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An Iranian Jeff Wall? Dissecting Mitra Tabrizian's Politically Incisive Photo Tableaux

Language

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Photo by Kyle Chayka

An installation view of Mitra Tabrizian's work at Leila Heller Gallery

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At first glance, British-Iranian photographer and videographer Mitra Tabrizian's photographs, currently on view at [Leila Heller gallery](#) in Chelsea, look very familiar. The stiff postures of her subjects and the strictly horizontal, minimally obtrusive perspective of her camera lens is straight out of the Jeff Wall textbook, while her touch of surrealism and the sense of a movie scene stopped in motion comes from Wall, Philip Lorca diCorcia, and Gregory Crewdson. What sets this tight selection of Tabrizian's images apart from its numerous influences is its cross-cultural, politically aware subject matter rather than its aesthetic execution.

Tabrizian shoots in both England and Iran, offering a series of desolate landscapes. She focuses in on Leicestershire, a county in the English Midlands, depicting a quartet of ruined warehouses and empty factory buildings. In one shot, a single suited gentleman, Middle Eastern in appearance, stands in profile in front of a grid of mossy windows. The combination of polished, besuited businessman and crumbling industrial decay is incongruous, and feels unexpectedly sad. Rather than mournful, "City, London" (2008), a collection of bankers gathered in the austere marbled lobby of some anonymous office building, has an air of vague foreboding. The grey gradient of suited men stand to attention but their gazes never meet one another's, or anything, for that matter. They look, perhaps, like they're shiftlessly dodging the blame for the global economic collapse.

The photographer's subjects are creepy because of their apathy. Though posed in emphatic, stolid stances, Tabrizian's people are passive: They aren't in the middle of completing any specific action or participating in a visible narrative, as they often are in Wall or Crewdson's work. In "Tehran 2006" a crowd of bystanders carrying briefcases, grocery bags, and other signifiers of everyday life cross a sparse landscape with high-rise buildings and political murals in the background. "Untitled" (2009) pictures a group of black-clothed figures marching through a desert road like refugees.

Read in the context of the current political climate, Tabrizian's work seems to be about decay, both in the physical sense and the spiritual one. The bankers stand around idly while the economy plunges, the original means of production in disarray. The Iran photos point to the humanity-dulling, oppressive conditions of an entrenched dictatorship. If the style of her photos is familiar, then her content is at least more critically engaged with the trials of its time than the work of other set-up photographers. Though they lack the clean intensity of Wall's semiotic puzzles, Tabrizian's work has a broader worldview.

Mitra Tabrizian's photographs are on view at [Leila Heller gallery](#) through July 7. See our video tour of the exhibition below.

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