

Harper's BAZAAR TALKING POINT

California DREAMING

*In Southern California, Bazaar discovers
a community of Middle Eastern women
working to create a better world*

Words by *ALEXAUBRY*
Photography by *SEBASTIAN BÖTTCHER*

Half an hour down the San Diego Freeway is Westwood Boulevard, which 45 years ago was a treeless stretch of road with an unremarkable assemblage of dry cleaners, hair salons and fast-food restaurants. By 1974, the first Persian businesses began to emerge along its corridor, a few blocks south of the University of California's campus. Today, the area in Westwood known as Persian Square, serves as the heart of Los Angeles' Iranian community. It's also home to the city's Persian culinary scene, where restaurants and patisseries offer delicacies such as faludeh, frozen rosewater noodles, and bastani, a Persian ice cream that comes in flavours such as saffron, pomegranate and cucumber served between slices of waffle.

Although LA and Tehran lie at opposite ends of the world, they've been linked together for over 50 years. The first Persian immigrants arrived in LA as students in the 1960s and prospered in the early '70s. As the 1979 revolution unfolded, a large number of educated Iranian professionals came to settle in the city and its surrounding area, attracted

by its similarities to 1970s Tehran with its sunny weather, mountainous landscape and car culture. Many more followed to join families and in search of better opportunities. As a result, the LA area boasts the largest Persian community outside Iran, and is also home to diverse immigrants from the Middle East and North Africa.

Estimated at close to 715,000, California has the greatest number of Arab Americans of any state, many of whom live in the LA area, in addition to San Diego and the San Francisco Bay. From the late 19th-20th century, they came from countries such as Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Palestine and Morocco. It's a community, which also counts a sizeable Armenian diaspora that traces its roots back to the Middle East and North Africa. Many settled in Glendale, north of downtown LA, where a mixture of Armenian, Persian and Arabic can be heard along its streets. As part of a year-long series exploring the Middle Eastern diaspora's contributions to the American fabric, *Bazaar* meets a group of California women who are bridging cultures in their own unique way. ►



Behnaz Farahi begins her day surfing at Venice Beach



The designer walking past a restored bungalow

BEHNAZ FARAHİ

Designer, Architect & Creative Technologist

the next day, while walking through USC's sprawling campus towards the School of Cinematic Arts, one of the most prestigious and cutting edge institutions in the country. It's within this creative environment that Behnaz works on innovative projects that have garnered her several high-profile awards, including the 2016 World Technology Design Award and a Rock Hudson Fellowship.

Opening the door to her studio, she reveals a world populated by techno-fabrics, 3D printers and depth-sensing cameras. "My goal is to enhance the relationship between human beings and their environment by exploring examples already found in nature," says the designer, who also co-teaches and conducts workshops on topics that include 3D printing and wearable technologies. Since 2015, she's worked on several fashion-based projects that explore the concept of body architecture and second skins. She picks up one of her more recent works, 2017's *Bodyscape*, a poncho-like garment with a surface reminiscent of a sea urchin. It incorporates minuscule LED lights that illuminate with the flow of the wearer's movements. "After *Bodyscape*, I wanted to push these materials to the edge of what they could do with other mediums," she explains, while pointing to *Opale*, a custom garment entirely covered with translucent fiber optics embedded in silicon.

This other-worldly creation comes equipped with a tiny camera that detects anger or surprise in the wearer's face, causing the fibers to bristle, droop or stand on end in response. "I was inspired by this involuntary action in animals that causes muscles and skin to set fur, feathers, quills and scales in motion as a reaction to their environment," says Behnaz, who readily admits that her work can sometimes be seen as speculative. "There are instances where I'm questioned about the purpose of such projects by people who may not immediately understand the benefits of wearable technology. Like other research fields this is the early work that needs to happen, which eventually leads to new innovations that will impact our daily lives," she says, noting that clothing is one of the most significant layers between our bodies and the environment, one which also defines who we are.

