

# FAKE – IDYLIC LIFE SHOJA AZARI

WEB EXCLUSIVE BY BANSIE VASVANI

LEILA HELLER

IRAN USA



SHOJA AZARI, *Idyllic Life* (video still), 2012, HD video. Courtesy Leila Heller Gallery, New York.

In the press release for Iranian artist Shoja Azari's exhibition "Fake – Idyllic Life" at the Leila Heller Gallery, New York, the artist states, "Faced with an increasingly hostile world governed by identity politics I approached this new series as a way to examine assigned and reassigned identities."

Referencing famous 19th-century Orientalist paintings by Jean-Léon Gérôme, Eugène Delacroix, and Jean-Auguste Dominique-Ingres, that depict slaves waiting on reclining odalisques, Azari attempts to re-envision the objectified female body by making its objectification explicit. This is also an effort to challenge Western perceptions of the Middle East by generating more empowering narratives.

In *Oriental Bath or Bunnies R Us* (2013) and *Oriental Interior or Bunnies R Us* (2013), Azari attempts to upend the intentions of the original paintings by replacing the women's languishing bodies with upright, voluptuous Playboy bunnies. The diptych created by the two works is surrounded by a wallpaper of violent images associated with Islam gleaned from YouTube. The composite is sensationalizing, and thus renders the central compositions impotent. Yet this swapping of female bodies, in spite of the replacements more sexualized and potentially more empowered nature, is not entirely effective. The women remain surrounded by 19th-century depictions of dark-skinned slaves and their Playboy status continues to reduce and caricature. In addition, pale bodies pandering specifically to a Western male gaze resist the reassignment of power.

If identity politics are concerned with the experience of the subject, Azari's alterations are centered on Western notions that have been projected onto the East. In *The Snake Charmer* or *The Anatomy of*





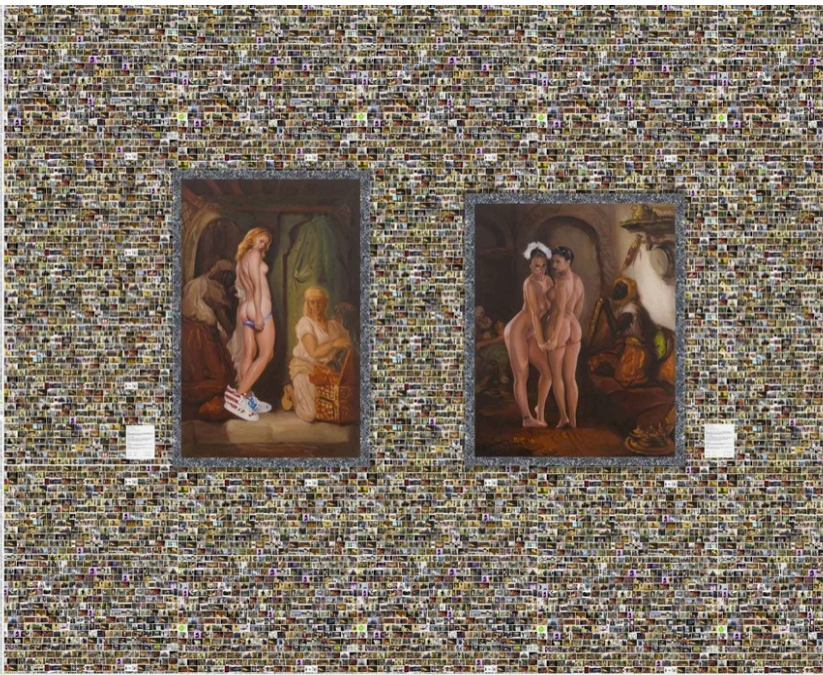
SHOJA AZARI, *Idyllic Life* (video still), 2012, HD video. Courtesy Leila Heller Gallery, New York.

the *21st Century Savage* (2013), musical instruments are replaced with Kalashnikov rifles while in the *Fanatics of Tangier* or *The Muslim Rage* (2013) a burning American flag appears. Iconographies of cultural imperialism, Western fantasies of the Orient and historical notions of Eastern irrationality are repeatedly played out.

*Banquette of Houries*, (*The King of Black*) (2013), a video work inspired by the Persian poet Nizami Ganjavi's 12th-century text *Haft Paykar*, portrays a king's quest for an idyllic life. Entering the garden of paradise, he finds ultimate fulfillment continuously eludes him, forcing him to acknowledge the fake idyll. While the video's aesthetic continues to appeal to Orientalist fantasies, the work comes closer to engaging the viewer with a uniquely Middle Eastern narrative and metaphorically hints at the dispelling of fantasy.

*Idyllic Life* (2012) is perhaps the most striking piece in the show. 16th-century Persian miniatures are projected with moving images from YouTube. Here, the constant transposing of the old and new, traditional and modern and tranquil and violent effectively communicates a complex and nuanced view of the Middle East and Iran.

Negotiating one's identity while remaining true to oneself is a challenging and ongoing process. Azari's exhibition lays bare the artist's journey as he traverses landmines of degrading Middle Eastern imagery while attempting to locate something that is distinctive and authentic.



SHOJA AZARI, *Oriental Bath or Bunnies R Us and Oriental Interior or Bunnies R Us*, 2013, oil on canvas, each 88.9 × 55.9 cm. Courtesy Leila Heller Gallery, New York.

*Shoja Azari's FAKE: Idyllic Life is on view at Leila Heller Gallery through December 14, 2013*

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