CORPORATE CULTURE

MITRA TABRIZIAN'S SOMBRE TABLEAUX EXPLORE DYNAMICS AND TENSIONS ARISING FROM CONSTRUCTED IMAGES OF SOCIETY. SIMON BOWCOCK MEETS THE ARTIST TO DISCUSS HER NEW WORKS.
Tribalism's taboos are more concerned with critical and philosophical ideas about society.

While an affinity with critical theory is characteristic of photographic academics, especially in Britain, other than their subject there is little specifically British or Iranian about Tabrizian's photographs. In fact, they sit more properly in a global art context rather than a local or even a regional one, as attested by her worldwide exhibition history. As if to align with this, the suit, the global corporate uniform, has been a prevalent motif throughout Tabrizian's career, from her early work in the mid to late 1980s right up to her latest, ongoing series. In fact, her entire output could, on one level, be read as an ongoing commentary on corporate culture and where it is taking us.

Tabrizian's photography clearly owes much to the movies, and for a long time her work was often dramatic, constructed and cinematic. Inevitably, this invites comparisons with another North American large-format art photographer, the USA Gregory Crewdson. But here again, Tabrizian is actually quite different: while Crewdson's sumptuously produced pseudo-film stills are often infused with tension, Tabrizian's focused mise-en-scéne tends to be sweeter and edgier, with an implied threat of violence often hanging around (but never in the scene). The images commonly portray people grouped together but not necessarily interacting with each other, each one alone within the crowd, lost in their own uneasy thoughts, which the viewer can only speculate upon. All is clearly not well, and as viewers we can be forgiven for feeling relieved that we are not part of the scene.

However, further contemplation leads to the uncomfortable realization that in fact we are all implicated: even though we ourselves may not be in the frame, the photographs are very much about us, or at least about things which affect us all directly. It is this quality which sometimes makes the work both universal and disturbing.

Rather than groups of people, Tabrizian's latest images depict a derelict, man-made landscape with either a solitary figure or none at all. The suit will features, but like the people, it has almost disappeared completely. It is as if society has ended, as if our corporate culture has brought us to this terrible conclusion: the last man standing in a post-industrial wilderness.

But all of this is merely one interpretation. I caught up with Mitra in London to let her talk about her work, and the ideas behind it.

Your earlier photographs are overtly stylized or manipulated, for example with text inserted or the use of dramatic lighting. Later on there is a move to more 'natural' looking pictures. Tell us about the aesthetic evolution of your work.

Initially I was interested in documentary photography, but after studying photography under Victor Burgin at the Polytechnic of Central London in the '80s and being introduced to the whole range of critical theory, including psychoanalysis, semiotics, postmodernism and post colonialism etc., I started experimenting with the idea of constructed images.

In short, I have always been interested in documentary photography, even though at times I produced highly stylized constructed images. I now prefer the aesthetic that is more naturalistic, closer to the old approach to documentary although it differs conceptually (that hopefully confuses the viewer as to whether the image is constructed or not.) All the projects since 2004 use real people, whether the banker at JP Morgan headquarters, the ex factory workers in Leicester, Muslims living in East London, or Iranians in exile. Whereas in the past I sometimes used actors or non actors/ friends to stand in for the subject in a particular scenario (as the main ethos than way you don't necessarily have to use the real works, for instance, to say something about working conditions in a factory), I now believe it's important for the actual people to participate: to play themselves in the image which, in one way or another, reflects aspects of their lives.

Migration seems to be a consistent theme in your more recent photographs. How has your work changed thematically over time, and what has remained a common thread?

Some of the more recent projects, and to some extent "Tehran West Suburb" (as it depicts the low paid workers including the Afghan who tend to migrate to Iran to work), address the question of migration. However, there are a number of other projects which engage with different subjects. The common thread is what we might call the crises of contemporary culture both in the West and East.

You are Iranian, but you have lived in London for a long time. Do you think there are any aspects of your work which are particularly Iranian or British?

More recently however, Tabrizian has moved away from this horrific narrative style and towards a kind of naturalistic yet staged portraiture, often conveying dysfuction and isolation. The images commonly portray people grouped together but not necessarily interacting with each other, each one alone within the crowd, lost in their own uneasy thoughts, which the viewer can only speculate upon. All is clearly not well, and as viewers we can be forgiven for feeling relieved that we are not part of the scene.

