

Kaveh Golestan

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The Citadel

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A conversation between guest curator Vali Mahlouji and Foam curator Kim Knoppers

On a cloudy day in the fall of 2013 curator Vali Mahlouji and I met for the first time in person at his home in London. It was preceded by two years of irregular email contact about the intriguing photographs of Iranian photographer Kaveh Golestan (Iran 1950–Iraq 2003). In our correspondence, Vali talked about his ambitious project *ARCHEOLOGY OF THE FINAL DECADE*. This large project investigates the artistic milieu and intellectual conditions of the final decade before the fall of the Shah in 1979 – the pre-revolutionary moment – in Iran. The project re-circulates and reincorporates historical and cultural material – destroyed, banned or under-represented, yet historically significant – back into cultural memory and discourse. For Foam, this first iteration of the project on the photographic series entitled *Prostitute* (1975–1977) by Kaveh Golestan is very interesting. First of all, the photographs themselves are simply excellent, and some are even iconic. Showing the photographs in this exhibition is the first step in making them part of the history of photography. Second of all, the exhibition will reveal a part of Iranian society that many people are unaware of. It gives a face to women who were structurally and socially marginalised. During our conversations, Vali provided insight into the work and background of Kaveh Golestan, and elaborated on the walled neighbourhood of Shahr-e No in Tehran, where he photographed the prostitutes who lived and worked there.

Kaveh Golestan (Iran, 1950 – Iraq, 2003) is quite unknown in Europe. Before talking about the exhibition *The Citadel*, can you explain a bit about his background?

Kaveh grew up in an environment which was intellectually charged. His father, Ebrahim Golestan, was an important intellectual figure

in Iran. He was a celebrated filmmaker, renowned for his short stories and for his Persian translations of American literature. Kaveh's mother, Fakhri Golestan, was also an artist.

I believe his father had a number of connections in the UK. Kaveh was sent to a well-known boarding school in Somerset. He lasted several years before escaping from the school. He hitchhiked to London and eventually all the way back home to Tehran where he occasionally began to work in animations and advertising. He travelled across the country, while he was taking photographs and publishing them. He was then sent by Kayhan, an Iranian daily newspaper, on commission to report on Northern Ireland. After that, Kaveh published extensively, especially in Ayandegan, a daily newspaper, exposing the life of the dispossessed and socially downtrodden. This really became Kaveh's signature.

The Vietnam War played an important role in shaping Kaveh's own view on the world and attitude to his work. This was clearly a deeply humanistic one. He was very moved by the works of Don McCullin, W. Eugene Smith and Philip Jones Griffiths especially. McCullin's important Vietnam photographs shaped much of Kaveh's attitude towards photography. When he documented the citadel of Shahr-e No, he was still very young and already deeply engaged with social issues.

Kaveh documented many other major historical events after the conflict in Northern Ireland, such as the Iranian revolution, the Iran-Iraq War, and the Gulf Wars. On 2 April 2003 he stepped on a fatal land mine, while he was on a BBC assignment in Iraq. He died in Kifri in Northern Iraq, only 52 years old. His photographic practices has hugely influenced the work of future generations of Iranian artists.

For the exhibition in Foam, we have chosen to focus on photographs taken between 1975–1977 in the citadel of Shahr-e No, the red light district of Tehran in Iran. How did this part of the city look back in the days?

We have some descriptions of the area, but it is very under-documented. Kaveh's photographs confirm the very squalid nature of the area and its housing. The area consisted of several streets, some quarters were inhabited and others consisted out of working houses ran by madams and controlled by pimps. Around the area was an urban sprawl of cabarets and drinking houses.

There has been an interesting evolution in the area's history with regard to political events. Different political eras established their own relationship with the area. It would take too long to recount the whole history, but after the American-backed coup in 1953, a wall was built around Shahr-e No, so that it became a walled ghetto within the city itself. Access was through two gates but this was later reduced to only one where only men could go in. The area consisted of about 150 houses. These were run by madams and managed by other women, who were often older and no longer working as prostitutes. It was literally a ghetto and some women were born there and never really left it.

How did Kaveh gain access to this walled area carrying a camera? That must have been difficult.

Kaveh's camera is the last, of only a few, photography cameras that ever entered the space of Shahr-e No. In the first instance, he hid his camera in a bag of groceries and attempted to use it as a spy camera which wasn't a success. It took him three years to complete the project. This involved many visits and a long period of befriending the working women, gaining their trust and respect. This resulted in intimate, intense, respectful but never sentimental photographs. He also befriended the social services agent who managed the relationship sometimes. He wasn't required a permit for the work and I am not aware of any official restrictions at the time to prevent him from the project.

