



SOODY SHARIFI

OF MINIATURE SERENADES &
MAXIATURE MOMENTS

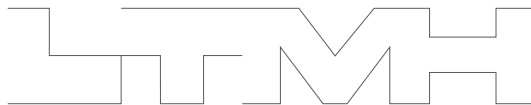


SOODY SHARIFI

OF MINIATURE SERENADES & MAXIATURE MOMENTS

February 4 – February 22, 2011

LEILA TAGHINIA-MILANI HELLER GALLERY



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STAGED TRUTHS

THE PHOTO-COLLAGES OF SOODY SHARIFI

Soody Sharifi's works introduce the viewer to a world of inventiveness and playfulness. Modern characters invade the heavenly and stylized landscapes of traditional Persian miniatures with their paraphernalia—radios, motorbikes, satellite dishes, and KFC buckets—proposing new narrative threads that parallel, overlap, or infringe those associated with these images for centuries. When devoid of such elaborate and impracticable spaces, Sharifi's photographic montages combine rollerbladers and hikers with horsed knights and courtly servants, staging a series of direct confrontations that reflect even more powerfully the preoccupation informing her production: the tension between tradition and modernity at the core of contemporary Iranian life. Often tinged with humor, most of these fictional compositions are indeed commentaries on the daily existence of Iranians, especially the young generation, which strives to reconcile traditional values with the needs typical of his time and age.

Born in Tehran, Soody Sharifi first came to the United States at the age of 17, as an American Field Service exchange student, and returned in the mid-1970s to attend the University of Houston. After pursuing a degree in industrial engineering, she developed a great interest in photography, culminated in an MFA that she completed at the same university in 2004. The events following the Islamic revolution of 1979 prevented Sharifi to go back to Iran, which she was able to visit again only in 1999. As many Iranians who had left the country and returned after the fall of the Shah, she was confronted with a severely altered society, and struggled to comply with the restrictions imposed by the regime of the ayatollahs. As a woman, she grew particularly sensitive to the control exerted on the female body and sphere, and began reflecting on the nature of Iran's patriarchal society and on the ways in which women have created their own spaces within the restricted framework imposed on them. Some of her first series, which include "The Self-Portrait" and "Teenagers," emerged from such reflection, and established a point of departure for the analysis of a number of related issues, which range from male-female interaction and the contrast between private and public life, to the challenges posed by progress and modernity in a conservative society like the Iranian one.

These are the themes that inspire Sharifi's most recent and representative photographic series, "Maxiatures" and "Persian Delights," which form the bulk of this exhibition. The term "maxiature" was coined by the artist as a distortion of the word "miniature," the incorrect albeit common term used to categorize small-scale paintings included in Islamic manuscripts. Enlarged versions of the most elaborate of such paintings form the backdrop of Sharifi's photo-collages, hence the name *maxiatures*. The choice of the Persian arts of the book as a point of departure is not casual. The creation of pictorial cycles in secular texts represents one of the most enduring and sophisticated forms of figurative art produced in the Persian-speaking world. As such, these images—drawn from manuscripts produced in the golden age of Persianate painting, the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries—exemplify tradition not only in artistic terms, but also in relation to the values that they intended to celebrate. Respect of authority, chivalric codes, and examples of personal modesty inform the behavior of the characters in the original paintings, and symbolically define the notion of tradition in relation to which, or against which, the modern experience is presented.

The confrontation of old and new is achieved through extensive digital manipulation some of the old miniatures. At times, their luxurious gardens and elaborate architectural constructions are kept in their original form. In other instances the structures are distorted, reconfigured, or upgraded with modern interiors and panoramic views of today's cityscapes and rooftops. Suspended between fiction and reality, these spaces welcome modern actors, providing contexts for new stories while at the same time offering the opportunity to comment on the themes that underlie the traditional images. Hence, not only do the new compositions build on their traditional models pictorially, but they also elaborate on them conceptually, creating a continuum between past and present.

Courtly Love (2007) is among the most eloquent of these unique *tableaux vivants*. The painting that inspired Sharifi's composition, *Khusraw at Shirin's Palace*, belonged to a now dispersed late fifteenth-century illustrated version of the *Khamza* ("Quintet"), a collection of five poems composed by Nizami Ganjavi (d. 1209) between the end of the twelfth century and the beginning of the thirteenth century that includes the romantic story of the Sasanian king Khusraw Parviz and the Armenian princess Shirin. In the original image, Khusraw reaches Shirin's palace and declares his passion to his beloved who acknowledges it by timidly returning his gaze from the top window of her lofty castle. In spite of his central role, the prince remains outside the manor, a fact that underscores the distance that separates him from the object of his longing. Guarded by curious maids and servants, the pavilion stands as an emblem of its mistress, gorgeous but impenetrable, and as a symbol of the detachment regulating the interaction of men and women. This applies to the past as much as to the present, as suggested by the modern reworking of the image. Indeed, distance continues to characterize the behavior of the modern couples inserted by Sharifi within the walls of the princess' secluded palace. New Khusraws have come to court modern Shirins, but the previous barriers continue to limit their physical contact and to hinder their union, suggesting how old values still affect human interaction, particularly in the public domain.

The series "Persian Delights" adopts the same digital *escamotages* as the "Maxiatures," although the setting is in this case annulled in order to concentrate on the characters. The color-saturated backgrounds of these compositions encourage the viewer to focus on the exchanges occurring between old and new protagonists, and the range of messages generated by these direct confrontations. These fictional couples engage with issues of personal fulfillment, female emancipation, and global culture, which are often hinted to in the "Maxiatures," but appear more immediately addressed in this series. *Escape* (2009) delivers one of the strongest messages with its arresting presentation. A bay window with a turbaned youth, excerpted from *The Allegory of Worldly and Otherworldly Drunkenness* from an illustrated copy of *Hafez' Divan* ("Collected Poems"), has transformed into the deck of a balloon suspended in the air. In place of the ceramic jug originally attached to a rope pulled by the man is now a woman wrapped in a vibrant red chador whose precarious state and resolute climbing towards the flying machine forcefully conveys her desire to abandon the world beneath. In *Hoops 'n' Hijab* (2010) a veiled girl intensely gazes at a basketball hoop, ready to throw a ball made of stripes of American flag. Having become Sharifi's new home,

America recurs in her series as a term of comparison, and as an example of a rather diverse individual and societal existence. Therefore, aside from the ludic nature of the picture, the young woman's will to score may ultimately communicate her desire to experience a world that is still far from her, but that is very much on her mind. At times, the attraction for what lies beyond Iran's boundaries takes humorous twists, such as in *Kite Runner* (2007). Extracted from the painting *Caliph al-Ma'mun in His Bath*, attributed to the celebrated artist Bihzad and part of a 1494-95 illustrated manuscript of Nizami's *Khamza*, the boy that was once hanging anonymous bath towels is now lining up a series of cloths decorated with motifs that alternate Western themes and Iranian formulas, a reference to the conflicting models that characterize contemporary Iranian life. Significantly, the bath attendant engages with the one displaying the most explicit imagery—a row of three attractive blondes in bathing suites posing in front of the American flag—pointing at the variety of “solicitations” that manage to reach Iran despite governmental control and censorship.

