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Frieze Abu Dhabi 2026
Date: November 19–22, 2026
Booth No: C14
Location: Manarat Al Saadiyat, Abu Dhabi, UAE

Ali Akbar Sadeghi's Limbo series, painted between 1981 and 1986 during the Iran–Iraq War, presents a world suspended between reality and nightmare, myth and history, life and death. Across these monumental pieces, familiar structures of heroic narrative are transformed into scenes of disorientation and absurdity. Bodies collapse, skeletal animals wander through barren landscapes, warriors appear alongside grotesque figures, and machines and architectural fragments become part of an unstable theatrical stage.

Sadeghi, rather than directly depicting war, translates its psychological and existential consequences into an allegorical universe. The title Limbo evokes a condition of suspension, a space neither fully of this world nor the next, where judgment, resolution, and escape remain indefinitely deferred. In this sense, the series can be understood as a portrait of a historical moment in which ordinary life itself had become suspended between destruction and survival.

Sadeghi's visual language draws together seemingly distant traditions. The monumental compositions and heroic figures recall the narrative structures of Persian epic and Coffee-House painting, while his distorted bodies, impossible encounters, theatrical spaces, and irrational juxtapositions reveal the influence of Surrealism and Dada. His long engagement with illustration, animation, Persian mythology, and popular visual culture is equally apparent: each canvas seems to operate like a frozen frame from an enigmatic film, populated by recurring characters and symbolic objects whose relationships remain deliberately unresolved.

Death is omnipresent, but it is rarely represented as a singular event. It appears instead as a condition permeating the landscape. Skeletons stand where living animals should be; human bodies become monumental, vulnerable

forms; trees are stripped of their vitality; and landscapes seem simultaneously ancient and post-apocalyptic. Against this atmosphere, acts of movement and combat continue, producing an unsettling sense of repetition; the machinery of conflict persists even when its meaning has disappeared.

The works also contain a distinctly theatrical quality. Sadeghi stages his figures rather than simply placing them within a landscape. Warriors, animals, machines, and fragmented bodies occupy carefully constructed scenes, as if performing within an allegorical theater. This quality connects the paintings to the artist's experience as an animator and illustrator: the Limbo paintings can be read as enlarged, suspended narratives, where every detail suggests a story but no definitive resolution is offered.

The preparatory drawings accompanying the paintings further reveal this process of invention. They function not merely as studies for individual compositions, but as evidence of Sadeghi's construction of an entire visual vocabulary; one populated by recurring bodies, creatures, weapons, machines, gestures, and architectural forms. Presented alongside the paintings, these drawings expose the movement from fragment to tableau and from individual image to an interconnected imaginary world.

Seen today, Limbo is both deeply rooted in the specific history of Iran in the 1980s and remarkably resistant to being confined to it. The paintings transform a particular historical trauma into a broader meditation on violence, mortality, heroism, and the persistence of the human imagination. In Sadeghi's world, history does not progress toward resolution; it remains suspended, endlessly replayed between nightmare and memory.