

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

"VIOLENCE/SILENCE" *Harper's Bazaar Art Arabia*. (November/December, 2014).



REZA ARAMESH



VIOLENCE/ SILENCE.

At Frieze London 2014, Reza Aramesh became the first Iranian artist to be exhibited at the Frieze Sculpture Park with his sculpture, Action 137: 6:45 pm, 3 May 2012, Ramla. Shiva Balaghi investigates the genesis of the piece and delves into the world of Aramesh...

On a rainy spring New York afternoon, I shared a taxicab with Reza Aramesh. We'd just left the Leila Heller Gallery in midtown, where Aramesh's sculpture 'Action 137: 6:45 pm, 3 May 2012, Ramla' had been on view. In this re-installation of the work, first shown in Dubai in March 2014, the gleaming white marble sculpture was exhibited in a room with glass ceilings with New York City's high rise buildings providing a stunning background.

As our cab wove through traffic, we closed ourselves off from the city and talked about books. Aramesh is an avid reader, and we discussed his relationship to literature. 'When I'm making art,' Aramesh told me, 'I'm not thinking linguistically but intellectually. Reading literature fills something that no other discipline can. Reading feeds into my art, otherwise, it would just be a sensory experience.'

In Aramesh's point of view, conceptual artists are philosophers. The challenge, he wonders, is whether an artist or a writer can communicate a layered subject in a simple way. In this respect, the writer William Burroughs is his model. So much so that when he was young, like many intrepid writers and artists, Aramesh trekked to Morocco to experience the place that animated so much of Burroughs' own writing.

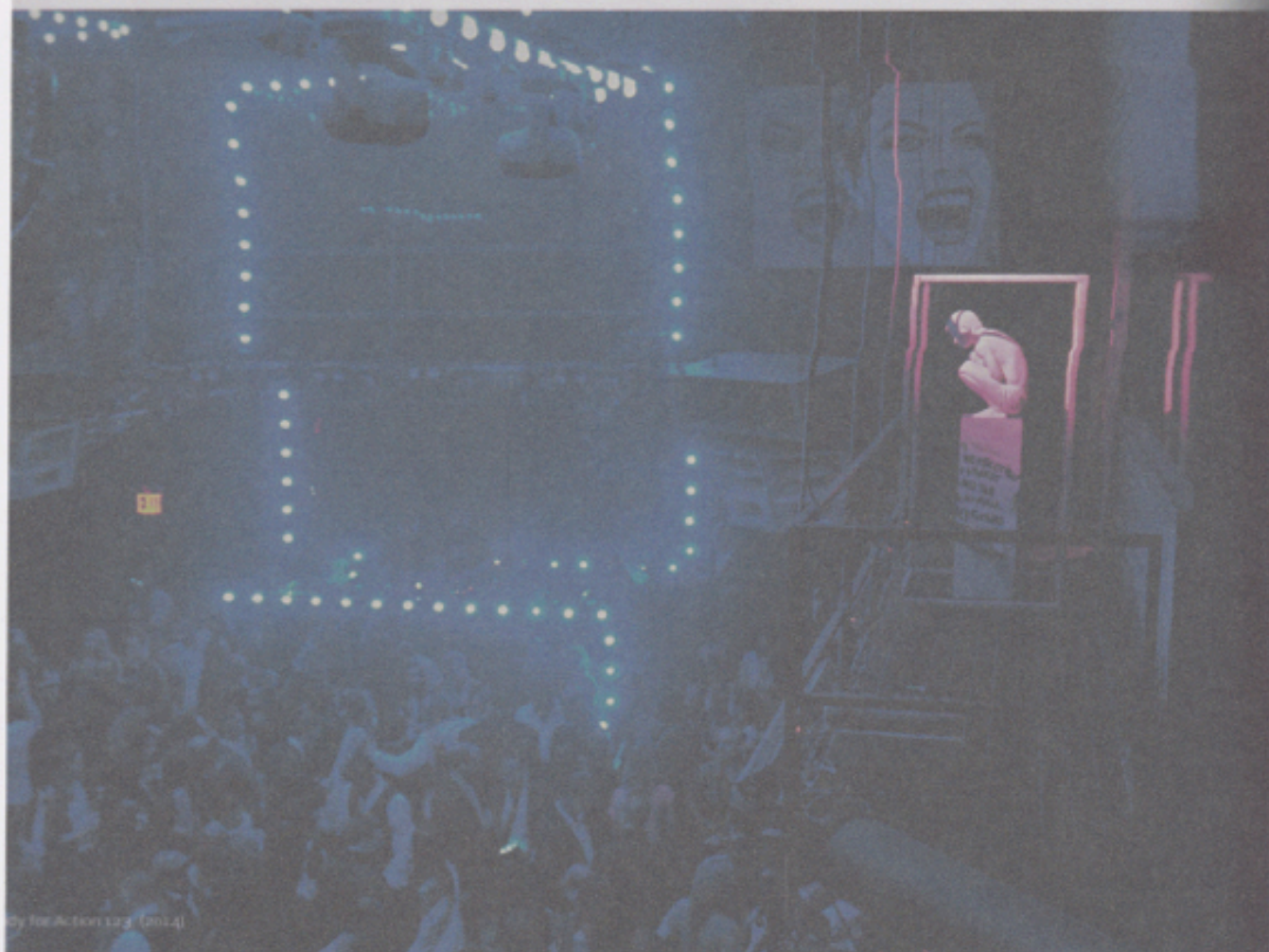
At the moment, Aramesh told me, he was reading the scholar Judith Butler's provocative book, 'Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?' The book, in part, was inspired by the critic Susan Sontag's decades' long engagement with the relationship between photography and violence—begun with Sontag's classic 'On Photography' and culminating in her last book 'Regarding the Pain

