



Mitra Tabrizian, *Surveillance*, 1989-1990, C-Print, 20x60, Courtesy of MAC Collection, Dubai

Self-Orientalise: Iran Inside Out

By Yulia Tikhonova

The exhibition *Iran Inside Out - Influences of Homeland and Diaspora on the Artistic Language of Contemporary Iranian Artists* that opened last summer in Chelsea Museum New York presented the art works that trade in controversies of Orientalism. The exhibition included fifty-six artists showcased a variety of interpretations of stereotypes in which the West imagines the East. The veil, harem, Persian patterning, conspicuous consumption - every facet of modern life either banned, but existing on black market or officially sanctioned filled over 120 works presented in the exhibition. There were less known names of the artists from Iran, but those who lived outside the country Shirin Nishat or Mitra Tabrizian become familiar to the Western audience. Selected by the curators Till Fellrath who is the recent CAM Managing Director and Sam Barriodi who teaches Middle Eastern Art and Culture

and Performance Art at the Tisch School of the Arts, at New York University the exhibition presented chances for personal exploration of what does it mean to be an Oriental artist.

In context of booming interest towards Iranian art in the West, more than ever the artists from the Middle East are conscious of the expectation that the art market invested in them. They are eager to wear veil or beard and make their patterning even more esoteric to show that the West expected to see, and achieve some economic, political, or other benefits. By focusing on distinctions of dress, and body type, the artists take up the references that are rooted in the past, ancestry and place of belonging. They self-Orientalise by offering a voyeuristic glimpse into their life, acting as a camera obscura for the polluting Western gaze. A sociologist Bulent Diken said

that “Showing their culture that is at once subalternized and exoticized by the West,” contemporary Iranian art amounts to exhibitionism of the Western clichés.¹ Such increase in amount of exhibitions from the Middle East played on hand to the esoteric guises of both sides (West and East)

By labeling the exhibition - Iranian, the curators situated the art in particular region, localizing the artists in their geopolitical context. The definition of the Middle East is not only a geographical placement; it is construction loaded with religious and political subtexts. The curator Vasif Kortun confirmed “bracketing of artistic practice within the confines of a territory, region, country, or geography is already a liability.”² Fellrath and Barriodi were responsible for a one-sided reading of the subjects and contexts and diminishing them for a stereotypical take.

Not only was the geographic location clearly stated throughout the exhibition, the artists were also divided in two groups: those still living in the country, and those who are part of the Diaspora, formed mainly after the 1979 revolution into the strong and developed art communities of Berlin, London and New York.³ In the catalog both groups were separated either: “by sources of individual creativity from inside and outside the country,” or as “exiled identities and the oppressed.” Such juxtapositions have only served to create a disconnection between the two, bringing to the fore a higher aesthetic accomplishment of the works by diasporic artists. The inclusion of diaspora was a strategic move as it extended works’ enchantment on to the less known artists from mainland. In the words of the gallery director Leila Heller, “including artists like Shirin Neshat--whose high profile lends the project credibility, helped to define the

professional caliber of the show.”⁴

Indeed Neshat’s early video *Turbulent* from 1997 was one of the exhibition highlights. Projected on two opposite walls, the video moved by the power of witnessing a human drama. On one wall, a singer delivered a passionate love song to a group of men, but faced away from his audience, toward the viewer. On the opposite wall, a woman in a black chador stood silently throughout his song, confronting an empty auditorium. According to Islamic law, she is not able to sing in public. At a certain moment, the camera begins a sinuous track toward the female singer, and we hear an impassioned wordless song composed of supernatural breaths and ecstatic cries. Given that the woman’s performance is an outlawed act, it communicates her indomitable resistance. In the course of the video Neshat effaced the ethnical characteristics for the impact of woman’s power. The artist’s recent works, however, were discussed in less exciting terms registering a turn towards an ethnographic mode as evidenced by the recent film *Women Without Men*, which presented an aestheticized version of Oriental drama.

Whether from diaspora or the mainland majority of artists took upon themselves the stereotypical subjects finding a slippery road of self-Orientalisation appealing. Ala Ebtekar, who was born in Berkley, CA in 1978 works at the crossroads between Persian mythology, graffiti and Western mass culture. In the painting *Ascension* from 2007 Ebtekar overlaid text, appropriated from the pages of a prayer book with images of American missiles and bombs. Local to the Bay Area, and DJs hangouts, Ebtekar was popular among the viewers. But not many of them knew that the artist had turned their gaze onto himself, fulfilling the expectations for the clichés subjects of calligraphy, religion and war.

