



## Mitra Tabrizian

**OPENING RECEPTION**  
Thursday, June 7, 6 - 8 pm

**LEILA HELLER GALLERY.**  
568 West 25th Street

*Exhibition continues through July 7, 2012*

### Biography

Mitra Tabrizian, born in Tehran, Iran, lives and works in London. She has exhibited widely in major international museums and galleries, including her solo exhibition at the Tate Britain in 2008. Her most recent book, *Another Country*, published by Hatje Cantz in 2012, includes texts by Homi Bhabha, David Green, and Hamid Naficy. Her photographic and film works are represented in major public collections, including, Victoria and Albert Museum, London; Queensland Art Gallery/ Gallery of Modern Art, Australia; Moderna Musset, Stockholm; Museum Folkwang, Essen; Musée d'Art Moderne, Luxembourg amongst others. She has received several photographic and film awards, including the Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB) Innovation Awards for the film 'The Predator' (28 - minute film, 35 mm print, 2004).

Special thanks to Zadoc Nava, Alan Harris, Dennis Tuffnell, Bill Winters, Sean Carney, Bhawan Patel, Dennis Powdrill and Paul Brown

Design by Demetra Georgiou

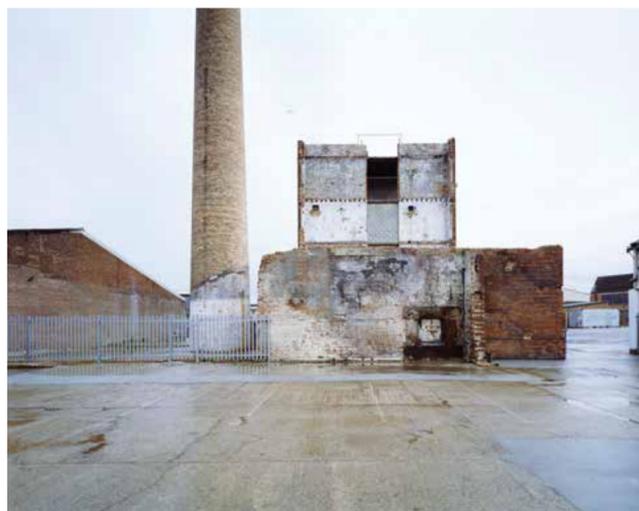
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Leicestershire 2012, 2012, C-type photographic print, 71 x 48 in / 181.5 x 122 cm  
Edition 1 of 5, 2APs, In collaboration with Zadoc Nava



Leicestershire 2012, 2012, C-type photographic print, 62 x 48 in / 158.5 x 122 cm  
Edition 1 of 5, 2AP, In collaboration with Zadoc Nava



Leicestershire 2012, 2012, C-type photographic print, 61 x 48 in / 155 x 122 cm  
Edition 1 of 5, 2APs, In collaboration with Zadoc Nava



City, London 2008, 2008, C-type photographic print  
48 x 98.5 in / 122 x 250 cm, Edition 5 of 5, 2 APs



Untitled 2009, 2009, C-type photographic print, 42 x 121 in / 107 x 308 cm  
Edition 5 of 5, 2 APs, In collaboration with Zadoc Nava



Tehran 2006, 2006, C-type light jet print, 40 x 119 in / 101 x 302 cm, Edition 5 of 5, 2 APs

## SILENT PROTEST

A great deal has been said about the intersection between documentary and fiction across the photographic contemplations of Mitra Tabrizian. Through her meticulously choreographed *mise-en-scènes*, Tabrizian questions the very core meaning of the photograph and its relationship to both viewing and reality. Embedded in personal or psychological narratives and conflicts on the one hand, and as commentaries on societal politics on the other, these fabricated *tableaux*, are self-consciously ordered. Intentionality in regard to artificiality is central to their formal and organizational considerations. Nothing is arbitrary. Along Artaudian and Brechtian lines, "by making obvious the manipulative contrivances and 'fictive' qualities of the medium" the artist strives to intensify the work's emotional resonance and the spectator's intellectual and emotional empathy'. Intentional *unrealness* acts as a distancing device. Distancing mechanisms (what Brecht called *Verfremdungseffekt*) serve to alienate the audience. Distancing sets intentional demands upon the spectator to actively engage in *deciphering the truth*. Sentimentality is minimized or near eradicated - albeit the subjects and concerns are usually, or always, dealing with deeply human issues. The viewer's engagement is demanded, arguably, more through intellectual than emotional empathy. Despite the laden emotional landscapes of the subjects' realities, the viewer's connectedness remains emotionally un-manipulated, opening and safeguarding space for contemplation.