of Others'. For Sontag, war photographs can shock but they lack the possibility for interpretive narration necessary to be moved to action. In this sense, as the immediacy of the shock dissipates, war photographs can create a chasm between the distant spectator and war victims. For Butler, images of war are always viewed within larger narrative frames that condition how they are seen or not seen, which in turn informs the possibility of formulating a moral position on which to act.

This debate about the impact of photographs of violence as they circulate beyond the immediate context of wars, conflicts, protests, and detentions animates Aramesh's recent art. 'My work always begins with an idea,' he explained. He then selects the materials he works with, on any particular project.

Aramesh is an archivist. He collects reportage photographs of violence from a variety of news media. In particular, he focuses on pictures depicting violence perpetuated onto male bodies. Images of a Korean prisoner of war awaiting execution; two youths killed in Gaza City; an American soldier as he is dying in the war in Iraq—he carefully collects these images in folders on his computer. In his art practice, Aramesh reanimates this archive of violent images. Extrapolating the pictures from their photojournalistic frames, he manipulates the images, recasting them into various art forms. Whether large-scale photographs, public performances, or sculptures, his recent works are meditations on violence - and the ways some forms of violence are commemorated, while others disappear from the collective gaze. Aramesh's art explores how some war images, in a sense suggested by the thinker Jacques Derrida, mark an absence of presence.

War monuments mark a collective historical memory; public sculptures provide a tangible form for the visual narratives of the past. But even as they commemorate certain events and individuals, memorials inevitably erase others. Our collective memory of violence becomes selective, marking some deaths while forgetting



by for Action 137 (2014)

THERE ARE ELEMENTS OF VIOLENCE THAT WE DENY

others. 'Action 137: 6:45 pm, 3 May 2012, Ramla' is 'a proposal for a public sculpture.' The sculpture focuses on those victims of violence who have been swept away from public memory, for whom no war memorials are erected.

Recalling grand Renaissance sculptures of idyllic male bodies, 'Ramla' features a partially-disrobed man. His clothes are modest. His jeans are pulled down at his feet—the details of his sneakers and his pants impeccably etched into the marble surface. His T-shirt is pulled over his head, like a shroud covering his face. At the back, the shirt drapes with such lusciously-carved detail that one is taken with the masterful workmanship of the sculpture. The very scale of the sculpture conveys a contradiction. Made of gorgeous solid marble, the diminutive sculpture made smaller than human size sits atop a rather tall cement plinth. In order to view it, you crane your neck ever so slightly—creating a deliberately vulnerable position in which the spectator views the work.

As the art historian Geraldine Johnson wrote, the art of the 'Renaissance and Baroque masters seems to soak through the surfaces of Aramesh's photographs and animate the very limbs of his sculptures.' Aramesh told me he was taken with the formal aspects of Christian religious iconography after seeing an exhibition at London's National Gallery, years ago. Since then, he's researched the subject intensely, and his London studio is filled with books on the topic and photographs of art from that era. During the production of his sculptures, he lives in Ortisei, a small village in

northern Italy, and works closely with the craftsmen at the Demetz Art Studio, known for their ecclesiastical art, who craft his sculptures.