Similarly, the Brooklyn-based painter Negar Ahkami (b. 1978) has traded in the erotic references that made the Orient so tantalizing for the Westerner. The banal images of oppressed Middle Eastern and Muslim

1 Bülent Diken and Carsten Bagge Laustsen, *Postal Economies of the Orient*, published by the Department of Sociology, Lancaster University, Lancaster LA1 4YL, UK at <http://www.comp.lancs.ac.uk/sociology/papers/Diken-Laustsen-Postal-Economies.pdf> 2002

2 Vasif Kortun <http://vasif-kortun-eng.blogspot.com/2007/10/interview-with-huseyin-alptekin.html>

3 In the exhibition catalog the diasporic and mainland artists were distinguished by a logo: an outline of Iranian map with a star places outside or inside of it.

4 <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2009/06/iran-inside-out.html>



Shoja Azari, *Coffee House Painting*, 2009 Video Painting, Courtesy of Lelia Taghina-Milani Heller Gallery

femininity triggered varying sentiments associated with male power and whiteness. Ahkami exploits the painterly traditions of Western fantasies by rendering her odalisques in a naive, and cartoonish style. The artist situates her harem within an opulent décor that merges into a quilt of Persian patterning. An updated version of female seduction, a mix between Western and Eastern canons of beauty was presented by the Iranian-born painter Nazanin Pouyandel (b.1981) who resides in France. The artist learned about large-eyes-faces from the film posters, displayed on billboards and the facades of Tehran buildings that are similar to Bollywood production. Pouyandel highlighted a sensual and sinister side of the Orient that is layered with deepened anxieties about the power relationship of the superior West to the submissive East. Other artists included in this exhibition applied exotic, and sensational motifs that attest to a desire to match viewer's expectations. An overheard remarks such as.. "well, she's doing this orientalist shit because they buy that" confirms the

traps that artists fall into.⁵ The business term 'ethnic marketing' often applied to the art strategies that play on the ethnographic references that are desired by the West.⁶ Commenting on the artistic complicity with the rules of the ethnic marketing Kortun called these artists the "Yes generation" – those who cherish any exhibition opportunity that comes their way, a kind of podium or catwalk, with a bit of travel, rest, relaxation and networking as perks". With exhibitions like *Iran Inside Out* the opportunities were up for grabs, pushing the artists into exploration of their ethnic and exotic selves.

The exhibition design also played on Oriental expectations: the curators proposed several subsections

5 Hüseyin Alptekin Mutual realities, remapping destinies 2001, Istanbul Biennale Nor is it enough The issue of otherness has become a cliché, but the problem still exists", an interview with Hüseyin Alptekin, in *European Cultural Policies 2015*, ed. By Maria Lind and Raimund Minichbauer, Iaspis 2005.

6 This theme was addressed at curator Tirdad Zolghadr's 2004 exhibition "Ethnic Marketing: Art, Globalization and Intercultural Supply and Demand" (curated with M. Anderfuhren).



Shirin Neshat, Rapture women boat closeup press, 1999

spread between three museum floors. With titles such as: "In Search of the Axis of Evil", "From Iran to Queeran and Everything in Between", "The Culture Shop: Special Sale on Stereotypes--All Must Go!", "Iran Recycled: From Vintage to Vogue, and Where in the World: City Quiz," these categories seemed to be borrowed from catchy marketing lines, and not from curatorial reflections on art context and content.

The first floor exhibition area "In Search of the Axis of Evil" named after the anti-terrorist Bush campaign was painted in black and reserved for art related to war and politics. Jinoos Taghizadeh born 1978 in Iran used newspapers from the time of 1978 revolution for her collages titled *Rock, Paper, Scissors*. On top of newspaper,

the artist applied images from Western art history that reference heroes of revolution, such as the painting *Death of Marat* by Jacques-Louis David. The artist superimposed cutouts of people's hands in a gesture of victory: a clenching fist, the 'V' sign or an open palm. Taghizadeh's collages marked the 30th anniversary of the Iranian revolution but also acquired a timely context during anti-election riots in the summer of 2009. The modest medium used, their documentary take, and the aesthetics of the political poster brought recognition when the works were exhibited in several biennales including Thessaloniki and Istanbul this year.

