

## Reza Aramesh on Bringing His Images of Violence to NYC Nightclubs

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Rodin Hamidi

"Study for action 123: Korean prisoner of war awaiting execution, 1950," 2011 (Installation view at Marquee New York)

by Sehba Mohammad

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In his first U.S. exhibition, the Iranian-born, London-based artist **Reza Aramesh** has brought his highly political works into what would initially seem, to those unfamiliar with his work, to be unlikely venues. In co-organization with his local representative **Leila Heller Gallery**, Aramesh created site-specific installations of his works at five NYC nightclubs: ranging



"Action 132: Dying South Vietnamese Marine, Duc Hoa, Saigon, August 5 1963," 2013

from Bobby Rossi's members-only celebrity gastropub **No. 8** in Chelsea to the edgy, hole-in-the-wall **Bossa Nova Civic Club** in Bushwick. On view since May 10, "12 Midnight" closes tomorrow.

The works are gesso-surfaced, limewood sculptures of soldiers from wars ranging from Vietnam to the Gulf War, experiencing the agonizing moments before death. They were carved, under Aramesh's supervision, by Italian technicians experienced in the

trade of sculpting saints, and later painted by another artist, also trained in religious art, in layers of polychrome that create an eerie resemblance to 17th-century Italian devotional icons. The martyrs then placed on plinths, which are painted by graffiti artist **Jason Castro**, and later placed in crate-like enclosures, with slotted frames or peepholes to create a voyeuristic viewing experience.

The trendy locations serve to emphasize Aramesh's social commentary, which explores the seduction and fetishization of violence in mass media, and the desensitization that results when we're unable to distinguish tragedy from entertainment. But it's not a condemnation of nightclubs, either, which the artist often frequents; and it's more a study of a subject he has experience with from both perspectives through the duality of migration.

"My childhood was directly affected by war,"

Aramesh says. "Now I live in a place where I

witness it from a distance." Living in Iran while the first Persian Gulf conflict was ravishing his country, Aramesh later fled at the age of 16, arriving in London without any knowledge of English. Through a combination of what he calls "human survival, interest in other cultures, and excitement," he mastered the language and first went into studying chemistry, following his family line. He later switched to painting at **Goldsmith College**, and from there, into the more contemporary practice of concept-driven artwork.

Aramesh has been preoccupied with decontextualizing images of violence since late 2008, when he was first struck by the disconnected sensation he felt while looking at war reportage. This fascination first led to his work with staged photographs, in which, using amateur actors, he would reenact well-known conflict scenes, against the backdrop of opulent British mansions and

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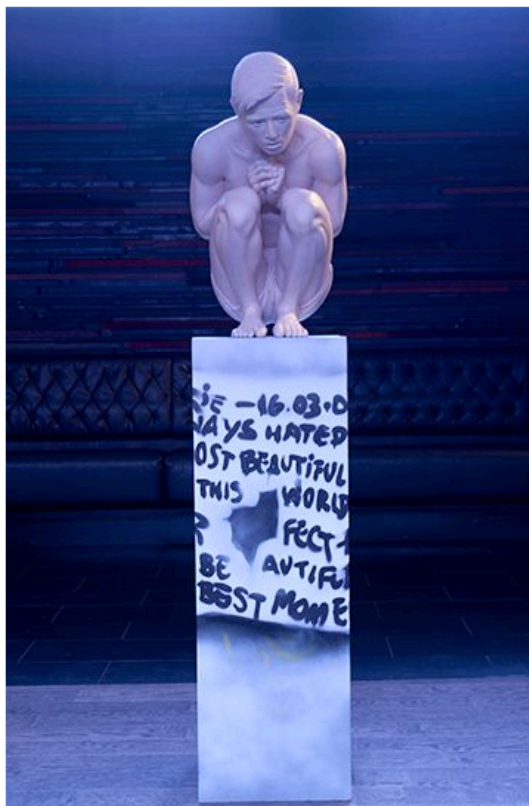




museums. The final images would be titled after the captions of the original news photos that inspired them.