The advent of digital imaging has often been perceived as a threat to the fate of photography, the artistic form that purportedly best documents reality, and to the ability of the viewer to distinguish between the imaginary and the real. In spite of the technological shift in the way images are generated, the digital mode perpetuates the selective approach that always characterized photography, and actually multiplies this medium's expressive potential. A look at the *Honeymooners* from the “Moslem Youth Series,” the only “classic” photograph featured in the exhibition, demonstrates this creative dimension of the photographic genre. The image features two Iranian youths sitting by the shore in silent contemplation of the sea. The title of the print presents them as a newly wed couple, and yet the personal nature of their relationship is not immediately apparent, being further masked by their attire. In a public and accessible space such as a beach, women are expected to remain covered, while men have the choice to undress themselves. Therefore, in spite of the sanctioned nature of their union, the interaction of the two lovers is minimal, conditioned by official morals and obscured by public decor. Indeed, it is only through the staged positioning of their bodies—placed side by side and with their arms crossing and invading/sharing each other's space—that the intimate nature of their relationship is revealed.

Soody Sharifi's wide range of works demonstrates how the manipulation of images can sometimes reveal truths that are not necessarily self-evident or easily available to be documented. By blurring the line between reality and fiction, her work joins a wide pool of contemporary Iranian artists and film-makers who have adopted a similar creative strategy in order to express their different ways of coping with the challenges and contradictions of today's world.

Francesca Leoni, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

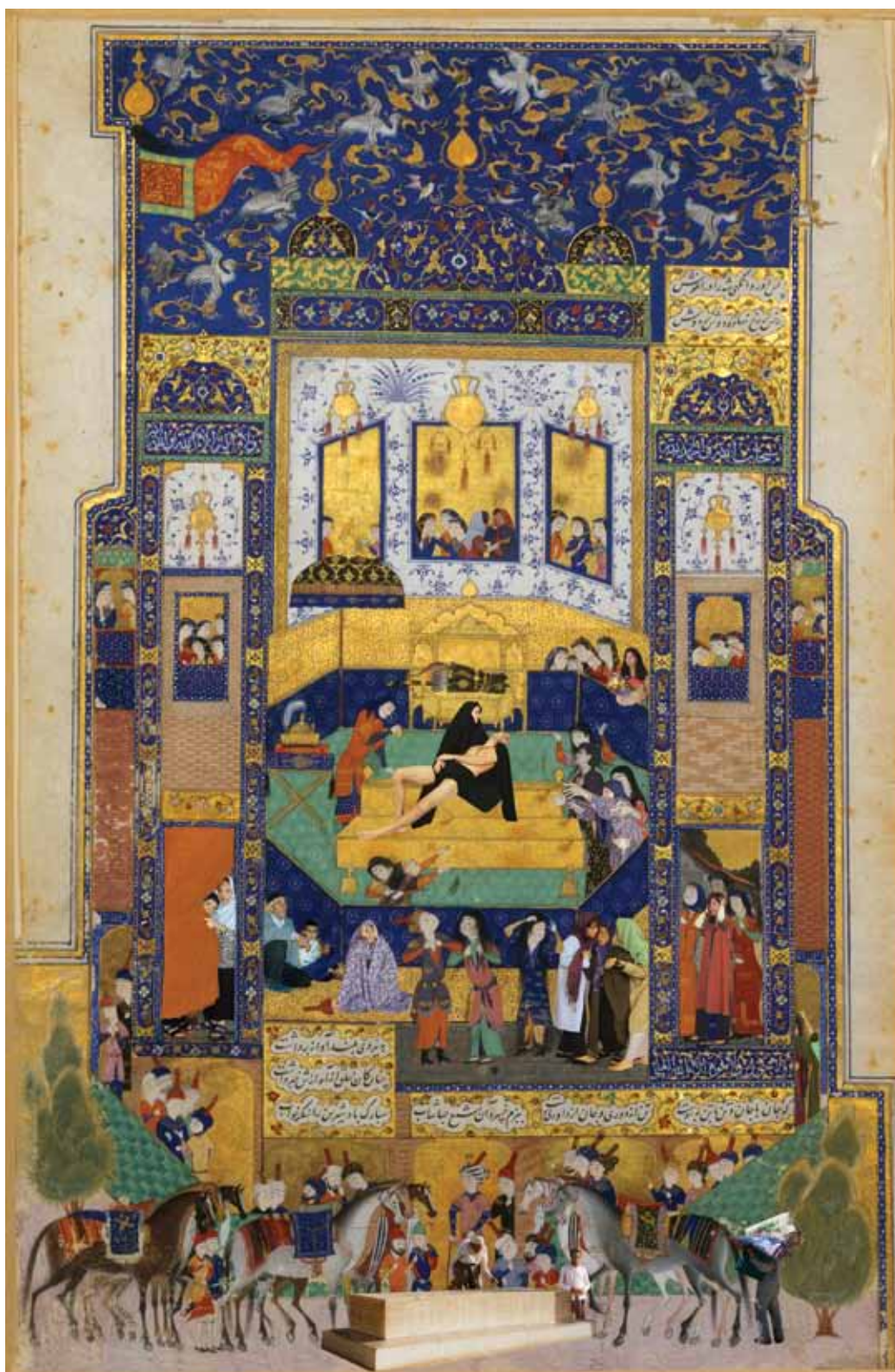
MAXIATURES SERIES



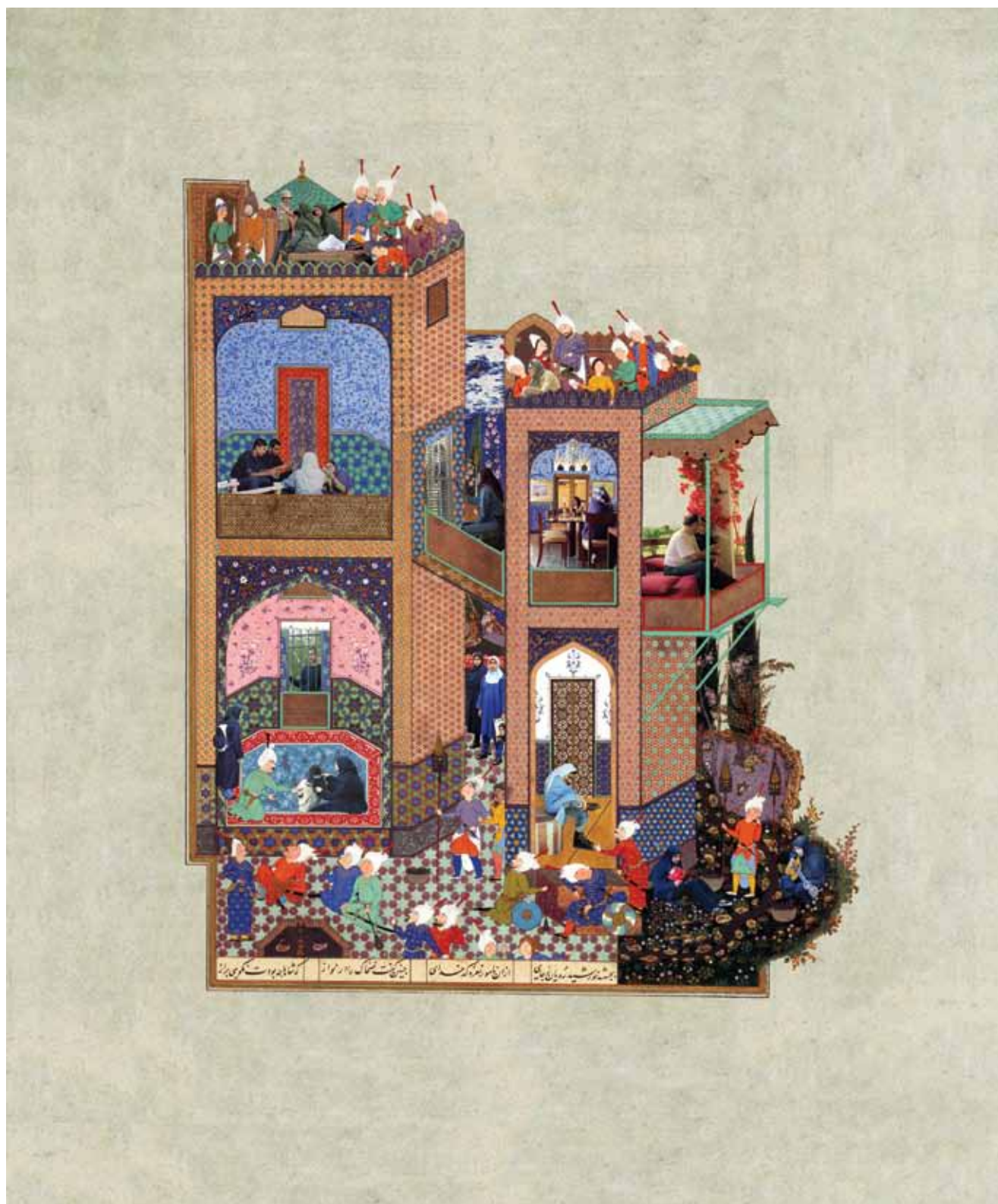
Fashion Week (Maxiatures series) 2010
Archival inkjet print, Edition of 3
40 x 60 in / 101.6 x 152.4 cm



