

SHOJA AZARI
ICONS

SHOJA AZARI ICONS

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SHOJA AZARI: MAKING THE HOMELY UNHOMELY

By Hamid Dabashi / Professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature, Columbia University

Shoja Azari is the artist of the danger zone, of the realm of the forbidden, where the homely becomes unhomely, the familiar foreign, the comforting uncanny, the sacred sacrilegious. He is the artist of the borderline, where you cannot tell if he is going or he is coming, in or out, to or from, the habitat of our humanity, site of our solace. Shoja Azari plays with fire. He is the artist of our liminality, of the twilight zone of our certitude and doubt. In Persian we call that moment of the dawn when light is about to overcome darkness Gorg-o-Mish/Wolf-and-Sheep, for one (the shepherd) cannot tell one from the other. He could be, like that Aesop fable, a wolf in sheep's clothing, or else a sheep in wolf's. His art thrives on the uncertainty of that border.

In his most recent work, Shoja Azari goes back to two venerable artistic traditions in Iran and in Shi'ism in order to test the waters and experiment with the formal and temporal borderlines of the sacerdotal and the societal, the poetic of vision and the politics of pain and suffering, where his people, the people he has to call his, have to negotiate the distance between their highest hopes and their deepest fears. His most recent work are by far his most socially committed, politically potent, and above all formally jolting, works of art, destined to be most disconcerting, pulsating with a verve and energy that conspire to catapult him into the forefront of where we stand today, at the crossroad of a history that demands and exacts from the work of art, and from the artist, to come out and speak in a language that is the testimonial of our worldly whereabouts. Shoja Azari gives this moment his all—and his all will shake and shatter, dismantle and disconcert, deform and disturb. He means business—and his business is deadly serious.

THE PAIN OF THE PRESENCE

We are all (along with the artist) standing on the edge of the precipice—and this is the point of no return. This, to be sure, was not by choice—this was (perhaps) by historical inevitability. In a key moment during the social uprising in the aftermath of the post-June 2009 presidential election in Iran, young men and women were pictured praying in public (in streets adjacent to Tehran University Campus, which the ruling clergy has now occupied for Friday Prayer ceremonies and sermons) standing shoulder to shoulder with each other, some of them wearing shoes (sneakers to be exact). The public anathema angered the custodians of the Islamic Republic, denouncing the young praying crowd as blasphemous, not even knowing the proper etiquettes of praying (which requires that men and women pray separately and with their shoes taken off). Within minutes after this official rebuke was leveled against the young men and women joining in prayers, the Internet was abuzz with commentaries and pictures of soldiers during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) praying with their shoes on and standing in their trenches—arguing that they too (the young antigovernment demonstrators) were in

a battlefield, that they too were in a state of war fearing for their lives from attack by the Basijis, the militarized security apparatus of the Islamic Republic. These are all innocent and even subtle niceties compared to when Tahereh Qorrat al-Ayn (1814-1852), the iconoclastic nineteenth century revolutionary woman, unveiled herself in public in 1844 and who so shocked the people in the audience with her outrageous act that one of them instantly slit his own throat upon seeing the site of a veil-less woman. Forms have always been invitation to assault—and art is nothing if not an assault on the form in the formal destruction of the impossible. From the streets of Tehran to Manhattan galleries, the artist and the citizen are breaking the unwritten rules. They have had it up to here—where form implodes under the weight of a logic that once authorized it.

By far the most provocative aspect of Shoja Azari's two most recent works—*Coffee House Painting*, 2009 and the *Icons Series*, 2010—is precisely their formal ambitions to re/think and re/form the *locus classicus* of Shi'ism in visual modernity. From the iconoclastic and provocative *Icons Series* to transformative and frightful *Coffee House Painting*, we are in the presence of the familiar made foreign by the formal destabilization of the sacred. To be sure, the Shi'i iconography in and of itself is transgressive, a visual and performative aberration launched against doctrinal inhibitions of Islam, whose absolute monotheism is an anathema to any mode of visual representation. Sunni Muslims have always been suspicious of Shi'i Muslims' love and adulation for their Imams and consider them blasphemous. The Wahabi orthodoxy in particular is categorical in its denunciation of Shi'ism precisely because of such proclivities. But Iranians, and by extension Shi'is, have always found ways to navigate their visual and performative urges pass such doctrinal inhibitions and sectarian rivalries. The Shi'i iconography is a deeply rooted and widely variegated art form in both visual and performative registers. What Shoja Azari is now doing with the legacy of that visual transgression made into an act of piety is an aberration upon aberration. He is outgaming the game. Heresy is the fuel of Orthodoxy—has always been: from the Spanish Inquisition to Salem Witch Trials to Kangaroo Courts in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

In his homage to coffee house painting, Shoja Azari invites you to look at a classical canvas, in this case *The Day of the Last Judgement* by Mohammad Modabber (died 1346/1967), one of the masters of the genre. Coffee house painting is a unique Iranian genre that developed late in the Qajar and early in the Pahlavi period, with such masters as Hossein Qollar Aqasi and Mohammad Modabber as its prominent representatives. The genre assumes its name from tea and coffee houses scattered from major urban areas to small villages in which these canvases were unfurled and stories of ancient Persian kings and heroes and the travails of Shi'i

Imams and saints were narrated upon them by a traveling troubadour, a Naqqal/Narrator. One might in fact consider this genre as a precursor of cinema in Iran, in which you have a narrative picture, a narrator, and an audience all participating in a performative experience. Shoja Azari's invitation is initially innocuous, familiar, and homely. Then things begin to happen. Pictures begin to move, images start morphing and altering into and out of each other. Wars and mayhems begin to change time, space, history, sides. We are on a move—towards the unfamiliar that is (alas) only too familiar, unhomely that is homely. Familiar news headlines begin to appear on foreign frontiers of visual registers. Did we just hear someone come alive and speak American English on Mohammad Modabber's canvas?

Shoja Azari's *Coffee House Painting* takes full advantage of the larger framing of Shi'is Passion Play (Ta'ziyeh) in which the tradition of coffee house painting might in fact be located. He becomes the Naqqal, and he has a story to tell. The distinct aspect of Shoja Azari's work is its contemporary relevance, in which scenes from the most recent carnage in Iraq, Palestine, and Afghanistan are cinematically interjected into and onto the canvas. Mohammad Ghaffari, the prominent Iranian theater director, did a similar take on Ta'ziyeh in his staging of *Moses and Wandering Dervish* at Trinity College in 1988. What Shoja Azari is now doing with his deadly serious and yet ponderously playful manipulation of the sacred certitude of those metaphors is to lend them renewed power and legitimacy by asking them to speak to terrorizing realities beyond their historical (and perhaps even formal) reach. The pain of presence, where headlines become bone-deep, resonates on Shoja Azari's canvas, trespassing on Mohammad Modabber's.