Another example of documentary approach came from Mitra Tabrizian. A long time diaspora artist



Farhad Moshiri and Shirin Aliabadi, *Intifada Laundry Liquid*, Operation Supermarket Series, 2006, Ink Jet Print, 75x100 cm., 2006, Ink Jet Print, Courtesy of The Third Line, from the private colle

Barbad Golshiri, *Middle East Impromptu*, videostill, 2007



and a professor of photography at the University of Westminster, London Tabrizian's two works *Surveillance* from 1988-89 and *Tehran 06*, 2006 presented panoramic views. *Surveillance* summed up the documentary images of three key dates in Iranian contemporary history. The image on the left side detailed revolt against the Prime Minister Mossadegh in 1953, the central part encapsulated events on the verge of the Iran-Iraq war and strengthening of Islam as a new national identity. The effects of the Islamic revolution in 1979 were detailed on the right. The background of this panoramic scene was culled from images of protesting people – the witnesses, who persistently stand against different powers. The artist's objective and historical take marked this work as anti-ethnographic.

The works by Iranian artist Khosrow Hassanzadeh (b.1963) assume in-between position, which is difficult to decode at first. In the series of silkscreen prints on canvas *Ready to Order* (2007-8) the artist traversed the popular definition of death rituals. Wooden boxes filled with memorabilia, and plastic flowers which frame a portrait of a dead person, martyr or a saint have been long used in the Middle East. Under the impact of the Western culture death rituals passed into the hands of entrepreneurs, who packaged mourning and grief as a service that is 'ready to order'. Hassanzadeh takes a subversive approach replacing faces of the dead with images of those who are still alive: his mother, children, or pop-stars. Adopting the candy-sweet folkloric clichés, this self-trained artist is aware of the drawbacks of mainstream culture. "All of my ideas and projects have come from the people around me," said the artist commenting on the populist motifs of his works. It is not through subversion but through appropriation of visual clichés and pushing to the extreme, to the highest degree of kitsch Hassanzadeh communicates his message. "The people love kitsch, they live by kitsch."⁷

The art critic Tirdad Zolghadr, however questioned Hassanzadeh's sincerity in relation to his success: "How to account for the fact that the Hassanzadeh

7 Sohrab Mahdavi, "Terrorist," in *Tehran Studio Works: The Art of Khosrow Hassanzadeh*, ed. Mirjam Shatanawi (London: Saqi Books, 2006), 124.

environment consists not only of popular painting traditions but also of an art scene that it is deeply bourgeois and fraught with careerist competition.”⁸ The artist does not hide his deliberate reflection on Western stereotypes, when he openly calls himself an “Occidentalist”, who “studies the patterns of his Western admirers.”⁹ Hassanzadeh pays attention to what appeals to the West and plays on the phantasmagorias of the West.”¹⁰ By calling himself an Occidentalist the artist enters a fluctuating territory between two dependent notions, one of the “oriental” and another one ‘occidental’. This binary opposition is mutually reflexive; the goal of Orient is to maintain the Western imagination of itself and thus, ironically, Orientalism has become the “life force of Occidentalism.”¹¹ For various reasons the artist has received a considerable success in the West, in which his naïve, and unmediated style was accepted as a sincere stream of consciousness.

This kind of Orientalisation goes both ways when not only the artist's play out Oriental tunes, but also curators: Fellrath, and Barriodi adopted roles of emissaries for the Iranian art. They were inspired by the previous exhibition *Italia Arabia* in 2007, and together with Heller went on a research trip around galleries in Tehran and Europe.¹² The Ministry of Nomads, from London was included in a support team and this is how the exhibition acquired its legs. Guided by the selective eyes of the team the curators delivered art, which reflected the ways the West imagines Orient. The title *Iran Inside Out - Influences of Homeland and Diaspora on the Artistic Language of Contemporary Iranian Artists* implied a presumption that the organizers know the art from every perspective, from A to Z and inside out. This was a strong claim to make. The title also echoed

to a brand of city guidebooks - *Inside out* that embody a ‘tourist gaze’, including curiosity, stereotyping and reproduction of the clichés. Like tourists, the curators became the voyeurs, with an eye on colonization for the arts whether actual or metaphorical. Instead of offering a new stake, they guided the audience along the beaten track.