Frolicking Women in the Pool (Maxiatures series) 2007
 Archival inkjet print, Edition of 3
 42.75 x 52.75 in / 108.59 x 133.99 cm



Martyrdom (Maxiatures series) 2007
 Archival inkjet print, Edition of 6
 26.75 x 40.75 in / 67.95 x 103.51 cm



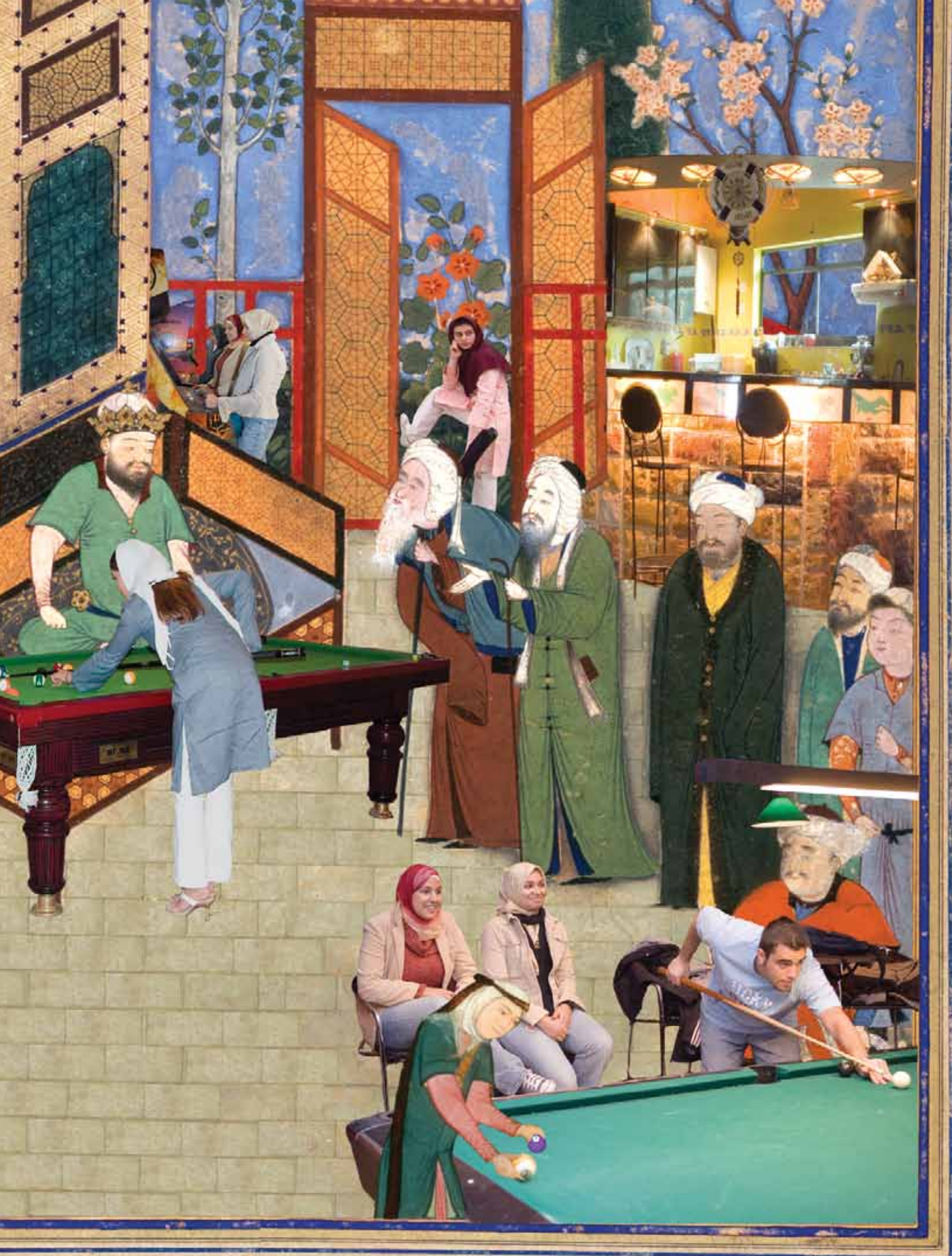
Love is in the Air (Maxiatures series) 2007
 Archival inkjet print, Edition of 3
 42.75 x 51.63 in / 108.59 x 131.13 cm

