



the re-framing
of conflict

reza aramesh

Since fleeing from Iran when only 16 years old, Reza Aramesh has increasingly developed his own personal concepts of power, history and ritual. His stark, yet endlessly finessed, work is highly political and politicised, yet not without humour, as he challenges the very notions of identity, nationality and society.



TEXT BY ANTHONY DOWNEY
IMAGES COURTESY OF B21 GALLERY

Previous pages: *Action 52. An Egyptian soldier guards Iraqi prisoners in the Kuwaiti desert, August 2, 1990. 2008. Black and white silver gelatin print. 124 x 157 cm. Edition of three.*

Facing page: *Action 54. Israeli soldiers lead two blindfolded Palestinian prisoners as they walk from the Gaza Strip through the Karni Crossing at the end of a ground and air operation in Gaza, 15 January 2008. 2008. Black and white silver gelatin print. 124 x 162 cm. Edition of three.*

In early 1968, Eddie Adams, a former combat photographer-cum-photojournalist, was walking through the Cholon District of Saigon. The communist-led Tet Offensive had begun a few weeks earlier and sporadic fighting was breaking out across the city. Adams, camera in hand and accompanied by an NBC cameraman, carefully followed the shooting until he caught sight of a prisoner, arms tied behind his back, being brought before a Vietnamese soldier. In the moments that followed, the soldier calmly walked up to the prisoner, took a gun from his holster, and shot him in the head. With one methodical and impassive gesture, General Nguyen Ngoc Loan had summarily executed Viet Cong captain Nguyen Van Lem and, in the split second it took to pull the trigger, Adams had taken a photograph that would become one of the iconic images of the Vietnam War. At the time, Adams was not even sure he had got the picture and he continued to take more as Van Lem lay on the ground with blood gushing profusely from the single, irrevocable gunshot wound in his head.

The caption accompanying this image when it was published by the Associated Press – “General Nguyen Ngoc Loan executing a Viet Cong prisoner in Saigon” – still has something of a clinical, matter-of-fact tone to it when we consider the furore that followed its publication, not to mention its continued infamy to this day. Alongside Ronald L Haerberle’s colour photographs of the massacre at My Lai in 1968 and Nick Ut’s image of a naked young girl fleeing her

napalmed village in 1972, Adams’s image was instrumental in bolstering the anti-Vietnam War movement, although he himself would remain ambiguous about responses to it. As to the visceral impact of the image itself, the intuitive sense of the ruthlessness at work here, it is notable that although graphic and moving film was also taken on the day, it is Adams’s photograph that has come to define both the moment and the brutality of the Vietnam War.

It is precisely these simple but far from simplistic questions [of conflict] that underwrite the work of Reza Aramesh.

Lens Power

We may want to stop here and ask a relatively simple question: does photography, in an age of digital reproduction and the unchecked proliferation of war images, still have the authority and impact associated with it when Adams clicked his shutter

release at precisely the moment a bullet entered the temple of the unfortunate Van Lem? Or have photographs of conflict and war zones become so ubiquitous that they are now just another part of the media noise that hums in the background of our lives? It is precisely these simple but far from simplistic questions that underwrite the work of Reza Aramesh and his enquiry into the exact nature of representation when it comes to zones of conflict and warfare today.

Aramesh was born in a small town in Iran in 1970. In the mid-1980s, with Iran deeply embroiled in a bitter war with neighbouring Iraq, he left his homeland and travelled to Britain. From here he had hoped to continue to the USA, but the American authorities indicated that he would not be allowed entry, and in the event, he was granted asylum by the British.

...have photographs of conflict and war zones become so ubiquitous that they are now just another part of the media noise that hums in the background of our lives?

Action 42. Fatah Loyalists at the Erez Crossing in northern Gaza flee the Hamas-run territory for the West Bank. June 2007. 2008. Black and white silver gelatin print. 164 x 124 cm. Edition of three.





Left: *Action 50. Lebanese intelligence agents arrest demonstrators near the justice palace in Beirut, August 9, 2001. 2008. Black and white silver gelatin print. 124 x 157 cm. Edition of three.*

Aramesh ... would often begin with a couple of hundred images and whittle them down to 40 or so, then further distilling those into a series of eight to 10 finished works...



Action 44. Baghdad
September 10, 2004.
2008. Black and white
silver gelatin print. 124 x
157 cm. Edition of three.



As viewers, we are regularly bombarded with such images until they lose their sense of context and power. It is at precisely this point .that Aramesh's images come into their own

Action 51. Kerem Shalom, Israel – February, 2008: Palestinian prisoners sit blindfolded on the ground after they were captured by Israeli soldiers. 2008. Black and white silver gelatin print. 124 x 157 cm. Edition of three.



Aramesh's photographs tend to re-frame the moment and, in doing so, re-inscribe it ...with a disconcerting sense of immediacy

Action 43. An Israeli soldier arrests Palestinians on suspicion of being members of Fatah. 2008. Black and white silver gelatin print. 50 x 70 cm. Edition of three.

It is at this point that Aramesh's work takes on a sense of uncanny present-ness; a sense that history, far from learning from its mistakes, is only ever destined to repeat them, first as tragedy and then, to gloss Marx's insight, as farce.

He has lived and worked in London ever since, and become renowned for his manipulation of aspects of photography, film and performance to create often uncomfortable dialogues about the nature of power, conflict and political behaviour.

