

REZA AND

MAMALI SHAFABI

INTERVIEW BY JINA KHAYYER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MELIKA SHAFABI





At the beginning there was daddy sperm. DADDY is Reza Shafahi, born in 1940 in Saveh, Iran, an ancient metropolis located southwest of Tehran, known for its pomegranates, melons, wheat, and cotton. Saveh is a wealthy city, once ruled by Reza's father, a rich patriarch who until the late '30s owned pretty much every business in the city. But Reza did not see much of his father's wealth and splendour. He died when Reza was only two years old and the fortune was shared out between his father's many siblings, five brothers and multiple sisters. Not much was left for Reza by the time he came of age.

Reza grew up to become a professional wrestler, a very popular sport in Iran, comparable to the status of football players in Europe. Reza was good at wrestling. As a wrestler he earned respect and, with the name of his father still echoing through every alleyway, he was among the beloved bourgeois of Saveh. Reza's troubles began when he discovered playing cards. In Iran it is common to play cards, everyone does it, from the old to the young, but Reza played for money. His games were poker and rummy. Much like his experiences in sport with wrestling, Reza enjoyed that his skills in playing cards developed as he practised. The more he practised, the better he played. So Reza played and played until gradually what started as a pastime turned into an addiction. Reza began to stay away from home, playing for 48 hours or more. The addiction slowly took over his life until he was left with only one option: he needed to win big to pay off his gambling debts, but he lost, hands down. In the meantime, Reza had married and fathered three daughters and one son. SPERM is Mamali Shafahi, Reza's son. Mamali was born in 1982 in Saveh, three years after the Islamic Revolution, the year the war between Iran and Iraq broke out. Mamali has few memories of his early childhood. It was war. The name of his grandfather was still very respected in Saveh, so merchants would spoil Mamali. His dad was mostly absent. For many years Mamali, his sisters, and even his mother believed that his dad was working a lot, which is what fathers do, but in reality he was gambling. When Mamali's mother found out that her husband had a gambling problem, she decided that they had to move to Tehran. She was afraid that Reza would keep on asking people for more money and that because of his respected family name people would continue to give him loans. In Iranian society, even if you lose all your



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financial wealth, a once-respected family name means a lot. Reza's credit in Saveh would have been unlimited. So they left Saveh and moved to Karaj, a suburb of Tehran. Reza's debts followed him to Karaj. The book-makers were after him, he had to go into hiding. He remained absent as a father, this time for many years. Mamali's mother took charge, overnight transforming herself radically from a bourgeois woman of leisure to a worker. She found a job as a teacher at a college in Tehran and went to work every day from 5am until 7pm, commuting by bus, until all the gambling debts were paid off and Reza could come out of hiding. In the meantime, Mamali became an

And art, is it hereditary too? Is all information lodged in every nucleus of a sperm cell? Or is it like roulette, you never know what you'll get? To find his answers, Mamali invited his father, Reza, to participate in a daily drawing exercise. Reza had never held a coloured pencil in his hands before. By proposing this delicate tool, Mamali was hoping to learn more about his dad through what he would draw. The idea was for father and son to work on identical subjects; his dad would go first and create the original image which Mamali would use as a base for his sculptures. The aim was to show the works side by side, to see if there was any visible genetic link. Growing