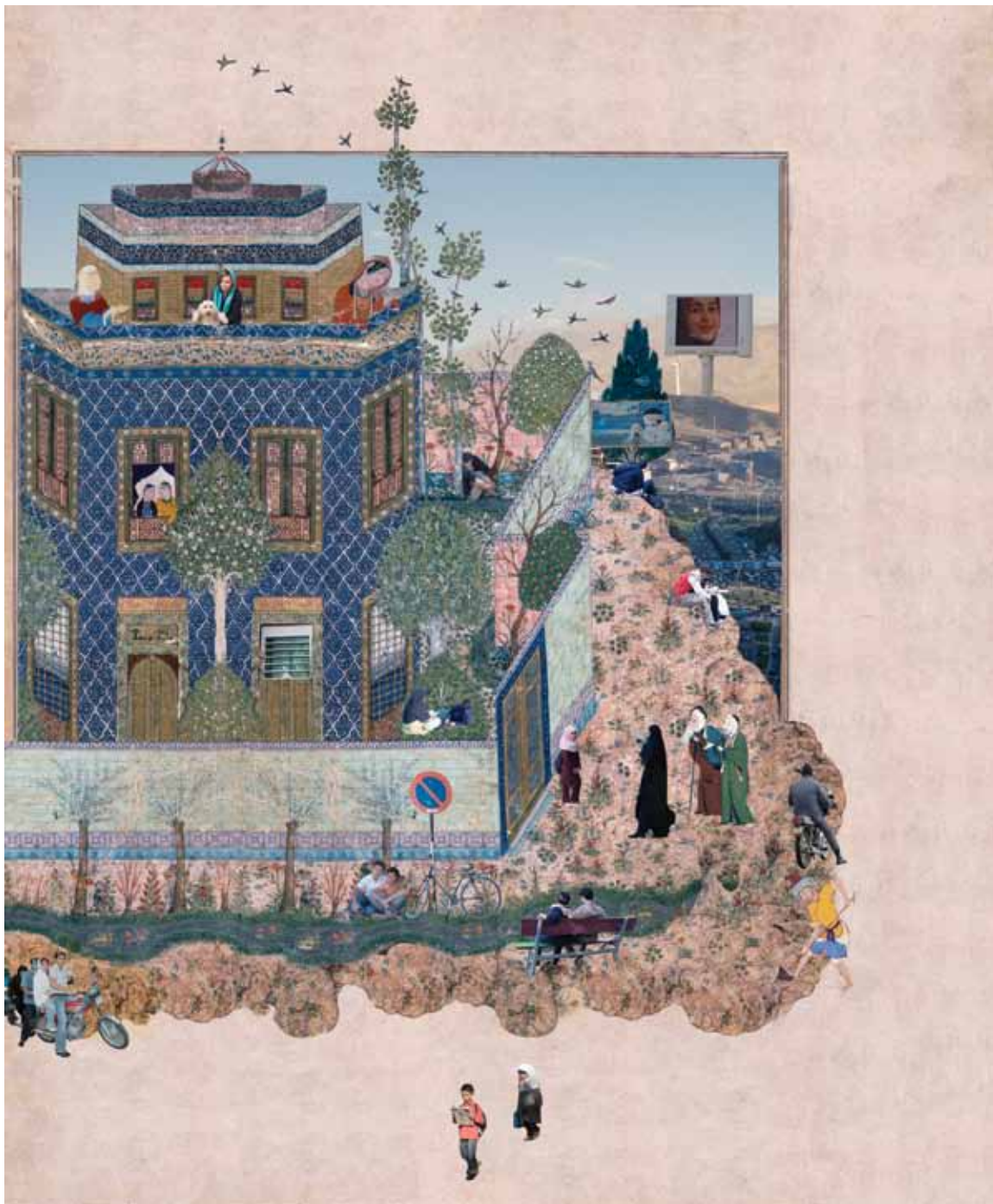
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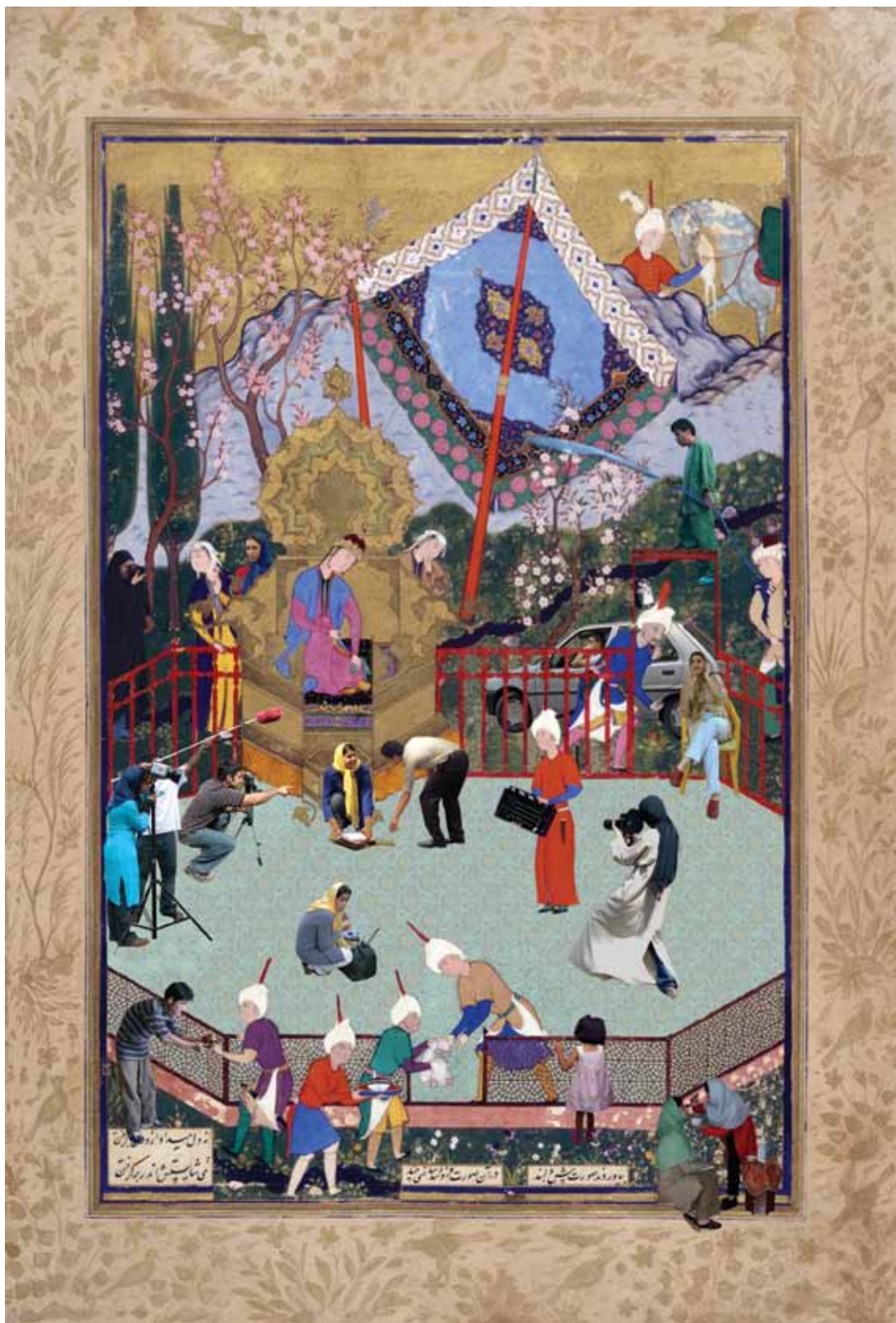
Everybody Plays the Pool... Sometimes (Maxiatures series) 2009 (detail)