They are titled, similar to his recent pieces, after the original newspaper caption they were inspired by: such as his black-and-white hand-printed triptych, “Action 121: Palestinians wait at the Rafah border point to cross into Egypt from the Gaza Strip. Tuesday, 8:00 a.m. 15 September 2009,” 2013, which depicts forlorn Palestinian refugees ironically placed in the **Palace of Versailles**. “I have never believed that conflicts are ideological, there are always economic reasons behind them,” he explained. Three years later he switched to the three-dimensional approach, first viewed with the works in his exhibition “Them Who dwell on earth,” which comprised figurative sculptures of Muslim captives, displayed at the former Holy Trinity Church, **One Marylebone**, London.

But these conflicts, as Aramesh has pointed out, are in certain ways, human inevitability. “Every great civilization has its consequences, which are usually violent,” Aramesh said. “Like those of the pyramids of Egypt. The great architectural marvels were built by slaves, many of whom were massacred in the process.”



Courtesy of Reza Aramesh and Leila Heller Gallery / Photo by Rodin Hamidi



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(Installation view at the Bosa Nova Civic Club)

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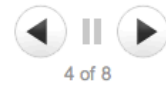
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"Action 133: Baghdad, Iraq, Tuesday November 9, 2005. Dying American Soldier," 2013 (Installation view at No.8)

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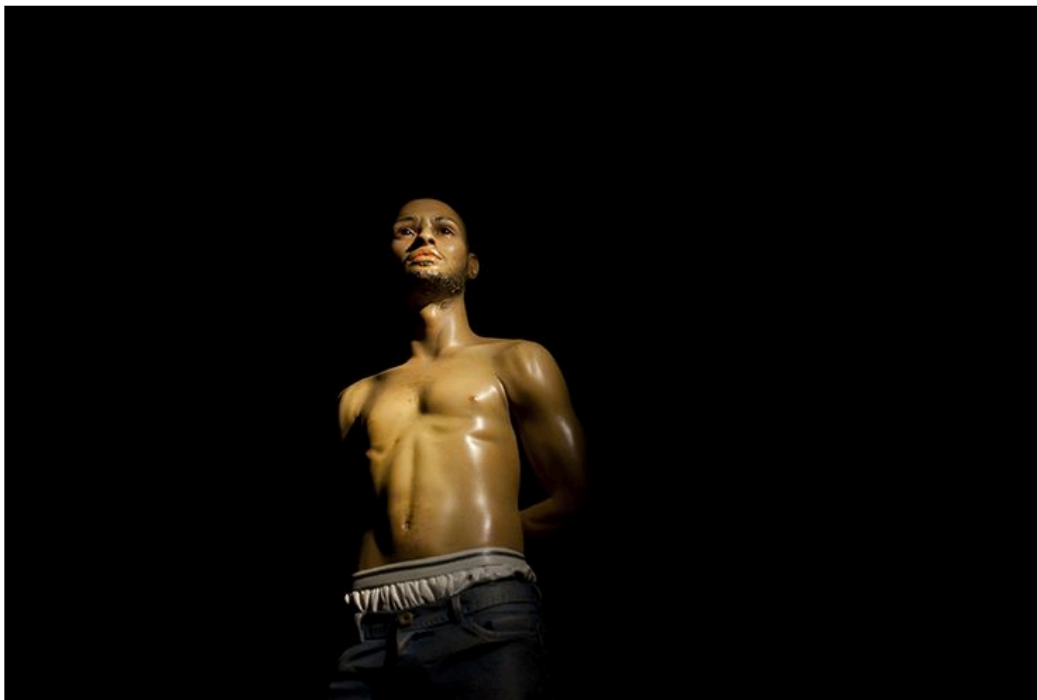
"Action 131: Dying Iranian Soldier, 1987," 2013 (Installation view at Santos Party House)



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