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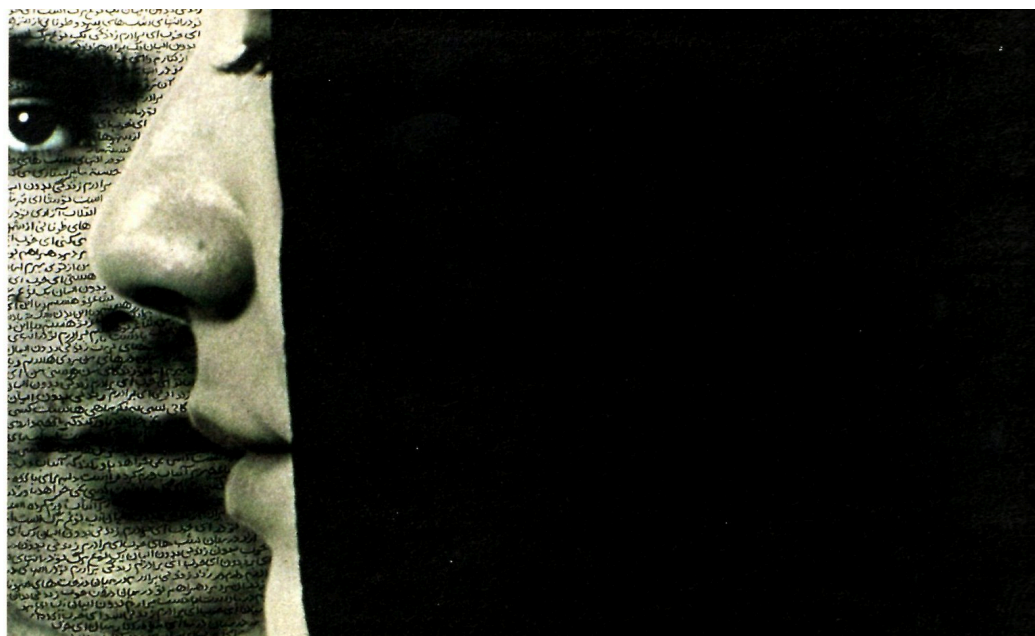
IRAN CALLING
A NEW GENERATION
TASTES SUCCESS

FOCUSING ON *iran*



IRANIAN PHOTOGRAPHERS WORKING INSIDE AND OUTSIDE
THE COUNTRY ARTFULLY EXPOSE A SOCIETY IN TURMOIL.

By Abigail R. Esman



WHEN SOOREH HERA, an Iranian artist living in the Netherlands, was selected to participate in a group show at The Hague's Gemeentemuseum in late 2007, no one could have anticipated the uproar that ensued. Hera's contributions included "Adam and Ewald," a series of photographs depicting gay men dressed in black leather and disguised by masks. Among the shots was a portrait subtitled *Mohammed and Ali*, after the prophet and his son-in-law, also an important figure in Islam.

Immediately, Muslim groups in Holland protested, calling for the museum to be shut down, some threatening violence. Its then director, Wim van Krimpen, pulled the offending photo from the exhibition.

