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Viola Raikhel-Bolot, left, and Miranda Darling



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Monarchs, muses, mistresses and moguls. This is how writer Miranda Darling and art expert Viola Raikhel-Bolot describe the extraordinary women they want to showcase to the world through books and documentaries created by their newly formed production company Vanishing Pictures.

"We want to tell the stories of women who have changed the course of history but their stories have been hidden," says Raikhel-Bolot. "We're interested in how women navigate the corridors of power in a different way," adds Darling. "We like to talk about soft power, and the power of art and culture is soft power. It is often women who take on this mantle because in the past they have had less access to more traditional options, like just to be that direct person who says I've got a policy, I've got a gun, I've got a list. So women have to meander instead. I like to think of it as a river going around the rocks and into the sea rather than going in the direct way."

Their first project — which led them to form Vanishing Pictures — ticked all those boxes. The subject was the former Empress of Iran, Farah Pahlavi, and how she amassed the world's most valuable art collection outside Europe to fill a newly constructed art museum she created in Tehran in the 1970s. But when she and her husband, Mohammad Rez Shah, the King of Iran, were forced into exile after the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the paintings were taken down and have not been seen in their entirety since.

This lost art collection, worth at least \$US3 billion, includes works by Pablo Picasso, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Andy Warhol, Salvador Dali and many others. Warhol actually painted Pahlavi's portrait after meeting her at The White House in 1976, although the artist tried to avoid her for much of the party held by US President Gerald Ford. "He wondered why this woman was running after him," she later told journalists, laughing. Pahlavi convinced Warhol to visit her and her husband in Iran and he ended up painting the portrait, which graces the cover of Darling and Raikhel's book on the topic.

"We want to rewrite their legacy, we want to bring to the world stage stories like this one that have been buried under the sands of Tehran for the past 40 years," says Raikhel-Bolot. The book, called *Iran Modern: The Empress of Art*, is almost a piece of art in itself, such is its size, weight and price (it retails for \$US895), and it is full of images of the lost art as well as detailing the Empress' extraordinary story as Queen of Iran (she was dubbed the "Jackie Kennedy of the Middle East" and popular throughout the world), as well as her work during a time when Iran was more westernised.

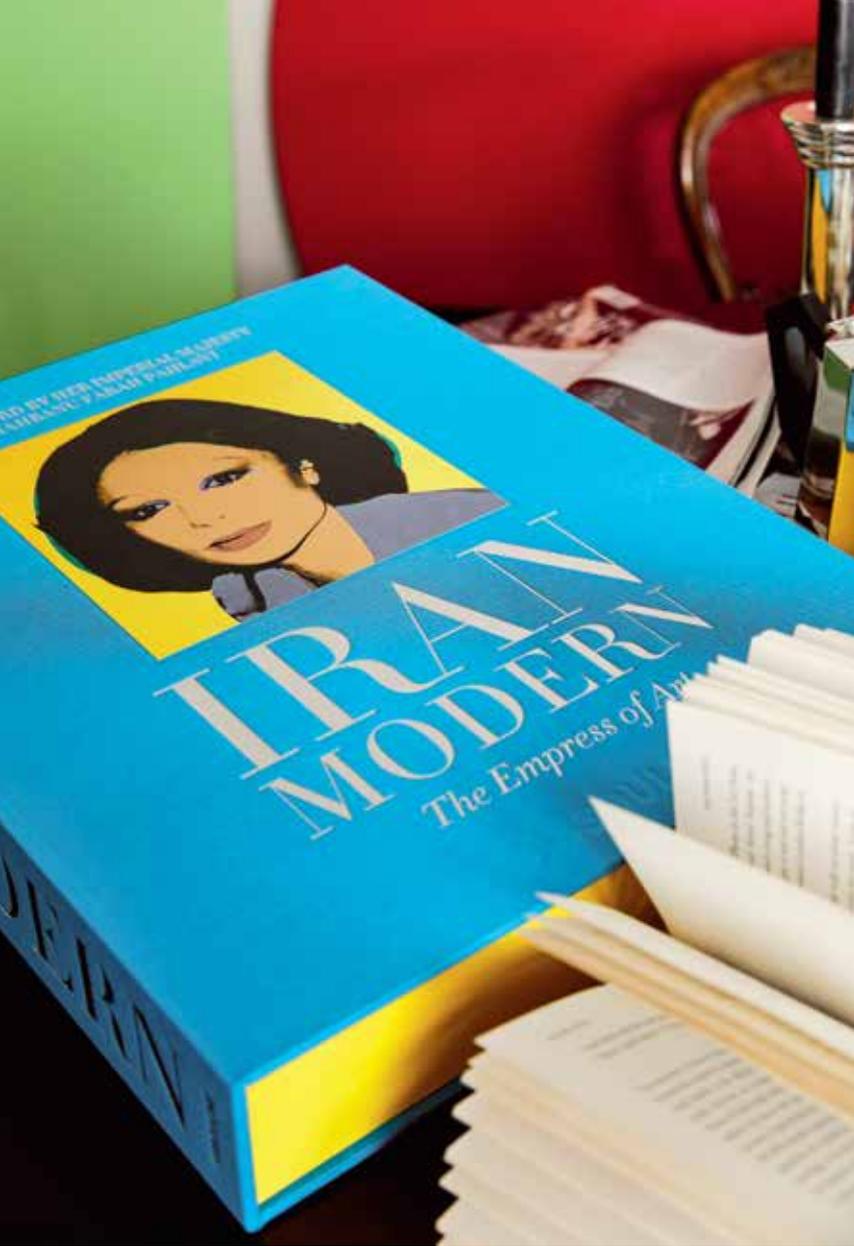
The idea for the book originally came from Raikhel-Bolot, who had heard about the famous lost collection while running her art advisory firm in London. Raikhel-Bolot, who divides her time between the UK and Sydney, met Darling when the writer was sent to interview her for a story on art for *RUSSIA* magazine. The pair instantly clicked and talked about art, but then "got on to the topics we are really interested in", such as history, espionage, politics and "all those kinds of geopolitical cogitations that happen under the surface", says Darling. "We realised we had a lot more in common than art."