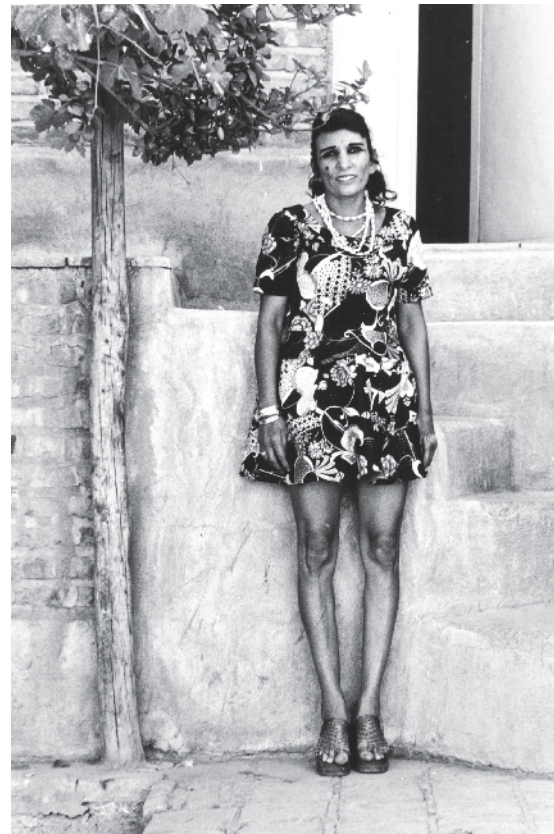
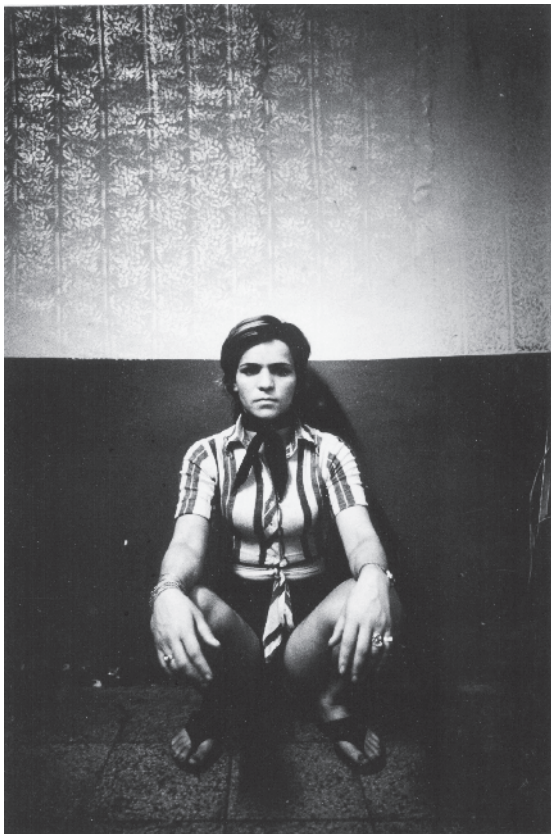
Do you have any idea why Kaveh Golestan wanted to photograph Shahr-e No, this difficult to enter, poor and bad-smelling area?

Kaveh made it his absolute responsibility to criticize society. He belonged to an affluent and educated milieu that was engaged with social and political issues. Kaveh's work though, had a double edge. He was as critical of the issues as he was of the bourgeois intellectual attitudes that he was obviously very aware of considering his family and social connections.

He published some of his photographs in three photo essays in the daily newspaper Ayandegan in September 1977 where he exposed the plight of these working women. He set up an exhibition of his photographs at the university of Tehran in 1978. The exhibition was shut down, most likely by the intelligence services, after just fourteen days without explanation. This was only before the riots started against the regime of the Shah.

It was typical of the era that state institutions and individual intellectuals were engaged and instrumental like Kaveh while driving forward progressive projects and legislations, those activists were being sabotaged by state control at the same time. In these photographs, Kaveh was both a social commentator and a transgressive artist. The provocation – showing poverty and degradation as the face of a society in progress – was not welcome. For that reason, the exhibition had been shut down. These photographs have never been seen again as a vintage set since 1978.