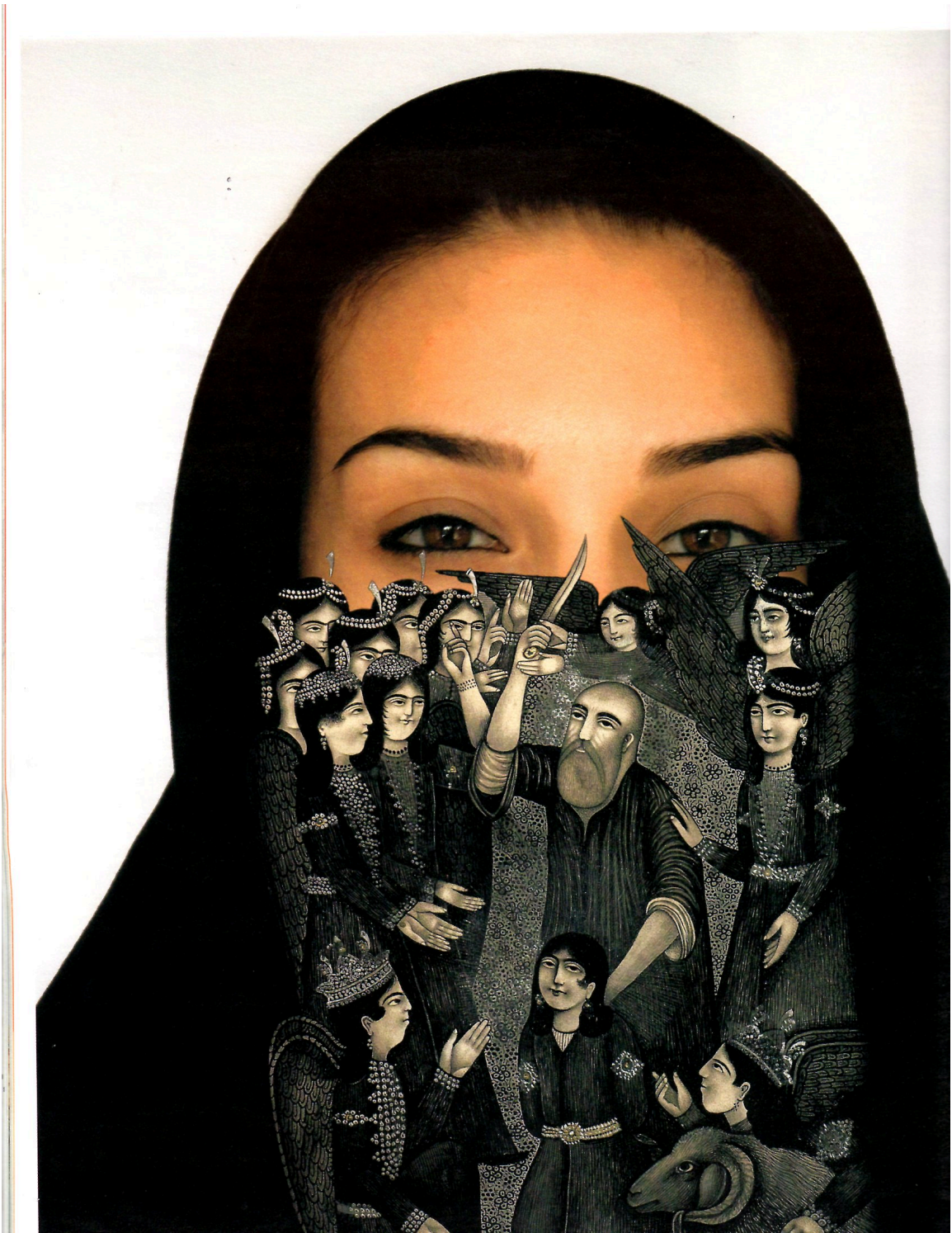
Two years later, Hera's work and that of other Iranian artists and photographers—much of it dealing with potentially controversial subjects such as religion, gender roles and identity issues—arouse a different kind of passion: International collectors clamor for their pieces, which, accordingly, command ever-greater sums. As Middle Eastern art becomes a market focus, that from Iran is the most sought after, with young Iranian photographers bringing the highest prices at auction.

The recognition these artists are receiving comes largely thanks to a confluence of political, economic and technical developments. The attacks of 9/11 put the international spotlight on the Middle East. The region's increasing wealth has drawn the auction houses to Dubai and Doha, where sales have been strong. International attention to Iran increased dramatically with the Green Revolution during the 2009 presidential campaign and the subsequent protests against perceived election fraud. Perhaps most important for the young photographers, the Internet allowed the world to view their pictures of the crackdown on the demonstrations, which revealed truths their government would not.

Several recent shows reflect the rising Western interest in the country's culture. "Iran Inside Out," a show of contemporary Iranian art that ran last summer at New York's Chelsea Museum of Art and included photographer Abbas Kowsari and video artist Farideh Lashai, garnered popular attention and critical acclaim. In November the Musée de quai Branly, in Paris, staged a retrospective of Iranian photography timed to coincide with the Paris Photo fair, which highlighted Arab and Iranian photographers. And at least 10 photographers will be included in "Tehran/New York," at New York's Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller (ЛТМН) Gallery next month.

Above: Shirin Neshat's *Whispers*, 1997, brought \$265,000 at Christie's Dubai in 2008. Her work is hugely popular in both the Middle East and the West. Below: Shadi Ghadirian's *Nili Nil #4*, 2008. Opposite: Mitra Tabrizian's *Tehran* 2006, from 2006.





This wave of shows has come despite the problems that working with Iranian artists can pose for foreign dealers, even those collaborating with local partners such as Tehran's Aaran Gallery, the most prominent in the country (and a sponsor of the Chelsea Museum exhibition). Sanctions and restrictions make transferring money to artists in the country nearly impossible. But "we all find loopholes," says Rose Issa, whose London gallery has exhibited Middle Eastern artists since the 1980s. "The West forbids us to make a transfer [of funds into Iran], but it's possible to put money into an account in Istanbul or Dubai. If I as a collector want to buy something, the artist will usually know a way." Works generally run from \$5,000 to \$7,000, their relative affordability reflecting the economic differences between Iran and the West.