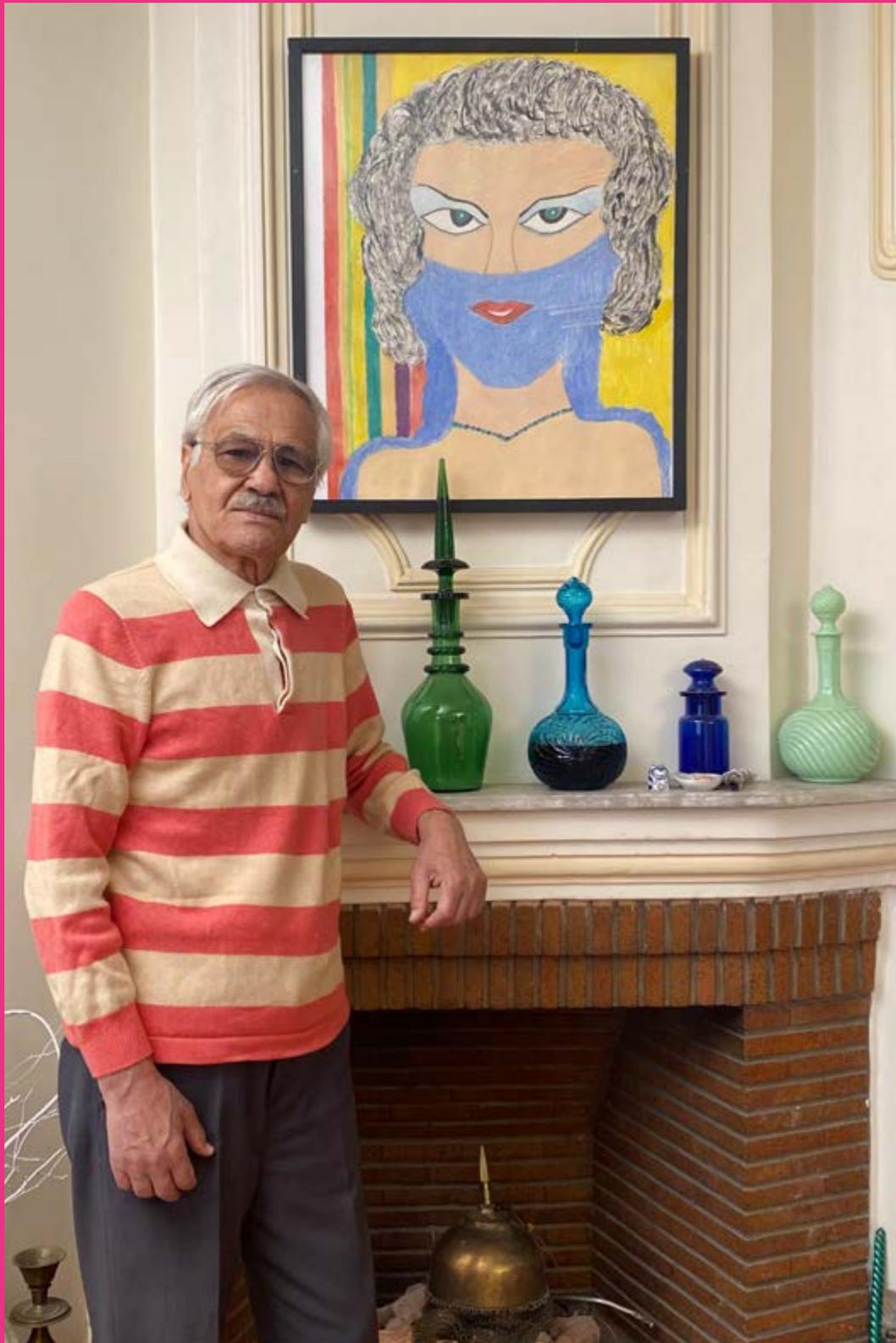
artist, left Iran, moved to Paris, and came out. DADDY SPERM is a long-term art project by the multimedia artist Mamali Shafahi, which investigates the dynamic between creator and subject, artist and artwork, and father and son. It is a reflection on the miracle of life and how a single drop of liquid becomes a being. First exhibited in its most complete form at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris in 2019, *Daddy Sperm* encompasses paintings, sculptures, and video installations that all try to answer Mamali's questions: what is coded within one's DNA? Is there such a thing as a genetic link? What is genetic? Can addiction be inherited? What about self-destruction, is that also heritable?

up without a present father, Mamali wanted to see if he could connect with his father through art. He could. Reza Shafahi hasn't stopped drawing since. A decade later and now in his late 70s, Reza has built a widely respected art career for himself, exhibiting his work in New York and Paris. This is the first interview the artists Mamali and Reza Shafahi have given together.

Who gave birth to whom?

Mamali: My dad gave his sperm so I was created, but then I gave birth to him as an artist. Now people think I'm the son of the artist Reza





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Shafahi, while Reza used to be the father of the artist Mamali Shafahi.

Coming out as an artist at the age of 72, how did that feel?