What else could explain bizarre headings such as *From Iran to Queeran*, encircling works which tap into sexuality. The photo collages by Vahid Sharifian (b.1982) were suggestive of strange likings. The artist is seen while boxing with a stallion, leading a herd of reindeer through a sleek kitchen or blowing flames at a bald eagle. Sharifian was named a “Persian Warhol” for his subversive mixture of kitsch and pop-culture quotations, but his current work could be read as commenting on attraction to the Western consumer products. Other artists, such as Farhad Moshir, together with Shirin Aliabadi, Siamak Filizadeh, and Arash Hanaei offered pop-satirical sensibility, manifested in detailing the stereotypes that Western media associates

8 Tirdad Zolghadr, Swell and Transfigure: The Dizzying Velocities of the Tehran Art Scene, *Frieze*, Issue 86, 2004

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Michal Buchowski, The Specter of Orientalism in Europe: From Exotic Other to Stigmatized Brother, 2006, *Anthropological Quarterly* 79/3:463-482.

12 The exhibition *Italia/Arabia* juxtaposed 80 works by mid 20th century Italian painters with paintings and sculptures by Lebanese, Egyptian, Syrian and Iranian artists.



LMTH Ahmadi, *Oil Barrel*, 2008 Oil on steel 23. x 34.5 x 23.5

with the Middle East. The philosopher Nina Power describes these contradictions in the follow way: “The Tehrani cultural class, extremely well-educated, well-travelled, and forever dashing from one gallery opening to another, seems worlds apart from Ahmadenijad’s tin-pot proclamations about the nuclear programs and homosexuality...Iran and Tehran in particular, is an extraordinarily divided place, fractured along class and cultural lines.”¹³ These works reveal the duality between a society orientated towards Western culture and the conservatism of the regime.

It is worth noting that the critique of this exhibition has arrived at from within. Contradictory to the press reviews of the show, which were overall complimentary, the artists were alert to the exhibitionist politics. Based in Iran the photographer Ghandchi offered a perceptive view in her catalog text. The artist said that she is aware of the exoticizing factor that underlies this show, which made her question the ways that the art was located in geopolitical and social settings. “Such cultural pigeonholing evinces a reductive approach,” states Ghandchi about the curatorial premise. Similarly, the Iranian artist Barbad Golshiri (b. 1982) who openly criticizes the current socio-political situation in Iran, and the hegemony of the new art market, said that ...”exoticism has little to do with being exotic; it is rather a trend that operates within an ideological apparatus”.¹⁴ Golshiri, the son of prominent writer developed a distinctive body of work based on language that mixes foreign art influences and Iranian resonances. Largely evolving around autobiographical experiences, his work echoes a general desire for change. The video *mAmI-06*, addresses the role of the media, which became so powerful and omnipresent that it turned into second religion.

Iran Inside Out falls into the sequence of other ‘geographically’ orientated market-discoveries, which counts its history from the beginning of globalization.

Starting from the emerging economies of Russia, followed by China, and now India, the wave of the local surveys has been ceaseless. Other multiple projects which brought art from Iran into the recent spotlight were: *Far Near Distance*, at the House of World Cultures, Berlin 2004, *Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East* at the Saatchi Gallery in London, *Tarjama/ Translation*, a group show of the art from MENA countries, both early 2009. These exhibitions exposed the increasing sophistication of the Iranian art, but also reinforced the Western clichés and orientalised it.

Years that have passed since these exhibitions took place have provided a valid space for reassessment of the agendas that the curators were driven by. We can revisit the conversations, and examine the use of ethnic, geographic, cultural, or political realities to package artistic identities. *Iran Inside Out* proves that aesthetic investigations were prompted by the demands of the Western market and the pressure to Orientalise production from within the country.



Ala Ebtekar, *Elemental*, installation view

¹³ Nina Power Malls and mausoleums, New Humanist, <http://newhumanist.org.uk/1737/malls-mausoleums>

¹⁴ Barbad Golshiri, For They Know What They Do Know Positions June 2009 <http://e-flux.com/journal/view/80>



دو جوان بزنده بستور و با اجساد این جانکشان در میدانک تهر کشته شده راه طولانگشتند. فرانسوا بهی، ملازجان، هجر هوس، خیابانری، معاشقی، وودری، زانی، طارک

اعمال و جنایاتی که تیر باران شدگان هر تکب شده اند

ملازجان از دستگیری تا اعدام

ملازجان در ۱۳۵۷ در تهران متولد شد. او در ۱۳۷۵ به عضویت سازمان مجاهدین خلق درآمد. در ۱۳۷۸ در جریان کودتای ۲۸ مرداد در تهران کشته شد. او در ۱۳۷۹ در تهران اعدام شد.

دستگیری و اعدام

ملازجان در ۱۳۷۵ در تهران دستگیر شد. او در ۱۳۷۸ در تهران اعدام شد.