THE FORMAL DESTRUCTION OF THE SACRED

Equally compelling is what Shoja Azari does with the Shi'i tradition of iconography in his *Icons Series*. This will be by far his most disconcerting work that will jar, shock, awe, drop jaws, and may in fact prove most unsettling to his audience. What we are witnessing here is a straightforward iconoclastic gesture, the disconcerting replacement of the face of ordinary women (the artist's own female friends) for the image of extraordinary saints in Shi'i iconography, while keeping the entire topography of its visual registers—including its masculinist demeanors—intact. The initial shock of looking at these pictures—female faces occupying masculinist gestures in familiar Shi'i iconography—will only expand and exacerbate the more you dwell on them. Add to that initial and expanding shock the fact that the gentle video installation projected onto the icons makes these faces actually come alive and make subtle motions, and even at one point cry, with tears welling up in her eyes. Here we are witnessing multiple acts of transgression: the icon has become worldly, its theomorphic force anthropomorphized (like the

famous *Ognissanti Madonna* of Giotto, circa 1314-1327); the icon has come alive; and the icon is cross-gendered—and yet in a unique and unprecedented gesture, the icon has been, ever so imperceptibly, re-signified. We stand in front of the transfigured icon, and if we can overcome the uncanny moment (and there is the rub), we are in the presence of a renewed spirituality. The sacred is cracked open and the icon has been brought back to life and released upon the world. The moment is revelatory, frightful, uncanny.

RE-IMAGINING THE SACRED

In order to dwell on that uncanny moment, when Shoja Azari makes the familiar foreign, we need first to come to terms with the formal destruction of the received dramaturgy that he has ventured to upstage. What in effect we are witnessing in Shoja Azari's work on Shi'i and Iranian iconographic, performing, and visual arts is a very powerful participation in a more widespread national resurrection of premodern Persian traditions, in which Iranian artists, in both visual and performing arts, have turned to these premodern genres in order to push them forward in meeting the challenges of a more urgent reality. In both visual and performing arts, throughout the twentieth century, and well into the first decade of the twentieth-first, Iranian artists (from painters to sculptors to filmmakers) have turned to such traditions as *Manaqeb Khani* (reciting in epic poetry the valiant acts of Shi'i Imams), *Hamleh Khani* (doing the same about heroic battles of the Prophet and Shi'i Imams), *Roze Khani* (reciting the suffering of the Third Shi'i Imam, Hossein ibn Ali, and his family and companions in the Battle of Karbala in 61/680), *Pardeh Khani*, *Surat Khani*, *Shamayel-gardani* (doing the same from a canvas), *Ma'rekeh-giri*, *Kheymeh Shab Bazi* (performative variations on similar themes), as well as the art of *Saqqa-khaneh* (sanctified and ornamental water stations). These premodern performing traditions have offered contemporary artists ample opportunity to address far more urgent and immediate issues and concerns than those of the bygone years and events that may or may not register with the younger generation of sensibilities. The preeminent Iranian dramatist and filmmaker, Bahram Beizai, in his *Namayesh dar Iran/Theater in Iran* (Tehran: Roshangaran Publishers, 2000), has extensively studied these theatrical forms, as he has also been instrumental in extending them into cinematic and performative adaptations.

The key question of course is if these mundane manipulations of the sacred icons of a people does them harm, robs them of their allegorical magnitude, sacred certitude, or else depletes them of their enduring sanctity—or, alternatively, re-signify them for a renewed generation of sensibilities. Salman Rushdie's venture into the life of the Prophet of Islam in his *Satanic Verses* (1988) has now become proverbial for the limits of such playful fireworks. People may mix your metaphors, as you mess with theirs. Here we need to make a

clear distinction between what Salman Rushdie was doing in the *Satanic Verses* and what Theo van Gogh and Hirsi Ali did when they deliberately launched a rather crude assault on Muslims' sanctities in their *Submission* (2004), or the Danish *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons did in their depiction of the Prophet in compromising gestures (2005). All these varied forms of turning on the sacred have now been mixed. The murder of Theo van Gogh is the prime example of how such abuses of a people's sanctities come with at times very heavy prices, and an artist ventures into this dangerous zones at his/her own risk. Such ventures, however, assume entirely different disposition when Muslim (nominal or practicing) intellectuals and artists venture to this forbidden zone knowingly. Leading Muslim intellectuals like Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, Abdolkarim Soroush, and Akbar Ganji are now all on the record for having questioned the most sacrosanct principles of their own faith—including the revelatory nature of the Qur'an, the nature and function of Prophet's mission, and even the viability of the Twelfth Shi'i Imam's "occultation." These Muslim preoccupations with the nature and disposition of their collective faith ought to be categorically differentiated from the abusive speculations of Christopher Hitchens or Bill Maher who "go after Religion" with a vengeance and seem to be entirely oblivious to the politics of their atheism.

In his *Icons Series*, Shoja Azari has trespassed into the danger zone, where his particular take on the sacred needs to be saved from being assimilated backward or forward into a globalized domain beyond his control. On that domain, to which Shoja Azari is subject and not an agent, Islam and Muslims are sitting ducks, and this is an open season on them. It is not just the late Theo van Gogh or the Danish cartoonists who take liberties at their own perilous risk. The Prophet of Islam has been a consistent subject of Christian insult long before Dante's *Inferno* Canto 28, and it is only when the Pope Benedict XVI decides to quote these passages that they assume far more urgent contemporary power. When in his lecture at the University of Regensburg in Germany in September 2006 ("Glaube, Vernunft und Universität: Erinnerungen und Reflexionen/Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections), Pope Benedict XVI quoted a derisive remark about Islam, originally made in the 14th century by the Byzantine emperor Manuel II Palaiologos, the full force of Dante's Canto 28 in *Inferno* assumes far more contemporary Islamophobic significance. Shoja Azari, as a man, a person, a Muslim (by communal identity if not by practice), and artist is subject to that domain, as he, paradoxically, intends to be an agent in his own community of sacred sensitivities. Will he ever succeed (will he ever be allowed) to evade that subjection and become the agent of his own art? Time will tell.