Archival inkjet print, Edition of 6
36.25 x 39.75 in / 92.08 x 100.97 cm





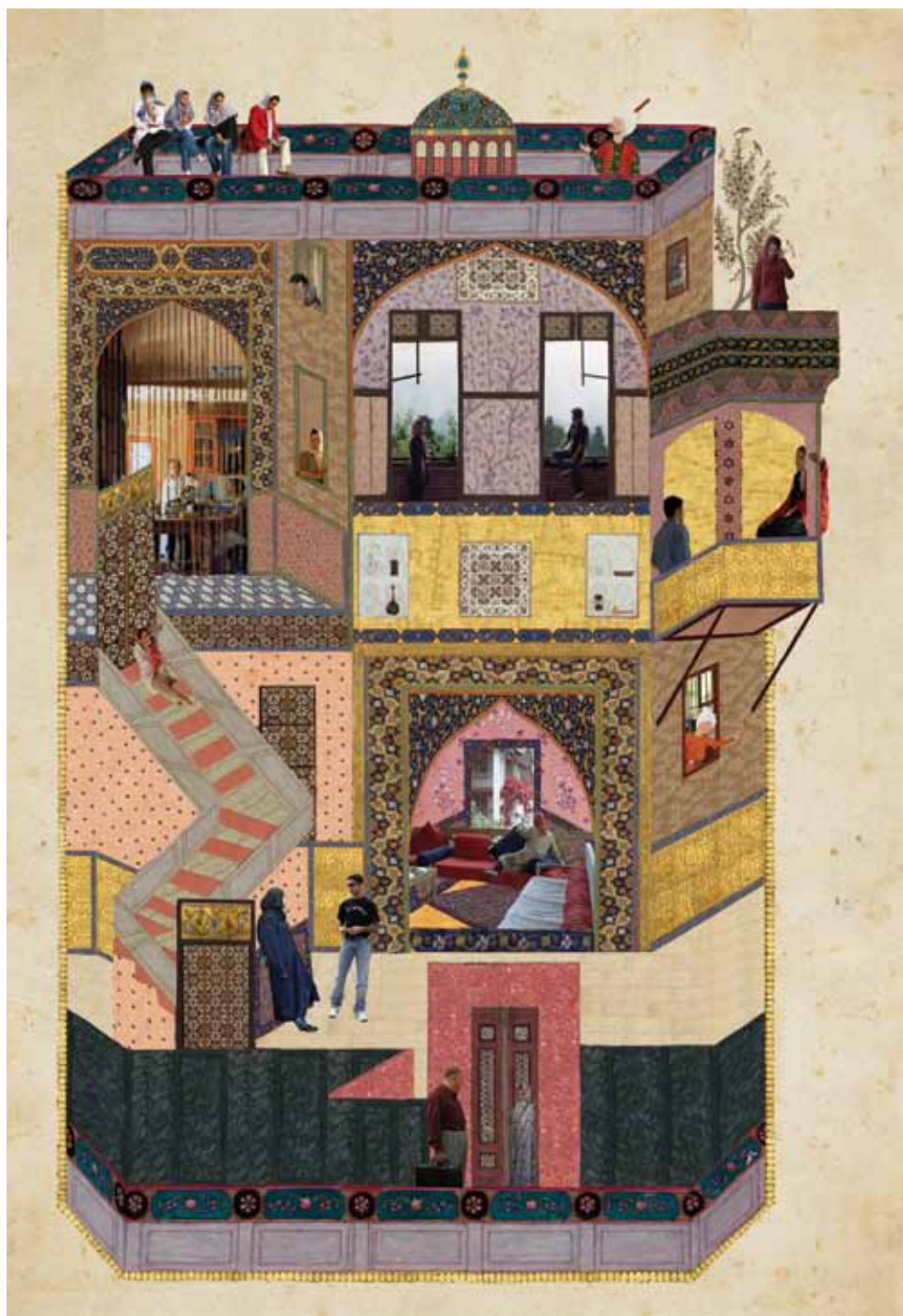
Lovers Picnicking (Maxiatures series) 2010
Archival inkjet print, Edition of 6
34.75 x 42.25 in / 88.27 x 107.32 cm



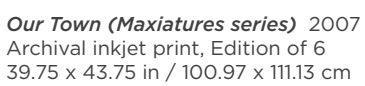
Movie Set (Maxiatures series) 2007
 Archival ink jet print, Edition of 3
 33.75 x 49.75 in / 85.73 x 126.37 cm



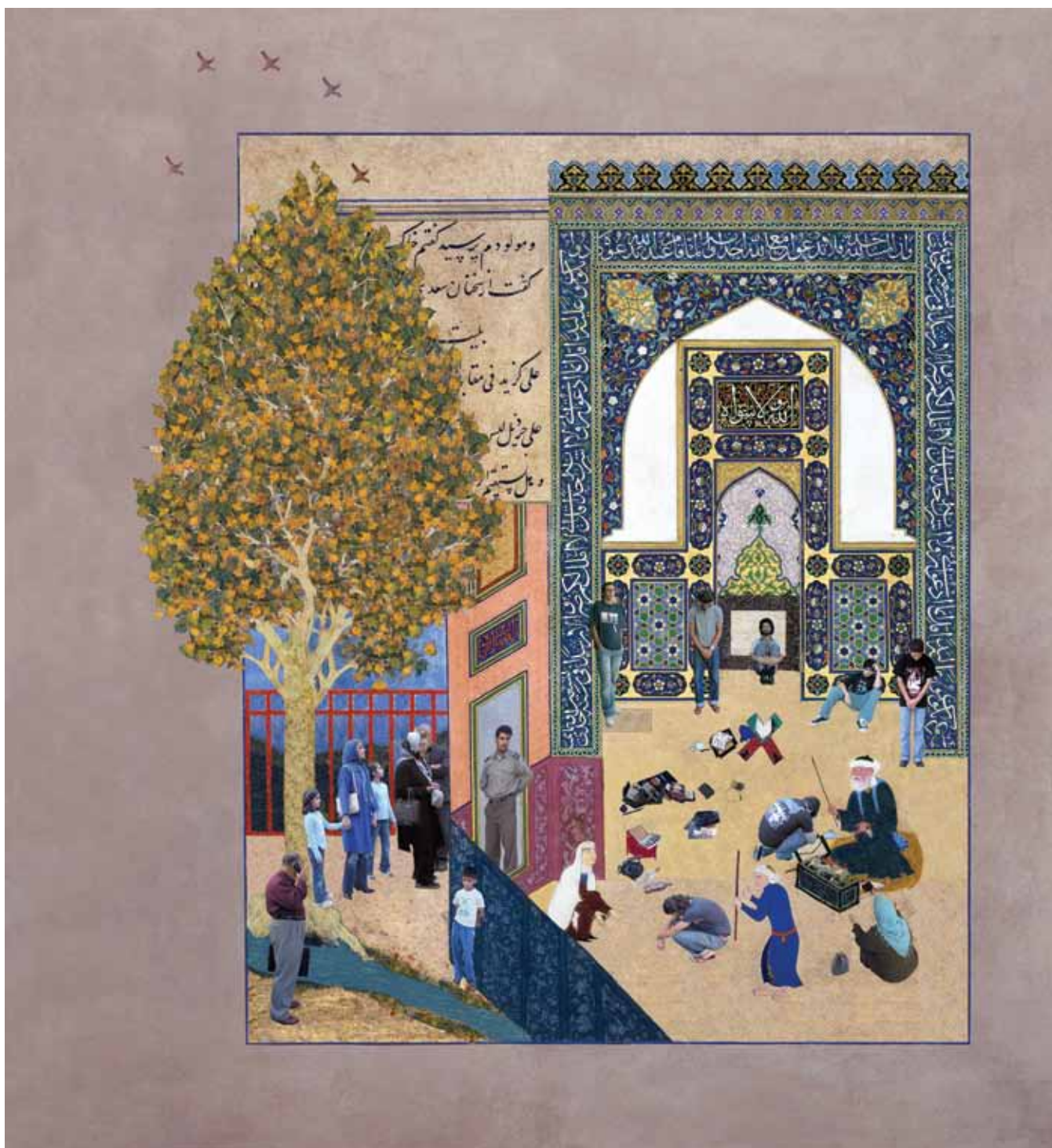
Courtly Love (Maxiatures series) 2007
Archival inkjet print, Edition of 6
40 x 60 in / 101.6 x 152.4 cm