"Imagine the possibility of smart materials that reflect a person's emotions, allowing us to shift our interactions with them in a way that fosters empathy? One day it may even be normal for sportswear to have built-in sensors that detect ones posture or the speed of your movements to improve an exercise regimen," says Behnaz, while acknowledging the importance of encouraging young women and girls to see careers in science and technology as an opportunity to be creative and dream big. "What excites me every day is the possibility of having an idea that I can bring to reality, no matter how fantastical it is," says the designer, who will unveil her latest project at Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry this month. ►

“WHAT EXCITES ME IS THE POSSIBILITY OF HAVING AN IDEA THAT I CAN BRING TO REALITY”

Behnaz Farahi

“This is one of the reasons why I love living in Venice Beach,” says Behnaz Farahi, while carrying a surfboard on an early Monday morning. Walking past rows of restored Craftsman cottages, she makes her way to the nearby beach, where she begins each day surfing.

“It’s a way for me to connect with nature,” adds the Iranian-American designer and creative technologist, who works at the intersection of fashion, architecture and interactive design. “It’s not easy explaining to people what I do, because it’s about exploring the potential of interactive environments and their relationship to the movement of the human body,” says the designer, who was born into a family of academics in Tehran, where she studied for a BA and Masters in Architecture at Shahid Beheshti University.

She later pursued a second master’s degree in architecture at the University of Southern California, where she’s currently an Annenberg Fellow and PhD candidate in Interdisciplinary Media Arts and Practice at the School of Cinematic Arts. “I spent several years as an architect and never thought I’d want to do anything else,” says Behnaz, recalling the day she found herself mesmerised by a group of children playing with an interactive fountain in a park. “I couldn’t get over how much fun these kids were having and a light bulb went off in my head. It got me thinking about the future of public spaces and design in general,” adds the architect, who began exploring interactive technologies.

“We live at a time when the lines between the sciences and other creative fields are blurring,” she says, noting that people were once expected to lean to either their right (logical) or left (intuitive) brains to determine their career path. “Perhaps those two sides of us have always been one and the same, but the tools didn’t exist for us to fully embrace that notion. Today, what I find interesting is exploring ways to combine design and interactive technologies to come up with new scenarios and functions for objects that could enhance the way we live our lives,” says Behnaz



Behnaz fuses her love of technology and design to create the garments of the future



In 2018, Azniv Korkejian released her critically acclaimed folk album, *Bedouine*

AZNV KORKEJIAN

Singer and Songwriter

“This is the longest I’ve ever lived in one place as an adult,” says Azniv Korkejian, while walking along Echo Park Lake with her German shepherd, Hans, trailing behind her. Once home to a thriving Mexican-American community, the low-key neighbourhood also gave birth to the earliest silent film studios along Glendale Boulevard. Today, Echo Park has the feel of Williamsburg with its independent cafes, colourful murals and Victorian homes lining Carroll Avenue.

“I love this area because it’s walkable and has a small town feel,” says Azniv, the Syrian-Armenian-American singer, who also discovered a close-knit community of artists, writers and musicians. An hour later she enters Stories Books & Café, a local institution that’s been selling and trading books since 2008. She makes her way to the bookstore’s back patio, where its café serves fairtrade coffee and locally baked goods. “I never thought having a career in music was feasible, until I moved here and met people who were not only making a decent living from it, but also encouraging each other to grow and improve their craft,” says the songwriter, whose family is part of the Armenian diaspora that settled in Syria between 1914 and 1923.

“My mom and dad were born in Aleppo and grew up there,” says Azniv of her parents, who returned to the city to give birth to her after they’d moved to Riyadh for work. She would spend the first three months of her life in Aleppo before returning to Saudi Arabia with her parents and two older brothers. “My dad managed an American compound in Riyadh that was a self-contained village. I also attended an American school and even went trick-or-treating during Halloween,” recalls the songwriter, who visited her relatives in Syria twice a year with her family. Today she still cherishes vivid memories of Aleppo, when her extended family would converge on her paternal grandmother’s house, which she last visited in 2009 before the outbreak of war.