In the larger global context of Islamophobia (Muslims as terrorists, Arabs as homicidal, Shi'is as suicidal, etc.), artists

who, like Shoja Azari, have a communal connection to Islam face a double-bind, which makes their own creative conversation with their ancestral faith a double-edged sword. The global spectacle is now inseparable from any given communal conversation, and the introduction of a radical contemporaneity can both dismantle and reaffirm their faith—if in nothing else then at least in their own art. To be sure, the artist is not the person who made the first move on the sanctity of the icon—the tyrants and the world conquerors did. From the Islamic Revolution of 1977-1979 to the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 those sanctities, the certitude of the metaphors that have hold a people together, has been at the receiving end of militant assault. The intrusion of an instrumental, historically anchored, reason into the realm of the revelatory was in full operation when the Islamic revolution began to claim the entirety of a massive social uprising all to itself and spend everything Islam and its revelatory language had to possess, own, and tyrannize it. The de-iconification of these icons has happened long before Shoja Azari reached out to claim them for a renewed signification, make them once again meaningful to a renewed set of communal and global sensibilities. These icons were effectively used and abused first during the Iranian revolution of 1977-1979 and then during the eight brutal years of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). Today the (massively contested) Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and the entire Islamic Republic apparatus along with him, continues to use and abuse people's faith for their own, immediate, political purposes. These sacred icons have been equally instrumentalized by militant Shi'is in Lebanon and Iraq. So if anyone were to be shocked by the "abuse" of these icons they are a bit late. Karbala was violated, long before Shoja Azari began artistically to rethink it as a metaphor, when the US Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld unleashed his military campaign of "shock and awe," as he called it, on Iraq and Iraqis, Karbala and its sanctity. The raped, burned, and murdered body of Abeer Qasim Hamza al-Janabi, the 14-year-old Iraqi who was gang-raped on 12 March 2006 by the US soldiers from the 502nd Infantry Regiment, was the site of a violation infinitely more sacred than a picture of a saint or an Imam. What is happening to these icons in Shoja Azari's work is in fact entirely in the opposite direction—a cry of defiance, the iconography of a revolt against the obscenity of violence done in the name of or against those who hold these picture sacred. He does not so much de-iconicize them, as he in fact re-signifies them for a new generation of aesthetic, emotive, and political registers.

THE VERFREMDUNGSEFFEKT EFFECT OF THE UNCANNY

Clearing the air from the global context of the work of art and naming the site of the far more deadly violations before the artist has turned to the icon and refocuses the attention on the work of art itself and its, above all, formal

daring of the elements. Shoja Azari's work does have that distancing effect (the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*), that shocking perhaps, certainly perplexing, effect that forces the audience away from a comfortable and complicitous location, passively partaking in the dramaturgical event that these pictures signify, and as such, positions the audience in a distance that inaugurates the radical shock of the pictures the artist has placed in front of his and her eyes. One looks at these pictures and they are at one and the same time both warmly familiar and yet eerily strange—so that the Freudian sense of the uncanny sets in and reminds you of something that you may have never actually seen before, or else saw and readily repressed.

The Unheimlich/Uncanny is unsettling, for through it these pictures become familiar yet strange, and thus the sense of strangeness and discomfort they generate and sustain unsettles their audience, disturbs their metaphors, dislodges their allegories, and thus dismantles the scaffolding that has held their mind and soul together. The cognitive dissonance that this sense of the uncanny, this transgenering of masculinist icons, generates dwells on the moment when they become (at one and the same time) both attractive and repulsive. The cognitive dissonance is conducive to outright anger, frustration, and of course rejection, even violent rejection, for in the Heimlich/Homely one is seeing something Unheimlich/Unhomely, in the familiar something strange, in the sacred something sacrilegious, subversive, disconcerting. The foreignness of the transgenering suddenly makes the familiar masculine icons equally foreign—was there something always feminine about these familiarly masculine pictures we had failed to notice? Perhaps—and that perhaps becomes disconcerting/reassuring at one and the same time, which is exactly what both the Heimlich and the Unheimlich do. These icons used to be the topography of a reassuring haven by the force of their own repression, and now, that repression returned, they have become the signposts of a danger zone, or the artist has forced them to expose their hidden paradox—and thus they attract and repulse, reassure and frighten, at one and the same time.

At issue here is not any scarcity of women saints in Islam or in Shi'ism. In Shi'ism the figures of Fatemeh, the Prophet's daughter and Ali's wife, and Zeynab, sister to Imam Hossein, project a particularly powerful presence in Muslim history, doctrine, and particularly in the communal rituals of Shi'ism. Even in Shi'i iconography and Ta'ziyeh performances these and similar feminine presences appear regularly, but of course completely veiled, their faces invisible, as in fact should be—doctrinally—the faces of all other saints and Imams, and Prophet Muhammad (as you notice in the late Moustapha Akkad's famous film *Message* [1976]). The paradoxical (and entirely controversial) Shi'i proclivity pictorially to imagine the picture, and to picture the face, of Prophet Muhammad

or Shi'i Imams is an act of popular piety that has always troubled the doctors of law (the custodians of the sacred) of both Shi'i and Sunni schools. Shi'i popular piety has defied their own doctors of law and pictured those faces and staged their redemptive suffering in Ta'ziyeh performances as if authorized (commanded even) by their own pious fantasies and imagination. So the uncanny disposition of Shoja Azari's replacing feminine faces where masculine faces used to be is a twist on a twist, a transgression upon a transgression, a transgendering and cross-dressing that simply pushes and twists a popular art form only one—and there is the rub—notch.

In his essay *Unheimlich/The Uncanny* (1919), Freud discovers that what is Unheimlich is the reversal of the Heimlich, and Heimlich is not just homely but also secret and thus covered, concealed, camouflaged, denied. So in the uncanny we become warily familiar with something we had better stayed unfamiliar with and distanced from. In the uncanny, we are in the presence of what Philip Rieff (in his extension of Freudian theory) called a "transgression," for in that transgressive mode we are revealing to ourselves that which we had wisely thought well concealed. The result is anger at self-indulgence, in self-revelation. So the Heimlich is always already Unheimlich, the comforting disconcerting, the trust built on a betrayal, truth on a lie, and the act of estrangement reveals that debilitating secret. Heimlich is both homely and frightful; Unheimlich grabs hold of one of these two twins and thus exposes the other, and thereby the binary collapses and our having deceptively concealed our own anxiety is exposed—we catch ourselves red-handed, with our own hand in the cookie jar of our own sacred order. The fear of watching for Freud was the fear of castration (and thus the blinded Oedipus), which here in the case of visual art that Shoja Azari has placed in front of our eyes simply means the loss of any potent control over metaphoric meaning, allegorical legacy, and above all a sense of sanity and solace.

