

## **MOHAMMAD BARRANGI: DREAMLAND**

### 30 March-5 June 2022

**Dreamland** is an exhibition of new prints, murals, and sculpture by Iranian-born, UK-based artist Mohammad Barrangi. The artist draws from the aesthetic of Persian miniature painting and is informed by his lived experience of exile and disability. Using traditional and contemporary printmaking techniques applied to handcrafted paper, Barrangi creates works inspired by his heritage, Persian myths and stories, often combining Western and Eastern imagery.

Born in Rasht, Iran, in 1988, Barrangi began drawing at the age of nine, and later went on to study art formally. With a passion for storytelling, he naturally transitioned into book illustration and graduated in Graphic Design from the Islamic Azad University of Tonekabon in 2011. Both an artist and medal-winning para-athlete, Barrangi has established an internationally respected reputation. Alongside his artistic practice, sport has played a major role in his life. At the age of 19 he began running, and joined the Iranian national team before going on to represent his country as a Paralympian. He describes competative running as a form of meditation, and a metaphor for life, "training day in and day out to become a hero".

"My work often focuses on journeys and travelling. Sometimes I will combine elements from classical Western paintings with Eastern stories or imagery."

Cultural identity is an important strand in Barrangi's work, merging Persian iconography with his own experience of seeking asylum in the UK. Having left his homeland in 2017, the artist was placed in an initial accommodation centre in Wakefield. During this time, he was introduced to The Art House and welcomed into the Studio of Sanctuary residency programme. His practice is deeply rooted in exploring the concepts of migration, and centres around the storytelling of travel and journeys. The symbols and motifs found across the city of Rasht continue to inform his artworks, which often reimagine stories of Persian folklore.

Opposite: Noah's Ark, 2021



Reoccurring motifs found in his prints are images of women and animals, often combining them both to create dream-like and hybrid creatures whose figures are manipulated to feature beautiful human heads on the bodies of strong animals. To create his magical creatures, Barrangi uses animals found in Iranian iconography, such as elephants that are a symbol of royalty, felines that feature prominently throughout mythological stories, and bulls that represent the earth. Other animals include the Persian fallow deer, which is native to Iran and has long featured as a motif throughout the country's history, and the zebra, an animal often described as a symbol of community, freedom, and balance.

"My work ultimately shapes me, my feelings and view of the community around me, so while every exhibition is different it comes from my own innermost feelings. Every exhibition I like to try new methods and new work. Of course, there is a risk, but for me it is a challenge."

**Dreamland** marks the first time Barrangi has translated his evocative illustrations into sculptural forms, which have been developed using pioneering 3D-printing technology. Central to the exhibition is **Wonderland** (2022), a 2.5-metre-tall sculpture of a woman riding a stag, a reoccurring character in his work. **Waiting for a Saviour** (2022) is Barrangi's first mural to include a three-dimensional form. Mounted to extend out from the work, is the zebra-unicorn, a fantastical hybrid creature taken from the 2022 **The Mystical Creatures of Eden** canvas series, in which the artist attempts to blur the boundaries between imagination and reality.

"I live in a wonderland where anything is possible. You do not need a passport to travel to my world. Everyone lives in a common world and a land. In my world, animals talk. Humans and animals have one nature – a combination of human and animal."

Birds feature significantly in Persian art and culture, representing salvation and the breaking of control. Flying birds, alongside his human-bird-hybrid, reoccur in Barrangi's works. Referencing the migration of birds as an act of survival – as is also the case for many humans across the world – the artist uses this imagery to represent companionship, movement, and freedom, as well as advocating for the importance of worldwide, cross-cultural understanding.



"I imagine myself as a bird flying over the borders regardless of country or nationality."



It is important to the artist that his characters are female, and Barrangi has stated that in his world "all heroes are women". He includes those he admires or has a personal connection with, such as friends and family members, especially his mother, who has had a powerful influence in his life.

Other inspirational women include exiled Iranian queens, such as Queen Soraya, wife of the late Shah of Iran and Princess Fawzia Fuad of Egypt, the first wife of Mohammed Reza Pahlavi. Also referenced, is the artist Frida Kahlo, and the British-Irish catwalk model Frin O'Connor.

