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MOST MUSEUMS SEE THE MIDDLE EAST AS A PLACE OF RELICS. LACMA SEES IT AS A PLACE FOR NEW ART

BY CATHERINE WAGLEY

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Abbas Kowsari's *Police Women Academy* (2006)

© Abbas Kowsari, photo courtesy Aaran Gallery Tehran and the artist

Iran's Women Police Academy had existed for just two years in 2005 when Iranian artist Abbas Kowsari went to photograph a graduation ceremony. The women wore hijabs as they did things such as scaling walls, which is what they're doing in the Kowsari photo on view in LACMA's "Islamic Art Now: Contemporary Art of the Middle East."

Kowsari had to ask permission to take the photo, and it has an understated feeling: Four staggered figures in flowing black robes look as if they're almost floating up a brick and concrete wall. You could almost overlook the strangeness of the situation the photo depicts, one in which conservative tradition clashes with a certain kind of progress. And that clash is already a thing of the past, since Tehran's new police chief no longer allows women to climb, practice karate or jump out of windows.

A lot of the work in LACMA's new exhibition traffics in subtlety. "At the end of the day, these artists don't have the same freedoms. You have to read between the lines," says photographer Firooz Zahedi, who was born in Iran but left at age 9 and doesn't consider himself an Iranian artist.

Zahedi belongs to LACMA's Art of the Middle East:

Contemporary council, which purchased Kowsari's work along with about half of the artworks in the exhibition. Zahedi also is partly responsible for the council's relatively recent formation.

Late in 2010, his friend, artist Yassi Mazandi, took him with her to visit Linda Komaroff, the head of the museum's Art of the Middle East Department. Komaroff had become interested in contemporary art coming out of the Middle East around 2006, after seeing an exhibition at the British Museum. She found resonances between the contemporary work and the historical work she had studied for years.

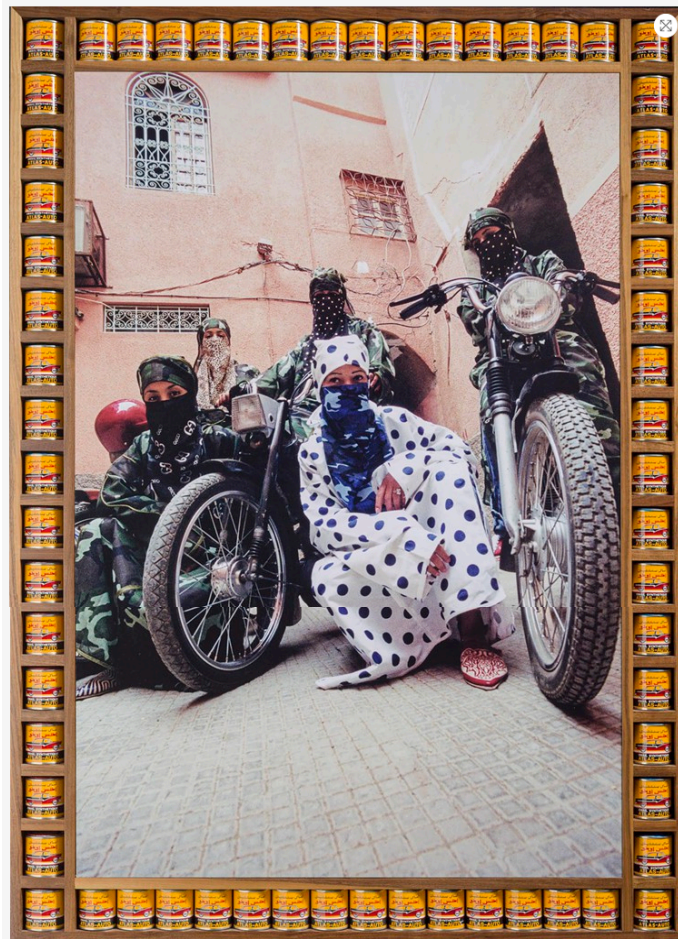
Michael Govan, who believes in giving curators freedom to shape their departments, had just become LACMA's director at that point, and he encouraged her to collect contemporary work, as long as she found the funds. Her department already had a collectors council (its own group of donors) but its members weren't terribly excited about newer art. So she began to wonder if she could start a contemporary council.