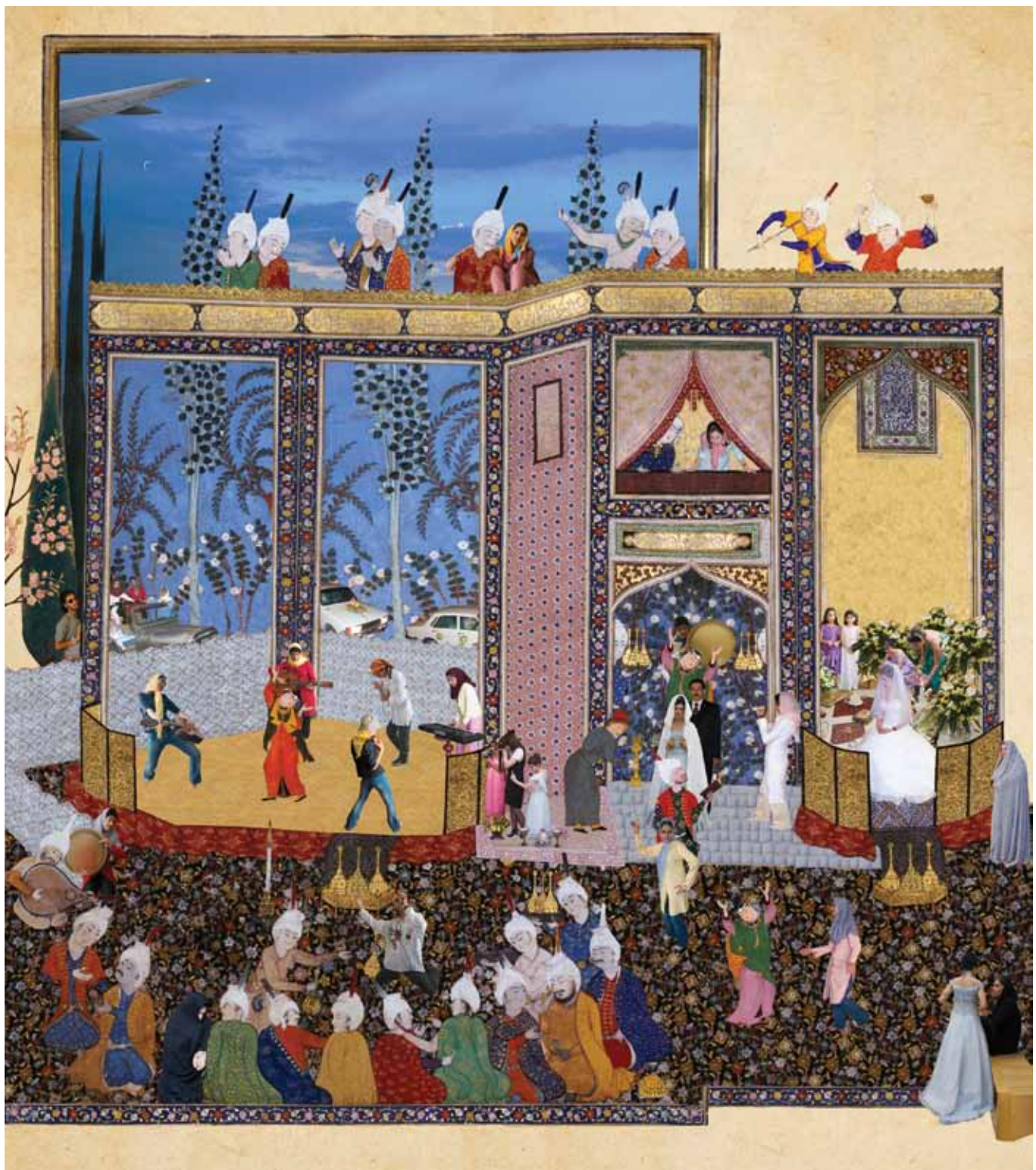
Leila and Majnoon (Maxiatures series) 2010
Archival inkjet print, Editions of 6
31.75 x 46.75 in / 80.65 x 118.8 cm



***Our Town (Maxiatures series)* 2007**
Archival inkjet print, Edition of 6
39.75 x 43.75 in / 100.97 x 111.13 cm



Boys Night Out (Maxiatures series) 2010
Archival inkjet print, Editions of 6
37.5 x 40.75 in / 95.25 x 103.5 cm



The Feast of Id (Maxiatures series) 2010
Archival inkjet print, Edition of 6
48.50 x 42.75 in / 123.19 x 108.59 cm

MOSLEM YOUTH SERIES



Honeymooners (Moslem Youth series) 2009

Digital c-print
27 x 37 in / 68.6 x 94 cm

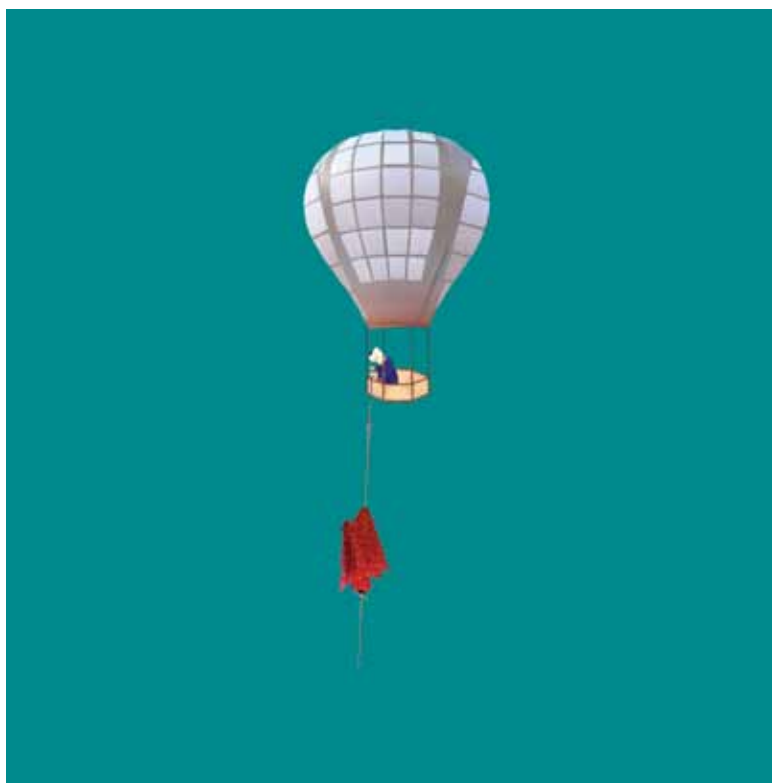
Whisper and Shadow (Moslem Youth series) 2010