اعلامیه سخنگوی دادگاه انقلاب اسلامی ایران درباره اعدام شدگان

اعمال / a.m. / action
جنایات / crimes / felonies
اعدام شدن / capital punishment
اعدام کردن / execute
اعدامی / capital
اعراب / diacritics
مطالب / demands
روزنامه / newspaper
تحریم / prohibition

خواجیه پوری، همیشه اند

خواجیه پوری، همیشه اند
درخواست میکرد
سرنگ زمانی
از کشته در زمان
قصر تا ساوان
روایت عمومی
تخریبی

ملازجان از دستگیری تا اعدام

ملازجان از دستگیری تا اعدام
ملازجان در ۱۳۵۷ در تهران متولد شد. او در ۱۳۷۵ به عضویت سازمان مجاهدین خلق درآمد. در ۱۳۷۸ در جریان کودتای ۲۸ مرداد در تهران کشته شد. او در ۱۳۷۹ در تهران اعدام شد.

توضیح میدهند

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جینووس Taghizadeh, Rock Scissors Paper, 20x14, Courtesy of Aaran Gallery Tehran (1)

عمومومی زندانیان سیاسی

۱۱۶۰ زندانی، تسفاده دیگری از محکومان سیاسی مزدوی آزاد میشوند.

اعلامیه دولت: دولت تضمین میکند هیچگونه اعمال نفوذ و دخالت مستقیم و غیر مستقیم در مطبوعات صورت نگیرد

پایان یک قرن سانسور

میلاد خنده
حضرت امام
رضا (ع)
شماره ۲ - سنون هشتم

اعلامیه آیات عظام در باره تعطیل فردا در تهنیت

شماره ۲ - سنون اول



شماره ۲ دکتر حنا تاطق استاد دانشگاه ومعلق ملی در سالن سخنرایی کیهان، پشتیبانی استادان دانشگاه را از خودتنبای مطبوعات مطبوعات اعلام میکند.

مطبوعات آزادی خود را پس گرفت

گفتوگویی نویسندگان و نخست وزیر و وزرا:
در ۷۰ سال مشروطه
۷۰ روز هم آزادی
مطبوعات نداشتیم

آزمون وزیر مشاور: آزادی کامل مطبوعات محکمت ضراباتی پها وارد سازد. باید این ضرابیات را تحمل کنیم

شماره ۲ - سنون اول

اعتصابات ادامه دارد

شماره ۲۳

کریم سنجابی رئیس جبهه ملی شد

میلاد خنده

مطی بیانیهای کانون نویسندگان ایران: آزادی نویسندگان زندانی ایران در خواست شد

کانون نویسندگان ایران طی بیانیهای خود اعلام کرد که اعتصابات نویسندگان ایرانی علیه سانسور مطبوعات ادامه دارد.

اعلامیه دولت: برابر قانون اساسی دولت آزادی مطبوعات را تضمین میکند

مجلس اعلامیه دولت که به امضای نخست وزیر، وزیر مشاور (نویسنده ارجمند) و وزیر اطلاعات (دکتر عباس توپرانی) و وزیر کارآمدان گنجینه ۱۰ نظری استقامت رسیده است.

دولت بدلیل رعایت ضوابط که نمایندگان کسبه ۱۰ نظری استقامت مطبوعات که در سه روز مذاکره صورت گرفت با حضور اعلامیه ای از مطبوعات را براساس قانون تضمین میکند.



مجلس اعلامیه دولت که به امضای نخست وزیر، وزیر مشاور (نویسنده ارجمند) و وزیر اطلاعات (دکتر عباس توپرانی) و وزیر کارآمدان گنجینه ۱۰ نظری استقامت مطبوعات رسیده است.

اعتصاب مطبوعات صدر صندسی سیاسی بود

مینویسیم، پس هستیم...

مجلس اعلامیه دولت که به امضای نخست وزیر، وزیر مشاور (نویسنده ارجمند) و وزیر اطلاعات (دکتر عباس توپرانی) و وزیر کارآمدان گنجینه ۱۰ نظری استقامت مطبوعات که در سه روز مذاکره صورت گرفت با حضور اعلامیه ای از مطبوعات را براساس قانون تضمین میکند.



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دانشجویان مسلحان دانشگاه تربیت معلولان بر خود غیر دموکراتیک را محکوم می کنند

دانشجویان مسلحان دانشگاه تربیت معلولان اعلام کردند که رژیم را محکوم می کنند.

Jinoos Taghizadeh, Rock Scissors Paper, 20x14, Courtesy of Aaran Gallery Tehran (2)