Shoja Azari's incorporation of video images from Iraq, where Karbala is located, and where the US-led invasion and occupation has caused such unfathomable pain and suffering, is by far the most potent force in re-metaphorizing a medieval allegory for modern effect. His images of the mayhem in Iraq and Lebanon, where Shi'ism is having a renewed rendezvous with its militant history, is equally empowering for his work. These transhistorical migrations sustain the formal force of the image, while making them speak to contemporary calamities. To the degree that he is anthropomorphizing the sacred icons of a people, he is also theomorphizing those very people's pain and suffering, bringing them to attention of the transcendence that has to be a witness and even made accountable.

This transhistoricity of images and the interplay between anthropomorphizing iconic representations and simultaneously theomorphizing factual realities brings us back to the manner of Shi'i dramaturgical mimesis, which is quintessentially different though on the surface identical with the *Verfremdungseffekt*. The emotional distance that Brecht thought necessary in order to break the identification process is predicated on the Aristotelian mimesis of a one-to-one correspondence between reality and representation, which is absolute, total, and final, whereas Ta'ziyeh mimesis is always already incomplete and transitory, and thus a *Verfremdungseffekt* (long before Brecht theorized it) is always already built into the mimetic act, for it is never complete, total, or final. We go to see a play where Lord Olivier will do his damndest to convince everyone he is Hamlet. No Ta'ziyeh actor or audience will ever take that particular Hossein Aqa they know from their neighborhood as a greengrocer or teacher or barber to be Imam Hossein. The audience is always aware of the theatricality of the event, while fully partaking in its drama. In his version of Ta'ziyeh, as previously in his *Taste of Cherry* (1997), Abbas Kiarostami sought to recognize and come to terms with this particular dramaturgy by way of visually transporting an Iranian (Shi'i) audience, taking a video of them and projecting it on a screen along with the Ta'ziyeh they were watching, for a non-Iranian (non-Shi'i) audience now to behold in France or England. Kiarostami's act inevitably has an anthropological gaze built into it, where art becomes (perhaps despite itself), a medium of turning a people into the ethnographic curiosities of another. Incorporation of modern sites of mayhem in Iraq, Afghanistan, or Palestine into the allegorical sites of other atrocities now codified in bygone years works in Shoja Azari's case far more effectively, for in effect he is telling an American audience what they have done in Iraq, so the American audience is far more directly implicated in the drama, and Ta'ziyeh is effectively brought home to them.

RENEWED PACTS OF PIETY

To surmise the sense of the transcendence is and remains first and foremost worldly, communal, material to the best that is hoped in the sacred un/certainties of a people, the hope (and the fear of losing it) that keep its artists awake at night. "Now faith," if the cross-referential wisdom of Hebrews 11:1 were to be taken beyond its Biblical borders, "is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen"—as "believing in the Unseen" (The Qur'an II:3) is the defining moment of faith in the Qur'anic revelation. Our artists habitually see things we wished we did but we cannot. They are far more invested in that vision than their audience will ever be. Why would an artist like Shoja Azari go to the danger zone (Unheimlich) of the sacrosanct, to the abode of the transcendence, where our sacred sanctities dwell—if he were not morally invested in that realm? The question has baffled everyone at least since Omar Khayyam, (1048-1131)

who too had the same proclivity—dwelling too much on the moments of his doubts and disbelief to be believable as a non-believer. Omar Khayyam too made of his disbelief an act of piety. He, like Shoja Azari, spoke too much of his doubts and impieties. They both protest too much.

In Rumi's (1207-1273) *Mathnavi*, there is a story about a shepherd whom Moses once run into while the shepherd was singing his heart out to God Almighty with love and affection. Oh my beloved God, the shepherd was singing, where are you so I can comb your hair, kiss your hand, massage your feet, mend your clothes, and look after your comfort? Moses gets very angry at hearing such blasphemies, the attribution of human organs and attributes to God Almighty, and severely admonishes the shepherd for not knowing the proper etiquette of praising Almighty God without anthropomorphizing His Absolutist and Abstract Majesty. He has no hand for you to kiss, Moses wags his finger at the poor shepherd, no feet for you to massage, no hair for you to comb, no clothes for you to mend. Stop your blasphemous nonsense! The shepherd is properly reprimanded, swallows his pride in his love for God, apologizes, and goes away. What follows is one of the most magnificent segments of the entire *Mathnavi*, when Rumi brings God's voice down to speak to Moses and reminds him who is who and what is what. God now turns around and unleashes His anger against Moses and severely admonishes him. Why did you turn my obedient servant away from me, God asks Moses. It's none of your business how he expresses his love for me. I have sent you to bring them closer to me, not to make them more distant. You never mind how they talk to me, God says to Moses. For each one of my created beings I have given them one particular language for them to talk to me. The Indians praise me in their language, Arabs in theirs, Persians in theirs, so do Chinese, the Africans, everyone, everything. You don't tell people who are drunk with my love how to walk properly, you don't tell people who have torn their shirt with joy in my love to run along and mend their clothes! God then sends Moses to run along and find the shepherd and apologize to him. Artists are just like that shepherd. We should never find fault with the language—visual or verbal, emotive or affective—with which they address the sacred certitude we thought we had but evidently still lack. Instead, we need to be patient and learn the language in which they bring the transcendence down to grace our being and talk to us mortals. They know what they are doing. We don't.