At some point during their conversation, Zahedi told Komaroff about photographs he had taken on a diplomatic trip to Iran with Elizabeth Taylor in 1976, because his cousin, Iran's ambassador to the United States and a friend of Taylor, wanted her and other big names to be on Air Iran's inaugural flight. Taylor, who had met and liked Zahedi, said she would go if he went.

Certain photographs Zahedi took during that trip look almost like ornate tapestries. In one, Taylor wears glimmering clothes she'd just bought at a bazaar and reclines in a tent of fabric she and Zahedi built together as a slapdash set.

LACMA exhibited these photographs in a small gallery in its Ahmanson Building. The opening, on Taylor's 79th birthday, pulled in the Hollywood and Iranian community, and the excitement around them helped Komaroff get a viable council started. By the end of 2011, a growing group of people had agreed to contribute at least \$1,000 a year to help LACMA acquire contemporary Middle Eastern art.

Zahedi remains a member of the council. "I like art in general, and some of the contemporary Middle Eastern art I really like and some is OK," he says. "But for me to see an American woman like Linda so committed to this part of the world was inspiring. Many Westerners would like to avoid this part of the world."



Hassan Hajjaj's *Gang of Kesh Part 2* (2000)

Gift of the artist

Installed on the fourth floor of LACMA's Ahmanson Building, "Islamic Art Now" (the first part of a two-part exhibition) is the first chance to see much of the work Komaroff's department has acquired with the council's help. For the past few years, visitors who came to see historical tiles, calligraphy or manuscripts might also encounter recent video work by Moroccan artist Hassan Hajjaj or a photo of a young woman in hijab and red boxing gloves by Iranian artist Newsha Tavakolian. But now there's room for a full exhibit, since some of the permanent collection is on tour.

Komaroff's department has a world-class contemporary collection, with almost 200 works. The Met's Islamic Art department, in comparison, has fewer new works, and its holdings are less diverse (fewer young artists, less conceptual photography).

"We tend to see Islamic art as ending around 1900," Komaroff says. The reasons for this, as usual, have to do with the unwieldy ways in which institutions work, the way history is written and the fact that much of the Middle East has been embroiled in conflict, keeping its art under-exposed. Plus, many people in the West see Middle Eastern culture as stuck in the past.

For instance, when art historian and curator Tim Stanley joined the Victoria & Albert Museum in London around 2002, he found the Middle East department had been subsumed into the materials department around 1900, and there had been little focus on new art since. Stanley spent his first few years at the museum constructing new galleries for Islamic and Middle Eastern art. When those galleries opened a few years later, they included a *minbar*, or pulpit, from 1468 next to a video of people in Cairo of today, praying in a mosque with a similar *minbar* in the

background.

"We want to combat the idea that it's somehow a dead civilization," Stanley says. Since 2009, his department has been awarding the Jameel Prize to artists influenced by Islamic tradition. It's a way to "demonstrate that our collection is a living artistic phenomenon," he explains.

Glenn Lowry, director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, gave a 2012 lecture in which he described driving around Abu Dhabi, thinking about how Middle Eastern art history has either been "erased over the course of much of the 20th century" or "simply never written," whether due to a lack of interest or prejudices.

"Artistic practice in the Middle East," Lowry said, has "parameters and a history we are only now beginning to see and understand."

That "we" could refer to the Western curators who only recently started paying attention to art of the Middle East. But it also could apply to the artists beginning to understand their history in a new way.

In "Islamic Art Now," the wall texts Komaroff wrote are especially open-ended, leaving the art itself to push at the parameters and tell complicated stories about tradition and history. London-based Iranian artist Mitra Tabrizi's panoramic view of a residential area on the edge of Tehran shows figures dressed in solid colors, all moving as if entirely alone, in different directions, while a billboard of Iran's revolutionary leaders looms behind them. The leaders, reads the wall text, seem "incapable of imposing order or direction."

Hassan Hajjaj's photograph *Gang of Kesh Part 2* shows a group of women in hijabs made of patterned fabric posing next to motorcycles – their veils, in this context, are like gangster bandanas.

The photograph, about being badass while tied to a heritage, is conventionally elegant in the way it's been composed, with the figures centered. It seems like a strategy: to stay familiarly beautiful while challenging perceptions.

"Islamic Art Now: Contemporary Art of the Middle East,"
LACMA, 5905 Wilshire Blvd., Miracle Mile;
ongoing. lacma.org.