live under. The affects of the discrimination - banning of Bahá'í Faith followers from entering higher education institutions or holding major cultural or political offices – are obvious in Safajoo's works. What's most conflicting is that the followers of this Faith are, by their religious convictions, most peaceful, accepting and inclusive of communities. The sense of "service" to humanity is a daily practice for the followers of this Faith - and hence odd that they should be persecuted. Most followers of this Faith are imprisoned - for no reason other than the fact that they are followers of a Faith. The leaders of the community - *Yaran* - are for the most part imprisoned, tortured and persecuted for daring to uphold the beliefs of their Faith.

Where were you born? Tell me about your family and early childhood

I was born in Tehran, Iran and grew up in Karaj a city of about 2 million people an hour west of Tehran. I grew up in a culture where I understood that members of the Bahá'í Faith were persecuted. There were always reports of friends and family being put into prison simply for being Bahá'í and that the Bahá'í youth were unable to go to any Public University.

How did this change your world – as a child – and as an adult?

The persecution of the Bahá'ís shaped my world growing up. And although our community was under severe pressures due to the way we were treated, we were taught principles such as the ones which we find in this quote from the Bahá'í Writings:

“...let them [the Bahá'ís] never be defeated by the malice of the people, by their aggression and their hate, no matter how intense. If others hurl their darts against you, offer them milk and honey in return; if they poison your lives, sweeten their souls; if they injure you, teach them how to be comforted; if they inflict a wound upon you, be a balm to their sores; if they sting you, hold to their lips a refreshing cup.”

Or “It behoveth us to kiss the hand of the would-be assassin...” These quotes shaped my world in a way where I understood that the proper response to oppression and persecution is with love, kindness and forgiveness. I also learned that we are not silent in the face of oppression and that through proper legal channels we should seek to gain those rights from which we have been denied.

When did you move to the U.S.?

I came in December of 2013.

When did you begin your artistic endeavors?

I sporadically created art and studied it by myself since I was a child. I felt that I would love to progress in the world of art. But I was unable to pursue professional and academic art education because of my belief in the Bahá'í Faith. However, I have been pursuing art professionally and academically since 2014 with my acceptance into the MFA program at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

How did your move to the U.S. open doors for your artistic endeavors?

Coming to the United States allowed me to enter into a formal program of artistic study. Since Baha'is cannot go to University in Iran, America allowed me to enter into the art world in a professional way.

And how did this help you select your media?

I am largely self-taught and have had the chance to develop my own technique through an art diploma course in Iran, private classes as well as being in touch with various artists. I generally paint on canvas and first learned about acrylic color in 2011 and have been using oil colors since the age of 11. Currently my technique is a mixture of oil and acrylic. I have also recently started experimenting with sculpture and video to explore my topic.

What was your inspiration, your muse and reasons for selecting the media?

I have received the most inspiration from the story of my family. This story has surrounded me since when I was a child, - I grew up with it; the story of their persecution. My mother was in prison at the age of 19 and watched 11 of her close friends march away to execution. In 2009 our home was raided, personal items taken from us and I watched as my father was taken away to prison. I feel that the stories of all these experiences have different elements that are suited to various forms of media. Earlier as an artist, I would have just thought about painting. Now I look at the story I want to share and choose the suitable media for it. The School of the Museum of Fine Arts freed me from feeling as if I had to belong to only one type of media, because the philosophy of the school is that if you are an artist, you should consider the different media through which you can show your concept with better effect on the viewer. I started painting about the persecution of the Bahá'ís of Iran in 2013 when I began to investigate various MFA programs. My husband encouraged me to think about using the medium of my art to show the stories of persecution, which I always shared with him. It was from then on that I started to, with more focus, study the various persecutions of the Bahá'ís in Iran to gain inspiration for the stories, which I could paint.

Was it a conscious act of channeling the pains and terror of persecution of the Bahá'í Faith through your art? Or did it happen spontaneously?

I think it is a bit of both. Sometimes I have a strong internal emotion inside my heart that persuades me to move in a direction. Sometimes, in the beginning of a painting, I very consciously will choose the specific purpose and elements the painting will have.

Does your art empower you?

Art gave my empowerment a shape, a focus and an angle. I was already empowered to share these stories as I would tell them verbally to those close to me. But art allowed me to share them with a much wider audience.

If you were to summarize the overall message of your artwork, what would it be?

The overall message of my art is informed by the twin dialogue of crisis and victory in the history of the Bahá'í Faith, specifically using the persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran as the crisis. The message is that even amidst suffering, if it is for a worthy purpose, there are victories, which are associated with that suffering. Sometimes these victories are hard to perceive, sometimes they aren't clear until years after the event occurred. But, if we give a part of our lives to a worthy cause, these victories do materialize.

I don't feel that that my art disturbs the viewer. Instead, it causes them to think and question what it is and why these events happened. This topic is not very familiar to people, as many have not heard about the persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran. This causes many questions to arise about the different elements that I use in my art.

I am hopeful that these things that I have seen have improved my thoughts.

What has been lost in you as a person – or as an artist?

I didn't lose anything as an artist, because I believe that nothing can stop an artist from making or creating art. To stop the work of an artist, you would have to stop their thoughts, which is not possible. It is with thoughts that humans are human and nobody has the power to take these away from anyone. However, I do feel that my academic study of art was delayed because of not being allowed to formally enter into an art program.

The purpose of this oppression and persecution in Iran against the Bahá'ís, the vilification in the media, imprisonment, denial of higher education, executions, the destruction of cemeteries, arson of homes and businesses, torture, the looting of property etc.... is to extinguish the light of their existence.

How do you explain all this to the next generation? Do you feel your art is a testimony for the next generation?

I hope that with my art I can show future generations a small breeze of the hurricane of the greatness of these events that have occurred since the birth of the Bahá'í Faith some 170 years ago.

What are your hopes for the future – your own personal and that for humanity?

As a human being, my purpose is to serve the entire human race. The Bahá'í writings state it better than I can: "That one indeed is a man who today dedicateth himself to the service of the entire human race." I think that this thought of service should surround our entire life, even our art. So as an artist, we can leave something behind that can help the betterment of the world.

Would you want to return to Iran – your homeland - someday? Or do you feel you can never really return or belong back in your birthplace?

Definitely I would, even tomorrow. If I would be able to go with my husband, who is both American and Bahá'í, I would definitely go. I love Iran, the country of my birth. More than that, I feel that I am a citizen of this earth and that I belong everywhere. The Bahá'í Writings teach us: "The world is but one country, and mankind its citizens."

March 2016 - video interview

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