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Icon #1, 2010, Video Portrait



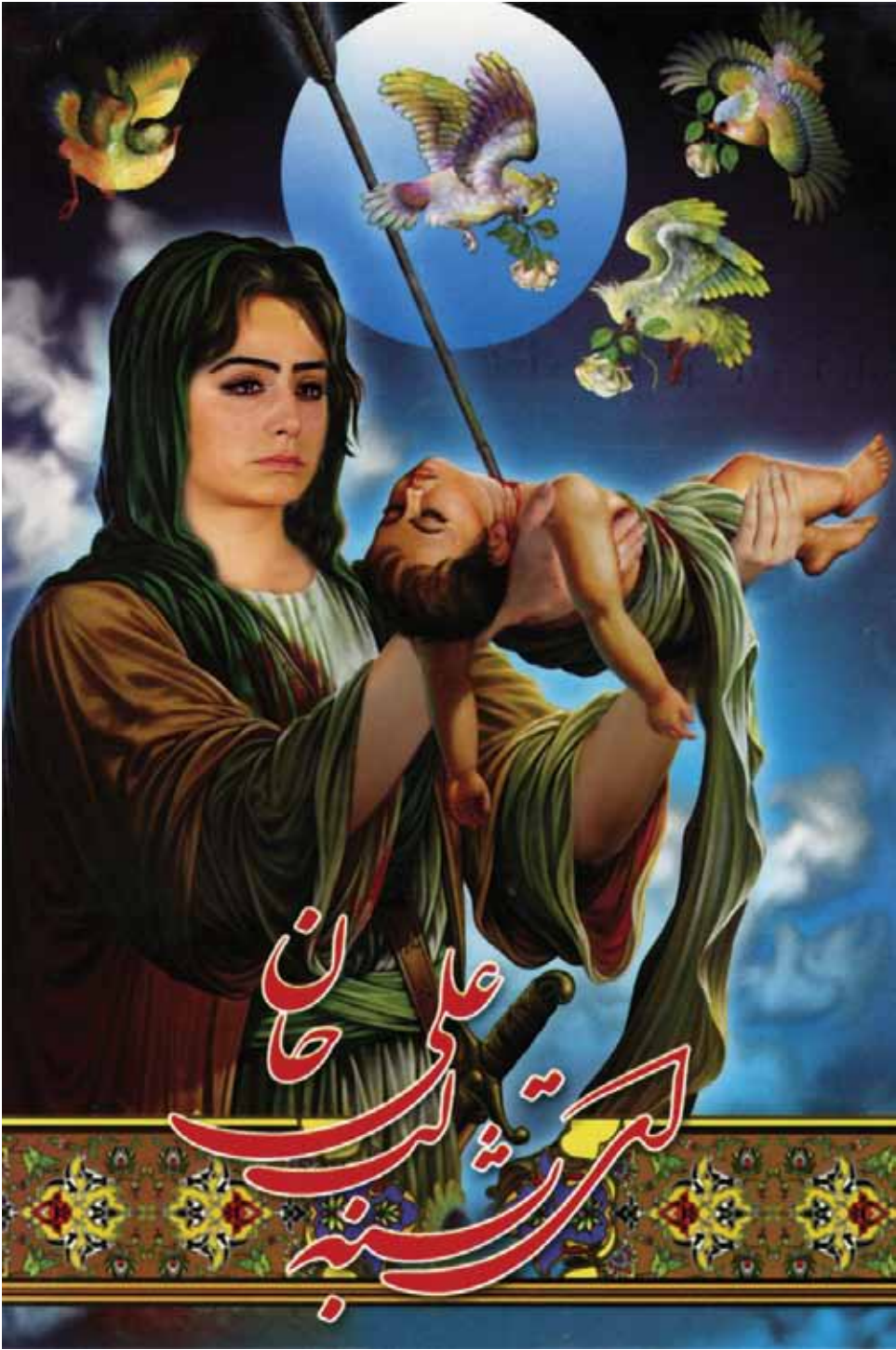
Icon #2, 2010, Video Portrait



Icon #3, 2010, Video Portrait



Icon #4, 2010, Video Portrait



Icon #5, 2010, Video Portrait

SHOJA AZARI: KEEP THE FAITH

By Benjamin Genocchio

People keep asking me if Shoja Azari is an artist or a filmmaker. The honest and unhelpful answer is that he is really both and yet neither of them. He is a revolutionary, a creative individual who has been drawn into media and social activism. Sometimes he pours his ideas and principles into films and sometimes he makes videos and multimedia works that are better suited to display and viewing in a gallery.

It's seeing the range of Shoja's work, getting to know the issues which vex and excite him that enables the dedicated observer to understand his essentially political motivation. It also offers you insight into what you might call his interpretive abilities, his responses to various sorts of subject matter and the way he treats different artistic media. He refuses convention, and in that sense is a revolutionary.

His present exhibition, *Icons*, contains examples of what I am talking about. Five video portraits echoing idealized, popular religious imagery of legendary Shiite Imams fill a small side room of the gallery. They are gaudy and kitsch. But they are also innovatory and radical, for the artist has substituted live female figures for the male martyrs. If you look closely you can see their eyes and lips move. Some even cry.

The Shiite religion does not generally condone female Imams. The Imams tend to be men and bearded, and where women are revered as holy figures, their faces are usually covered. Shoja's sly gender switch gives these images a charm, quirky humor and lightness of touch that makes them cleverly entertaining. But he is also venturing into the touchy and sharply politicized arena of Islamic gender politics.

This theme recurs with some frequency in Shoja's work, from his own, earliest films to collaborations in film and video with Shirin Neshat. *Women Without Men*, a recent film collaboration with Neshat that tracks the story of four women in early 1950s Iran, has received world-wide praise. It also picked up the Silver Lion for best director at the 2009 Venice Film Festival, a much coveted honor among filmmakers.

But there is more going on in Shoja's video portraits than a hint of humor and mild abrasiveness toward male chauvinism in Islam. The Shiite Imams which he has chosen are revered as martyrs because of their commitment to struggles for social justice. They are popular heroes in Islam, religious figures who took a stand against injustice, who stood up for the poor and disenfranchised. They were social revolutionaries. Giving these noble Shiite Imams female facial characteristics humanizes them, makes them seem more like real people than mythic storybook characters, which they are. But it also connects up to something else entirely, something much more contemporary: daily television imagery of women protesting in the streets of Tehran against Iran's repressive theocratic political regime. They are today's martyrs.

Moving between these five portraits and Shoja's other video work here, *Coffee House Painting*, 2009, and thinking about his films, I began to see a common thread running through his creativity. He is interested in realism, real people and their lives, but not in a linear, narrative way. He is interested in the confusion and stickiness of life, and the ways in which the past is constantly interacting with the present.

Shoja puts it another way. "I am interested in layers of reality" he told me, standing in front of *Coffee House Painting*, which intertwines video and painting. The work is a projection of video projections onto a reproduction of a famous, traditional Persian coffee house painting. Popular in early 20th century Iran, coffee house paintings were vernacular representations of epic Persian myths and legends.

Coffee House Painting is about the ways in which moral or ideological structures, even religious ones, are infused with politics. Against the backdrop of the painting, depicting scenes of Heaven, Purgatory and Hell, Shoja has projected imagery of contemporary wars, conflicts, injustice and suffering ranging from media images of brutality at Abu Ghraib prison to Israeli bulldozers destroying Palestinian homes and Hezbollah fighters firing machine guns. It is a harsh, layered rendering of the cosmos in chaos.

