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Contemporary Practices

VISUAL ARTS FROM THE MIDDLE EAST



REZA ARAMESH

A Replay on the Tragedy
of Art vs. War

VAN LEO

From Turkey to Egypt

Contemporary Practices

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Gemma Tully
in conversation with

Reza Aramesh

Reza Aramesh is a man with an acute perception of the world who is unafraid to make bold decisions in both his life and his art. Choosing to leave his hometown in southwest Iran, Aramesh came to Britain at the age of 15. Thrown into British culture, he rapidly learnt English and went on to achieve an undergraduate degree in Chemistry. However, always one to act on his instincts, Aramesh abandoned the 'safe' career path to pursue a life-long passion for art.

Since gaining a Masters from Goldsmiths College, London, Aramesh's photographic, performance and video work has received international acclaim. Through the creation of powerful juxtapositions between symbolic settings and peopled content, Aramesh's art demands attention. Deconstructing notions of identity, his work challenges audiences to question taken-for-granted beliefs about self, society and culture. Dealing with stereotypes and the theme of conflict, his work appears highly political, but on meeting Aramesh in his London studio I soon realised that nothing about the man or his art was simply 'black and white.'



Action 46 Palestinian prisoners sit blindfolded on the ground after captured by Israeli soldiers, February 17, 2008 at the Kerem Shalom base.



Image right and left: **Action 71** At the Tate Britain, 2009. Photograph by Atlanta Rascher

Contemporary Practices: I thought we could start by talking about ACTION 64, a piece from your most recent photographic series, which is on the cover of this issue.

Reza Aramesh: The piece really summarises my work of the past few years, which used media images to restage events from conflict, both recent and historic, from across the world. ACTION 64 was originally a cover photo for Life magazine in 1968. It was a headshot of a Vietcong prisoner gagged and blindfolded. I selected the image and added elements to the original by including the whole person in the frame and restaging the scene in the elite environment of Kenwood House, in London. But I also took things away from the Life scene - the gag and the blindfold - to avoid the inclusion of such obvious classifications of a victim.

CP: So, you are using these techniques (removing elements from the original picture) to look at the universality of war, not simply issues of direct relevance to your own heritage.

RA: At this point I must talk about the difficulty of dealing with the representation of tragedy in art; we are bombarded with images of disasters but are left unaffected by them...Why is that? One could argue that because we've been bombarded with these images they lose their impact. I personally think it is because of the way they are reported or if you like presented to us... the inclusion of a gun in a picture is enough for us not to read further into the image. Similarly, in soap operas or theatres when a tragic scene is played by actors they often overact and therefore it is difficult to relate to the characters and we remain merely spectators. If we study closely a pho-



tojournalistic picture of a conflict, we discover that the facial expressions of victims and victimizers tell us nothing of their states of mind and emotions. This is what I am particularly interested in concerning these photographs; I take tools of physical oppression out of the picture and bring the background, which normally goes unnoticed by the photographer, into the foreground.

Because I silence the 'dramatic' elements of the 'characters' and take out the physical tools of aggression, the viewers are able to see themselves within the ACTION.

By taking dramatic images of conflict which are so alien to us and by removing the alien aspects such as guns, gags, blind-folds etc., and by putting soldiers in civilian clothes, I suggest

that we all have the potential to be both victim and victimiser. For similar reasons I stopped using the masks that I had used in my earlier work, to make the photographs more subtle and encourage audiences to look at themselves through the depicted narratives and consider the relationship between the event and the experience of the image. This also allows the spectator to bring whatever they want to that image. Unlike some art, which can dictate a message completely, one of my aims is to give people the space to bring their own experiences to the work.

I feel that some of the elements of my practice are similar to Goya's later work, such as *The Disasters of War*, in that he recorded the history of war while subverting and critiquing the process. He also drew attention to individuals and the ordi-



Action 71 At the Tate Britain

nary people caught up in conflict - soldiers as well as civilians.

Considering the question in relation to my own heritage - as a human, my inheritance is the world with its history. Most of the contemporary conflicts right now are in the Middle East; it was not long ago that conflict existed in South and Central America and in many other parts of the world... My aim is to show conflict over time and space, dealing with contemporary society as well as making reference to the past. Western history of art is rich in paintings that explore the narrative and pictorial potential of warfare, which I wanted to avoid in my treatment of conflicts.

CP: *How does your current ACTION series differ from your earlier work?*

RA: My earlier work dealt with Western perceptions of terror in the Middle East. I used the mask as a symbol at the time, but you need to keep in mind that when you make an image it instantly goes out of your control and how it is interpreted depends on everything else happening at the time. Some of the first pieces I made were self-portraits looking at my various selves. Identity is very significant to all of my work, how the

self is constituted in time and how our behaviour and repetition of acts seems to constitute what we are. The self-portraits aimed to illustrate the fact that we are all different people. By complete chance these portraits of me in various black embroidered balaclavas coincided with 9/11 and gave a whole new meaning to the work. The event also led the work more specifically down the road of exposing stereotypes of Middle Eastern men as terrorists as well as idealised notions of the West held by many in the Middle East.

CP: *These works were in colour. What made you change to black and white in your photography?*

RA: The use of black and white developed due to the incorporation of media images in the ACTION series as I wanted to communicate timelessness and the universality of war. With black and white it could be any place or any era – war is war.