Reza: I always loved the arts, especially poetry and literature. At some point in my youth I even wanted to be a novelist. I was good at it, but it all got covered by the addiction; the cards led me the wrong way. Growing up I never had anyone believing in me, until my son encouraged me.

Are you surprised to see what was hidden in you after all that time?

women, especially Iranian women navigating through the Islamic world—their beauty, their ability to seduce.

Your colours glow.

Reza: At the beginning my drawings were simple, black pen on paper. My son and his friends encouraged me, saying they liked my work. That gave me energy, it somehow switched on my athlete's mind: work hard every day, practise to get better and better. I soon started using coloured pencils. Then I tried oil for a while until I discovered acrylic paints. I have a secret way of mixing them, hence the glow.

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Reza: I'm excited. My first love was writing and poetry and I'm still a big reader. Now I draw what I read. I translate poems by great Persian poets into paintings, songs of beauty, love, and desire by Khayyam, Hafez, Forough Farrokhzad. But I also depict my own fantasies.

Your work is very vivid, often sexual.

Reza: Persian poetry is very abundant; all texts are about desire. The same applies to Persian miniatures, which I also find very inspiring. Persian culture is sexual and gluttonous, it's not minimal. Look at our landscapes, it's all bountiful, the mountains, the flowers, the fruits, the women. I was always inspired by

You offered your dad a second spring. How old were you when you discovered that you wanted to be an artist?

Mamali: I was maybe 14, 15, but first I thought I would be a filmmaker. I was obsessed with cinema. You might be aware that since the Islamic Revolution everything that is against the Islamic worldview is forbidden in Iran. Parties, music, alcohol, and especially art are either illegal or censored. The moral guardians famously censor paintings and photographs; cinema is the only exception.

How come?

Mamali: Some said the reason why Ayatol-

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lah Khomeini allowed cinema was because he loved movies, even American movies, like *Spartacus* or *Ben-Hur*.

What were your favourite movies at that time?

Mamali: *Salaam Cinema* by Mohsen Makhmalbaf. It is still one of my favourite movies. Makhmalbaf was a giant in the '90s. I remember going to the cinema every week with my older sister who was also a big fan. We would go together, downtown, to Enqelab Street [Islamic Revolution Street]. I remember each time Makhmalbaf had a new film coming out there was a two-week-long queue, you couldn't even get in.



If everything apart from cinema was censored in Iran, how did you first come to learn about contemporary art?

Mamali: The first time I was introduced to paintings I was 18 years old. I was trying to get into the public university, which is very hard in Tehran. There are so many applicants and not enough study places, so you have to do a kind of preparatory school. That's where I met a teacher who opened the whole art world to me. He owned a small library with badly printed artbooks. I didn't like Gauguin for a long time because the printing quality of the books was so bad; almost all his paintings seemed brown.

Coming of age is tricky for pretty much every human all over the world, but I imagine being a teen boy in Iran in the '90s, with a father in hiding because he is a gambler, is as hard as it gets.

Mamali: It was violent. The violence was really in everyday life. I remember once walking down the street with my mum when a moral guardian came and took my hand, pushing me into a corner, yelling at me to tell my mother that she should put on her hijab correctly. My mum wasn't a provocative woman, she never tried to stand out with a coloured or slipped headscarf, she always tried to keep a low profile. Yet the Basij always made up reasons to bother us.

Are the Basij the moral guardians?

Mamali: Yes, Ayatollah Khomeini invented them. They were volunteers, a kind of community police to keep the order. They had a lot of power during and after the war. They were even allowed to come into your house. I once got slapped in the face by one of them, just because he didn't like the way I dressed. The worst was when I got picked up and they took me to the police station because, according to them, my hair was too long. They shaved my hair.

How old were you?

Mamali: I was 14, 15. It was hard to be a teen-



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ager in Iran. I remember in the late '90s Western culture arrived in Iran, with all those cool brands like Levi's and Caterpillar. They would arrest us almost every week on the street for not dressing appropriately. Or they would just come to our homes and crash private parties, arresting everybody.

For what reason?

