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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.



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etached, dysfunctional, dystopian, and disturbing are some of the adjectives which spring to mind while considering the oeuvre produced by Iranian-British artist Mitra Tabrizian over the last 25 years. Tabrizian is best known for her large-scale, orchestrated photographs of people, which inevitably

means parallels are drawn with Jeff Wall, one of the contemporary art world's best known photographers. But while Wall's work is typically preoccupied with art and aesthetics, Tabrizian's tableaux are more concerned with critical and philosophical ideas about society.

While an affinity with critical theory is characteristic of photographic academia, especially in Britain, other than their subjects there is little specifically British or Iranian about Tabrizian's photographs. In fact, they sit more properly in a global 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's 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-scènes tend to be rawer and edgier, with an implied threat of violence often hanging around (but never in) the scene.

More recently, however, Tabrizian has moved away from this filmic narrative style and towards a kind of naturalistic yet staged portraiture, often conveying dysfunction and isolation. The images commonly portray people grouped together but not 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 photograph is very much about all of 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 no-one at all. The suit still 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 wilderland.

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 production. 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 theories, 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 stylised constructed images. I now prefer the aesthetic that is more naturalist, 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 bankers 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 then was 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 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 Afghans 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 crisis 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?

I'm not sure whether I can identify any aspect of my work as being particularly British or Iranian. But having been born in Iran and educated in England, going back and forth has given me the advantage of observing both cultures from an outsider's point of view. This mode of experience, belonging neither here nor there, provides a sense of detachment as well as engagement and thus perhaps a different understanding of the role of fantasy in the cultural and social processes.

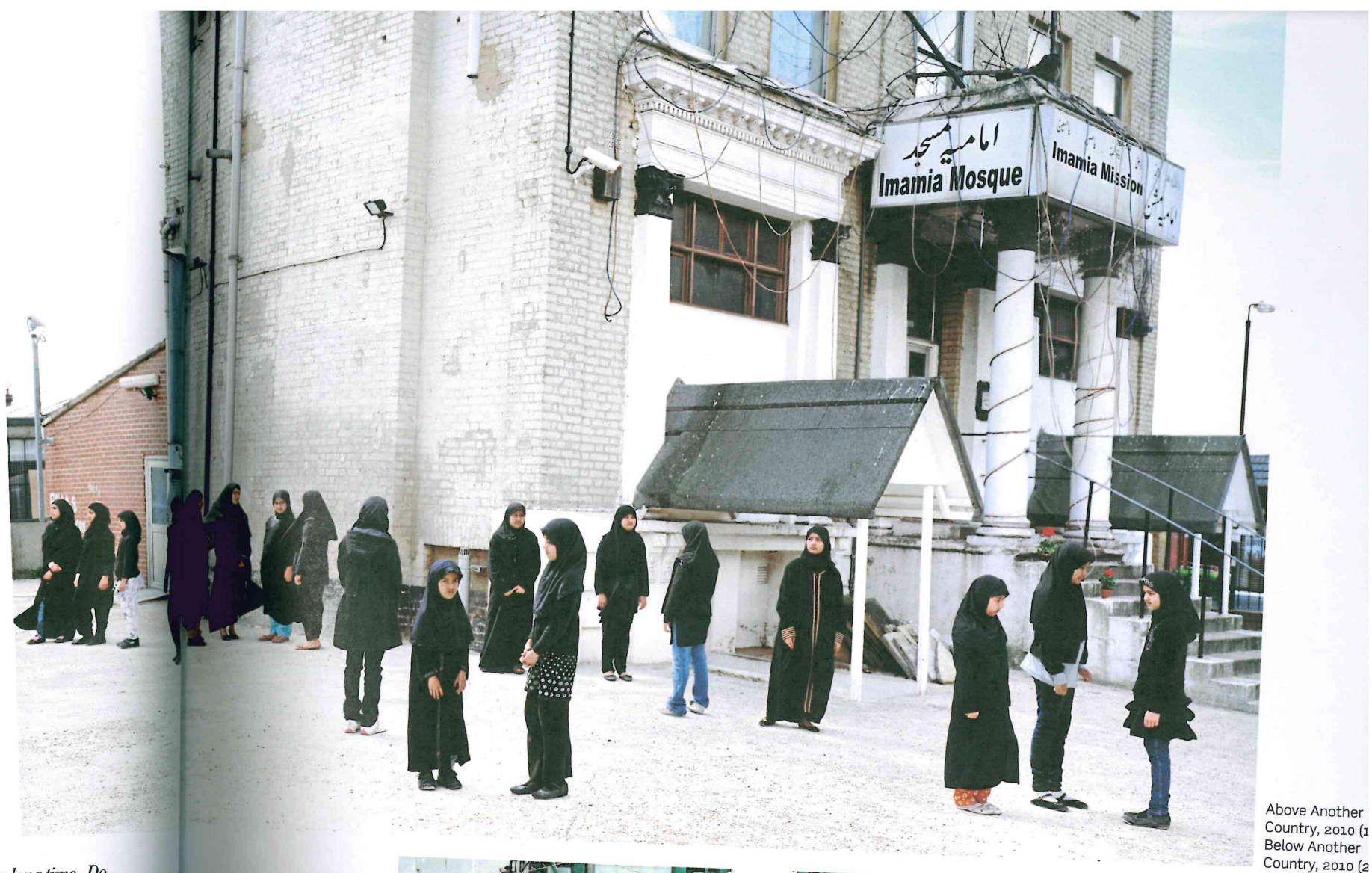
What is the importance of what we might call "critical theory" in your work, and how has this changed over time?