Digital C-prints on plexiglass, Edition of 5
33 x 48 in / 83.8 x 121.9 cm



Maryam (Moslem Youth series) 2010
Digital c-print
34.5 x 24.4 in / 87.6 x 62 cm

PERSIAN DELIGHTS SERIES



Escape (Persian Delights series) 2010
Archival inkjet print, Edition of 6
12.5 x 12.5 in / 31.75 x 31.75 cm

Hammam (Persian Delights series) 2010
Archival inkjet print, Edition of 6
12.5 x 12.5 in / 31.75 x 31.75 cm



Nude (Persian Delights series) 2007
 Archival inkjet print, Edition of 6
 12.5 x 12.5 in / 31.75 x 31.75 cm

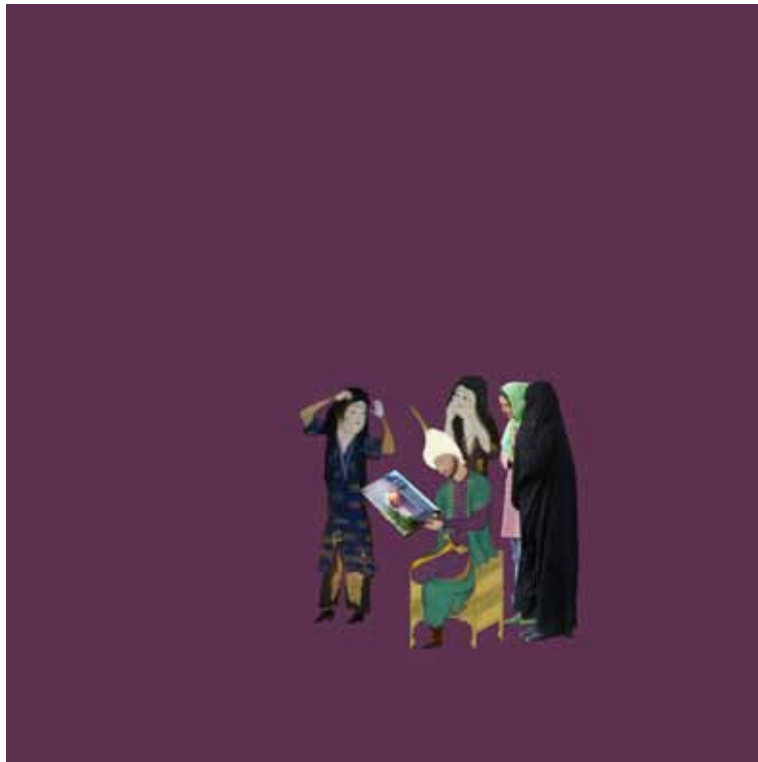


Two Women (Persian Delights series) 2007
 Archival inkjet print, Edition of 6
 12.5 x 12.5 in / 31.75 x 31.75 cm



Kite Runner (Persian Delights series) 2007
Archival inkjet print, Edition of 6
12.5 x 12.5 in / 31.75 x 31.75 cm

Blades (Persian Delights series) 2007
Archival inkjet print, Edition of 6
12.5 x 12.5 in / 31.75 x 31.75 cm



Twin Towers (Persian Delights series) 2010

Archival inkjet print, Edition of 6
12.5 x 12.5 in / 31.75 x 31.75 cm

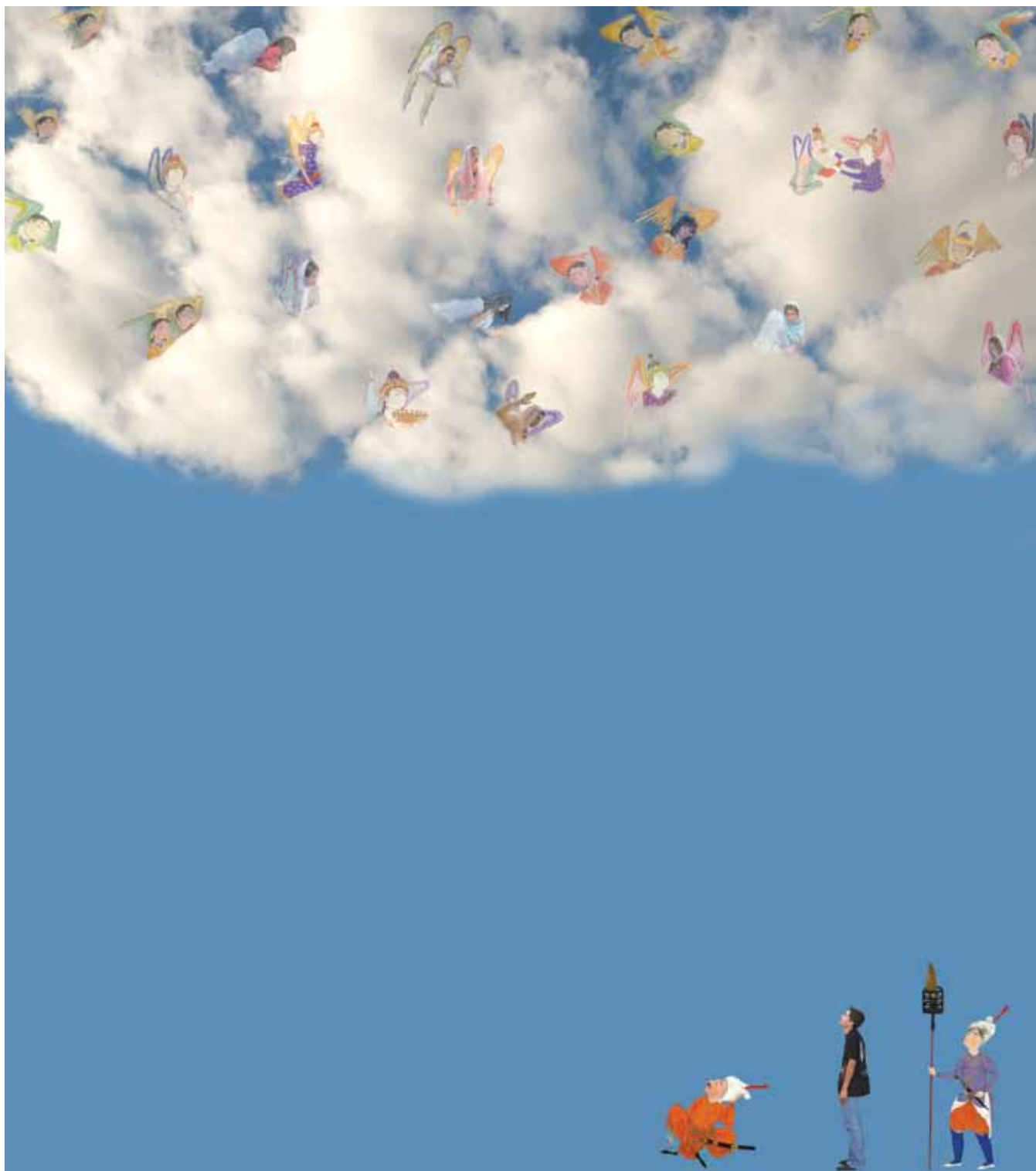
Shirin and Farhad (Persian Delights series) 2010

Archival inkjet print, Edition of 6
12.5 x 12.5 in / 31.75 x 31.75 cm



Hoops 'n Hijab (Persian Delights series) 2010
Archival inkjet print, Edition of 6
12.5 x 12.5 in / 31.75 x 31.75 cm

