

German/French TV Station ARTE is showing a portrait of the Iranian artist Bahman Mohassess on September 7th 2015.

Painter and sculptor Bahman Mohassess (1931-2010) used to be a popular artist during the reign of the Persian Shahs, the Pahlavi dynasty. After having studied in Italy, Mohassess brought his art back home. His bodies of work included both huge sculptures and large-scale paintings. His work was considered subversive; his bronze figures explicitly showed naked bodies, provocatively revealing genitalia. It is no wonder his work was considered inappropriate by officials and thus was often censored.

However, Mohassess understood his art work as living creatures: demolition and destruction were only part of their circle of existence. Possibly that is the reason why he destroyed a huge amount of his creations with his own hands and chose to leave the spotlight in the late 1960s.

After three years of research, filmmaker Mitra Farahani, an artist herself, found out where Mohassess had taken residence. In a small hotel room in Italy, surrounded by some selected pieces of his former life as an artist, she interviewed the man for whom age had no power over his creativity and intelligence.

Mohassess deliberately articulated his own ideas on how a film about him should be designed. He gave himself credit for being a co-author, as he gave detailed instructions to the young filmmaker on how to film and edit the portrait.

Mitra Farahani confined herself to this mode of operation. The result is a film in which Bahman Mohassess speaks openly about his views about art, his own homosexuality and the opposition to freedom and censorship.

In fact, it's not easy to make a film set in just one location. To break free of this "Huis clos", the filmmaker planned to film her protagonist while painting. For that reason she arranged for him to work on a commissioned painting. His clients were two Iranian artists, Rokni and Ramin Haerizadeh. In meeting these two people, Mohassess gained new creative impulses. In addition, he negotiated persistently with them to fetch a good price.

Yet, while preparing for the painting, Mohassess's already poor health worsened. He realized that he would not survive the end of the documentary.

"Fifi Howls From Happiness" is the name of one of Mohassess's favorite paintings, one he never wanted to destroy and which he never let go.

It is a red figure, its black mouth wide opened. It is obvious that Fifi is actually not howling from happiness, but giving it this particular title, Mohassess showed that he never lost his sense of humor despite facing censorship and pain.

This emotional film is a tribute to a misjudged artist who has taken his art from the eyes of the world in order to withdraw himself from it.

*"I wanted to be like an artisan of the 'Quattrocento'. I see myself as a worker. I never felt like belonging to a place, a country or a nation, least of all to Iran. I consciously destroyed my artworks because they had become useless. I will not leave anything behind for the necrophiliacs. Because how does a painting make sense in a world where there are no fish in the sea nor animals in the forest?"* – Bahman Mohassess

"Fifi Howls From Happiness" was first presented at the "Berlinale Festival" in 2013 in the category "Panorama". The film was awarded best film at the International Festival of Independent Cinema in Buenos Aires and continues to receive nominations and prizes.