During those trips, she would also accompany her mother to Beirut to visit her maternal grandmother in the Armenian neighborhood of Bourj Hammoud. At the age of 10 her family won the green card lottery and moved to the United States in 1995. They settled on the outskirts of Boston for a year, where she saw snow for the first time. “I felt connected to Saudi Arabia while growing up, so it was a somewhat confusing period in my life. I went from a sheltered environment with clear borders, to one where I couldn’t tell where neighbourhoods began and ended because there weren’t any walls around us,” says Azniv, whose family eventually moved to the warmer suburbs of Houston. After graduating from high school in 2003, she went to college in LA and Austen, where she initially majored in English.

One day, while staying at a friend’s horse farm in the rolling hills of Lexington, Kentucky, she was searching online when she came across the sound design department at The Savannah College of Art and Design. “I knew I wanted to integrate my love of music into a sustainable career and it seemed like a good option,” says the songwriter, who attended an orientation at SCAD, where the chair of the department gave her a tour and recommended she apply for a scholarship. In 2008, she moved to Georgia to study post-production sound design for films and television at the school. Shortly after graduating in 2011, she set off for LA where she’d landed an internship that would turn into a full-time job editing dialogue and music in Hollywood.

A few years after leaving the company to establish her freelance career, she landed her first big film credit, editing the sound for the 2017 indie



Azniv with her German shepherd, Hans

hit, *The Big Sick*. “Even though it was a low-budget film, I had a feeling it was going to be something very special,” notes Azniv, who was also writing music at the time, which she performed at clubs in central LA. Moved by Sibylle Baier’s *Colour Green*, a lost folk album self-made on reel-to-reel tapes in the early ’70s, Azniv was determined to record her first album using a similar technique. While searching for a reel-to-reel tape machine, she approached Gus Seyffert, a friend and music producer who worked with Beck and Norah Jones.

They would end up recording a collection of 10 exquisite and intimate folk songs that formed her first album, *Bedouine*, named in reference to her nomadic life, as well as that of the Armenian diaspora. At the end of her song *Summer Cold*, Azniv recreated the sounds of her grandmother’s street in Aleppo. Amidst the noise of busy traffic and storefronts rolling up their metal gates, she layered the clicks and clacks of donkey hooves, dice falling on a backgammon board, and the clinking of tea cups against saucers. “Aleppo was our home base and a beautiful vibrant city where we would go to see family. It bothered me that I couldn’t go back and have those experiences again. A lot of my extended family have since resettled in Armenia, so recreating those sounds was a kind of therapy for me,” says Azniv, who also explores the difficult decision of leaving one’s home in *Louise*, a song she sings in Armenian.

Through the language, she was able to reflect on a personal story that speaks to a larger issue. “I was thinking a lot about my family members who decided to stay in Syria during the war and those who left. I asked my parents why would they stay? Shouldn’t they leave at all costs?” says the songwriter, who realised the answers to her questions were far more complex. “The more I thought about it, the more I sympathised with their position and how difficult it must be to start over again and leave everything behind,” she adds of the song, which is ultimately about trusting one’s own decisions in spite of what others may say or think.

The past year has also found her touring the US, Canada and Europe. “It still feels very surreal to think that I can travel the world to do what I love, and I want to continue writing songs that speak to our shared experiences and truths,” says the songwriter, who will release her second album in the spring. ▶

“ALEPPO WAS OUR HOME BASE AND A BEAUTIFUL, VIBRANT CITY”
Azniv Korkejian



Melody Ehsani combines her passion for social justice with her love of design

MELODY EHSANI

Designer

“I typically carve out time to meditate or catch up on reading when I wake up early each morning,” says Melody Ehsani, over cups of tea at her home in the Silver Lake neighborhood of LA. Walking towards a bookshelf, she scans its contents, which have long served as a source of inspiration and guidance over the years. They include works by James Baldwin, Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* and a translation of Hafiz’s poetry by Daniel Ladinsky. “This is the book that came into my life at a time when I was questioning a lot of things,” says the Iranian-American designer, while holding up *Atlas Shrugged* by Ayn Rand, a novel about a talented architect whose vision went against tradition and the status quo.

