

DRIVING FORCE:

ZIBA ARDALAN AND PARASOL UNIT

In the hurly-burly of the art world, creating and running a not-for-profit space is never easy. It requires a suite of strengths, not least imagination and determination.

James Parry meets Ziba Ardanan, who returned to her curatorial roots to set up one of London's most innovative art venues.





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he London districts of Hackney and Islington remain one of the British capital's many paradoxes. With deprived estates and elegant terraces often juxtaposed, their post-industrial landscape has an edgy, frontier-style character much beloved of artists and the cultural glitterati. In the heart of this sometimes incongruous mix, located on Wharf Road in the City Road Basin, is the gallery Parasol unit. As one of the capital's few genuinely not-for-profit art venues, Parasol has carved a very special niche for itself and it is indeed hard to believe that it has only been in existence for five years. It represents many things, but first and foremost a very personal achievement by one woman: Ziba Ardan.

Ardan grew up in Iran but was sent to Switzerland to study. There was little doubt in her mind that she was on a kind of mission. "In the 1960s there was a pattern among young Persians educated overseas," she recalls; "You'd go and study so that you could come back and contribute to the development of the country. So I certainly felt that I had to achieve something for my family and my nation, so that both could be proud of me." Her academic training was initially in science, and she ultimately undertook a PhD in physical chemistry. At that time in her life, art was a purely recreational pastime, but signs of the direction her life was to take later on were beginning to stir: "My art antennae started to really twitch when I saw a Warhol show at Bruno Bischofberger's gallery in Zurich. I was quite captivated."

Opening spread: Ziba Ardan de Weck with a work by Shaun McDowell. Untitled. 2009. Oil stick on board. 119 x 157 cm. Photography by Jake Gavin.

Above: Ziba Ardan de Weck and YZ Kami with two works by Kami. Left: Untitled. 2010. Oil on linen. 46 x 28 cm; Right: White Dome. 2010. Oil on linen. 127 x 139.7 cm. Photography by Lana Kurtz.



*Parasol unit exterior.
Courtesy Parasol unit.*



GOING WEST

Meanwhile, Ardalan had married Pierre de Weck, whose banking career subsequently took them to the USA and, for his wife at least, to a new set of professional horizons. She was offered the chance of a science research fellowship at an American college, but was by then rethinking her whole approach. "I really wanted my creative side to come out and so decided that it was time to do something about it," she recalls. She subsequently enrolled as an art history undergraduate at Columbia University and became a volunteer at the Whitney Museum of American Art. This proved to be a defining moment, and one that would shape the next chapter in Ardalan's life.

At that time, the Whitney, and New York generally, was at the epicentre of all that was brave and new about the Contemporary art scene. Through her involvement with the Whitney, including attendance on a one-year curatorial course with a decidedly practical slant, Ardalan was able to get firsthand experience of top-line shows by living

artists, something she looks back on now as "a hugely important education and experience". Her key opportunity came in 1984 and was one which she took with both hands and made her own.

One of Ardalan's great passions is the American artist Winslow Homer, whose love of the sea and skill at portraying that most fickle of the elements is something she has always found spell-binding. She proposed an exhibition to the Whitney of his East Coast seascapes, and was invited to guest-curate it, travelling across the USA to secure the required loans. The result was the highly successful show *Winslow Homer and the New England Coast*, which ran at the Whitney from November 1984–January 1985. Ardalan had succeeded in re-inventing herself as an art curator, amassing a vast amount of invaluable experience in an arena that was leading the world at that time; "It was wonderful to be in New York then. I loved all the East Side galleries, the scene was really hot and some very exciting art was going on. I was particularly fortunate in that I learned about exhibition installation in the USA, where standards are very demanding."

Darren Almond. Tide. 2008. 600 digital wall clocks. Perspex, electro-mechanics, steel, vinyl, computerised electronic control system and components. Each clock is 31.2 x 18.2 x 14.2 cm. Photography by Hugo Glendinning. Courtesy Parasol unit.

*Parasol unit interior.
Photography by James Morris.*



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On the back of this success, Ardalan returned to Switzerland (her husband’s job requiring a move back to Europe) and after an abortive attempt to open up a *Kunsthalle* – “Sadly, I was regarded as an incomer and outsider, which on both counts meant that there was a lot of resistance to the idea” – she returned to the USA. Here, ironically, she was invited to set up what was to become the highly successful Swiss Institute of Contemporary Art in NYC. She later returned to Switzerland and by her own admission, was preparing for a quieter period in her life. Yet a sense of unfulfilment lingered: “It was my husband who could see that I wasn’t yet done as a curator, that I had another big project in me.”