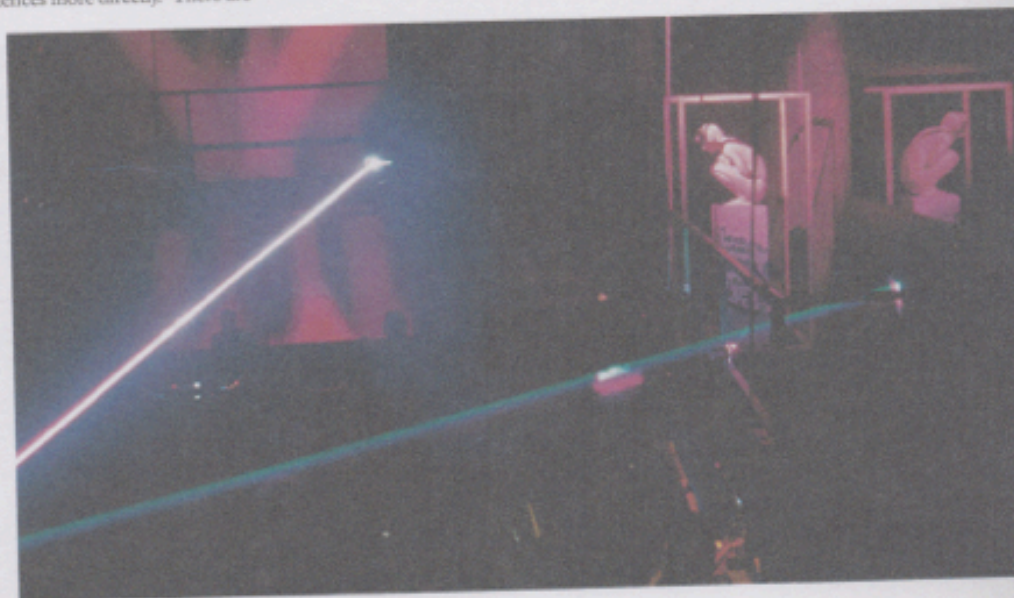
The visual encounter with 'Ramla' is meditative, with its smaller scale and its intricate details. The sensual flow one experiences as the eye traces the surface of the marble work is disrupted by the ruggedness of the political references embedded within the sculpture itself. The effect of this discrepancy between the beautiful sculpture and its political content can be discomfiting, even jarring. This visual dissonance is an inherent quality of Aramesh's artistic approach, underlining his perspective on society's larger inability to confront violence and its consequences more directly. 'There are elements of violence that we deny,' he explains. 'We have grown accustomed to seeing images of violence; Aramesh pushes us to reflect on them. There is an element of violence that is erotic. There is a context. Violence becomes attractive and repulsive at the same time. This has always been embedded in my work. The surface is desirable and beautiful—but the subtext and context gives it meaning.'

And the context of Aramesh's art is signalled in the titles he gives his works. 'Action 137: 6:45 pm, 3 May 2012, Ramla'. That is all the narrative explanation that accompanies the work. The exactitude of the title paired with the dearth of explanatory wall text, gives one pause. The captioning serves as a prompt without being pedantic.

There is a deliberate tension in Aramesh's work. You may know that the photojournalistic image on which the sculpture is based is of a Palestinian man at an Israeli checkpoint, disrobing at gunpoint. Or you may be viewing the work without knowledge or awareness of this subtext. Beyond the specific photograph of a particular moment of violence, the work reads like a broader commentary on violence—the ways one man can stand vulnerable but defiant, disrobed but firm in the face of an imminent mortal danger. It is this balance between marking a particular historical moment and the simultaneous erasure of specificity that allows the work to make a bold statement about violence in contemporary society.

'Art doesn't have a political impact,' Aramesh told me. 'Art can change perceptions over time. Artists can create concern about social and political issues. Art can help create a dialogue. It becomes part of our collective history.'

With Aramesh's art, the gaze is never averted. Rather than flaring up and disappearing, the image as reimagined through his art insists on contemplation and reflection. The deliberate ambiguity in his works underlines a political aesthetic. The inevitable tension created by viewing Aramesh's art is productive and generative. The work is not didactic or overtly pedagogical; it is intended to create a context for thinking, to spark dialogue and to trigger a search for meaning. On the one hand, Aramesh insists on memorialising the bodies history has forgotten; on the other hand, there is an artistic refusal of a static monumentality. www.aramesh.com



Study for Action 123 (2014)