A few coffees and chats later, Raikhel-Bolot asked Darling if she had heard about this extraordinary modern art collection in the basement of a museum in Tehran. "She said, do you think it would be an interesting story?" and I was like yes, do you want to write a book together?" recalls Darling, laughing. "I've never written a book," adds Raikhel-Bolot (whereas Darling has published three novels). "So where do we start? We have this story and we have this phenomenal Empress who is still alive and this \$US3 billion art

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VANISHING ACT

A new company wants to unveil the work of some extraordinary women who changed history



Clockwise from far left:
The lavish book produced
to document the art
collection amassed by
the former Empress of
Iran, Farah Pahlavi; details
of Raikhel-Bolot's Sydney
home; Viola Raikhel-Bolot
and Miranda Darling

THEIR NEXT PROJECT, ABOUT FEMALE SPIES, FEATURES WOMEN SUCH AS AUSTRALIAN NANCY WAKE, WHO WORKED FOR THE FRENCH RESISTANCE

collection which is underground, but what next?" Raikhel-Bolot concentrated on finding images of the art, while the pair also approached the Empress, who is still in exile and lives in Paris and the US, and recently turned 80.

"So we met her for a beautiful afternoon tea in Paris and we thought we just needed to get the answers to her questions, and we would pepper them through the manuscript as it was pretty much done," Raikhel-Bolot recalls. "Fast-forward a few years later and that was the first of many meals, many days we spent with her. Not only did she grant us that interview, she edited our manuscript and wrote the foreword, we filmed her, and she launched the book for us in New York, Paris, London. She has been the most extraordinary support in our journey to bring this book to life, as well as being an inspiration to us."

The book was met with high praise and it sold out within two weeks of its launch in September 2018. It is now in its third print run. "We crashed the website at one point," laughs Raikhel-Bolot. The pair did ruffle a few feathers, however, especially in Iran. "It wasn't our intention to be controversial but it was our intention to tell a story that a lot of people did not want to be told, because it was the work of a woman who has been living under a fatwa for the past 40 years," says Darling. Iranian authorities have been since quoted in local newspapers saying they are "pondering" legal action.

After the success of their first project, the pair wanted to do more, but not just books; they wanted to do films as well (they are working on a documentary of the Empress) on women who changed the course of history but whose stories have been lost. They realised that perhaps it was a good idea to "put a structure around it" and Vanishing Pictures was born. "It's this exclusion from the ordinary stories of history that we are trying to rectify," says Darling. "But we are not screaming militant feminists at all," adds Raikhel-Bolot. "As Miranda says, this concept of soft power hasn't been applied in terms of defining the women who have changed the course of history through culture."

Raikhel-Bolot and Darling also want to provide alternative role models for girls in the age of Kim Kardashian West and being famous for the sake of being famous. "We want to say, 'What about all these fabulous women in history who have done the most extraordinary things; take their strength, take their courage,'" says Darling. "And they're also glamorous, incredibly beautiful and kind. Maybe they're a princess or empress, but they're also, you know, diving in a wetsuit in the Caspian Sea or riding a motorcycle, or they're flying a fighter plane. They can be all those things. And so we coined this term early on: we refer to our women as monarchs, muses, mistresses and moguls."

The next project Raikhel-Bolot and Darling are working on is about female spies. They are writing the manuscript and hope to have it done by Christmas. It will still be image driven — mostly photographs this time — and it will be a standard-sized book, featuring women such as Nancy Wake, an Australian spy who worked for the French resistance in World War II, was dubbed "The White Mouse" by the Gestapo and at one point had a five million franc price on her head, such were her talents. "She's amazing," says Darling. "But there are so many [spies] and the clandestine nature of the way these women have to operate is incredible. The idea of being able to switch between identities and being able to keep that cover story and hold it together, having to operate differently from a man — you realise how different it is to be a woman in the clandestine world."

This idea of living multiple lives is not lost on the pair as they juggle multiple lives themselves, as mothers with careers. "All women to some extent lead a double life in a way," says Darling. "We are mothers, we work, we are doing this, we are doing that. So we like the idea that the stories will resonate with women who are not in the clandestine services." This book also means they get to do what they love most — mining history for these untold stories. "It is like Aladdin's cave for us," laughs Raikhel-Bolot. "All the treasures are there and we just want to bring them out into the open." ©