STARTING AFRESH

So in 1999, Ardalan travelled to London, then enjoying one of its brightest artistic moments, with the YBAs and their successors holding centre stage and opportunities opening up all the time. “I didn’t know a soul in the London art world then, it was all foreign territory to me,” she remembers. “Yet the desire to curate shows was so strong, that’s what drove me on.” Ardalan worked hard, familiarising herself with the city’s gallery scene, and then met Victoria Miro, who in 2000 had bought two semi-derelict warehouses on Wharf

Road. She was busy converting one of them into her own gallery, but was looking to sell part of the building next door.

A former furniture factory, this space was later to become Parasol unit, Ardalan’s most impressive undertaking to date. “It was really very undesirable then,” she recalls. “Over three floors, full of columns, dark and gloomy.” It certainly required a leap of faith and imagination, yet Ardalan could see nothing but fabulous opportunities. “I didn’t really pay any attention to what anyone else thought, which was probably a good thing! I didn’t know why I couldn’t do it. So I made it happen.”

A refurbishment project designed by Italian architect Claudio Silvestrin and costing \$9 million was drawn up, but Ardalan was anxious to start using the space for art as soon as possible. So she invited seven artists from Rio de Janeiro to come and create site-specific installations in the then raw space. The result, a show called *Unbound*, helped set the stage for the imaginative programme of exhibitions which has since become Parasol’s hallmark.

The official opening of the gallery came on 4 May 2005, with a Michaël Borremans show. The Belgian artist’s strangely prosaic but unerringly powerful paintings put Ardalan and her new space firmly on the map: “The response was amazing, way beyond what I’d anticipated,” she recalls. “Everyone was waiting for that show, because Boormans had suddenly become much better known and people were so keen to see his work.”

*Installation view with a sculpture
by Hans Josephsohn and paintings
by Shaun McDowell from the
2009 exhibition Visible Invisible:
Against the Security of the Real.
Courtesy of Parasol unit.*

MATTERS OF PRINCIPLE

Since then, an adventurous and dramatic series of exhibitions has placed Parasol at the forefront of Contemporary art in the British capital and secured it an enviable international reputation. Artists shown there include Mona Hatoum (*Canvas 6.1*), Keith Tyson and Y Z Kami (*Canvas 5.3*), who in 2008/9 held his first one-man show in the UK at Parasol with *Endless Prayers*. Ardalan continues to keep in close contact with Kami, recently visiting him in his New York studio. She values the personal nature of what she does, but is unequivocal about promoting artists from one particular region – the Middle East, say – over any other; “I don’t think it’s doing Middle Eastern artists justice to show them just because they’re from the Middle East. I choose artists because they have something interesting to say and express their ideas in stimulating and innovative ways.”

Through Parasol, Ardalan has made a point of mounting first major one-person shows in the UK, as well as exploring important themes that receive little attention in other venues. In March 2007 the unit premiered *Momentary Momentum: Animated Drawings*, the first major show to look at the role of animated drawing in Contemporary art, and earlier this year held *Visible Invisible: Against the Security of the Real*, an outstanding exploration of deceit and deception, illusionism and abstraction, in the minds and eyes of five artists.

A busy education programme brings local school-children to the unit, which also offers internships to fine art and art history graduates. The three- to four-month long placements are designed to equip the interns with an introduction and overview of the realities of working in a not-for-profit arts institution. “Not-for-profit spaces need to be properly run and managed,” maintains Ardalan. She does this at Parasol with a small staff – just four full-timers, with extra help brought in as and when required.

Ardalan always wanted to create a space that was a genuine *Kunsthalle*, in the sense that it deals solely with loan shows from museums and other galleries. She works on a schedule of four shows per year in a range of media and featuring both UK-based and international artists, a mix of established names and up-and-coming talents. She wants to be responsive and reactive, so doesn’t plan too far ahead, “but I never do selling shows,” she declares. “First and foremost, I’m a curator. I have no training in running a commercial gallery and wouldn’t want to try. Besides, for me, there’s a purity and a beauty in presenting art for art’s sake.” Almost uniquely among London galleries, that’s precisely what Parasol is all about. Now, five years after it opened, is Ardalan satisfied? “Yes, I am,” she admits; “I’ve finally realised what I’ve achieved.” And what does her husband make of it? “He’s delighted that I’m the old Ziba!” comes the reply. 

For more information visit www.parasol-unit.org