CP: *Thinking about this particular message, how important is the setting for your ACTIONS?*

RA: Settings of the ACTIONS are an integral part of the work. I want to address structures of power that operate in



Action 68 South Vietnamese soldiers show of a Viet Cong prisoner captured near Tan Son Nhut Airbase, May 6, 1968 (2009)
Black and white silver gelatin print, 158 x 124 cm, Edition of 3

conflicts and wars. By intervening in these structures, juxtaposing images of conflicts and stately homes, I hope to expose the nature of war and to illustrate two points. One, conflict may perhaps be justified on ideological grounds but I feel that it is fundamentally about financial gain, and two, history, far from learning from its mistakes, sadly repeats them. These situations make me think of this amazing quote by Aldous Huxley, 'Experience is not what happens to a man; it is what a man does with what happens to him.'

Tensions created by placing actors (lots of them non-professionals) within these architectural environments, loaded with historical or social significance, are the essential factor of the work.

CP: In relation to the above question, can you talk about ACTION 60 and ACTION 23 'I am a believer'?

Regarding the Zoo Art Fair 2008, for which ACTION 60 was commissioned, it was very important to research the

venue and its history (Royal Academy of Art, London). I put most of the art fair staff and security guards into military uniforms for the duration of the fair with the aim of making visitors aware of how in different countries military presence constitutes a permanent interference with culture and art. I wanted people to think about other systems of power, other cities, other cultures, and how it feels to experience the presence of the military. Visitors did not know how to respond. They were shocked to begin with as they were taken out of their comfort zone. This is exactly what I hoped for since, when the confusion subsided, perhaps it made them think 'why were the soldiers there?'

For I'm a Believer I chose Trafalgar Square, a historical location associated with battle, the monarch and the Changing of Guard ceremony which has taken place in London for hundreds of years in the same way. While tradition and tourism mean that the ceremony still exists in the same format, Britain has changed; the white faces of the guards do not represent today's reality of Britain. This is why I worked with second-generation British-Middle Eastern and North African individuals within the action. You have to bear in mind that these acts are not intended to repeat reality, but to challenge it.

CP: You frequently focus on conflict and aim to make people re-think issues that they might commonly overlook within their day-to-day lives, yet you say that this is not directly political. How do you reconcile these elements?

RA: Well, this is the problem of work being put in 'a box' by others, not necessarily reflecting what the artist intends. Besides, conflicts and wars are part of our day-to-day life... we hear about them in the news as they unfold in one part of the world or another at different times. This does not, however, imply that all our day-to-day actions can be seen as political.

CP: How do you approach the selection of an image?

RA: I am researching all the time - newspapers, the BBC, Reuters. I start with thousands of images and then I gradually cut down their number, as well as cutting down the focus of the images themselves. I am not looking for the central figures or main actions but for what is generally not seen, what is in the background. I'm looking for the elements that are not so obvious to the camera. Journalism always goes for the shock and the gore, but I try to see what the camera does not see, the other stories that are overshadowed. My interest is in the psychology of what is really there in the photographs. So, by taking out the implied divide between 'good' and 'evil', I make the scene seem more human - normalising it. But I am also

concerned with the power of images or, if you like, the power of art. In 1964 Allan Kaprow wrote, 'Power in art is not like that in a nation or in big business. A picture never changed the price of eggs. But a picture can change our dreams; and pictures may in time clarify our values.'

CP: How do you select people to take part in these ACTIONS? Are they all actors?

RA: No, they aren't all actors. I chose individuals from all walks of life who I cast for the way their faces and physicality communicate certain messages.

CP: Working with homeless people in ACTION 71 is slightly different to your other recent work. Could you tell me a little more about the project at Tate Britain, and how it came about?

RA: Photographs that I had taken of homeless people wherever I had travelled during the last two years initiated the concept for ACTION 71. I researched the history of Tate Britain and discovered that a great deal of the art was produced between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, the time of the slave trade, and that the paintings implicitly reflect the aspirations of a society accepting slave trade as normal. With the exception of a few artists such as William Blake, the art was made and sold to meet the demands of collectors. So, I selected two rooms within which the ACTION would create a poignant contrast. The first room contained work by artists who created romanticised portraits of landowners who had moved to the cities but wanted to be painted within 'their' landscape. The second room contained portraits of similar individuals that focused on status and lineage. In addition, I offered the participants a shelter for an evening.

CP: How did you come into contact with the homeless individuals?

RA: I got in touch with the homeless charity The Big Issue and selected a number of homeless men to come and sleep in the galleries.

CP: How did visitors respond to this?

RA: I don't know. I don't stand around to watch the audience's response to the work. My job here was to highlight an aspect of society that is often overlooked or approached in terms of stereotypes. Homeless people are often invisible within our daily lives. People often make associations between homelessness, drugs and alcohol and do not think that for

many, there are more complex stories behind their situation and their poverty.

CP: How does your publication Centrefold relate to all of this?

RA: Centrefold is a limited edition publication in scrapbook format, with a print run of no more than 60 copies. Born in 2003 from a curatorial project entitled Wooden Hearts, it is a low-tech cut-and-paste production, working directly on the pages of the book. For every issue artists are invited to treat one to two pages as their own scrapbook, while a writer/historian/curator or an artist is normally invited to produce the centrefold of that particular issue. All the pages are then compiled, formatted, and designed.

Centrefold attempts to record a non-linear local art history through the view of an artist (myself), rather than echo how art is recorded and fictionalised by art historians. It's more of a suggestion of other possible ways of recording history or art. Centrefold is like much of the rest of my work in that it synthesises a great deal of material and also gives me the chance to meet other artists, to bring work together and to create things that I could not do through other formats of work. It has the same sensibilities as my other work but functions on a different level.



Action 60 CollectiveLiveArt at Zoo Art Fair, London, 2008. Photographer: Bobby Wittaker. Image courtesy of the artist and CollectiveLiveArt





Action 23 I am a believer, re-staging Changing of the Guard Ceremony, Trafalgar Square, London, 2006
Photograph by Breda Beban