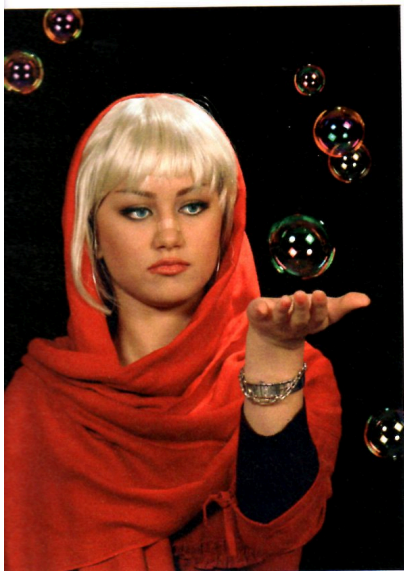
Iran's current prominence in Middle Eastern art in general and in photography in particular is hardly surprising. When photography was introduced, in the 19th century, Iranians were among the first to embrace and experiment with the new medium. "There is a commitment with photographers to the nation, photographing the people of the country, the landscapes, the architecture, the cultural traditions and so on," says Catherine David, who curated a special section on Iranian photography for the Paris Photo fair. Moreover, Iran has been at the forefront of art making in the region since the 1940s, when the University of Tehran was founded. At the time, the school's art faculty was largely composed of Iranians who had studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris and promoted a Western modernist aesthetic, a tendency encouraged by the government of the last shah, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi.

The 1979 revolution changed all that—at least officially. The Islamic regime that replaced the shah favored social realism and tributes to its founder, the Ayatollah Khomeini. But in their studios, avant-garde artists continued working quietly. Others living outside the country chose not to return.

Shirin Neshat, the Iranian artist perhaps best known to Western collectors, moved to Los Angeles as a teenager with her family a few years before the revolution. Since the early 1980s, she has lived in New York and shows with the Gladstone Gallery, among others. Neshat produces politically charged videos, films and stills of female subjects whose hands, faces or feet she inscribes with Farsi script. Hugely popular in the West, her work, which evokes the plight of women in her homeland as well as Persian heritage and history, are even more coveted in the

Right: From Shadi Ghadirian's 2002 "Like everyday/ Domestic life" series: *Like everyday #08*; *Like everyday #62*; and *Like everyday #02*. Below: Mitra Tabrizian's *City*, London, 2008. Opposite: Sadegh Tirafkan's *The Loss of Our Identity #6*, 2007.





Middle East, where one of her photographs sold for \$265,000 at Christie's Dubai branch in April 2008.

The Tehran-based Shadi Ghadirian—who exhibits with Kashya Hildebrand, in Zurich—pursues similar themes with a more sardonic approach. Among the first Iranian artists to employ photography as an art medium, according to Maryam Eisler, a London-based collector, author and curator specializing in Iranian art, Ghadirian produces pointed photos of women draped in flower-patterned chadors, their faces replaced with objects of domesticity: a rubber glove, a broom. In her sepia-toned 2001 “Qajar” series (prints from which sell for about \$15,000 to \$20,000 at auction), women pose in 19th-century Qajar dynasty settings while holding contemporary emblems: a can of Pepsi, a boom box.

While Neshat and Ghadirian both came to photography via art school, many of their compatriots have achieved celebrity in the medium by the very different route of photojournalism, notes LTMH gallery's Leila Heller, who represents the London-based Mitra Tabrizian, among other Iranian artists. Newsha Tavakolian, whose work has been included in nearly a dozen international exhibitions, covered the 2009 uprisings in Tehran for the *New York Times*. Her series “Mothers of Martyrs,” portraits of pious Iranian women proudly clasping photographs of sons killed during the Iran-Iraq war of 1980–88, is both a powerful cultural commentary and a historical record, as is her “The Day I Became a Woman,” a set of pictures of the ceremony in which nine-year-old girls first don their chadors. From that day on, they must pray daily, keep themselves covered and never shake hands with a man.