Looking at this projection I found myself drawn to the drama of the interaction between the embedded, projected small-screen video imagery and what was happening around it in the painting. It is an original, even revolutionary mixing of media which pushes art and film into inventive and unconventional areas. It also teases the audience with a choice of focus: do we explore the content, or marvel at the form.

The English word revolution derives from the Latin *revolutio*, which means "turn around". That's pretty much what Shoja does, his versatility and imagination transforming ideas, concepts, images and media so that we see them and the world about face. His ambition is no less than to change art and life.

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THE BLURRING OF BOUNDARIES: TWO DECADES OF DECONSTRUCTION AND REINVENTION IN THE LIFE AND WORK OF SHOJA AZARI

By Sam Bardaouil / Curatorial Director, Art Reoriented

Starting a scholarly essay with a quotation from *Playboy Magazine* is definitely not the most academic or customary of routes to follow. However, there is nothing customary about the work and character of Shoja Azari, and the man I am quoting is none but the controversial Marshall McLuhan who in an interview with *Playboy* in March of 1969 (to add insult to injury it had to be 1969) described the artist as "a man of integral awareness" referring to the artist's attunement with the latest technological advancements of the time. Around thirty years before him, Ezra Pound proclaimed artists as the "antennae of the race" born to mould the masses through their esoteric talent to read and shape the happenings of their age. While most artists struggle to fulfill either one of these roles, Shoja Azari makes it look so effortless.

When Allan Kaprow wrote, in his 1966 *Guidelines for Happenings*, "the line between art and life should be kept as fluid, and perhaps indistinct, as possible," he was making a direct statement against the elite status of the art world. "While everyone is called, none are chosen," declares the Fluxus Manifesto. This blurring of boundaries is probably one of the most constant and bold characteristics in Azari's work. In his work, the dialectic ambiguously becomes dialogical and the alien becomes recognizable. What we otherwise approach with prudence, we embrace with a sense of familiarity. We transform into what Brazilian theater activist Augusto Boal has coined as "apect-actors". Neither mere observers, nor entirely immersed in the acts of conflict always central to Shoja's themes, we find ourselves instantly engaged with the scenes presented before us, imagining unraveled endings, seeking an active role in the conclusion of these Brechtian dramas, assuming the disposition of the characters portrayed before us. We find ourselves rebuked for our inertia while we simultaneously pass our visceral judgments so brilliantly conjured up by the artist's ability to tap into the most primeval within us.

Two bodies of work that brilliantly illustrate this conundrum of perception and reception are *Odyssey* (2007) and *Windows*, (2006). Shot in a desolate slaughterhouse in Casablanca, the *Odyssey* hurls us into a world of a post-apocalyptic nature that reflects on a world where justice, not love, prevails. Inspired by the 1992 Farsi-poem *Thus Spoke Earth* by Iranian poet Ahmad Shamlou, (probably a literary pun on Nietzsche's philosophical novel *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*) the film sweeps through the façade of the dilapidated monument capturing on its way the stifling grotesqueness of this site of carnage embodied at times through the discarded chains and meat hooks of this annihilation machine, and at others through the eerie overgrowth of weeds and grass scattered along a monochromatic grey palette of stone and earth. We are then abruptly confronted with a deluge-like sequence of still shots, akin to the type of documentary-like reporting we often witness on the news. With a sinister multi-layering of image, music (the brilliant cello of Maya Beiser) and text,

Azari lulls us into a desensitized state, a subtle criticism of the effect of mass media on individual synthesis, only to catapult us into the grim reality of what he had so eloquently foreshadowed from the start: a heavy mass of veiled corpses. With a cinematic language informed by master filmmakers as diverse as Michael Snow, Hitchcock and Kurosawa (the last two have been very influenced by the art of painting; something Azari reverses in his shift from cinema to his first collaboration with painter Shahram Karimi on their *Stalker Paintings*, 2006, based on Tarkovsky's 1979 movie of the same title. Tarkovsky himself was known for his infatuation with Renaissance iconography) and a brilliant reduction of a complex text into an accessible language that encapsulates the universal question of coded morality vs. inherent compassion, the artist awakens in us the remembrance of past and present atrocities such as the Holocaust, Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, the Iraq war and the whole (un) clash of civilizations to put it in Huntington's words. He has exposed the centrality of institutionalized religion and cultural separatism as the re-enforcers of such inhumane acts. The unfamiliar (how many of us have in actuality been to an abandoned slaughterhouse?) has become, through the artist's interpretive eyes, the gateway to what is perhaps too familiar, too close for comfort.

Emanating from a similar preoccupation with the psychology of oppression (Azari holds an MA in psychology from New York University) *Windows* exemplifies the artist's profound demarcation of borders, both from a spatial and temporal perspective. Oscillating between the realms of presentation and representation, this body of nine short films roams within the parameters of "the private space" while unmasking the voyeuristic desires in us all. In a fashion similar to that of experimental director Jim Jarmusch, the maker of such poignant films like *Dead Man* and *Ghost Dog*, Azari makes his own bid at deconstructing, through his foreigner/immigrant perspective, the fabric of what Americana is. However, while Jarmusch's intention is to create a form of cinema that blends European and Japanese film with that of Hollywood, Azari's short films are primarily concerned with a non-Aristotelian approach to narrative: a non-linear cross section of a specific moment within a given incident. Moreover, while the former's characters usually believe that the departing on a journey may lead them to some form of salvation, Azari's couples, lovers, prisoners, employees and other myriad characters, are irreversibly trapped in a perpetual constancy in which they are oblivious to the ever-changing cathartic moments that abound their worlds. This "endgame" is further enhanced by the uncanny usage of framing and uninterrupted long takes which, as we peek into the lives of those victims and victimizers, turn inside out on us transforming those windows, according to the words of F. Javier Panera Cuevas into "distorted mirrors in which what we do not want to see is reflected: our precautions and our cowardice." Once again, Azari triumphs in overlapping the

specific and the collective and summons, even if ruthlessly at times, those shaded areas where the immediate and the distant overlap.

