

“I will never forget, during the Iran-Iraq war, when I was standing in our home in Darrou in Tehran in the gardens watching everything going up in massive flames due to part of a bombshell falling in our land and amongst all of it, I could still see these beautiful, very old, rose bushes with massive buds as tall as trees still standing strong in the midst of a gigantic wave of flames,” says French-Iranian artist, Sassan Behnam-Bakhtiar. On the verge of being burned down, the strength of these untouched flowers has been engrained within the artist. They exhibit a type of resilience that a human might only be able to attain through the endurance of a life-threatening situation.

On show at Düsseldorf's Setareh Gallery from 18 October until 23 November. *Extremis*, named after a Latin phrase meaning “at

once, by looking within, I developed a deep connection with my psyche and self in order to better understand the human force and will to be able to resist what would normally be deadly to many.”

Courageously recalling his experience of a post-revolution Iran and the Iran-Iraq war, the new paintings portray near-death experiences as an opportunity to embrace survival and nurture psychological wellbeing. “The adoption of a survival behaviour throughout the life-threatening duress tolerated during my early to late teen years moulded my human psyche to channel new behavioural traits in order to not succumb to the constant pressures. This is a strong focus of the show.”

The exhibition will reveal new works entitled *Immortal Rose Garden* (2018-2019) and *Immortal Rose Garden at Midnight* (2019), two paintings that signify the dancing rose bushes the artist witnessed amidst the burn-

stories always kept in secret,” expresses Behnam-Bakhtiar. “In my case, I had to go through much hardship in order to better understand my humanity and I would like to share this with my audience, leaving them with something to think about.”

As expressed through the evocative paintings, by confronting the traumatic memories which have reformed his perspective of the world, the artist discovered solace and hope. “These moments triggered something unexplainable in me that helped me, in time, to understand the power and knowledge dormant inside all of us,” he shares. “When in solitude, the mind gains strength and learns to lean upon itself.” While the struggle he endured for a decade enticed him to give up on hope, Behnam-Bakhtiar chose to transform it into his greatest strength instead. “There is no point to remain in a state of trauma, but there is value in using that experience to better yourself in this life,” he says. “A spark of optimism can start a wonderful journey if believed in and felt within, even if in a place of distress—this is a vital first step.”

Having worked with Setareh Gallery for the past two years and collaborated on projects such as an exhibition at Abu Dhabi Art fair in 2017 and Art Monte Carlo in April this year, the artist felt *Extremis* was a natural fit for the space. “I think my work fits very well with Setareh's programming and I am looking forward to working with Setareh as part of their roster of represented artists,” he says. “I was always keen to show this body of work in Germany, one of the cradles of abstract expressionism.”

Setareh met Behnam-Bakhtiar in 2017, instantaneously recognising the energy that transcended throughout the artist's work. “We immediately connected on a profound level of friendship, with the promise of much inspiration and opportunity,” admits Setareh. “In the exhibition *Extremis*, Sassan gives weight to a very intimate view of his personality and it is remarkable how the bright colours and organic motifs contrast with the repetitive rhythm. His approach to contemporary expression is manifested by his cultural background and influences of his intercultural reality.”

Additional works on show at the exhibition include *Midnight Love Ritual* (2019), *In Sync* (2018-2019) and *Love Ritual at Sunset* (2019). By drawing on the conflict, sorrow and fragility of human condition, Behnam-Bakhtiar presents aesthetic representations of joy, strength and love. By intertwining life and death, the artist reminds us that we are the surviving flowers amidst a burning flame. By confronting suppressed truths, we too can heal our wounds and grow from painful realities. [sassanbehnambakhtiar.com](http://sassanbehnambakhtiar.com) ■

*Extremis* is on show from 18 October until 23 November at Setareh Gallery, Düsseldorf, Germany