“It’s ultimately about the individual versus the collective, and how society can fear what’s different,” says Melody, who came across the book while interning in 2001 at the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights in Washington DC. “It was a surreal time, because I arrived there a week after September 11th. I was an undergrad at UCLA and trying to decide whether to pursue a law degree because I was passionate about social justice,” says the designer, who realised soon after her internship, that the practice of law wasn’t the career path she wanted to take. It was also a time in her life when she faced pressure from both family and community to marry and have children.

“In many cultures, there’s the pressure to conform to certain career choices, such as law or medicine, which are considered safe yet can also be limiting. I also couldn’t understand why a woman’s value had to be attached to whom she marries and the number of children she has. The thought of making major life decisions based on what others think is right for you or how a community will judge you, didn’t sit well with me,” says Melody, who graduated from UCLA with a bachelor’s in philosophy and sociology. It was while taking a year off that she realised there were other ways to pursue her passion for social justice. Growing up in an Iranian family, also allowed her to tap into spiritual practices that helped her along the way.

“Self-care is very important to me, which is why I take time to meditate each day. It helps in cultivating self-awareness and becoming intuitive enough to make better decisions. It’s also a practice that centres me and puts things into perspective,” Melody says, of how she reached the decision to pursue a career in design. While researching product design, she came across the ArtCenter College of Design in Pasadena and enrolled in its program. Shortly after graduating, she landed an internship with the sneaker company, Creative Recreation, which led to launching her own line of shoes in 2007.

“It was a big learning experience for me, as I refined my vision and what I wanted to say through my brand,” notes the designer, who moved to Guangzhou, China, for six months to work with a factory. Three years later, her career would take an unexpected turn when her entire shipment of shoes was seized at US Customs, which required a large sum of money to be released. She shifted her focus instead to designing jewellery made from materials such as laser-cut acrylic and gold-plated metals. Initially working out of her studio apartment, she began selling on social media platforms and her business soon grew through word of mouth.

Her rings caught the eye of Erykah Badu, who tapped Melody to design a dozen pieces of jewellery, one of which appeared on the cover of the singer’s 2008 album. By the time she’d opened her store on North Fairfax Avenue four years later, she’d already established a client base that included Rihanna, Alicia Keys and Solange. Although she was the only woman-owned brand on a street populated by male-centered street wear labels, she transformed her store into a space where female skateboarders and girls

from the local high school could hang out. “One of the reasons I opened my store was to create a space where young women can feel empowered,” says Melody, who was the first female designer to have a multi-year collaboration with Reebok from 2012-2017.

Later in the afternoon, she stops by her store where clean white walls provide a backdrop for a rotating selection of artworks such as a large photograph of a famous New York women’s march from the 1970s. The jewellery, apparel and accessories on display feature phrases such as

‘You are not your history’ and ‘Stop waiting to be who you already are.’ Despite her celebrity following, the designer insists on keeping her pieces reasonably priced, with a portion of proceeds from sales going to charities that support the advancement and education of women of colour. She also regularly hosts free talks and performances at her store featuring dynamic women such as Serena Williams, Lauryn Hill and Lena Waithe. “For me activism is about using whatever is at your disposal to make your voice heard. Knowing I have the opportunity to do that is what motivates me to work even harder.” ➤

“I OPENED MY STORE TO CREATE A SPACE WHERE YOUNG WOMEN CAN FEEL EMPOWERED”

Melody Ehsani



Melody at her LA store, which serves as a community space that empowers women

ROSHI RAHMANA

Founder and Director of Advocartsy

“Love is the bridge between you and everything,” says Roshi Rahnama, while quoting Rumi, the 13th-century Persian poet, scholar and Sufi mystic. It’s an apt statement for the founder and director of Advocartsy, an organisation dedicated to bridging cultural divides through the artists of the Iranian diaspora, who are exploring ideas of identity that ultimately brings the conversation back to Rumi. “As a child of the diaspora and an Iranian-American, ones identity is formed through a constant process of negotiation. In my case, what grounds me are the teachings of Persian poets and philosophers, such as Hafiz and Rumi,” says the Tehran-born former lawyer, who vividly recalls the day she left Iran with her parents and brother on January 16, 1979.



