

Niccu Tafarrodi remembers her Persian past with incredible miniature artworks

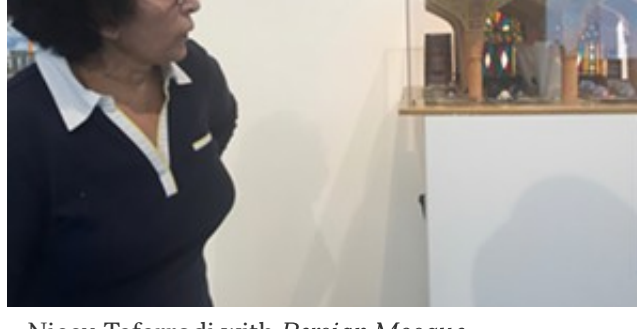
BY SHEILA REGAN

THURSDAY, JUNE 2, 2016 AT 8 A.M.



Niccu Tafarrodi, Persepolis

When Niccu Tafarrodi came to the United States from Iran 30 years ago at the age of 46, she felt like she had lost her identity. “I was so depressed, so confused, so lost,” she says. “Feeling different is awful, really.”

Niccu Tafarrodi with *Persian Mosque*.

She arrived with her teenage daughter and 20-year-old son. They had fled at the urging of her husband, who remained in Iran on house arrest. As someone who already had a career in business education, she found herself not only having to learn a new language, but going back to school and starting her life completely over.

Five years after her arrival, a friend took her to the Art Institute of Chicago to see the Thorne Miniature Rooms, which depict 68 American and European interiors in one-inch scale. “It inspired me so much,” she says.

The exhibition got her thinking. While the Thorne rooms depicted Western culture and design, she wanted to do the same thing for Persian culture. “I said to myself, ‘Why not Iran?’” she says.

Although she had no prior experience, Tafarrodi began making her own dioramas, learning as she went, with her daughter helping her with the scale. Early on, she would redo them several times before she was satisfied.



Niccu Tafarrodi

This week Tafarrodi, who received a Minnesota State Arts Board Artist Initiative grant in 2015, opens an exhibition of her work at the University of Minnesota. The show features more than 30 of the dioramas that she has made over the last 25 years. These intricate scale models include all kinds of locations: historical sites; marketplaces filled with tiny, painstakingly created jewelry; domestic interiors; farms; and places of worship. The dioramas all reveal Tafarrodi’s memories of life in Iran as a young person, with some pieces that propose a point of view on the struggles that Iran has faced in the past and faces today.

Tafarrodi grew up in a middle-class family, a class which now has for the most part disappeared. Her husband, who had studied at MIT and was a general manager of a big factory under the Shah before the revolution, was persecuted under the new regime. He has since left Iran, and travels all around the world and the United States. “Probably loneliness makes me an artist,” Tafarrodi says. “Art became my friend, my company, my antidepressant.” Working on her dioramas gave her an opportunity to explore meaning, to figure out ways to put the abstract into concrete visuals.

While Tafarrodi’s dioramas can be seen as a way of capturing the colors, designs, and culture of her memories, there are also subtle sociopolitical observations. In one piece, you see two women in the same living space.

One woman, her grandmother, is wearing a chador in prayer, while another woman, who is cutting sugar, is without it.

Tafarrodi explains that because the older woman is in prayer, she is in seclusion. She also notes that her grandmother was angry when she was young, as women were forced to take the chador off. “She complained about the king’s father, who made them become un-secluded,” Tafarrodi says.

Many years later, Tafarrodi and the women of her generation were angry that the chador was forced back on them. “They forced us to put that scarf on,” she says. “That was terrible. But it’s the same... force is force. Dictatorship is dictatorship. They did it with my grandma by taking off the chador and they did it with me by putting the chador on.”



