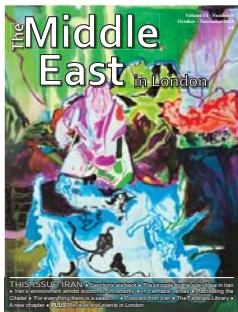


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October - November 2018  
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# The Middle East in London



**THIS ISSUE: IRAN** • Sanctions are back • The struggle for the rule of law in Iran  
• Iran's environment amidst economic uncertainty • In cannabis veritas • Recreating the Citadel • 'For everything there is a season...' • Postcard from Iran • The Ferdowsi Library • A new chapter • **PLUS** Reviews and events in London



Ali Nassir, *Untitled*, 2013,  
gouache on cardboard, 80 x 63  
cm. Courtesy of the artist

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# The Middle East in London

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**Vali Mahlouji** explains how photographs taken of the inhabitants of a red-light district in Tehran from 1975 to 1977 tell stories of lives lived in the margins, before they were censored and erased

© Kaveh Golestan Estate, Courtesy Archaeology of the Final Decade



Kaveh Golestan, *Untitled (Prostitute series)*, 1975-77, Citadel of Shahr-e No, Tehran

## Recreating the Citadel

To heed the call of the German philosopher Walter Benjamin for 'brushing history against the grain', Archaeology of the Final Decade (AOTFD) has committed to constructive re-readings of (art) history from the point of view of the defeated, the victims. AOTFD is committed to combatting the tainted nature of history transmitted from victor to victor and memorialising those who were subject to violent erasure. Culture is not a communal space of harmonious existence, it is a conflict-filled field of negotiations; art itself must be situated in this crossfire to realise its historical meaning. This means focussing on the dark spots of art history – especially those which have remained obscure or been deliberately erased – to reflect on traumatic moments and to make sense of present experiences.

Connecting to the past has to be an empathic process, in particular when the focus of attention constitutes a site of historical trauma. Identification

of artefacts and cultural objects that have been deemed sites of collective trauma is core to this process. Relying on archaeological forensics to locate cultural meanings, AOTFD uncovers, reintegrates and reconciles such artefacts, counteracting the damages of censorship and systematic erasures and filling in gaps in history and art history. *Recreating the Citadel* is one such undertaking that focusses on the intersections of art, society, law and religion during 1960-80s Iran.

The AOTFD project *Recreating the Citadel* reactivates the site of the now erased red-light ghetto of Tehran, the former urban neighbourhood of the Citadel of Shahr-e No ('New Town'), as a micro-ecology of trauma, to shed light on the present condition. We began the

*Culture is not a communal space of harmonious existence, it is a conflict-filled field of negotiations; art itself must be situated in this crossfire to realise its historical meaning*

project in 2010, recovering data and selected material culture (historical documents, artefacts and individual recollections) to expose and analyse the social and political landscape of the Shahr-e No district. AOTFD's point of departure was the excavation of a series of photographs, *Prostitute*, produced by the documentary photographer Kaveh Golestan between 1975 and 1977. *Prostitute* was purchased by Tate Modern and placed on view in August 2017, marking the first time a room in Tate's permanent collection was dedicated to an Iranian artist for a period of a year.

*Prostitute* constitutes the last extant visual document of Shahr-e No and its inhabitants. Golestan captured approximately 200 images from which he produced 61 gelatin silver prints with

the conscientious understanding that photography is the only civic refuge at the disposal of the marginalised. A compelling document, the series remains aesthetically powerful; it is one of the strongest studies of *femaleness* produced photographically in Iran. AOTFD's recirculation of these photographs, unseen since 1978, constitutes a subversive act of remembrance in contradiction to the official sanctions of revolutionary aesthetics and rhetoric that have dictated the post-revolutionary landscape since the 1980s.

The following is a brief historical survey of the site of the Citadel of Shahr-e No, organised and thematically classified by AOTFD.

