

UC SANTA BARBARA

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A gesture of solidarity, by way of art, with the struggle for Iranian women's rights

Since September 2022, women have been leading a peaceful civil rights protest movement across Iran. From large urban centers to small rural villages, and in the diaspora, there have been large public protests and more discreet acts of resistance. It's a movement that cuts across class, religion, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation and generations, that centers Iranian women, their basic right to self-determination, their dignity — and thus, more broadly, human dignity. Its slogan, “Woman, life, freedom,” is drawn from the Kurdish women's freedom movement.

The women-led revolutionary movement inspired a powerful, public art projection, “Woman. Life. Freedom.,” that premiered at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco in January. Among its organizers is cultural historian Shiva Balaghi, an academic coordinator with UC Santa Barbara's Area Global Initiative. The digital art installation comes to the campus Tuesday, May 9, where, from 8–11 p.m., it will be [projected](#) in a 7-minute loop onto the façade of the Art, Design & Architecture Museum. On Wednesday, May 10, Balaghi will speak about art and protest in Iran in historical context in the MultiCultural Center at noon. Both events are free and open to the public.

“From the start, the protesters asked those of us who live outside Iran to ‘be their voice’ and to share their message,” said Balaghi, part of the ArtRise Collective that collaborated with Mozaik Philanthropy to organize the public art exhibition in solidarity with the women of Iran. “For me, as a cultural historian working on Iranian art, I saw their message powerfully conveyed in the protest art. This projection is a way to help amplify their voice, their message and their aspirations. To see this art projected onto public spaces, where people could interact with it, was a really profound and moving experience.”

So moving, in fact, that the idea soon arose to bring this public art experience to campus. Enter UCSB Arts & Lectures, which added “Woman. Life. Freedom” to the programming for its ongoing Justice for All initiative.

“‘Woman. Life. Freedom.’ extends the reach of Justice for All onto the UCSB campus through the medium of large-scale projection,” said Celesta Billeci, Miller McCune Executive Director of A&L. “The project allows Arts & Lectures to address international issues of social justice in a creative way.”

The decision was made early on, Balaghi said, to show the art anonymously, not only to protect the artists working in Iran, “who face enormous risks for being outspoken and joining the protests,” but to ensure that the art itself — drawings, photographs, animation, digital art — was the true focus.

“The majority of the artists are women and many live in Iran,” Balaghi said. “Some of the artists are well known; others are emerging artists early in their careers. Some of the art uses culturally specific symbolism. But all of the art can be appreciated by broad, diverse audiences, each of whom will come away with their own understanding of this revolutionary moment in Iran — and what it means for that country but also for humanity at large. I hope viewers will be motivated to learn more about the situation in Iran, to engage with the protest movement, and to find their own ways to show meaningful solidarity with a people who are struggling to forefront woman, life and freedom.”

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About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.