Mamali: Since the Islamic Revolution every form of entertainment is forbidden. No music, no parties, no alcohol. Men and women, if they are not married or at least related, are not allowed in the same space unless the women cover up.

everyone had sticks—'baton' we call them, a kind of rubber truncheon.

What happened when you got arrested?

Mamali: They put you in a minivan and then usually you would stay for one or two nights in a temporary prison until they called you before a judge. It was all a farce, there were two sentences. Either you paid or they whipped you. But sometimes they didn't even give you that choice and sentenced you to 100 whips or worse.

Did you get whipped?

Mamali: I was lucky because I was young;



How did the Basij enter? Did they knock on the door? Or ring?

Mamali: They had very nasty techniques. Often they would hide in the bushes or behind trees and wait until someone arrived or left the house and enter with them; they would just push their way in. One time we were dancing when all of a sudden a gang of Basijis appeared in the middle of the living room. They came in civilian clothes; they didn't have an official uniform. The only recognisable thing they wore was a Hezbollah scarf.

Did they have weapons?

Mamali: At least one of them had a gun, ev-

I was still under 16 in those harsh days. Then the government changed, and when Khatami arrived things got much better.

When did you realise that you are gay?

Mamali: In my teens I thought my ideal status was being bisexual, because I thought it's interesting being open. I had very naive ideas of sex. Later I understood I was attracted to men.

Were you able to live out your desires in Tehran back then?

Mamali: I had some experience through Yahoo Rooms.

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What is Yahoo Rooms?

Mamali: At that time, it was the Grindr of Iran. It was really funny because there were no pictures, you couldn't see the face or anything. It was mainly blind dates. You just said your age and if you were top or bottom and went for a coffee. I did it a few times, but all my experiences were really bad.

Bad how?

Mamali: It was the first generation of being out; they didn't have experience. The sex was just bad. Seven out of 10 times it was not great. In Europe it's the opposite; sex culture is very rich here. Some guys in Paris, when I have



sex with them I feel like, 'Wow, this guy is a master'. They really surprise you. You can see they put everything into it.

How old were you when you left Iran?

Mamali: I was 23.

Did you leave because you are gay?

Mamali: Yes, I left for my sexuality and my art. I had wanted to leave since I was a teen. It wasn't easy though. I was scared. It was the first time I took a plane in my life. I remember when it took off, I felt like I had no weight. I was heading into the unknown. I knew no one in Paris, I didn't speak French.

Seven years later, in 2019, you opened your first major institutional exhibition at the Palais de Tokyo, in Paris: Daddy Sperm, a long-term art project which began as a reflection on how a single drop of liquid becomes a being and turned into an investigation of the relationship between father and son. Within this body of work, you directed a film called Nature Morte in which your parents played the leading roles. It was all filmed in Tehran at your parents' home. The film starts with a confession scene: you're facing your father, who has his back turned to the camera and you tell him, 'I am pregnant'. Mamali: Saying 'I'm gay' in Iran is as alien as it is for a man to say, 'I am pregnant'. We don't



talk about perversity at all. Everyone plays as if it doesn't exist.

What do you mean by perversity?

Mamali: In Muslim culture to talk about sex and sexuality is considered perverted. It's part of the religious education we get.

Were you raised religiously?

Mamali: Not from my mum's side and certainly not from my dad's side, but in school they force you to go to the mosque and to pray.

Friday prayer?

Mamali: Every day. I can still smell the mosques.





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What do they smell like?

Mamali: Not so pleasant, the sweet smell of roses and sweat. Mosques are dirty places.

Did you have to pray all five prayers a day?

Mamali: It depended. At school we had to do it once, at noon; that's the main prayer. Then the rest, like sunrise and sunset prayer, we had to do at home.

Can you still recite the prayer?

Mamali: No.

Have you forgotten?

Mamali: I never did it seriously. I only pre-

are a great student, if you have no religion, you have no value'. I felt humiliated.

You said earlier that you discovered your sexuality as a late teen. Do you remember a pivotal moment?

Mamali: I discovered my sexuality through cinema actually, through Pasolini movies, as it was the only uncensored medium allowed. But for a long time I confused sexuality with perversion. I come from a place where God and family are the fundamental values.

