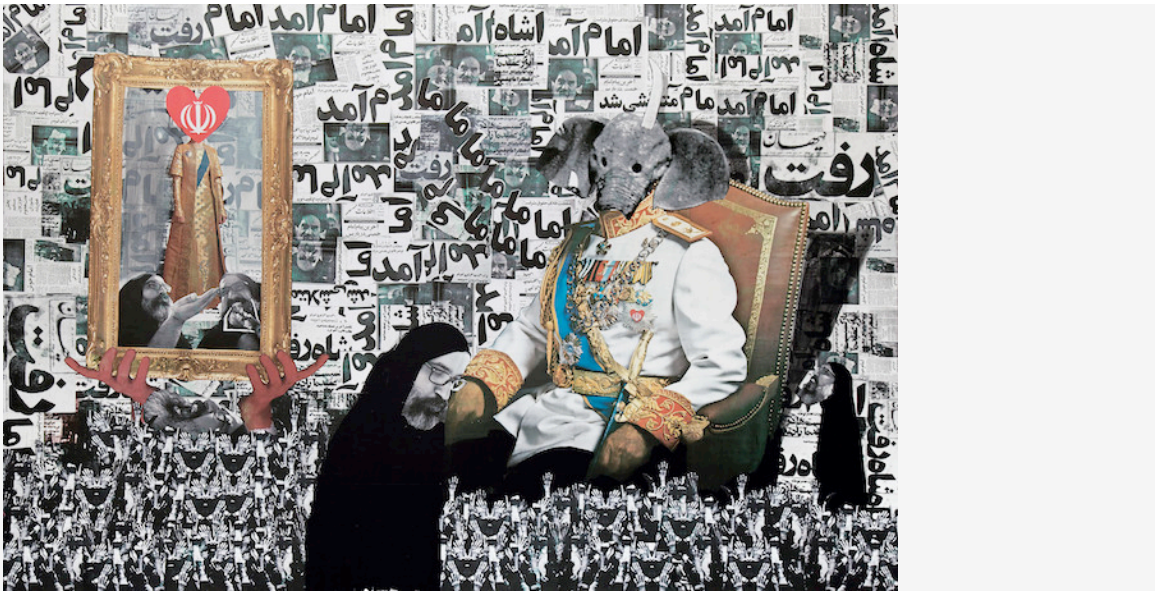


Chang, Richard. 'At LACMA, a Window on Iran Today.' *ARTINFO*. (September 5, 2018).

## At LACMA, a Window on Iran Today

BY RICHARD CHANG | SEPTEMBER 05, 2018



Ramin Haerizadeh, "He Came, He Left, He Left, He Came," 2010, mixed media and collage on canvas, 78 3/4 × 118 1/8 in.

Iran is in the news nearly every day — economic sanctions, reported support for terrorist groups, the international nuclear deal that Trump rejected.

But Iranian art — especially Contemporary — is rarely discussed.

There's an exception on Miracle Mile in LA: The Los Angeles County Museum of Art is presenting "In the Fields of Empty Days: The Intersection of Past and Present in Iranian Art" through Sept. 9.

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The museum has one of the most significant collections of Islamic art in the world, according to LACMA Director Michael Govan, and one of the largest collections of Contemporary Middle Eastern art in the United States.

This exhibition of 125 works, curated by Linda Komaroff, establishes that the past, especially historical figures, is always influential in Iran. Kings, other royals, heroes, sports figures, religious leaders and Shiite saints all appear again and again in the work. Often they are presented as champions and models of virtue. Sometimes they are objects of derision and depicted as betrayers of the interests of the common people.

Two shahs — Naser al Din (1831-1896) and Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (1919-1980) — play key roles in “Empty Days.” The first helped introduce photography to Iran, so we see several official-looking portraits of him as background material. But in brilliant, manipulated inkjet prints by Siamak Filizadeh, we also see Naser al-Din as a joke of a figurehead, with an oversized gold crown sitting atop his head as he hangs out with the British or Russian ambassador. We see him flashing the peace (or victory) sign as he clutches a machine gun in his left hand and is decked out in military camouflage and medallions. We see him posing as Michael Jackson, grabbing his crotch with a sparkly, silver-gloved hand as women wearing burqas rush by with their trendy shopping bags.

Reza Pahlavi, the last shah, is captured in official black-and-white photographs, greeting Prime Minister Amir-Abbas Hoveyda’s cabinet and is represented on the currency at a pro-shah rally. But Pahlavi’s face is also scribbled on and given horns and various cartoonish eyewear in Maryam Zandi’s derisive untitled gelatin silver print from 1979 (printed 2016). He’s plucked by a large red hand and headed for disposal in [Nicky Nodjoumi](#)’s lithograph “The Trash Can of History,” 1979, which is where he ended up, after the revolution of the same year.

The diversity of media is a major plus in this exhibit — there’s photography, painting, sculpture, video, posters, political cartoons, animation and historically illustrated manuscripts. One video

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installation by Pouya Afshar, “Mourn Baby Mourn,” 2017, tells an intriguing, albeit obscure, tale of an illustrated man walking past scenes of heartbreak and upheaval. A white horse with a green-and-blue riding smock gallops past.

[Shoja Azari](#) has created a series of video portraits (“Icon #1-#5,” 2010) that depict a Persian woman in heroic, iconic poses — as warrior, sufferer and mother sacrificing her son to an arrow through the neck. If you look closely, you can see the women blinking back their tears.

[Shirin Neshat](#) may be the most recognized artist of this group. She has already established herself as an internationally recognized photographer, performance artist and filmmaker, winning the International Award at the Venice Biennale in 1999. (She also won the Silver Lion for best director at the 2009 Venice Film Festival.)

In “Empty Days,” she has three photographs on view, each depicting a bare-chested or bare-legged man, with battle scenes covering their torsos or legs like tattoos. These photographs are from her series titled “The Book of Kings,” and the battle scenes are from the “Shahnama,” a long epic poem written by Persian poet Ferdowsi. The scenes are bloody and violent, yet they’re beautifully drawn and have a cinematic quality.

Except for some opening text at the entrance, there are no didactics or explanatory panels in this exhibition. It forces the viewer to focus on the art. And much of the art is worth the focus, different and fresh, coming from a corner of the world that’s rich in history and letters, yet underserved by the museums of the world.

The lack of explanation, however, does leave big question marks for the average viewer who may not be steeped in Iranian history and culture. Who are these figures who populate these artworks, and what are their stories? Why are they so important to Iranians today?

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One may find answers in the exhibition catalog, which, with its unusual fold-out format, is a work of art itself. But not every visitor is going to shell out \$60 (plus tax) for a show catalog. Thus, even with all the intriguing and illuminating art on view, one may leave “In the Fields of Empty Days” with more questions than answers.

*LACMA is presenting “In the Fields of Empty Days: The Intersection of Past and Present in Iranian Art” through Sept. 9. The museum is at 5909 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles. More information: [lacma.org](http://lacma.org).*