Beyond and in resonance with the artificial and fabricated *mise-en-scènes*, alienation is highlighted through the deliberate portrayal of often lone protagonists in a state of disconnect, with averted gazes and abstracted expressions. They appear controlled, even frigid. They appear closed off from the surrounding environment and closed in on themselves. Figures in most of Mitra Tabrizian's images linger aloof and solitary. In an earlier series of work entitled *Border* (2005-2006) - where the artist delves into the poetics of exile - this detachedness and its associated deep sense of loss and *not belonging to the land* is poignantly captured. When figures appear in groups, Tabrizian's meticulous compositional juxtapositions and directorial interventions ensure an even more acute sense of dissociation and dislocation. Where expectation is congruency and relatedness, actors remain hermitically solitary. Despite co-habiting a particular and shared fragment of space, the protagonists remain resolutely detached, disunited and scattered. Such spatial inter-relativities - or isolations - are composed with the aim of intensifying the inherent sense of alienation - firstly, between characters and then between characters and the shared space they exist in.



Deadly Affair (from Border), 2005-2006, C-type photographic print, 48 x 60 in / 122 x 152 cm, Edition of 5, 2APs

These void spaces in-between the figures enhance a sense of stillness. Like *silences* they interrupt the flow. The waits, the stares, the introversions, an empty billboard: all embody stillness, evoke silence. What is most monumental and impressive in the works of Mitra Tabrizian is this compelling quietude - *the total silence of each photograph*.

In expanding these voids, Tabrizian often omits elements of the narratives. In her series from 2005 entitled *Naked City* the artist recreates scenes of crime. These sometimes *represent* moments prior to

the actual crime (omitting the event). At other times the scene is represented with the omission of the antagonist(s): a mother and daughter in woodland; a couple about to have tea; an elderly lady staring down a hallway; a young man pushed onto a pavement; a passer-by crowd of professionals staring at an undetermined object. In all these the artist has dispelled essential story parts or characters. Tabrizian renders invisible the antagonists who would otherwise complete the scenes of crime. These missing, eradicated and omitted exponents gain meaning and presence only in reference to existing figures and their spatial dispositions. The evaporated narratives and the vanished truths become punctuated *silences*.



Naked City, 2005, C-type photographic print  
48 x 60 in / 122 x 152 cm, Edition of 5, 2APs

Psychologically, forgotten or omitted components within a narrative may be the essential parts of it. Seen through the psychoanalytic prism, the disappearance or forgetting of disagreeable representations and associations serve to protect the subject from painful memories and conscious confrontations. Repressed materials are remembered only in parts. Forgetting essential components is primarily a protective and defensive function of the ego.<sup>1</sup> Studies in Post Traumatic Stress Disorder identify some of the symptoms of the condition to include: *depersonalization* (feeling detached from one's physical or mental processes), *derealization* (an alienation in perception or experience of the external world) and *anhedonia* (the inability to experience pleasure from normally pleasurable experiences). According to psychologists Ulman and Brothers, dissociation "is a splitting of the ego into the 'experiencing self' and the 'observing self'".<sup>2</sup> This is seen to serve a dual defensive function. It provides protection against the overwhelming intensity of the trauma, allowing the individual to either perceive the occurrence as a dream (derealization) or to feel him/herself as a mere onlooker and not engaged in the trauma (depersonalization)<sup>3</sup>. Tabrizian's alienated characters portray some of these symptoms. Apparently unaware of their present surroundings, they also appear to be detachedly *out of themselves*, behaving as onlookers and observers of their own conditions.