# THE Beauty OF Adversity

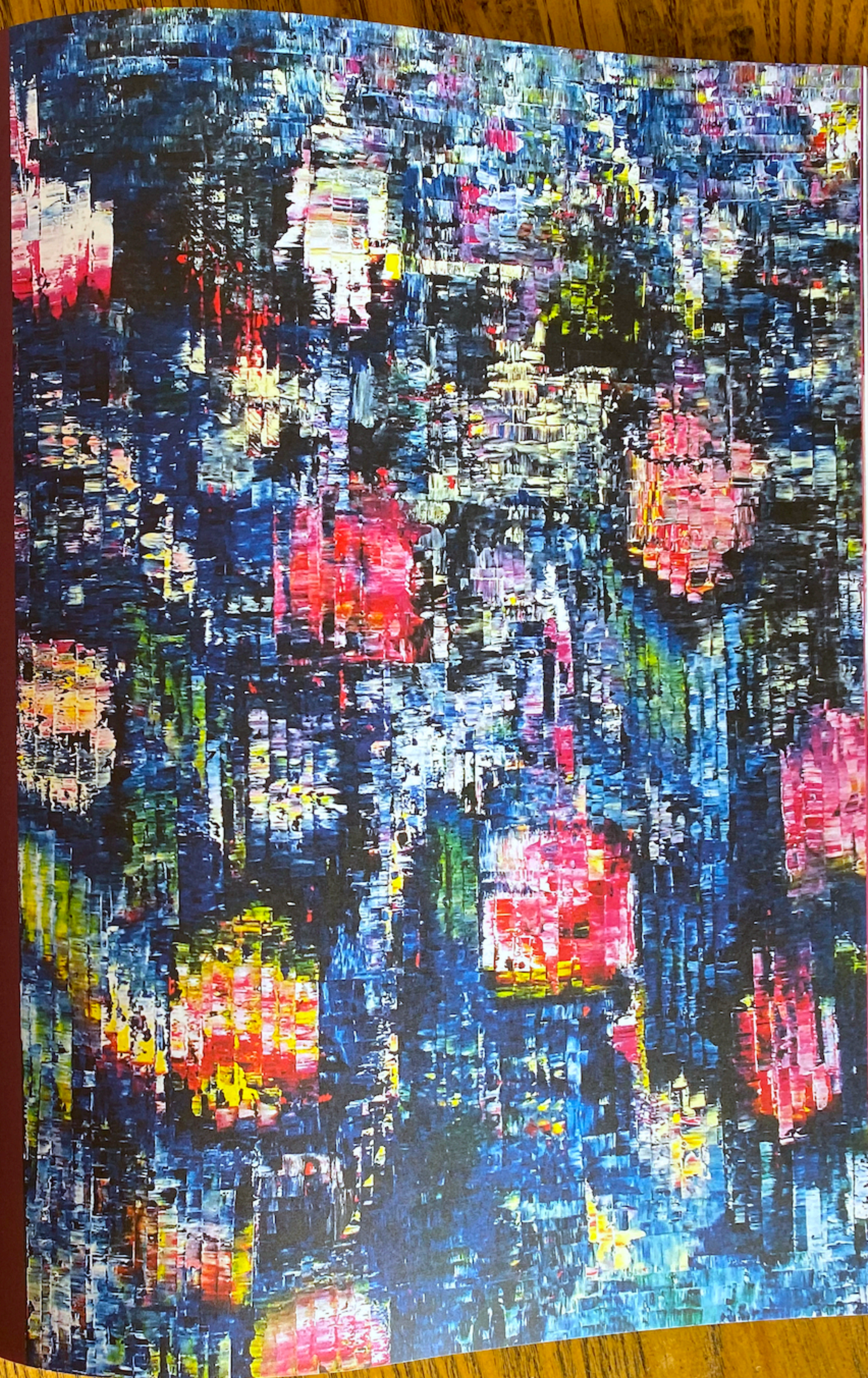
In a reference to regional political events and how they influenced his childhood, in his recent works French-Iranian artist **Sassan Behnam-Bakhtiar** juxtaposes life with death writes Ayesha Shehmir

the point of death,” is Behnam-Bakhtiar's story of coming face-to-face with the perpetual scars that he has lived with. “The exhibition shows Sassan's sensitivity as an artist who connects with his viewer,” says Samandar Setareh, co-founder of Setareh Gallery. “I have experienced and witnessed very strong reactions to his work—the immediacy of his colour fields holds a vibrating resonance with the viewer and energises the void in between.”

For the first time, Behnam-Bakhtiar is unveiling the realities that have haunted him for so many years. “With *Extremis* I am opening a gateway to my turbulent upbringing by putting out on the canvas personal stories, trauma, suffering, realizations and lessons collected throughout my life, all which helped me in becoming a stronger human being,” shares Behnam-Bakhtiar. “Through this decade of traumatic experi-

ing flames. “The strength of these old rose bushes against the fire was inspiring; they had managed to stay strong and survive,” he recalls. “I learned from these old plants how to better survive when in a dire situation later on in my life. Both of these works represent eternal strength, love, innocence, friendship, nature's energy and force when faced with a life-threatening situation.”

Comprising approximately 25 paintings including two 2.7x4.8 metre triptychs, *Extremis* provokes the viewer to contemplate the resilience of humanity by transforming traumas into strengths. The rhythmic interlock of vivid and deep colour palettes depicts the influence that adversity can have on one's spiritual, psychological and psychical identity, while the brighter tones highlight the beauty that can be found within it. “After a decade of work, I feel that now is a good time to bring about to my audience all these



Facing page: Sassan Behnam-Bakhtiar, *Immortal Rose Garden at Midnight*, 2019. Oil on canvas, 130x90cm. Courtesy of the artist and Setareh Gallery