#### [1920-50s] A Paradigmatic Site

During Iran's 20<sup>th</sup> century, the body of the prostitute and the space of prostitution constituted powerful sites of projection of social and political discourses. This intensified during the democratic, legislative and economic transformations of the early/mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Uneasy ambivalence characterised the relationship between official state policies and prostitution between the 1920s and 1979. While the state became increasingly concerned with social welfare, it contended with negative medicalising (focussing on prostitution as a major cause of the spread of various diseases), moral and religious projections onto the body of the prostitute and the site of prostitution.

Early feminists articulated a discourse around the exploitation and degradation of the female body in defence of the prostitutes' human rights, though they condemned their bodies as contaminated and the space as immoral. Medicalising approaches were advanced by abolitionists and those in favour of exclusion or demolition of the urban district.

#### [1960s] Emancipation, Compassion, Community

By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Shahr-e No became a significant site for the projection of compassion and social conscientiousness. Modern notions of citizenship, social justice and individual rights expanded and informed more humanitarian approaches. By the early 1960s, women's emancipation and progressive legislative changes in gender and family laws instigated a shift in attitude towards Shahr-e No, in turn

*No traces of the Shahr-e No district or the physical scars of its violated landscape remain. Today, what the visitor sees is an empty stretch of nature*

boosting state and public notions of social welfare. The humanising shift towards the inclusion of prostitutes within the community was driven by the founding of the Women's Organisation of Iran and the School of Social Work.

#### [1960-70s] Discourses of Natural Rights

Focussing on those robbed of citizenship and socially excluded, a distinct artistic trajectory can be observed, especially in films by Ahmad Faroughi, Ebrahim Golestan, Forough Farrokhzad and Kamran Shirdel in the 1960s-1970s. To a lesser or greater degree these works investigated the radical implications of the discourse of natural rights as defined by the plights of women, the poor, labourers, abandoned children, the mentally ill and inmates. The artistic lens was the conduit for the marginalised to interact with the mainstream, to overcome public denial about the truth of their experiences. It constructed a relational dialectic between the image of the impoverished, forgotten, forbidden from sight and metropolitan citizenry.

#### [29 January 1979] Critical Shift – Torched Earth

A violent historical shift was observed on 29 January 1979, three days before the arrival of the Islamist revolutionary leader Ayatollah Khomeini. The Citadel of Shahr-e No was set on fire by mobs. No individual or group claimed responsibility. The event was documented

by photojournalists, including Abbas, the late Magnum photographer, and the documentary filmmaker and photographer Kamran Shirdel. An undisclosed number of residents were trapped; several women burned to death during the blaze (though no official records of victims exist).

Broadsheet newspapers covered the fire in detail. *Ettelaat's* headlines on the following day declared: *Vast Preparations for the Moment of the Imam's [Khomeini's] Arrival*; next to it: *West and South of Tehran in Flames of Fire*. The areas burnt were listed: Shahr-e No, the famous cabaret Shokoufeh No, two beer factories, tens of liquor stores. The events signified a violent cleansing and purification of stigmatised individuals, marginal groups and urban spaces of popular culture.

#### [12 July 1979] A Marker of Revolutionary Terror

On 12 July 1979 the daily newspaper *Kayhan* reported that three of the Citadel residents were executed by Islamic revolutionary firing squads. AOTFD's research reveals that this practice remained extremely rare prior to 1979. Only three cases of women sentenced to death by the modern Iranian judiciary could be unearthed during the 20<sup>th</sup> century prior to 1979.

#### [1980–Today] Spectre of Memory

Within a year of the fire, the entire neighbourhood was bulldozed (deterritorialised). In keeping with authoritarian politics of erasure, the space was subsequently reorganised into a natural reserve and transformed into a park with a lake (reterritorialised). No traces of the district or the physical scars of its violated landscape remain. Today, what the visitor sees is an empty stretch of nature – shrubbery, trees, geese floating on the water surface of the lake.



*Vali Mahlouji is a London-based Curator, Founder of Archaeology of the Final Decade, Advisor to the British Museum and Bahman Mohasses Estate and Director of Kaveh Golestan Estate*