The relationship between father and son is everywhere a complex matter. But especially



tended. At some point me and my best friend made so much trouble at the mosque that they didn't let us in anymore.

What kind of trouble?

Mamali: We laughed, sang out loud, made fun of the mullahs' outfits, I don't know, teenage things. One year, I was the best in class. At the end of the year they always gave an award to the best student, but the director said, 'Mamali is a very talented student, but we won't give him a prize because he didn't come to pray'. The director said that in front of all the parents and students. I will never forget that, how the director went on and on saying, 'Even if you

in Iran the image of masculinity, the concept of manhood, is extremely archaic. It's even manifested in the laws: men must become husbands and fathers, husbands rule wives, fathers rule children. Passports contain the full name of the father, as an identity feature. Even inheritance is distributed in the males' favour: 50 percent goes to the son, and he is always the main heir.

Mamali: This is exactly why I did *Nature Morte*, to dismantle the classic hierarchy. Even in Iran the patriarchy is changing, the whole pyramid of family is in question. I'm not the only one who grew up with a strong mother ruling the house. Before *Daddy*

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Sperm, I never realised the influence kids can have on their parents. We talk a lot about how much of our parents is in us, but we don't look at how much of us is in our parents.

What do you see when you look at your father?

Mamali: I think you are a very good guy. You are nice and gentle. But when you have kids you should take responsibility for them. If you're alone, your lifestyle is your choice. I don't mind your choices. But having you as a father was a problem for me.

What do you see when you look at your son?

Reza: I see my son who encouraged me, who believed in me and led me back to myself.

One idea behind *Daddy Sperm* is for father and son to work on identical subjects and to show them side by side, to see if there are visible genetic links. And?

Reza: Our work is sexual, it's organic, opulent, vivid, we both use sensual textures.

Mamali: For example, on the last layer of my sculptures I put flocking on. It's considered a cheap material. At the same time, it brings up memories of brothels and luxury hotels. I chose it because of all that, but mainly because, to me, my dad's drawings are sensual and so is flocking; it's a material that everyone wants to touch.

Did you discover anything else in common?

Mamali: In our behaviour, many things. One bad example is that I don't have any trace of what I spend; I'm very bad with money. And a good one, I like to think I'm as gentle as my dad. Although I wasn't very gentle with him, when he came back.

You mean after he came back from hiding?

Mamali: Yes. I boycotted him. It is difficult to let go of all the expectations you have of your father. I was just telling my sister Melika, if my dad had not picked up painting I'm not sure I could stand him. It was the art practice that finally connected us. I was touched to see that through art he found a rhythm. Every philosopher always points out that people only find happiness in repetition, in rhythm. I'm amazed how focused he is.

Another strong concept behind *Daddy Sperm* is the idea of breaking with all hierarchies

within a family—meaning, everyone is equal.

Mamali: I would say that this classic pyramid of father on top was always upside-down in my family. Also, I don't only have a strong mother; I have three strong sisters too. Yet we are still victims of societal coding. While filming *Nature Morte*, I found that crossing all lines of respect was even more difficult than dealing with hierarchies. I was really surprised to see that my parents accepted my requests to do things that were disrespectful, like being a cow on the floor.

Why did you push them that far?

Mamali: I wanted to forget that these guys are my parents. It's healthy to remove the meaning of 'father' from your father. You can only free yourself from codes if you break them. Look at the societal codes imposed on men in Iran.

You shouldn't be gay, you should marry, you should have a family.

Mamali: Exactly.

If you had to decode yourself for me, is there anything significant that I can maybe even see in your work?

Mamali: My friends call me a gypsy, a nomad, a chameleon; I like to change colour. I'm a dreamer. I'm courageous.

What's the most courageous thing you believe you've ever done?

Mamali: Leaving Iran with only 1,000€ in my pocket, not speaking the language, not knowing anyone, but believing in my art. Keeping the courage to not give up, because of course the first years no one believes in you but you. You don't know if you are a bad artist or a good artist, but you have to deal with that insecurity and keep going until you prove it and you exist.

Do you want to become a father one day too?

Mamali: No. I'm an out-of-control person. If you don't have control, you can't be responsible for other lives.