Prince and the Balloon (Persian Delights series) 2007
Archival inkjet print, Edition of 6
12.5 x 12.5 in / 31.75 x 31.75 cm



Heaven Can't Wait (Persian Delights series) 2010
Archival digital print, Edition of 6
16 x 18 in / 40.6 x 45.7 cm



A River Runs Through It (Persian Delights series) 2010
Archival digital Print, Edition of 6
12.5 x 12.5 in / 31.75 x 31.75 cm

SOODY SHARIFI

EDUCATION

2004	Master of Fine Arts in Studio Photography, University of Houston
1982	Bachelor of Science, Industrial Engineering, University of Houston

AWARDS

2011	Nominee Jameel Art Prize
2006	Grant recipient, Artadia The Fund for Art and Dialogue, New York
2005	Cultural Art Council of Houston individual artist grant recipient
2004	National Graduate Seminar Nominee, Columbia University, New York, NY
2003	Photography Fellowship, Houston Center of Photography, Houston, Texas

RESIDENCIES

2010	Stiftung Kunstledorf Schoppingen, Germany
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ENGAGEMENTS

2010	University of Houston Adjunct teaching professor
2009	Photo workshop and talk at Chinguapin school
2007	Guest lecturer, Society of Photographic Education, Miami Florida

SELECTED INDIVIDUAL EXHIBITIONS

2011	<i>Of Miniature Serenades & Maxiature Moments</i> , LTMH Gallery, New York, NY
2010	<i>Assumption of Others</i> , Gallery F15, Oslo, Norway
2007	<i>Garden of Persian Delight</i> , Anya Tish Gallery, Houston
2006	<i>Maxiature</i> , Photographic Center Valokuvia Peri, Kuopio, Finland
2006	<i>Teenagers and Maxiatures</i> , Northern Photographic Center, Helsinki, Finland
	<i>Proud and Sad / Wrong and Strong</i> , Women and Their Work, Austin, Texas
	<i>Moslem Teenagers</i> , Blue Sky Gallery, Portland, Oregon
2004	<i>Moslem Teenagers</i> , Dom Fotografie, Poprad, Slovakia
	<i>Simply Girls</i> , Center for Photography, Woodstock, NY
	<i>Veiled / Unveiled</i> , Anya Tish Gallery, Houston, Texas
2002	<i>Women of Cover</i> , Hungry's gallery, FotoFest, Houston, Texas

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2010	<i>Abu Dhabi Art</i> , Abu Dhabi, UAE
	<i>Tehran - New York</i> , LTMH Gallery, New York, NY
2009	<i>Baku Biennale</i> , December 15, Baku Russia
	<i>Emancipated</i> , Haggerty Gallery Dallas, TX
2008	<i>We The People...</i> , Art League Houston, TX
	<i>Mechanical Perception</i> , presented by FotoFest, Houston, TX.
	<i>Puberty</i> , Haugar Art Museum, Tonsburg, Norway
	<i>Continuity and Change: Islamic Tradition in contemporary Art</i> , Williamsburg Art& Historical Center, Brooklyn, New York
2007	<i>Artadia at Diverseworks...revisited</i> , Diversework, Houston
	<i>Best of Texas Biennial</i> , San Antonio, Texas
	<i>Texas Biennial</i> , Dougherty Art Center, Austin
2006	<i>Perspectives 152: 4 Artists 4 Stories</i> , Contemporary Musuem of Art Houston,
	<i>Ground</i> , The Cultural Arts Council of Houston Fellowship Series, Houston, TX.

- 2005 *Spell of Childhood*, Backlight05: The 7.Int. photography triennial,
Tampere Art Museum, Tampere, Finland
REALITÄTEN II: Gesellschaftswerte, Fotogallerie Wien, Vienna, Austria
Co-existence, Lawndale Art Center, Houston, Texas
Pingyao International Photography Exhibition, Pingyao, China
Happy Nude Year, Anya Tish Gallery, Houston, Texas
- 2004 *The 2004 National Graduate Seminar Fellows exhibition*, the LeRoy Neiman Gallery, New York
Sharpening The Point, Blaffer Gallery, Houston, Texas
- 2003 *Layered Evidence*, Lawndale Art Center, Houston, Texas
Houston Center of Photography Fellowship Exhibition, Houston, Texas
Open Exhibition, Visual Art Alliance, Houston, Texas
- 2002 *Northlight Southwest 2002*, Northlight Gallery, ASU, Tucson, Arizona
Membership Exhibition, Houston Center of Photography, Houston, Texas
Big Show, Lawndale Art Center, Houston, Texas
- 2001 *Membership Exhibition*, Houston Center of Photography, Houston, Texas
Graduate Student Exhibition, Blaffer Gallery, Houston, Texas
- 2000 *Fresh Mix*, Video Installation, Community Artist's Collective, Houston, Texas

PUBLICATIONS & PANELS

- 2010 IANN: focus on growing up, Vol #5,
- 2008 "Cover page," European Photography Art magazine, No.82
- 2007 "Soody Sharifi," European Photography, Art Magazine, No. 79/80
"My Work" Houston Chronicle Zest, July2, 2006
"Exposures: Beneat the Hijab" PDN'S 30, March 2006
"Purkantuoksuinen Iran" Image, 03/2006, Finland
"Direction" A Magazine #3, London, England
- 2005 "Iran-Her motherland, his first trip-supplied setting for mother-son exhibit"
Austin American Statement, April 21
"Livers" Liberacion [Paris], June 2005
"Private Meetings," Livraison, No. 1 Spring/Winter 2005, Stockholm, Sweden
"Teinit on teineja," Suomen Kuvalehti, 40/2005, Finland
"Islam's Long War Within" Harvard Divinity Bulletin, Autumn 2005, Volume 33, Number 2. Boston
"Soody Sharifi with Payam Sharifi: Proud and Sad, Wrong and Strong,"
Glasstire: Texas visual art online, 04/05
"Grand Angle" Ados d'Iran... comme d'ailleurs, Libération, Paris, 12/24
Soody Sharifi's Photography, SME Kultura, Bratislava, Slovakia, 4/11
- 2004 Cover page of Chronogram Arts. Culture. Spirit, Mid-Hudson Magazine of Events & Ideas, 11/04m
Invited Panelist on Gender, Race, and Ethnicity in Digital photography, American Society of
Aesthetics 62nd annual meeting, October 27-30; Houston, Texas.
"Iranian teenagers are no different, M Publication[Germany], Volume3, Surprise Issue
"Simply Girls: Teenagers in Iran, Tatonic Weekend press cover page, September 2-8
"Put on your Sunday best, or Friday best or whatever..."; Cross Magazine, (issue 1, winter), Milan, Italy
- 2003 "A Guide to Ecstacity"; Nigel Coates, Author, London: Booth-Clibborn, Publisher
Girls Just Wanna Have Fun; Fluid Magazine, (issue 30, June), Poland

CANVAS IN NUMBERS

LAUNCH DATE 2004 PRINT RUN 15,000
STAFF MEMBERS 24 STAFF NATIONALITIES
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ART FAIRS 17 COUNTRY DISTRIBUTION 26
FREQUENCY PER YEAR 6 CONTRIBUTORS
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Sara Elliott, Gallery Assistant

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All images courtesy of the artist

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