However, the newspaper articles and the exhibition were not the only purposes Kaveh used the photographs for. What do you know about the use of the photographs for a documentary by filmmaker Kamran Shirdel? Shirdel belongs to the same strand of intellectuals as Golestan, who sees it as a responsibility to address social issues. This filmmaker was already commissioned to make a documentary back in the 1960s by the Women's Organisation that was concerned with prostitution. He started to make the film, but the film was banned unfinished. This was the situation: official bodies blocking the work of other official organizations.



After the revolution of 1979, the filmmaker resurrected his project with a polemical opening statement and borrowed Kaveh’s photographs as stills to fill out the body of his film where footage was scarce. The area was burnt down by orders of Ayatollah Khomeini, immediately after the Shah’s regime fell.

How does the archive of photographs by Golestan add extra meaning to what happened in 1979 to the area of Shahr-e No?

Shahr-e No was tragically destroyed. It was a brutal act. Ayatollah Khalkhali, the infamous revolutionary jurist, oversaw the project in which the area was torched. We do not have any record of the women who were charred to death. Shahr-e No had become an iconic symbol of social degradation, inherited from the monarchy. It was now exploited in the most tragic way to initiate the ‘cultural revolution’ of cleansing and Islamization.

What is very interesting, is that when Khomeini ordered the destruction of the Citadel, no one said anything. He put his finger on the weakest link, on the least loved area, on the most indefensible. Society didn’t really want to stand up and defend the inhabitants. It was a brutal turn of events. While Kaveh’s photographs were intended to urge the state and its intellectuals to take action, and to take hold of the fate of its inhabitants and the area, which was finally set on fire. Kaveh’s view is very human, but avoids pity.

Why do you think it is important to show these photographs from an art historical point of view?

I saw the archive of photographs some years ago at Kaveh’s home. I was just completely stunned by the quality of the portraits. The compositional strength and the women’s gaze back at the camera are quite unique in Iranian history of photography. I was very taken by the photographs and very surprised that they remained so artistically under-exposed.

I believed that they must absolutely be re-incorporated into our visual history. This

part of Kaveh’s corpus has been less visible and less represented, even though it has been significant in determining his vision and his distinct gaze. This was Kaveh’s starting point.

What is the relevance of the photographs in relation to the current situation regarding prostitution in Iran?

Today in Iran, three million prostitutes are estimated. This prostitution comes in a variety of forms: from the internet to curb crawling and now including transvestites and transsexuals. It is a lot more dispersed now and less manageable by the services. It is, of course, officially illegal. The issues are rife and there is a lot of social awareness about it today. There are also official and semi-official organistions that do important work in giving support, education and care provision. On the whole though, the women remain out of sight and off the social register. Visibility remains a huge issue today.

Kaveh’s photographs have accrued layered meanings when we consider the area’s history as well as the shifts in social and political realities since the revolution. They are our first unique photographic records. And now that the ghetto has been burnt down – it is now a park with a lake – the images attain a deeper, sadder dimension. Kaveh’s work documents social reality, it is historical and belongs to Tehran.

The exhibition *Kaveh Golestan – The Citadel* is curated by Vali Mahlouji. He is an independent curator and writer.

Kim Knoppers is curator at Foam.

Kaveh Golestan – The Citadel is curated by **Vali Mahlouji**. He is an independent curator and writer. This is the first iteration of an on-going curatorial and research project entitled *ARCHEOLOGY OF THE FINAL DECADE*. This larger project investigates the artistic milieu and intellectual conditions of the final decade before the fall of the shah in 1979 – the pre-revolutionary moment – in Iran. The project re-circulates and reincorporates historical and cultural material – destroyed, banned or under-represented, yet historically significant - back into cultural memory and discourse. Upcoming projects include an exhibition co-curated with Catherine David at the Musee d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris in May 2014. His new book *Perspectives on the Shiraz Arts Festival* is scheduled for publication by Black Dog Publishing.

Kaveh Golestan (1950–2003) was an important and prolific Iranian documentary photographer and a pioneer of street photography. His photographic practice has hugely influenced the work of future generations of Iranian artists but has remained seriously over-looked in Europe. *Kaveh Golestan – The Citadel* presents 45 vintage photographs from the series entitled *Prostitute* taken between 1975–1977 of women working in the Citadel of Shahr-e No, the red light district of Teheran. The photographs will be exhibited for the first time as a vintage set since 1978. Alongside the photographs, the exhibition will include original diaries of Golestan, newspaper clippings and audio interviews that he collected from and relating to the area.

All images
Untitled (Prostitute Series, 1975–1977) © Kaveh Golestan / courtesy Kaveh Golestan Estate

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