Contrasting with the *unrealness* - or in the artist words, *fictive realism* - of the figures and their contexts, Tabrizian's landscapes are wholly real. They may be subjected to interventions and manipulations, or stylized, but on the whole they are recognizable as everyday spaces. These architectural, urban, domestic, or natural settings are not only integral to the creation of the image and its inherent tensions, but they are in their own right aesthetically and emotively stirring and affecting. They are confrontational. Nature is usually a bleak, looming menace. Tabrizian's eery picturesque backgrounds are compellingly haunting and arresting. The room settings are evocatively lit with rich color tones. Sometimes, rarely, Hopper-like vistas through windows provide respite. Sometimes a sheer concrete plane slices nature down the middle. Pure architectural forms stand imposing under light. The settings are omnipresent and closing in. Tabrizian's chosen settings are organised with characteristic precision and these closed, painterly spaces are in some ways their own absolute monuments to silence. Their

still domineering presence - whether architectural or natural - engages the senses in its own right, despite the centrality of the alienated figure.



Leicestershire 2012, 2012, C-type photographic print, 62 x 48 in / 158.5 x 122 cm, Edition 1 of 5, 2AP, In collaboration with Zadoc Nava

In her most recent series, commissioned by the city of Leicester, the landscape assumes ascendancy and preeminence. Tabrizian's camera focuses on derelict and defunct urban settings and documents decaying ex-industrial factories. In some of these a lone man (who in real life has spent the largest part of his life at work in the building) appears like a phantom against the remnants of history. In others all traces of human life are erased. The abandoned monument becomes the very object of contemplation.

In *Tehran* (2006) the landscape is inhabited by figures seemingly going about their business. Nonetheless, everyday business takes place under the moralizing guard and menacing gaze of authority (and if you read Persian, the declaration of revolutionary zeal as is scripted on the billboard). Authoritative imposition is further echoed in the foreboding twin concrete blocks, which rise to one side of the billboard. Together they obstruct the horizon across almost one entire half of the photographic image. The spectator's vision is able to expand into the horizon across the opposite half. Looming and sinister, facing varied angles of surveillance, the solidity of the concrete blocks is pierced by windows. The hollow voids peer down like pairs of eyes. Despite impositions of authority and propagandising directives, life seems to go on. There is an air of normalcy - albeit portrayed through characteristically detached, alienated and alienating dimensions. For a city boasting one of the most polluted skies on the planet, the sky in Tehran is bright and relatively blue. A lone car, or taxi, is stationed at the opposite end of the panoramic scene, farthest away from the billboard and towers. It further embodies a sort of subtle optimism. Facing forward with its wheels turned towards the beyond, intentionally or not, the car subtly directs the viewer's scanning gaze out and beyond the frame, hinting perhaps at a possibility of a getaway, the potential for escape to the beyond, to another place to be.

In *Untitled* (2009), by contrast, the landscape closes in on the figures and is decidedly barren. What was relatively spread and expansive in the former is coagulated in the latter. Mobility, albeit stunted, is reversed into inhibition. This may be a reflection upon an aggressively infringing external reality that inhibits not only mobility, but the very nature of inhabitation. Semblances of motion, volition and diversity (which were enhanced through careful dashes of color in *Tehran*) become essentially condensed, static and monochromatic in *Untitled*. There is a reversal of energy. A closing in of the figures may, nonetheless, simultaneously, be interpreted as a closing of ranks. In *Untitled*, society might be further silenced, but it broods united and pregnant with intensified potential. Silent confrontation is encapsulated in the binary and oppositional juxtapositions of the single unit of figures against a unified barren landscape. In parallel, perhaps, the artist's own relationship to her homeland is most poignantly and simply embodied in the choice of her titles: *Tehran* of 2006 is simply *Untitled* in 2009. The title declares its own pregnant *silence*.

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<sup>1</sup> Calder, John, in Postface to Antonin Artaud, "Production and Metaphysics" in *The Theatre and its Double*, p.104  
<sup>2</sup> Sigmund Freud, (Chu, 1991, p.328) Chu, J. A. (1991). "The repetition-compulsion revisited: Reliving dissociated trauma". *Psychotherapy*, 28(2), 327-33  
<sup>3</sup> Ulman, Richard B. and Doris Brothers. "The shattered self: A psychoanalytic study of trauma". The Analytic Press, 1988 as cited in K. Coomarsingh. "Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Psychodynamic Explanations, cited in What is Psychology, 2012 (http://www.whatispsychology.biz/posttraumatic-stress-disorder-psychodynamic-explanations)  
<sup>4</sup> Coomarsingh, K. "Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Psychodynamic Explanations, cited in What is Psychology, 2012 (http://www.whatispsychology.biz/posttraumatic-stress-disorder-psychodynamic-explanations)