



*timeless
visions*

*'Oneness Wholeness with
Jean Cocteau', a solo
exhibition by **Sassan
Behnam-Bakhtiar**
at Villa Santo Sospir in
Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat,
connects the common
vision of two artists from
disparate eras, writes
Shalaka Paradkar*

Sassan Behnam-Bakhtiar
and his sculptures in the
gardens of Santo Sospir







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foundation for his solo exhibition, the existentialism-centred *Oneness Wholeness*, shown at London’s Saatchi Gallery earlier this year. Set within this philosophical frame, *Oneness Wholeness with Jean Cocteau* continues the artist’s questioning of modern value systems and calls for introspection—a more spiritual, human-centred approach to living.

Behnam-Bakhtiar is passionate when he speaks about ‘energy’, the chi that flows through his art, through people and environments—whether it is in the scraped paint technique of his large-scale works or the aura of the Villa Santo Sospir. “Walking into the villa feels like stepping into a time machine. You can still feel the energy and memories roaming around both in and out of the villa—the presence of Cocteau, Picasso, Matisse, Nijinsky and Chaplin in different areas of the home,” he says.

Translating that inspirational artistic life force, Behnam-Bakhtiar created sculptures for *Oneness Wholeness with Jean Cocteau*; these are works that pay homage to the spirit of Santo Sospir and its many frequent visitors—Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Charlie Chaplin, Vlaslav Nijinsky, Coco Chanel and others who have walked through its remarkable spaces. Along with the sculptures, he edited audio clips of him and Cocteau talking about how humanity needs to recalibrate, taking a gentler approach to life, being more in touch with emotions, and understanding the interconnectedness of the universe. It plays out on a loop, like a conversation between the two artists, separated in time but united in their artistic vision. Both Cocteau and Behnam-Bakhtiar appear in the sculptures and paintings, rendered in the latter’s scraped-paint style in bright, joyful colours. Beh-

nam-Bakhtiar believes that as an artist, he has a higher calling. “To show and talk about the life changing experiences that I have had during the past seven years is an important aspect of my work today. It is true that it took me a long time to make this body public, but after some time, I really wanted to share my experience and this knowledge with my audience. If I am able to bring a resonant truth and better understanding of life to my audience, I would consider my job being done as an artist.”

As an Iranian who lives in France with his Russian wife, Maria, borders hold little meaning to this artist. Yet his *oeuvre* draws extensively from his cultural heritage and he sees his legacy as one that brings about a positive change in perceptions. “[I want] to help people understand that there is another way, a much easier yet incomparable way that will bring us peace, love, unity and togetherness, instead of war, hate, jealousy.... We have so much to live for, so why focus on bad habits and feelings that this modern way of life brings us? We should understand that without love for ourselves and others, we cannot even take the second step; without understanding our own beings we will never be able to feel secure and complete.”

While people today chase fleeting pleasures and transient fame, Behnam-Bakhtiar urges a spiritual evolution as a necessary coping mechanism, an antidote to toxic modernity. “[We ought to] shift our primary language of life to love, replacing all else, and continue understanding the essence of love and what it truly means,” he says.

A French critic said of Cocteau, “very well known, and hence, unknown.” It’s still debated whether he was a prisoner of modern media or an artist who knew how to exploit it. *Oneness Wholeness with Jean Cocteau* makes this elusive artist more accessible to a present-day audience, and who may, in the process, get to know themselves as well. ■ *Oneness Wholeness with Jean Cocteau* runs from 6-30 September at Villa Santo Sospir. Santosospir.com

Above: Sassan Behnam-Bakhtiar’s sculptures in the gardens of Santo Sospir; Below: Sassan Behnam-Bakhtiar with his sculptures inside Santo Sospir; Facing page: Sassan Behnam-Bakhtiar. *Blood Garden*, 2018. Mixed media on canvas, 110x80cm. *Oneness Wholeness* series