In *Action 45. Execution of a Viet Cong Prisoner on the Streets of Saigon, 1968*, (2008), Aramesh restaged Van Lem's execution with some important differences. Firstly, our impassive general is notable in his absence and the entire focus is placed on the eponymous 'prisoner'. The absence of any obvious threat tends to lend Aramesh's image a form of iconicity that is different to that of Adams's original. Van Lem was shot by General Ngoc Loan; his death became indicative of the contravention of the Geneva Convention that oversees the humane treatment of prisoners; it stood for – and still stands today as – an indictment of the Vietnam War itself. However, *Action 45* takes on a more universalist aspect. The 'prisoner' here, in all his abject helplessness, could be a stand-in for prisoners of war *per se*; the abandoned figure who, in the face of his imminent death, comes to define the subject who is beyond recourse to the legal systems that govern warring nations.

Figures of Strife

It was these figures, the individuals who co-exist in the no-man's-land of war and conflict that awaited me when I visited Aramesh and was greeted by an array of press and web-based images that line an entire wall of his studio in London. Despite the geographic differences to be had in these images, there was also a degree of sameness: victim and victimiser, prisoner and prison guard, the living and the dead, all seemed

to be replaying history's lamentable refrain of the victor and the vanquished. However, these binaries are largely absent in Aramesh's finished images insofar as the source of threat in the original photographs, be they prison guards or soldiers, are largely *in absentia* in the final photographs. Speaking of his working practice, Aramesh noted that he would often begin with a couple of hundred images and whittle them down to 40 or so, then further distilling those into a series of eight to 10 finished works that may be in turn composites of different photographs. It is important to observe here that in *Action 45*, additional details have also been added. In conversation, the artist has noted that the scene in the background, men lying on the ground being frisked and a man with his arms in the air, was taken from a separate image of a more recent event in Iraq. And it is at this point that Aramesh's work takes on a sense of uncanny present-ness; a sense that history, far from learning from its mistakes, is only ever destined to repeat them, first as tragedy and then, to gloss Marx's insight, as farce.

The most obvious difference in *Action 45*, however, is the fact that the image has transposed the original and, for some, unfamiliar, context of Saigon into the far from unfamiliar context of a gallery, in this instant the Wallace Collection in London. There is a form of temporal uncanniness at work here: the past reappears in the present but in a different guise. This also works in relation to place: Aramesh's choice of location – the relatively familiar environment, for some, of a gallery – has become defamiliarised and rendered unsafe and confusing to the viewer because of the apparently unusual events occurring there. Just as the original image acted as a framing device for the event in Saigon, Aramesh's photographs tend


to re-frame the moment and, in doing so, re-inscribe it with a disconcerting sense of immediacy and present-ness. Or, in other words, the original images, distanced in our mind through repetition and ubiquity, are here re-presented in terms of vertiginous proximity.

These forms of re-staging and re-framing are at work throughout Aramesh's *oeuvre*. In *Action 51. Kerem Shalom Israel – February 17, 2008*, (2008), he turns to the present for his re-staging of conflict. The original image was a press photograph of Palestinian prisoners being guarded by Israeli soldiers on a border crossing between the Gaza Strip and Israel. As a source photograph, this image remains relatively unremarkable when seen amongst the many other similar ones. And this is perhaps part of the problem surrounding the ubiquity of images that take conflict as their source material. As viewers, we are regularly bombarded with such images until they lose their sense of context and power. It is at precisely this point that Aramesh's images come into their own. Transposing these Palestinian prisoners into the environment of Cliveden House, a one-time stately home in Berkshire and now a luxury hotel, reinvests an immediacy to them. All the visual ingredients are still there, the abject prisoners on their knees and two insouciant soldiers above them, and yet the context bespeaks of sanctuary, security and stability – the very elements that are missing in the original image.

Likewise in *Action 41. Iraqi Prisoner Praying After Being Released From Baghdad's Notorious Abu Ghraib Jail*. *BBC 30 May* (2008), Aramesh's transposition of a supplicant man from the streets of Baghdad to a Modernist house in North London gives this image a sense of immediacy that is possibly even more startling than if the context were a stately home or a gallery: this house, this image seems to say, could be your house, and all that happens within the confines of its walls is your responsibility. It is in this all too familiar context that the images we see on our television screens, laptops and newspapers, become proximate and all the more disconcerting.

The East on Fire

To the extent that Aramesh's photographs are a series of *tableaux vivants* that re-stage not so much the past but the present, and thereafter re-frame apparently distant conflicts in more immediate settings, they inevitably disrupt accepted ways of seeing. In his provocative volume *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said noted that representations of the so-called Orient systematically laid the ground for further representations. The context and content of these, inevitably biased towards Western cultural preoccupations, economic goals and political ambitions, entered into what he termed a "complex dialectic of reinforcement" wherein which only certain types of images could exist in relation to the so-called Middle East. It would appear today that the only acceptable images of the Middle East in Western media are those of conflict and strife. They not only sell newspapers and flesh out news shows, they are – in this "complex dialectic of reinforcement" – safe images, so to speak, inasmuch as they merely reconfirm preconceived views of a violent and tribally defined region we call the 'Middle East'. Of course, this is nonsense, but a nonetheless enduring nonsense.

In Aramesh's work, the propensity for the media to alight upon such images, and frame the reality of the Middle East in terms of conflict, is contested in the act of transposing these events to the immediate context of more visible environments. Civil space and the spaces of conflict, social and private space, political and personal space, are first juxtaposed in these images and thereafter elided: the privacy of the home or the sanctuary of public space is blasted open to reveal that the conflicts that surround us are not as distant as we would no doubt want them to be. There is no room for complacency, finally, when conflict is presented as an inherent feature of your own, as opposed to another more distant, setting. 

For more information visit www.b21gallery.com