

An abstract composition of various geometric shapes in shades of red and white, including triangles, circles, and lines, creating a layered, architectural effect.

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Featuring

Beneath the Surface

A specially commissioned exhibition of rarely seen works from
the Victoria and Albert Museum's Photographs Collection

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PROSTITUTE

Kaveh Golestan

Vali Mahlouji

Prostitute (1975–77) by the pioneering documentary photographer Kaveh Golestan (1950–2013) constitutes the last extant photographic document of the Citadel of Shahr-e No—the notoriously squalid and vibrant red-light district of Tehran—before it was burnt down (with an undisclosed number of residents trapped inside) during the Iranian revolution in 1979. After scorching, the remnants of the quarters were destroyed and the entire neighbourhood was bulldozed flat and out of sight by official decree. The formation of the district dated back to the 1920s. It was a thriving red-light quarter by the 1940s. The area came to be called the Citadel after the erection of a wall in 1953 that enshrined it as an inner city ghetto. The exclusion of the neighbourhood from the open city landscape was an initiative of the post 1953 CIA-aided coup d'état that deposed the government of Dr Mosaddeq and installed General Zahedi as prime minister. The Citadel of Shahr-e No became also known as the Zahedi Citadel.

The walled ghetto was accessed through a gate and was structured internally around two main avenues, broadly dividing living and business quarters. One of the avenues consisted mainly of houses where the women lived and raised their children some of whom were born into, and lived their entire lives inside, the neighbourhood. The other avenue was largely a business quarter where women received their clients. Throughout the district madames and pimps were busy cutting deals and trading in addictive substances. The area was rich with drinking dens, cabarets and other entertainments catering mainly for a highly bohemian clientele including artists and writers. Foreign directors of film and theatre such as Bernardo Bertolucci and Peter Brook adored the place. By the mid 1960s, it had its own health clinic, police station and a small but very active social services department.

A few years before the Iranian revolution, Golestan completed a very personal mission. Without an official permit he brought his camera to bear on the Citadel of Shahr-e No, publicly exposing its interior in three consecutive photo-essays in the Iranian daily *Ayandegan* in 1977. Golestan spent a year and a half between 1975 and 1977 carefully composing the sixty-one portraits, edited down from a substantially larger pool of negatives. His project involved several years of extensive study and research, long visits to the district during which he befriended many of its residents. His meticulous observation and sensitivity to the individual subjectivities of the women has produced a remarkable body of portraits. For Golestan photography is a civic refuge at the disposal of those robbed of citizenship. Here, this condition was exemplified by the segregation of his subjects from the mainstream of society, not just by

their abject poverty or illegal profession, but physically and geographically by enclosure within the walled ghetto. His transgressive lens became a conduit for the marginalised to interact with the mainstream, to overcome public denial about the truth of their experiences. Golestan consciously identified with the excluded, his aim was to summon us to action, to move, to radicalise and politicise his audience. Indeed, when he showed these photographs at Tehran University in 1978, his exhibition was shut down prematurely after fourteen days – the works remain unseen to date.

The project was originally conceived as a triptych; *Prostitute, Worker, Asylum*. It included parallel exposés of low-income labourers and mentally handicapped children who had been abandoned to the care of an asylum. Focussing on those robbed of citizenship, his engagement with the marginalised and socially excluded was part of a contemporary movement that found its voice in films of, amongst others, Ahmad Faroughi, Ebrahim Golestan, Forough Farrokhzad and Kamran Shirdel. 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. They were opportunities for the invisible to be seen and heard.

Importantly, Golestan insisted that we should look at the photographs formally as portraits:

'I consider this an exhibition of portrait photography. This is the context within which I framed the work. Naturally, in order to portray the reality, I have ensured that some of the sitters are portrayed within their [individual] setting. This was possible in the context of the Prostitute and Worker series but not when I photographed the children. There, I literally had only ten minutes.'

The scene, the situation of dispossessed citizenship, is supplanted by the centrality of the person. Golestan consciously attempts to avoid turning the prostitute into a sign whilst creating *Shahr-e No*. These images are mostly consciously constructed intimate portrayals of individual subjectivities. Young and apparently not so young women gaze directly at the spectator, quietly enduring their various predicaments. The gaze of the women varies. They are frank, sharp, probing, passive, exhausted, furious, introverted, defensive, warning, aggressive, hate-filled, pleading, unbalanced, sceptical, cynical, indifferent, anticipating or demanding.

To avoid fetishism, Golestan's own photographic gaze must sublimate sexual drives and mitigate patriarchal marks of masculine ownership. Nevertheless, notions of beauty, femininity, desire, erotic sensibility and the politics of sexuality are often openly projected through the technologies of the gaze. Similarly, the dynamic field of power relations through which the photographer creates *Shahr-e No* misses no intimate detail of costume, of a jewel if there is one, of a gesture, or a crack in the wall, a fold in the cloth. Whether ravishing beauties or distressingly abused individuals, these historically compounded portraits of trauma constitute one of the strongest topographies of femaleness produced photographically in Iran.



Untitled
Series: Prostitute, 1975-77
© Kaveh Golestan Estate



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