

Cultural Daily

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Acclaimed Iranian Street Artists Find Creative Freedom in America

Tod Hardin · Thursday, March 7th, 2013



Icy and Sot make a statement on the streets of Brooklyn, NY

Since the 2009 uprisings in Tehran, oppositional artistic expression has not been the easiest path to follow for the Iranian creative community. The government's fear and lack of understanding has lead to stifling crackdowns on such expression, forcing many artists to continue their work under the threat of arrest and intimidation, or to seek refuge for their creativity outside of Iran. Whether they stay or leave, a small yet flourishing underground art culture has emerged globally that is often very expressive in opposing government policies and what some might call outdated societal norms.

Two of the most prominent figures in that movement are brothers [Icy and Sot](#), street artists from the city of Tabriz, in northwestern Iran, specializing primarily in stencil artwork. Over the past few years, their visually stunning commentaries on the conflicting themes of love and hate, war and peace, and hope and despair have created an international buzz and garnered them critical acclaim ... and one might just say that they owe it all to skateboarding legend Tony Hawk.

Cultural Weekly's Tod Hardin spoke with Icy and Sot recently at the [Roll Up Gallery](#) in San Francisco on the first stop of their East Middle West Tour – a four-city excursion with friends and fellow Iranian rabble-rousers, the punk rock band Yellow Dog. These aren't just good street artist for being Iranian ... these are just simply good street artists – period.



“The Old” Tabriz, Iran, 2011

Your artwork has been exhibited all over the globe, but it wasn't until last August, in New York City, that you were able to actually attend one of your own shows. What was that like?

Sot: It was really amazing. We were so happy to be there ... to see people react to our work and hear them comment on it. In the past we could never attend our own exhibits outside of Iran because of how very difficult it is to receive a travel visa to leave Iran ... which is frustrating. Getting an artistic visa from America is so hard for us. We had to travel to Turkey twice, since there is no US embassy in Iran. We were lucky though. The person that interviewed us knew our work. He was a fan ... so we were granted an emergency interview and were thankfully approved.

How do two brothers from Tabriz, Iran, become internationally acclaimed street artists?

Sot: It really came about because of skateboarding. Tabriz is kind of a boring city, with not much going on. I was the first guy that started skate boarding there. It was crazy at first, because people used to laugh at me. I was an oddity. We were also into skating video games – Tony Hawk – and

in those games we would see street art and we knew that's what we wanted to do.

Icy: That was 2005 and it's been our profession since 2008.

Do you only work together?

Icy: We do our own stuff, but prefer together. We've been together since the beginning.

Sot: We are friends more than brothers, so we like it.



"Merry Xmas" Brooklyn, NY, 2012

How do you choose the street locations for your stencils? What features do you look for?

Icy: Back in Iran we tried to put our works at spots with the most views as possible, and with lower risk. In rural places it was totally different case. The risk was of lesser importance so was the view public and the other important factor is texture and the concept of the spot.

Sot: We use the same factors here in the US and for the legal walls we try to chose a piece which matches with the wall.

So many labels seem to be placed on what you do through your street art. Some call it Opposition Art, Resistance Art, Underground Art, Political Art, etc. What do you call it?

Sot: The interesting thing is the labels that the government places on us. They don't like what they see, but they don't know what to charge you with, so they stick labels on you that aren't related. For example, we've been called Satanists.

Icy: Street art is a kind of political art, because it's speaking directly to the people. It's to the people and for the people, but we have many themes and don't consider them all directly related to politics, but we are communicating our beliefs with walls.

Speaking of "themes" you use many images of children and old people, and often you show people with their eyes covered in some way. What meaning does that have for you?

Icy: Children, the old, and even woman ... we use them often because they are the most vulnerable in society ... the innocent.

Sot: And the eyes have many meanings. Some of it is what we've experienced and others that we know, like having our heads covered with a red cloth when we were arrested – we've used that image in our piece "Blindness." It might also mean the darkness in Iran.

Have you been arrested because of your art?

Sot: Yes, several times. In 2009 there was a show in LA which caused the government to find out about us, since our artwork was more political at that time. The elections had just happened so the government was much more active in trying to stop people like us. The officials called us and told us that we had to come in to answer some questions.

Icy: The last time we were in jail for a week and it was scary. There is always the threat of being detained and being accused of political crimes, or as Sot said earlier, of being Satanists. I knew we had to leave.



An early source of controversy: "Beer is not a crime" Tehran, Iran, 2011

And you have now left Iran, correct?

Icy: Yes, after receiving our artistic visas, we have been in Brooklyn for the past several months.

Sot: I've been granted political asylum and Icy has his interview soon to receive his. Since I'm his brother and because his story is the same as mine, he should be approved with no problem.

Do you hope to one day return to Iran?

Icy: Of course we want to go back, but it is hard there. We miss family and friends, but can keep in touch on Skype and later this year we will exhibit in Europe where they can more easily come

see us.

Sot: Our hope is that things will eventually change ... the government will change ... and we can return.

What do you think of the current Iranian government?

Icy and Sot: No comment.

I've been told by friends in Iran that they don't dream anymore, because they don't believe they have any chance of fulfilling their dreams. What do you say to that?

Sot: It is common in Iran that people lose faith in their dreams, but it's not a good way to believe. It's good to have dreams always. You may fall, but you can still reach your dreams.

Icy: We did not give up. And here we are living our dreams. In Brooklyn last week we were able to meet our favorite street artist – one that has greatly influenced us – and that was amazing. We're living our dreams now.



The circus moves south: 3 AM the morning of March 6 on Melrose Ave. in LA.

To learn more, visit IcyandSot.com.

Top image: Brothers Icy & Sot, Roll Up Gallery, San Francisco

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