Perhaps one of Azari's most noted cinematic oeuvres is his feature film *K*, (2002 – 2004) which comprises of an adaptation of three novels by Franz Kafka: *The Married Couple*, *In the Penal Colony* and *A Fratricide*. Given Shoja's ceaseless preoccupation with the mindset and apparatus of oppression and oppressive structures, it is not surprising in the least that Kafkian literature and philosophy have probably been most influential in shaping the ontological variables in semantics and form in most of Azari's work. Albert Einstein once stated, after returning a Kafka novel loaned to him by Thomas Mann: "Couldn't read it for its perversity. The human mind isn't complicated enough." This is not so surprising given Einstein's aversion to politics and people. He once declared: "Politics is for the moment, equation for eternity." Not the case of Shoja Azari. His words testify to a very different reality: "They say revolution eats its own children. Alas, my destiny was to be dismembered by it. Political banishment followed by exile added to the murkiness of an already nascent identity, yet the opening of a new horizon. Presumably more food for the gluttonous monster of art!" How more Kafka-esque could one be? It is this dismembering of origin, belonging and survival that Azari brings to the fore in a cinematic coup shot entirely in black and white, with an abstract narrative that entices us with its concocted mystery achieved so masterfully through his atypical casting of the same actors in various roles. In doing so, he crystallizes his employment of the subliminality of metaphor confusing our comprehension of the almost chiasmic confoundedness of reality and fiction. This becomes a distinguishing trait that continues to appear in his successive collaborations with visual artist, recently turned filmmaker Shirin Neshat which brings us into a new phase in this defiant artist's odyssey.

"Meeting Shirin Neshat in 1997 has proved the most fruitful event in my artistic life resulting in more than a decade of collaboration and intense creativity. Interestingly, this collaboration has resulted in a shift of interest for us. While Shirin has become increasingly interested in narrative film, I have started experimenting with visual art. A number of film installations and more recently video paintings have been the fruit of this burgeoning interest." In this last sentence, Shoja is referring to his ongoing collaboration with painter Shahram Karimi, which since its commencement in 2006 has heralded a new outburst of creativity for the artist. First came the *Stalker Series*, 2006. Departing from Andrea Tarkovsky's 1979 movie *Stalker*, Azari adjusted specific shots from the film by capturing, slowing and reframing them. These were then projected onto a canvas, scrupulously painted by Karimi depicting those same "tableaux" in a hyperrealist manner. This over layering of film and drawing resulted in a pioneering fusion of the art forms of video and painting,

of time and stillness, of color and projected light. This was followed in 2007 – 2008 by a new joint venture manifested in the *Silence* series in which the two artists repeat their earlier experiment to explore the subtle movements of water and wind in visually arresting natural landscapes. It was only a matter of time before Shoja would return to his content driven work, now that he was navigating with more confidence through this uncharted territory of aesthetic expression. In 2009, Azari and Karimi set out on what must be their most preeminent coproduction to date, *The Oil Series*, depicting the first Gulf war. The storyteller in Shoja was back in full swing, with a cinematic rigor akin to his earlier films. Through an ingenious re-contextualization of images from Werner Herzog's *Lessons of Darkness* (1992), mesmerizing fires glow, smoke bellows in the wind, a soldier vanishes into an infinite horizon while armored tanks ravage the ash laden desert; one haunting image after another. Only this time they were looped and layered and projected onto Karimi's meticulously painted linens. This was a seminal breakthrough in this transformative phase of the artist, a metamorphosis of sorts where, unlike Kafka's Gregor Samsa who doesn't like what he sees when he awakes one morning to find himself inexplicably transformed from a human into a monstrous insect, the reinvented Azari has finally come to his own. The academic boundaries between filmmaker and visual artist have been constricted. What emerges is a prodigious hybrid of both.

In a constant process of self-reinvention, Azari slingshots his artistic margins into the next investigation: how to achieve the painterly qualities of brush and pigment entirely through the exclusive use of video projection. Concurrently, vigilant not to settle within the confines of formalistic inquiry, he probes through the collectivity of his psyche in search for new stories to tell. This time his gaze turns towards the homeland. Edward Said once said: "Exile represents the unhealable rift between a human being and a native place, between self and its true home which separates one from the nourishment of tradition, family and geography." Azari turns inwards, embracing the diasporic schism that had always underscored his work and presents us with the powerful *Coffee House Painting* of 2009. In a Hegelian interpretation of Marxism, and a philosophical premise rooted in Adorno and Horkheimer, Azari reconstructs the popular 19th century Qajar painting *The Day of the Last Judgement* by Mohammad Modabber infusing it with clips of the post 2009 election demonstrations in Tehran, episodes from the Iraq war, fervent sermons by zealous clerics and other politically charged footage he had collected from the internet. If Adorno argues that the capitalist culture industry, which produces and circulates cultural commodities through the mass media, is responsible for rendering the population into passive receivers rather than active analysts of information, Shoja's double entendre lies in the fact that he went back to two forms of mass indoctrination, the historical coffee house paintings

and YouTube technology to achieve just the opposite of that and awaken the viewer from a desensitized slumber that has been long rigidified through political sloganism and the rhetoric of institutionalized religion. While the technological medium has evolved from fresco to screen, the mass dissemination of relentless ideology persists. With this work, Azari has come to terms with the power that a canvas has within this new formalistic context to distill narrative, condense metaphor and invoke an instant reaction from the receiver. Unlike his customary cinematographic approach, his artistic disposition is now more of a painter towards an opaque surface than that of a cinematographer to a screen. It is because of this shift in paradigm and process that he is now able to reconstruct his frames and colors as physically tangible visual elements within a concrete composition. In that sense he has managed to make us perceive the virtual projections as a true amalgamation of lines and colors.

It would not have been possible, or comprehensible, to arrive to this part of this essay where we discuss the artist's latest works the *Icons* series, 2010, had we not begun with dissecting the myriad of stylistic and expressionist factors that have impacted, both the semantic and formalistic qualities of his work to date. Following on from *Coffee House Painting*, 2009, Azari presents us with a series of five iconic images that culminate in a powerful fusion of narrative and aesthetic. From a formal perspective, the *Icons* series is a brilliant example of the "less is more" approach. When much later in his life, Picasso uttered the (in)famous statement "It took me four years to paint like Raphael, but a lifetime to paint like a child," he was making a direct reference to what he, along with many other canonical heavyweights advocated: "Art is the elimination of the unnecessary." With an unprecedented economy of camerawork, the artist has stripped his projected images into the barest of necessities leaving us with the subtlest of nuanced expressions. Those manifestations have become so minute in their detail making the difference between stillness and movement almost indistinguishable. The tangled fabric of eruptive scenes splashed across *Coffee House Painting* is now replaced with the piercing gazes of those figures. The harrowing sounds of explosions and vigorous homilies of flustered clerics are substituted with eyes that are swelling up with tears that might, at any moment gush out, releasing through their silent liberation the deafening outcry of an entire nation. There is a segmentation of time, a cyclical unfolding of narrative, an ambivalent reconfiguration of linear framing, all of which come together in an act of complicity to disarm us from our methodological modes of comprehension. We begin searching in our perplexed brains for any visual precedents that could help us contextualize what we are witnessing. Flashes of Douglas Gordon's 1993 slowed down version of Hitchcock's 1960 *Psycho*, or Bill Viola's video re-interpretations of obscure Italian Renaissance paintings come to mind. No matter what, we remain petrified by the

muzzled emotiveness that is made more bewildering through the artist's overarching command of both the projected and printed image alike.