It provides ideas as how to approach the subject differently, hopefully different from what has been done before, and if you succeed then it's an attempt at innovation, although I'm very cautious to use the word 'new' or 'innovative', as it's very difficult to achieve.

And as you become more experienced, the application of critical ideas becomes more invisible or subtle, i.e. you produce a work that is informed by, rather than illustrating, the idea. That is to say you produce a work that creates curiosity for people wanting to know the concept or the context that the work has been made, and it is still open to different interpretations.

The suit, the corporate uniform, has featured in many your pictures throughout your career. Can you explain the ideas around this?

I was highly inspired by the work of the French philosopher, Jean Baudrillard, and his critique of contemporary corporate culture in the West. His main point is that we are moving towards a world →



Above Another Country, 2010 (1)
Below Another Country, 2010 (2)



(Below) 'From Naked City' 2005, (Right) 'The Long Wait, from Border' 2005-6



MITRA
TABRIZIAN

BORN:
Tehran

STUDIED:
In the mid 1980s at the Polytechnic of Central London, since renamed the University of Westminster, where she is now Professor of Photography.

KEY SOLO SHOWS TO DATE:
National Museum of Photography, Film and Television (Bradford, UK) 1986
Museum Folkwang (Essen, Germany) 2003
Moderna Musseet (Stockholm, Sweden) 2006
Tate Britain (London, UK) 2008

OUR PICK OF HER MAJOR WORKS:
City, London (2008) portrays the dysfunction of City bankers at the outbreak of the financial crisis
Leicestershire (2012) is an ongoing, melancholic series featuring a dystopian backdrop of industrial decline

CURRENT AND UPCOMING EXHIBITIONS AND PROJECTS:
Wapping Project Bankside (London, UK) Sept - Nov 2012 (solo show)
Victoria and Albert Museum (London, UK) Nov 2012 - April 2013 (group show)
Museum of Anthropology (Vancouver, Canada) April - Sept 2013 (group show)
Fondazione Fotografia (Modena, Italy) April 2013 (solo show)
Another Country (Hatje Cantz) 2012 (book)

HER OUTLOOK ON HER PRACTICE:
'Generally speaking I'm interested in some critical engagement with the subject. And to be critical doesn't mean that you cannot be creative, unlike some people think.'

WHAT THE CRITICS SAY:
'Overall, Tabrizian has taken the tableau form and infused it with tough, deadpan desperation, a sense of resigned survival in the face of overbearing ruin. Her single frame narratives of dissociation are surprisingly lonely and forsaken, piling layers of subtle separation into something altogether more heavy and dispiriting.' (DLK Collection, 2012)



(Left) 'Another Country', 2010 (3)
(Below) 'Deadly Affair, from Border', 2005-6



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 Baudrillard, 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 Baudrillard's world of simulation, fractal 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. You have also made at least 3 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 even some early 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 'Leicestershire'. 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.

Shot against the derelict and disused factories, 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 Wolsey factory), the



Top Leicestershire
Bottom Leicestershire



participant, Suleman Nagdi, is 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 not 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.mitratabrizian.com