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MITRA TABRIZIAN

BORN:
Tehran

STUDIED:
In the mid 1970's at the Polytechnic of Central London, since returned to the University of Westminster, where she is now Professor of Photography.

KEY SOLO SHOWS TO DATE:
National Museum of Photography, Film and Television (Bristol, UK) 2008
Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, Japan 2011
Moderna Museet (Stockholm, Sweden) 2012
Take Britain (London, UK) 2013

OUR PICK OF HER MAJOR WORKS:

CURRENT AND UPCOMING EXHIBITIONS AND PROJECTS:
Wearetho Project, Camden Lock, London, UK
Sektor, New York, 2013
Victoria and Albert Museum (London, UK) May 2012
April 2013 - (group show) Museum of Architecture (Florence, Italy)
Canberra April - Sept 2013 (group show)
Fundacion Mapfre, Madrid (2013)
April 2013 - (group show)
Aldeburgh Country Fest, Castle 22, 2013

HER OUTLOOK ON HER PRACTICE:
Disciplinary aspects of life are determined by some critical engagement with the subject. And to be critical doesn't mean that you want to create a knee-jerk reaction in people.

WHAT THE CRITICS SAY:
Daniel, Tabrizian has taken the Tablith '54 and refined it with tough, deadpan imagery, a sense of color and clarity in the face of overwhelming. Her single film is an exercise of disassociation that surprisingly lingers and fascinates, pulling viewers of social issues into something else (2012) (Review Collection)
where the basic axioms of each system are pushed to the point that they produce the opposite effects from those intended, i.e. we are pushing things beyond the limits. Financial crisis is a good example of his ideas' prediction formulated well in advance. According to Baubhlitz, all we are left with is commodity culture.

So the idea of the suit signifying the corporate identity appears in a few projects including 'City, London' (2008), shot at the headquarters of JP Morgan in the midst of the crisis and with the second in command in the middle of the image. No one is communicating with one another, indicating the break down of the system. Or 'Silent Majority' (2001), which is not constructed, shot in the heart of the new financial city of Docklands.

At a literal level, the work is concerned with what we might call social depression, in a corporate world, where one has to compete at any costs, succeed at any costs, and depression has become the norm. At a more philosophical level, the work attempts to evoke Baubhlitz's world of simulation, a corporate culture, where the people are compelled into silence, into an extremity of indifference, conformity.

Which photographers and other artists do you admire, and which have been key influences?

Robert Frank, Walker Evans and film makers Michelangelo Antonioni, Takeshi Kitano, Jean-Pierre Melville and Abbas Kiarostami, amongst others.

Films are clearly a big influence on your photography, especially in your earlier work. Have you also made at least 5 films. How do you see film in relation to photography?

You are absolutely right and it is no coincidence that most of my work is narrative based. But although I'm very much inspired by films and evins some each works, as you mentioned, like 'Correct Distance' (which I did when I was student) directly reference Hollywood film noir. I still see photography and film as two separate entities. Especially when it comes to making a film as you need to employ a different strategy of working altogether. I have made three short films. All are narrative based, not video arts, and you realize how difficult it is to tell a story successfully. And that's a big challenge, and you have to be able to see the bigger picture from the outset, at least for me.

Tell us about your plans for new work.

Currently, I'm completing a series entitled 'Leicester'. This started as a commissioned project by Loughborough University in UK, to produce two billboards for the city of Loughborough and Leicester, to be displayed in November 2012, but then I got really interested in the city of Leicester as it's an old industrial city of migrants. So I decided to develop the project further.

Shoe against the deadline and allowed factors, the work attempts a historical documentation, and a tribute to the forgotten citizens, who, in effect built what were once major industrial cities. Some of the factories are in the process of being demolished, others have fallen into the hands of developers, and no attempt has been made to restore any of these monumental factories. For one of the billboard images (shot at the Wilsey factory), the participant, Selman Nagdi, a third generation Muslim migrant from Zimbabwe, who came to Leicester in the 70s and worked in the textile factories for over 25 years. He is looking forward, he said, to having his photograph on a 3 x 6 metre billboard in a city where he's always felt invisible. When you get a response like this, it is very rewarding as you feel the participant has got something out of the project and it's just self serving art.

I'm also developing a feature script with an Iranian writer that currently we are trying to raise funding for. www.mirabrahimi.com