Beyond its formal superiority, the most noticeable aspect about the *Icons* series is the artist's choice of visual terminology. Once again, he chooses to borrow an element from the popular culture of his native homeland. This time, though, it is the widely circulated 19th century folk portraits of the Shiite Holy Family. It is rather appropriate, if not indeed essential at this point, to reiterate that despite the controversy that ensues upon incidents where Islamic iconic figures or content is depicted, be it in a literal, interpretive or even transgressive manner, the objective of any critical exposition of the works at hand should primarily focus on the art-historical relevance, and worth if any, that the work possesses. As Nat Muller argues in *Contemporary Art in the Middle East*, "We have to look further and beyond the identitarian markers of ethnicity, politics and geography – (I would like to add religion) – important as they may be, and let the art first and foremost speak for itself, or in other words, let the socio-political and historical undercurrents speak from the art, rather than the other way round." As a matter of fact, this is indeed what Azari achieves in this cunning interplay between the recognizable and the hidden, the subtle and the audacious, the specific and the universal. However, what makes the content of this work most poignant is the timing at which the artist has chosen to tread on this holy ground, so to speak.

There have been other meanderings in the pool of sacred images into which Azari has ventured by a few other post-revolution artists. While I do not intend to embark on an exhaustive study of this phenomenon, I have chosen, for means of illustration and contextualization, to refer to three artists in particular. Peyman Hooshmandzadeh (b. 1969) borrows the Shiite iconographic images, namely of Hazarat Ali, Imam Hassan and Imam Hussein and digitally recomposes them onto what appears to look like prayer rugs. He then embeds them with clocks as found in many an Iranian household. In a bid for political commentary, Hooshmandzadeh makes subtle references to the post-revolution replacement of the portrait of the Shah on bank notes with Islamic patterns and the iconic portrait of Khomeini. More paradoxical in its juxtaposition of the sacred with the profane, is the work *Adam and Ewald*, 2007, by Sooreh Hera (b. 1973) who photographed male couples in homoerotic settings wearing face masks that depict the popular yet sacred portraits of the Shiite Holy Family. While both works share in Azari's source of inspiration, the former operates within the auspices of the internal *modus operandi* in Iran, and the latter makes a sensationalist claim for the liberation of alternative sexuality within Islamic culture. In that sense, they fail to grasp the universality, which time and time again, Azari brings into his explorations through

craft and wit. It is also important to mention that both works were created before the post election tensions of 2009. Another artist, Ala Ebtakar (b. 1978) features reverential portraits of Iranian women through multi-media pieces that employ photography and painting. In his series *1388*, 2009, he captures these women in resilient poses that emanate strength, resolve and determination, and portrays them as warriors, simultaneously hinting at ancient Persian epics such as Fedousi's *Shah Nameh* and the most recent call for freedom by Iran's youth – a movement led quite visibly by young Iranian women. The latter reading of his work is only possible due to the date at which these works were produced. It is within the framework of these recent historical developments that the work of Shoja gains an exuding force of political commentary. By grafting the faces of women into these Holy Martyr's faces, he has demasculinized the patriarchal hegemony over martyrdom and has thus destabilized the legitimacy of the current regime as the torchbearers of true Shiism, which seems to thrive only when in opposition to another.

In a career that has spanned two decades of weaving together what has become his very distinct visual aesthetic, Shoja Azari has managed to navigate the highs and lows of both culture and kitsch, (Greenberg style) the intimate and the universal and the spiritual and the profane. Borrowing from his ferocious skill as an "auteur" of film, his dramaturgically-inclined comprehension of narrative and his epistemologically-distilled visual constructs, Shoja has succeeded in creating a signature vernacular that is at once steeped in cinema and painting, in the time-based art of performance and the instant appeal of a well crafted still. In the process, he has recruited a wide array of technological devices and maintained a sense of immediacy and truthfulness in his work. Both McLuhan and Pound would be proud. But more important than all, Shoja has managed to preserve himself from what he calls the "binary contradictions of the process of making art, which are at once, exhilarating and devastating, creative and alienating, boundless and narcissistic and private while being devoured by the public." Through it all, Shoja continues on his own odyssey to create work that elates one's perception of the incomprehensible and infinite through the most simple and mundane, and at the end of the day offers us a glimpse into an iconic world where love, not justice, prevails.

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- 2010** "Icons", Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller (LTMH) Gallery, New York
"Blazing Grace", East Central Gallery, London
"Icons", Figge Von Rosen Gallery, Koln, Germany
- 2009** Marco Noire Conetemporary Arts, Turin, Italy
Art Dubai, Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller (LTMH) Gallery, New York
- 2008** Figge Von Rosen Gallery, Koln, Germany
Leo Castelli Gallery, New York
- 2007** Special Project, Marco Noire Contemporary Arts, Basel Art Fair, Switzerland
- 2006** "Project Rooms", ARCO, Madrid, Spain
Domus Artium Museum Salamanca, Spain
"Special Project", Marco Noire Contemporary Arts, Exitbart, Torino, Italy
Galleria Il Gabbiano, Rome, Italy
Helga de Alvear Gallery, Madrid, Spain
Figge Von Rosen Gallery, Koln, Germany

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2010** "Tehran - New York", Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller (LTMH) Gallery, New York
"On Rage", Haus der Kultur der Welt, Berlin, Germany
"In Defence", Progetto 107, Turin, Italy
"Live Art/Expanded", Institute of Contemporary Arts, London
- 2009** "Iran Inside Out", Chelsea Art Museum, New York
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Coffee House Painting, 2010, Video projection on canvas
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© Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller Gallery, 2010
Catalogue design by Demetra Georgiou

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- 2006 "Windows", a feature length film, shot in New York
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