



*Kashan from the series The Real Part of Me. 2014. Luster photo paper. 117 X 89 cm. Edition one of four.*

# MAN ON A MISSION: SASSAN BEHNAM BAKHTIAR

'I'm living the life. I'm probably living it better than you!' Self-styled purveyor of 'the truth', **Sassan Behnam Bakhtiar** is a man on a mission to inform the world of the true nature of Iran. **Arsalan Mohammad** visits the world of Bakhtiar.

**I**f there is one thing dapper 30-year Sassan Bekhtar Bakhtiar has in abundance, it's self-confidence. A self-taught artist from a prominent Iranian family, the Sassan Behnam Bakhtiar brand is a slick operation - an MBA-fuelled international marketing machine, selling drawings and print editions via auction houses and a private gallery in west London, where Bakhtiar has just had an exhibition, entitled 'The Real Me'.

'The Real Me' series features monochrome photographs of historic Iranian sites and landscapes, as well as portraits of Sassan Bakhtiar himself, 'living the life', at his home in the south of France, taking a refreshing dip in the sea at Cannes, or enjoying a drive in an open-topped sports motorcar. There is also a short film installation of manipulated images of historical sites, with the ubiquitous carpet designs stripped in whilst Bakhtiar solemnly intones poetic ruminations on his ancestral homeland over it all.

Sassan Bakhtiar has not studied art formally, but says he has experimented with numerous forms and media since childhood, learning from his artist father. He obtained an MBA in London and in deciding on an artistic path, alongside various other entrepreneurial endeavors, he has clearly applied his business sense to managing and furthering his creative projects. Rarely has an artist supplied me so much detailed information, images and invitations, he even inveigled me to phone up and seek corroboration of his talent from art world figures such as Rory Blain (the brother of London dealer, Harry), the founder of Sediton, an art app which will feature Bakhtiar's work.

Bakhtiar says he is discussing offers from galleries worldwide to exhibit his work, but after having worked with London's Debut Contemporary, is now considering his options for the future, rejecting the advances of major, international galleries who irksomely insist on restrictions on his freedom and artistry, as well as Dubai galleries. He is smart, wealthy, eloquent and genial - and completely, a product of today's globalised, contemporary art world. He insists he is on a mission to represent to ignorant Westerners, the 'truth' about real Iranians. 'I can show to the world what our real identity [is],' he promises 'And what our real culture is, contrary to everything that you see today on an international level...'



(Above) *My Brothers/ Baradaraneh Man* from the series *The Real Part of Me II*. 2014. Luster photo paper. 141 x 95 cm. Edition 3 of 4. (Below) *My Brother* from the series *The Real Part of Me II*. 2014. Luster photo paper. 140 x 94 cm. Edition two of four.

(Right) *Corvette 1953* from the series *The Real Part of Me I*. 2014. Photo luster paper. 95 x 95 cm. Edition one of four.  
(Below) *Monaco* from the series *The Real Part of Me I*. 2014. Photo luster paper. 128 x 97 cm. Edition two of four.

All images courtesy of Sassan Behnam Bakhtiar.



*When did you begin to seriously produce artworks?*

I believe it was in 2009, when I was 24 years old. It all started for me with a Christie's charity auction in Dubai with a sculpture I had made called 'Mitra', empowering the role and importance of women in Iran. Afterwards, I moved to London and one day suddenly it just hit me, I decided I am actually tired of constantly being looked at in a way that is not who I really am, as an Iranian today. I decided to put myself on a mission, a mission to show the world about the great culture, values and history of Iran along with its people. I just want to show the truth. I started with a series of portraiture works of iconic people of Iran, which some of them were sold with Christie's in London.

*Why do you feel as an Iranian artist, you have an overriding responsibility to represent Iran?*

I'm going to be very frank. One of the main reasons I became an artist - even though I am a creative, and my father an artist - [is that] I got to a certain age where I really felt this responsibility of being in the position today as an Iranian. I can show to the world what our real identity and what our real culture is, contrary to everything that you see around today on an international level. The younger group of Iranian artists today specially, the emerging voices such as myself are trying to now really show different sides of Iran, without saying there are girls having hijabs with lipsticks. We're kind of tired of that, you know. We're trying to break away from these things,

*Do you feel people outside the region significantly misunderstand the Iranian people?*

At the end of the day the media tries to portray Iran and every Iranian as something very, very - let's say different, for the sake of this interview. And we are not that. We have several thousands of years of heritage and we are not what we're portrayed as, and as an Iranian artist, my biggest responsibility is to represent the true values of our country and our people, and where we come from and what we have done in the past, and what we are today and what we are going to do in the future. Even though I was born in Paris and I lived probably most of my life between France and the United Kingdom and the Emirates, I still consider myself a true Iranian because I was brought up there and have the real values of an Iranian man.

*You have recently had a show of work at a gallery in London, titled 'The Real Me', works which splice patterns from traditional Persian rugs*



*across pictures of yourself larking about as well as historical sites around Iran. Could you tell me something about this series?*

Luckily for me, I had amazing pictures in my archives from everywhere that I went to in Iran. The idea was, okay, simple, I'm going to take the oldest, most important places of Iran and I'm going to try to modernise it, but in a very simple manner. I didn't want to complicate the artwork. I want everybody on a mass level to understand what this painting or what this artwork is saying. And then they start getting engaged with that, they'll say 'Oh Kashan, yes, it's one of the first cities where civilisation started 6,000 years ago', and this is actually my message to my audience. And this is where I consider myself a winner. When the audience come in, they get interested and intrigued with the artwork.

*For some of these pictures you have used pictures of yourself swimming, in an open-topped car - what is the significance of this?*

I used myself as a subject whereas I am basically living a very normal life. I'm living the life. I'm probably living it better than you as a Westerner. I wanted to show you might think that Iranians are what is being portrayed of them in the Western media, however the reality is a different story.

*And what has the reaction been?*

I remember I was setting up with Samir [Ceric] in the [Debut Contemporary, London] gallery for the solo show. The previous day we had had 27 people just walking in, in a matter of four hours, because they were just intrigued, 'Oh my God, what is this? This looks stunning'. [But] I [also] got criticised for the[se] first six works. There were two groups. Half of the people were criticising me and half of the people were loving it, because they would understand the humorous side of it. That's the whole point... just to be like, 'I'm better than you'. I'm literally trying to take the p\*\*s, but in a way that people understand the humour. But not everybody gets it... **NBA**