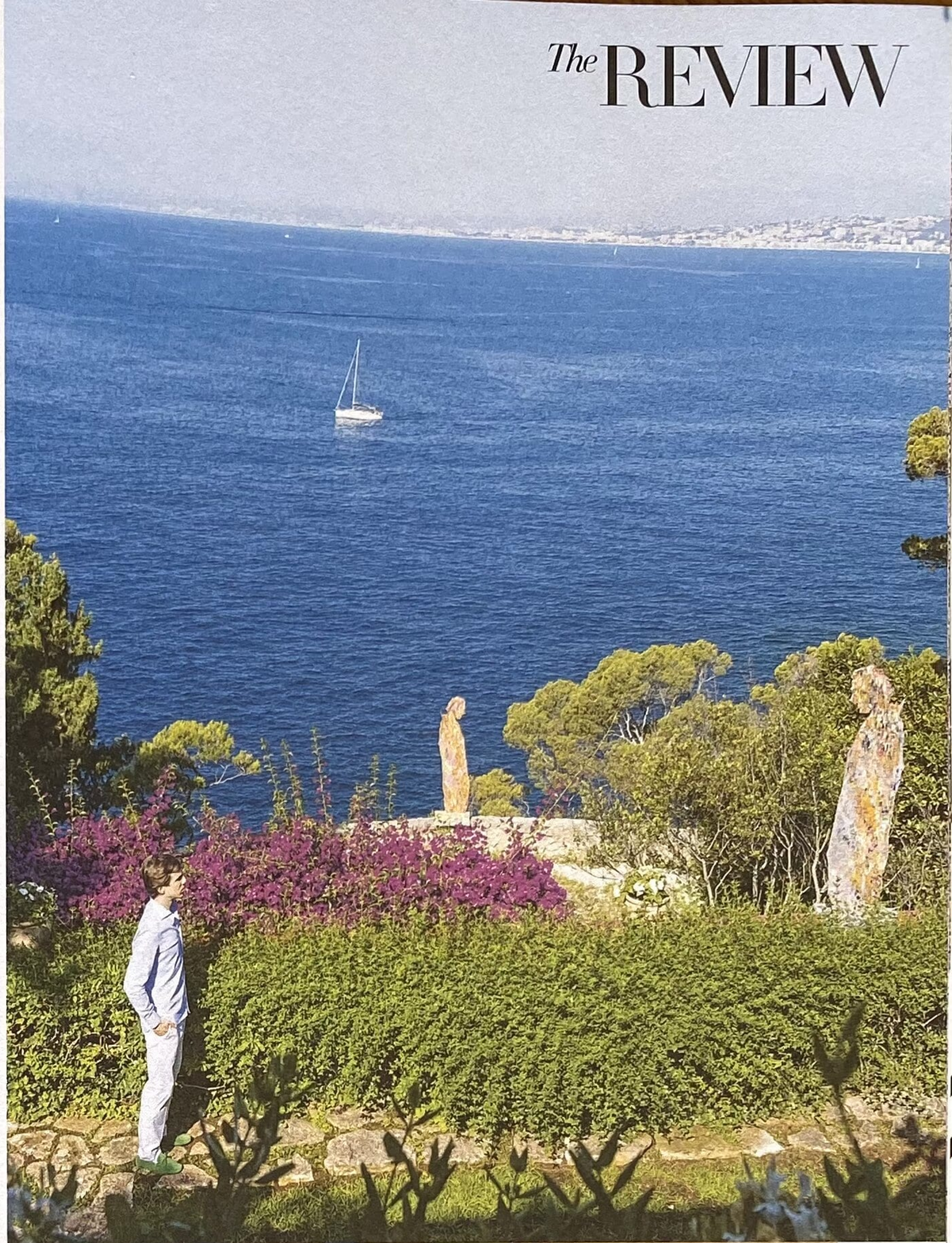


Cap Ferrat's timeless beauty has long attracted royalty, artists and writers; Matisse waxed lyrical on the quality of its luminous Mediterranean air and Somerset Maugham made it his home until his death at 91. Perhaps the most famous artist associated with the resort town on the French Riviera has been Jean Cocteau.

The avant-garde artist, poet and polymath was invited in 1950 by his friend Francine Weisweiler to holiday in her house, villa Santo Sospir in Cap Ferrat. A few days after his arrival, Cocteau said, "I'm tired of idleness, I wither here..." With Francine's permission, he proceeded to decorate the walls of the house with frescoes. Through the summer of 1950, Cocteau worked on his frescoes, helped by an Italian workman who prepared the pigments, diluted with raw milk. After the walls, he tackled the ceilings in soft-toned pastels, composed mosaics and added a tapestry. The result, in Cocteau's words, was "a tattooed villa," where he was happy to spend long periods of time.

Almost 70 years later, another Cap Ferrat artist, Sassan Behnam-Bakhtiar, encountered a film in which Cocteau addressed humanity in the year 2000. Seated in the Madeleine Castaing-designed dining room in Santo Sospir, Cocteau shares his existential observations, "We live according to conventional norms and it's likely that we have misled ourselves and perhaps you are still misleading yourselves. It's possible that what we call progress could prove to be the development of an error... I certainly hope that you have become very humanised. That's my hope."

For Behnam-Bakhtiar, it was a surreal yet moving experience to discover a film made in 1962 that dealt with the same concerns that had been shaping his art in the 21st century. It became the vital seed for a new exhibition on the hallowed grounds of Cocteau's Cap-Ferrat hideaway. Part memoir, part musings, *Oneness Wholeness with Jean Cocteau* marks the culmination of a personal journey that started some seven years ago for Behnam-Bakhtiar. The Franco-Iranian artist was struggling with health issues when he turned to meditative practices such as qigong and Vedic studies that focus on energy and human consciousness. As his wellbeing was restored, he was consumed with the urge of wanting to make this knowledge public through his art. "I was able to find myself and restructure my being the way it should be, for the first time," Behnam-Bakhtiar says. These practices were the



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Top right: Sassan Behnam-Bakhtiar and his sculptures in the gardens of Santo Sospir; Above: Jean Cocteau's fresco with Sassan Behnam-Bakhtiar's sculpture inside Santo Sospir
Facing page: Image featured on the invitation to the exhibition *Oneness Wholeness with Jean Cocteau*