The lawyer-turned-arts advocate, Roshi Rahnama, at her gallery space in downtown LA

“I was 11 years old and I remember boarding the plane, where a copy of the local newspaper, *Kayhan*, had been placed on each seat, with the headline announcing the Shah had left Iran that day,” says Roshi, noting that although she was too young to fully comprehend that moment in time, it was nevertheless seared into her memory. “The irony is that this particular newspaper headline has surfaced in a number of contemporary artworks over the years, because it came to encapsulate a period in history,” adds the arts advocate, who settled with her family in the suburb of Westlake Village, 30 miles from LA.

Her exposure to art came the day her 11th grade teacher took her class to visit the ArtCenter College of Design in Pasadena. “I was completely taken by this magical place. When I told my dad I was considering applying to art school, he advised me to pursue it as a hobby,” she says, while walking amongst thought-provoking artwork on display at The Space, her organisation’s gallery, which acts as an incubator for Iranian artists based in LA, as well as the larger diaspora. Located along a stretch of San Pedro Street in downtown LA, its very location is meant to shake up the local art scene by providing a space where the immigrant and the silenced can be heard.

“It was important to create a venue that’s not only welcoming and engaging, but also catches people off guard the moment they walk in,” says Roshi of the gallery, that’s not far from LA’s ever-expanding arts district. “What called me into action to establish Advocartsy in January 2015, was the need to connect the Iranian contemporary art scene to LA’s network of arts organisations, museums, foundations and collectors,” she says, while adding that Advocartsy is also focused on educating the larger public through art. “Particularly in the climate we live in today, it’s an opportunity to communicate in meaningful ways because art disarms and transcends borders,” says Roshi, who decided to launch her organisation with Art Brief, a series of pop-up exhibitions, the fourth iteration of which took place in San Francisco.

Since its launch, the Art Brief series has had a measurable impact on the arts scene, as well as LA’s museum world. “A number of works showcased in our exhibitions have since been acquired by LACMA as part of their permanent collection,” says Roshi, who majored in Mathematics and Computer Science at the University of California in LA. “UCLA is where I reconnected with my Persian identity, because

I was meeting so many young Iranians on campus,” she recalls of the university, where she served as the vice president of the Iranian Student Group, an experience that nurtured within her a desire to serve her community. She went on to pursue a law degree at LA’s Loyola Marymount University and joined a law firm shortly after graduating in 1992.

“Advocating for others has always come naturally to me, as it’s one way to foster substantive change,” says Roshi, who was involved in several organisations such as the California Lawyers for the Arts as well as the LA chapter of the Iranian American Lawyers Association, where she served as its president in 2015. Although she’d practiced law for 24 years, her first encounter with the world of art as an 11th-grader had stayed with her. “By the time I’d had my first child, I was beginning to explore ways of combining my advocacy work with my love of contemporary art,” says the former lawyer, who credits strong female mentors with guiding her throughout her career move.

They include the late Massoumeh Seyhoun, who founded her influential Tehran art gallery in 1966. “She helped establish Tehran’s gallery system at a time when there were very few venues to show this kind of work,” notes Roshi, who joined the board of the LA-based Farhang Foundation, which was established in 2008 to promote and celebrate Iranian arts and culture. It was there that she met another important mentor, the late Anousheh Razi, who co-founded the foundation with her husband Ali. “I’m lucky to have had these inspiring role models, who encouraged me each step of the way,” notes the arts advocate, who went on to become one of the founding members and the chair of the Farhang’s Fine Arts Council.

“I learnt a lot of lessons during that period, which I still use today in my work with Advocartsy,” says Roshi, who is preparing a major retrospective on the LA-based analogue photographer Hadi Salehi, for which she’s also producing a film about the artist. Such projects, reflect her organisation’s ongoing mission to create talks, publications and screenings around exhibitions, in order to engage diverse audiences. “Prejudice can’t be overcome through isolation, particularly in a world where we need to encourage more opportunities for positive exchange. That’s the end goal for me and I hope to carry on this work for many years to come.” ■

“ART DISARMS AND TRANSCENDS BORDERS”
Roshi Rahnama

Advocartsy's founder uses the platform to bridge cultural divides