Kowsari, another freelance photographer for the *Times*, who, like Tavakolian, is represented by Issa, produced the stunning portraits of female police cadets in Tehran in full chador, holding pistols and rifles, that grabbed the spotlight at the Chelsea Museum show. Heller, who plans to include his work in “Tehran/New



or statutory damages. Jaggers said copyright holders usually (latter, since statutory damages run from \$750 to \$150,000 per cent, plus attorneys' fees. The cost of litigation—not to mention if we lost—would ruin our small institution.

rtly after that we had an unexpected stroke of good luck: a Web-hosting address for Provis in deepest Australia! We he artist repeatedly but got no response. We thought of sending letter saying that we would interpret lack of response as tacit t to use the images, but Jaggers cautioned that under copyright ie does not equal approval. Then, just last year, I learned about legislation relating to so-called "orphan" works, meaning whose owners cannot be located. The Senate passed the bill ith little opposition, and another version was introduced in 2002. Although our friends on Capitol Hill assured us last June ge of orphan-works legislation was imminent, it was blocked ise. Many commentators believe that it is just a matter of time t bill is revived—and enacted.

ler the proposed law, if users of copyrighted works made dili- ts to find the owners and those owners later appeared and opyright infringement, the users would enjoy the benefits of a safe harbor and pay only a reasonable license fee instead of the tatutory damages provided for under current law.

ther that some artists, particularly photographers and illustra- ise the legislation, viewing it as a worldwide copyright threat. that if users, such as big businesses that might want the images ory purposes, went through the motions of carrying out a bly diligent search" (a vague standard not defined under the statute) to clear the works, they could actually steal them for ial gain.

ise artists consider themselves vulnerable for a number of rea- instance, they typically don't put their contact information works. Moreover, today's technology encourages a culture g and appropriation in which images are distributed freely. nany object to the fact that, under the bill, if the copyright peers after an unsuccessful search, the user needn't withdraw from circulation but must merely pay "reasonable compensa- hich remains an undefined term. Some artists, however, are d that the law's purpose is laudable: to make use of works so ot lost.

t when I had given up hope of using Provis's images, we her lucky break. The artist emerged, but under an entirely name—Magwitch—and not only let us use the illustrations offered to donate his share of the royalties to the archives. I was delighted to locate this new benefactor, I was taken aback other surprise. While we had hoped that Magwitch would essional artist, he turned out to be just a reformed criminal drawn the pair of kittens while behind bars. So much for our ectations!

conclude this tale of two kitties, I would ask: Might you be d in buying a few tote bags from our institution?

cerely, P. Pirrip

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raisers, art-rock shows and parties, including baptism celebrations and quinceañeras for the predominantly Hispanic church next door.

"There's a certain liberty out in Bushwick," de Balincourt explains. "You can still create your own community here. And that is what Starr Space was. It was my own little self-sustained utopia."

Such liberty comes at a price—especially when you're the perenn- ial host. De Balincourt served jail time (27 hours, to be exact) following one Starr Space event (he's mum on the details). And after three years of running the venue, he's throwing in the towel. It takes too much time, costs too much money, he says, and he really wants all that space to use as a studio.

Lately, he's been traveling a lot—the motorcycle trip through India, along with treks through Japan, California and, in the near future, Peru. The images and themes emerging in his new paintings, he says, reflect the precarious moment we're in as a country. The uncertainty manifests itself in ambiguous crowds—people with picket signs, strangers on foreign streets. The works are more free-associative, and while de Balincourt has always painted from his imagination, he's now looking inward even more. "It's my own sort of escapism," he muses. "It's coming out of going into the unknown—'Where is it going to take me?' Everything inspires my work; lived experiences, cultural and social phenomena. But it is more and more about that internal gaze, a mix of these utopian and dystopian ideals. It all sounds kind of New Agey, but these days, that's what I'm interested in." ■

Focusing on Iran

(continued from page 59) oppression that imposes the veil on women. Arman Stepanian, again in Tehran, also looks back, snapping pictures of aging wooden doorways on which he has hung Qajar dynasty photographs like icons. The resulting images combine past and present, evoking history and nostalgia.

Not surprisingly, the sense of loss conveyed by Stepanian and Tirafkan is also reflected in the works of many expatriate artists. Tabrizian, who has lived in London since 1977, creates montages that speak to alienation and isolation, drawing on her experience both as an Iranian abroad and as an artist unimpressed by the inner workings of the art world. In "Surveillance," from the 1980s, figures of authority wander across a podium, oblivious of the masses clamoring below, while the artist's more recent "Border" series portrays simple working-class lives: a woman alone in a room; a man walking on an empty road to nowhere. Lately, in a departure from her earlier, political series, she's begun addressing the Western art establishment with photos of men in business suits standing in an empty art gallery, staring at nothing. Such a print sold at Sotheby's London last October for £18,750 (\$30,600).

One thing all these photographers have in common is a defiance of the Iranian government's efforts to dam the wellspring of creativity within its borders, of limitations imposed anywhere upon their art or their freedoms. "No matter how much censorship they put down, artworks are coming out. You cannot stop it," says Rose Issa. Sooreh Hera agrees. "Artists must dare to say what they think," she says. "It wasn't my idea to be provocative, but if you make art, you have to do what you feel." ■