

FICTION

Inside story of Tehran's museum of atrocities

The Secret Letters from X to A

by Nasrin Parvaz
 (Victorina Press, £9.99)

MUSEUMS are generally regarded as institutions dedicated to the conservation and display of valued objects and histories, but, in some cases, they are the sites of erasure of national memory, where the past is obliterated for political ends.

That's the focus of this novel, in which young history teacher Faraz accepts his uncle

Rohulah's offer of a summer job to helping convert the Joint Committee Interrogation Centre, one of Tehran's most notorious prisons, into a museum, the Ebrat, commemorating repression under the Shah.

Against the wishes of his own family, who despised Rohulah and his work for the Islamic regime, Faraz accepts the job, but he soon realises that by replastering and repainting the cells once filled with prisoners' graffiti and messages, he will be destroying all evidence of atrocities committed by the

present regime.

While examining the wall of one of the cells, Faraz makes a remarkable discovery. Behind a waste pipe he finds hidden notebooks of a former woman prisoner Xavar, who movingly describes her daily interrogations and the appalling conditions she was held in while pregnant.

Xavar writes in detail about all manner of physical and psychological torture. Her letters are addressed to her activist partner Azad, who opposed the regime of Ali Khamenei, the



present Supreme Leader of Iran.

During the summer, Faraz finds more hidden notebooks and letters, which allow him at long last to comprehend the enormity of the horrors and barbarity perpetrated by the regime. But it is through Xavar's letters that he, and the reader, come face-to-face with the realities of unlawful imprisonment, daily interrogations, torture, rape and giving birth in prison. Xavar is forced to give her baby girl to her parents in one of their last

visits before her own execution.

With the help of a close friend, Faraz decides to publish all the notebooks on the internet, with dangerous consequences for him and his girlfriend.

The Secret Letters From X To A is a remarkable and courageous book, written by civil rights activist Nasrin Parvaz, who was herself arrested, tortured and sentenced to death in 1982. Her sentence was commuted to 10 years imprisonment and she was actually released after eight years in

1990. She managed to escape to Britain, where she was granted refugee status in 1994.

Having spent six months of her sentence at the Interrogation Centre, her narrative is based on actual facts and her book examines a country torn by violence and decades of human rights abuses where entire families are divided between supporters and opponents of the regime.

Her novel is a warning of how museums can so easily be used to selectively rewrite history.

LEO BOIX

SCULPTURE

Programmed to please

MICHAL BONCZA recommends an exhibition of computer-aided sculpture by Bruce Beasley

Bruce Beasley: Recent Works
 Pangolin London

★★★★☆

ON ENTERING the Pangolin gallery, the space is animated by numerous colourful and joyous sculpted "ribbons" that swirl as if released from some Gordian knot by Bruce Beasley's swift sword while elsewhere wall-mounted and free-standing groups of collided masses appear momentarily frozen at impact.

Their individual geometry intact, as in Inca-built walls or cave crystals, the compacted shapes retain a non-specific dormant energy, perhaps an anticipation of a further tectonic shift. Part cubist, part constructivist in form as well as futurist by motion, both sets of Beasley's creations, cast in silver and bronze with sporadic sky-blue patina, thrive on and delight with their puzzling, if somewhat elementary, abstract forms.

The contrast between the two propositions couldn't be greater, yet the compounded stillness of Sonata I, Oceanus or Seaborne and the twisting gyrations of Torqueri or the Aeolis improvisations share

spatial confidence and a sense of clearly defined purpose.

Now almost an octogenarian, Beasley has for 30 years explored the fluid boundaries between creativity and technology by using computer-based programmes to create and fine-tune his work.

He believes that fine art is the vision of the artist and is not defined by the tool of production and that the works on show use technology that best allows him to investigate and communicate what has fascinated him for over six decades – "the aesthetic and emotional potential of complex shapes in space."

Even so, whatever the tool – chisel or computer – it will always leave a mark when guided by a hand and mind. The geometry might be programmed but the uneven textured surfaces evidence and record physical human labour



and that's as it should be.

Ultimately, Beasley's work fosters the simplest and purest of allures. It intrigues and that alone is a praiseworthy achievement.

The exhibition is free and runs until October 27, opening times: pangolinlondon.com



INTRIGUING PRESENCE:
 (Left to right from centre top) Aeolis 4, Custos II, Sonata I, Seaborne, Torqueri V, Aeolis 3 and Aeolis 1