

Shabahang Tayyari
With My Back to the World
30.01 - 14.03.26

In a pink sweater, standing in front of ducks and heart paintings, Shabahang Tayyari has just arrived from the cursed land, as he calls it.

A black sheep and hothead at school—the one who set wooden desks on fire, spread naphthalene in the classrooms, hung out with heavy metal crews drinking disinfectant-and-juice cocktails. Later, he would frequent other marginal spaces: video-game centers called clubs. It is the 1990s. A dim room with a single CRT screen and a few chairs stranded in the middle of a former shop. All newcomers are hazed and insulted, but everyone gathers here to live life in other worlds. These were informal schools for misfits. Survival required humor, pride, and a certain elegance in absorbing hostility while keeping victory in mind.

Shabahang Tayyari is a painter, a true one. His subjects lie on the surface, no need for background. It all started in his father's sign-painting shop, at a time when large-scale calligraphy was handmade and names on graves were hand-carved. No tremblers.

The ducks' heads appear bright against the dark velvet. The motif originates from a cousin who raises them in his garden, in one of the most conservative villages. He nail-polishes their beaks, applies makeup, and eventually eats them. The act is tender, absurd, and violent all at once—a hobby, a disease, a kink, or an intimate form of resistance. What is the difference? The killing always happens at night.

Shabahang loves suits. He sources rare fabrics, chooses the perfect tailor, collects them meticulously, rarely wears them. The killing happens at night. In the *Waterfall* works, unstitched fabrics sustain themselves by their own weight. No bodies there. While shameful hairy backs become the meat and flesh of traditional Persian kabab.

The title of Shabahang Tayyari's exhibition *With My Back to the World* is borrowed from a series of paintings by Agnes Martin and echoes a shared worldview: art as a space deliberately set apart from the noise and corruption of the world. For Martin, this meant a moral stance and a hermetic way of life, working in isolation, often in series. Like Tayyari.

Tayyari's gesture is not nostalgic, nor reverential, but strategic, with a hint of humor. Turning one's back is not retreat but endurance, a way of inhabiting the world on one's own terms. In a context where continuing to be oneself, living, expressing, and creating is already an act of defiance, persistence itself becomes resistance.

"Smartness is of no use" says Tayyari, in a world where to be is to resist and to paint is to revolt.

— Tiffany Dornoy Rezaei

Shabahang Tayyari (b. 1987, Khalkhal, Iran) lives and works in Karaj. He has presented solo exhibitions at The Third Line (Dubai, 2023), Delgosha Gallery (Tehran, 2022), Balice Hertling (Paris, 2021), ZKU (Berlin, 2018), Raf Projects (Berlin, 2016), Etemad Gallery (Tehran, 2014), and Maryam Fasihi Harandi Gallery (Tehran, 2011). His work has recently been included in group exhibitions at Balice Hertling (Paris, 2022, 2020) and Giardino Segreto (Milan, 2019), among others.

Our time

Male mallards have spiral-shaped penises, and their mating behavior can appear laborious and even violent to humans. Several males may mate successively with a single female, during which she can disappear underwater. Males have also been observed attempting to mate with a deceased female. Humans often frame these behaviors as gang rape and necrophilia, rejecting what they perceive as the “unhingedness” of mallards’ sex lives. In contrast, Mandarin ducks are romanticized for their supposed lifelong loyalty to a single partner.

Aesop’s parable *The Bird in Borrowed Feathers* describes a raven who adorns himself with the feathers of other birds. Melchior d’Hondecoster’s 17th-century painting depicts the moment when the other birds violently gang up on the raven to reclaim the stolen feathers. Although male birds often appear more extravagant than females, the flock does not tolerate the raven’s drag.

People tend to project human concepts, among them normative bourgeois ones, onto animals. Those of us—animal or human—who diverge from these norms must spend our time managing stigma and shame.

Willem de Rooij, January 2026