Above: Discussions in a Surreal World, 2021 and The Mystical Creatures of Eden, 2022

#### MOHAMMAD BARRANGI AND THE ART HOUSE

**Dreamland** is Barrangi's most ambitious and comprehensive solo exhibition to date. It is a celebration of the artist's working relationship with The Art House, which began in 2017 when he was welcomed into the Studio of Sanctuary programme, the first of its kind in the UK, which supports artists seeking asylum to re-establish their creative practice.

Made specifically for the exhibition, Barrangi has created **Blue Homes** (2022), a series of sculptures inspired by his reflection of The Art House as a welcoming safe space which offers a feeling of 'home' and a sanctuary for many people.

The title references Barrangi's time in an immigration detention centre in 2018, when the artist was kept in a cell for 20 days, with the light – which was blue – kept on all day and night. The Art House was instrumental in successfully advocating for his release, preventing his deportation, and even housing the artist on-site after his accommodation was revoked.

"Wakefield and The Art House were a sense of comfort during that time, and helped in allowing me to rediscover myself and my artistic process. The Art House has always been a place of beginnings for me in the UK. The name 'Art House' feels more like 'Art Home' for me."

This period was a time of deep contemplation for the artist. Each of theses works take the form of a house, however the space is not large enough to accommodate a person comfortably. Every side of the sculptures represent aspects of his thinking during confinement, including fear, immigration, dreams, and the childhood memories that consoled him. Illustrations of birds in flight feature as another representation of freedom, which has always been a key theme throughout Barrangi's practice. The work brings together conflicting ideas of home as a sanctuary and as a place of confinement, and speaks about the power of imagination and the privilege of freedom.

"Creating this sculpture has been like a release of these feelings that I have been suppressing for all these years... I hope the work shows that it is possible to get through anything, even if for a time in your life, the only thing that feels like it exists is one blue light, and nothing more. However, so long as we have hope and dreams, life can go on."

## **PRINTMAKING**



Born with the use of only one arm, Barrangi works directly on the floor and uses his feet to stabilise his prints while he is cutting or printing. Reflecting on his lived experience, the artist's work includes characters with missing arms, legs or limb difference.

To create his prints, Barrangi begins by preparing handcrafted papers. Inspired by scientific illustrations, storytelling, and text, the artist uses a unique process involving traditional Persian calligraphy to create drawings, which he then digitises. Using inkjet printouts, he transfers the designs using solvents, collaging them directly onto paper which has been prepared with Iranian wood stain. The final results are delicate works on paper that evoke ancient manuscripts, both in colour and in texture, and in which the artist hopes to transport his audience to Iran using his art.

"As a disabled artist, I like to show images of people who are missing arms or other limbs, or have another disability, and show them in a new way."

Challenging the boundaries of Persian miniature painting, Barrangi's prints are often translated into large-scale murals that occupy full gallery walls. After directly applying the prints, he embarks on the long process of rubbing away the top layer of fibres to reveal the images underneath.

In 2020, Barrangi graduated from the Royal Drawing School in London. His prints have been acquired by the British Museum, the Government Art Collection, the San Diego Museum of Art, USA, the Royal Family Collection, and are featured in many international private collections.

Above: The artist working in the studio. Photo Ben Newbould and XPLOR.

Cover: Tanaz's Dance, 2021

I create images that come from my soul and feelings in which I show part of my homeland. I use Persian calligraphy and alphabetic shapes as the main components in my work. These elements are something like poetry for me. I try to invite the audience to visit Iran by looking at my artwork and getting familiar with my process of thinking. I hope I am being able to convey a little bit of this with my art.

# - Mohammad Barrangi



Produced to coincide with Mohammad Barrangi: Dreamland, 30 March-5 June 2022, The Art House, Wakefield, the-arthouse.org.uk

Wonderland (2022), Waiting for a Saviour (2022) and Blue Homes (2022) are kindly supported by XPLOR at Production Park in Wakefield.







