

## **Sara Shamsavari – Biography**

Sara Shamsavari is a British-Iranian interdisciplinary artist based in London. Her work has been exhibited internationally for over 20 years in museums and public spaces, including the Southbank Centre and City Hall, London; Museo Bardini, Florence; the British Embassy, Tehran; and the Lowe Museum of Art, Miami. Sara has lectured at prestigious institutions across Europe, America, and the Middle East. Currently teaching at Central Saint Martins and Chelsea College of Art, Sara leads art history courses that explore social change, ethics, and engagement through art. She also delivers regular talks and workshops in museums and public spaces, including the V&A, the Royal Photographic Society Library, the National Gallery, and Tate Britain.

Born in the midst of the Iranian Revolution, Sara recovered from infant cancer while fleeing war in Iran and was granted asylum at the age of two in the UK, where she and her family have resided ever since. Her early experience of surviving war, alongside her rich Iranian heritage and upbringing in the UK, has shaped her perspective and continues to inform her artistic subject matter. 2022 and 2023 marked a period of absence from art-making following her survival of a second life-threatening illness, hospitalisation, and subsequent recovery. Her early and more recent brushes with death have inspired an urgency in Sara to create, and she has returned to painting in full force.

Shamsavari's work explores themes of global identity, inclusion, and transformation. At its core, Sara's photography centres on the strong connection she shares with the participants in her work who, like herself, are from migrant backgrounds. Her photographic projects have provided a platform for diverse identities to be seen and heard, thereby challenging and subverting narrow ideas around gender, race, orientation, and faith, encouraging us all to look beyond the surface. Whilst the two are related, conversely, Sara's paintings look inwards, creating a connection to her heritage across time and distance, and reflect her own journey as a former refugee and the ongoing trauma faced by refugees and minorities around the world. Each painting contains words in Persian; these words are often obscured, drawing our attention to their absence.

Sara's work has been widely published in books and media, including *Aperture*, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, and the BBC. In 2024, she was the recipient of the Pioneer 20 Award in recognition of her empowering photographic work on identity. Shamsavari's work sits in several significant public and private collections, including the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago, and the NoVo Foundation, New York, founded by Peter and Jennifer Buffett. Artist Yinka Shonibare CBE also recognised Sara on the spine of a book in his "British Library" installation, naming migrants who have made a significant contribution to British culture.

## **Sara Shamsavari – Artist Statement**

I began painting at a very early age, and when introduced to the photographic process at college, I was impressed by the speed at which I could create an image. I was drawn to portraiture and photography as a medium that quickly allowed me to connect with others. For me, photography was comparable to making a painting - fast.

Being Iranian in the UK, I was always strongly aware of how lens-based media was routinely used to influence public perceptions, categorise, dehumanise, and stereotype individuals considered 'non-white' or 'foreign'. I was acutely aware of the huge disparity between a person's nuanced identity and the reductive ways in which any person belonging to a minority group was represented. I began to make photographs of people in the hope of creating space for different identities to be expressed in a way that was free from the misrepresentation and malignment that so many people feel their identities are associated with, without their permission.

My photographic portraiture works form multiple series, each highlighting different concerns but ultimately addressing identity as a source of expression, pride, and defiance. I have focused mainly on the experience of migrants in Western cities. Together, these works form a visual survey and celebration of individuals who fearlessly subvert narrow ideas around gender, race, orientation, and faith.

Although today there is greater understanding of all identities as nuanced and intersectional, and many individuals are now actively asserting authorship over how they are represented, the issue of misrepresentation is still sadly widespread. Binary definitions that define people in simple, reductive terms, narrow representations of beauty, and the absence or misrepresentation of minorities within Western culture, are still ubiquitous.

In 2021, I returned to painting after a primary focus on photography for over 20 years. At its core, photography has allowed me to provide individuals with whom I feel a strong connection a platform to be seen and heard. I have done this with the aim of challenging and subverting narrow ideas around gender, race, orientation, and faith, and encouraging us all to look beyond the surface in a judgemental world. Whilst the two are related, conversely, my paintings look inwards. The act of creating these works has provided me with a connection to my heritage across time and distance, allowing me to process my experience of being separated from my place of birth. Within this process, I am also reflecting on the heartache and struggle experienced by people around the world who are forced to flee their homes in search of refuge.

The series entitled *Saffar* (سَفَر) - meaning *Journey* is an exploration of a human experience that many who seek refuge struggle with: the comprehension and navigation of an unstable existence. Each artwork contains words in Farsi such as "cycle," "journey," "connection," "justice," "duality," "immortality," and "partition." These words are not always legible and are often obscured, with the aim of drawing our attention to their absence. The largest pieces in the series form a triptych of circular tableaux. This format is inspired by Persian cosmology and echoes the tableaux of Iran's past. The first of these tableaux is a deep lapis blue - paying homage to the precious stone that can be seen so prominently in Iran's ancient artefacts. The ultramarine blue I used was inspired by the depths of the sea and the painful journeys that many make across treacherous waters seeking safety. Entitled *Gozashteyeh maa nejaateh mahst* (گذشته ما نجات ماست), loosely translated as *Our past is our salvation*, it was inspired by the important connection we have to our past as a means

of mental and spiritual survival. The second tableau, in black and gold, *Sahar* (سحر), meaning *Dawn*, represents the triumph over darkness into the dawn. The contrast of black and gold is also inspired by the duality that many migrants live with. The third and final tableau, entitled *Aaghaazi djadid* (اغازی جدید), meaning *A new beginning*, is a malachite green representing the opulence, renewal, and hope that nature promises. In my most recent works, including *Naw-Afarini* (نواآفرینی), *Renewal*, I am using inks alongside acrylic paint to create letters and words that are reminiscent of figures in Persian miniatures.

All of humanity searches for clarity, stability, justice, safety, and the definition of identity. Those seeking refuge find that their situations are continually transforming, almost as soon as they have been defined. The words in the paintings represent a struggle for definition in the absence of stability. The circular, gold-leafed paintings, reminiscent of coins, are a visual representation of a different type of currency, and a concept I hope we can all aspire to: a world that values humanity over objects.