Niccu Tafarrodi

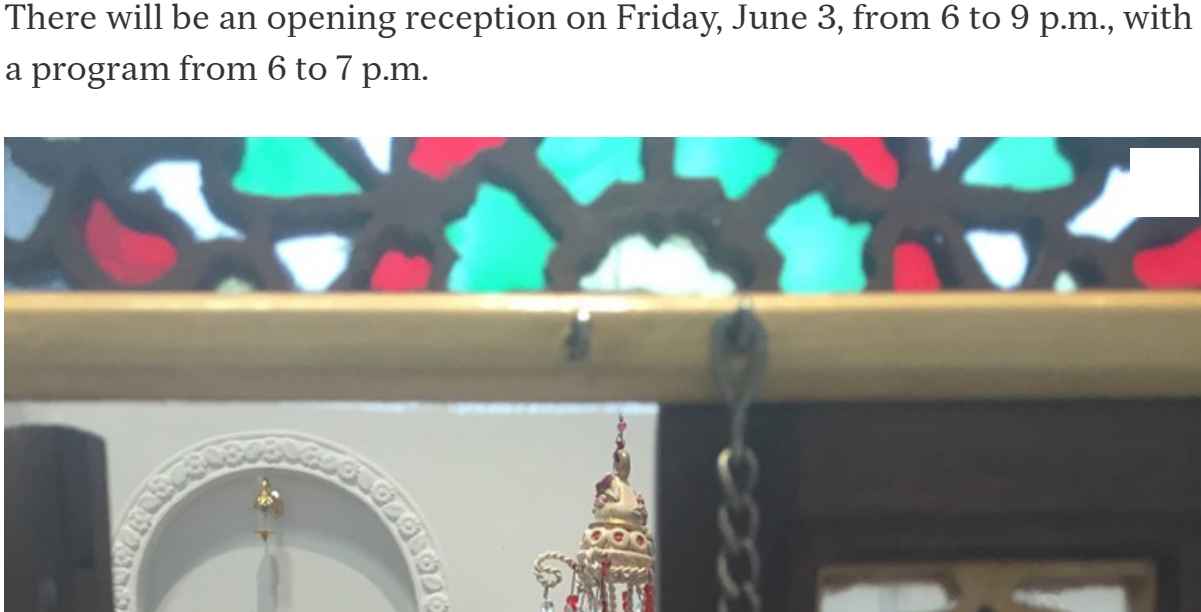
Tafarrodi also contrasts the living situations of rich and poor. In side-by-side dioramas, she shows a woman who spends her entire life within one room, and another who lives in the utmost luxury. She’s gotten criticism for the piece, but she’s happy to illustrate what she sees as huge problems in Iran with the growing disparities between rich and poor. “They don’t like the truth,” she says of people who have written her angry letters. “But I’m very brave and I like to be faced with the truth.”

One of the pieces on display is a miniature diorama of Tachara Hall in Persepolis, Iran. Built over 2,000 years ago, the ancient structure was used for celebrations and receptions. Tafarrodi remembers traveling to the ruins of Persepolis as a child for school and being shocked because she had been expecting to see grand palaces. “The teacher explained that it was made by our ancestors,” she says.

Another diorama depicts a bazaar, and took the artist five years to complete. Two of the years she took to construct the building, and for three years she went about making all the little items that the miniature tradespeople sell in the marketplace. Tafarrodi shows her skill in creating tiny objects in this work. There is a feast full of Persian delicacies, with kebabs, red meat, eggplant stew, and a dessert made of saffron, sugar, and rice on display.

“Remembering Persia: Art and Healing” opened yesterday at the U of M’s Quarter Gallery in the Regis Center, and is on display through June 24.

There will be an opening reception on Friday, June 3, from 6 to 9 p.m., with a program from 6 to 7 p.m.



Niccu Tafarrodi, Winter Solstice

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“Remembering Persia: Art and Healing”

On display now through June 24.

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The Quarter Gallery at Regis Center for Art
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Sun., Jun. 5, 4:00am

REMEMBERING PERSIA: ART AND HEALING

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