

CONTEMPORARY VISUAL ART+CULTURE

# broadsheet

CRITICISM | THEORY | ART



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COVER: Craig Walsh, *In Country-Lawrence Kerr*, 2012; from *Embedded: Craig Walsh*, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney, 12 September-24 November, 2013  
Photo courtesy the artist and Lawrence Kerr

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# symbols of transformation

VALI MAHLOUJI

Iranian art has gone through a massive transformation since the turn of the twenty-first century, the first decade of which has produced an unprecedented proliferation of Iranian artists and work, putting them firmly within the global art discourse.

This artistic shift is the result of a double transformation. On the one hand it is the manifestation of the rekindling of millennia-old creative energies that are undisputedly an integral and primary component of the multi-layered and complex culture of Iran. I use the word rekindling, because the injuries of recent history, with the inexorably ferocious dismantling and internal restructuring of socio-political structures, and the deep psychic and real wound of a murderously unwarranted eight-year war, not only affected production but brought it to a near standstill for a period. The relative 'healing' of those assaults, which came with the evolution of the historical process, unleashed an insatiability to communicate and reflect, a rejuvenation of expression, and an unprecedented multiplicity of approaches to an aesthetic view of life. The intellectual energy has gone beyond the didactics of time and place towards a new self-reflection that has brought the individual to the fore, more than ever before and the infinite possibilities of expression that come with it. On the other hand, there has been an external transformation of the global cultural world, which has allowed 'fringe' cultures, such as that of contemporary Iran, access to the global arena, and to what was until recently the domain of Western dominance and discourse. As the distance between the fringes and the centre is straddled by the Other cultures, we are witnessing a development towards a shared sphere and unitary reality. Such a trend removes the artificial distance between the West and indigenous cultures, allowing for a true synthesis of expressions about the totality of the human experience.

The idea of Iran conjures up contradictory images and representations not just in the mind of the outsider but that of the Iranian him/herself. Plurality of images in itself need not be a reason to decipher conflict but rather an astounding diversity, unless the recipient of the imagery is in search of a 'unified' truth and of isolating an ultimately reassuring 'simplified form'. This will certainly not apply in the conceptualisation of the Iranian current cultural reality. Far from being homogenous, contemporary Iranian reality is a mosaic of layered



complexities and juxtapositions of opposites—this being itself a significant aspect of its modern condition. The possibility of 'un-unified', dispersed and interchangeable points of view is intrinsic to modern society. Plurality, however, as a structure as well as a condition of being, predates the modern historical process in the Iranian narrative. It is a unique characteristic that has resulted from the archaeological layering of identities—not unlike Freud's early model of the mind—acquired and accumulated through the consecutive stages of its metamorphous evolution. These numerous identities provide a rich set of meanings. Therefore, to borrow from Daryush Shayegan,<sup>1</sup> it is only through the notion of the "kaleidoscopic vision" that one could propose to decipher its internal paradoxes and its spectrum of perceptions. The inter-layering of identities and the concurrence of old and new and the coexistence of opposites—which, as Shayegan points out, was engrained in the Iranian psyche from the time of its conception by its ancient prophet Zoroaster—drives and defines what it means to be or feel Iranian. Whilst the soul of the culture is intoxicated with a quest for archaic idealised abstractions—for it was here that Paradise was conceived—its vitality is fed by the opposite: a totally modern yearning for liberation from all that is archaic or traditional, and a desire for adapting to all that is modern. That simultaneous infatuation with the mythic and the modern has rendered the Iranian a polylogue. Therefore, as we observe today, any attempt at enforced homogenisation through ideological and religious constraints serves to enhance and compound the innate Iranian drive for heterogeneity, pluralism and now, in its modern state, individualism.

Consequently, what we observe in critical contemporary culture in Iran is the negotiation of a crisis of cultural disorientation—a crisis that is directly caused by the ideological imposition of a concretistic interpretation of society, leading to the negation of the plurality of culture. The vitality of the Iranian contemporary reality is a testament to a process of individuation and the manifestation of a deep-rooted psychic resistance to a monistic vision of existence. It is a reaction to, in Susan Sontag's<sup>2</sup> words, the "Great Monologue" that aims to define history with "clearly outlined, morally coloured meanings", serving up reductive representations. This anti-hermeneutic contemporary drive re-instates a complex and variegated picture of the individual and society, and it is this that encapsulates the sophistication of the Iranian phenomenon today.





Let us make reference to a number of artists with whom I have worked very closely over the past years. Farhad Moshiri explores a satirical/pop aesthetic, often appropriating commercial advertising, through which he inverts deep-seated incongruities within the core of Iranian society. Moshiri cleverly glorifies, romanticises, commodifies and ultimately critically subverts colloquial culture as it manifests itself through the commercial marketing of goods for the urban consumer. Moshiri's creations are fabricated fantasies of "promised goods" ready for mass consumption, a parody of art and the art world itself.

Rokni Haerizadeh often employs a "madness of magic" as a social and political critique of urban life in his floating landscape of "surfaced characters and memories". Rokni's 'dreamed' narratives are a kind of Gabriel García Márquez in paint, often bringing forth the burden of 'forgotten' histories in order to define the current moment. Devoid of pitiful moralising and surpassing fetishistic infatuation with depictions of human sordidness, in the series entitled *Fictionville* Haerizadeh cunningly (and controversially) violates and perverts found photographic media images depicting human suffering and appropriates images from anywhere and of any disaster—inflicted by nature or man—sometimes unrecognisably, into an anthropomorphic Orwellian world of fairytales: humorous, grotesque, satirical, bitter. With spontaneous violent fantasy Haerizadeh applies layers of gesso and bonding, breaks down the apparent integrity of the image, drains away the reductive moral stance, absolves his found canvas of its account of truth—in the Nietzschean sense unmasking all accounts of the truth in order to arrive closer to the truth. It is *ruthless criticism in the spirit of creative play*.

Rokni's brother and intermittent collaborator Ramin Haerizadeh, creates collages in which he often appears as a phantom in a chaos of appearances to emphasise a fractured self. Multiple cross-gendered self-portraits appear to celebrate a kind of triumphant bestiality. The artist masterfully uses the 'safety' of humorous juxtapositions and candy-soft background colours to 'contain and camouflage' the grotesque absurdity of the 'exposed' internal conflicts, highlighting the schism between the individual's internal and external realities.

In contrast, as fragments of philosophical reflection, the earthy portraits of Y.Z. Kami evoke the universal fragility of human existence. His hazy "mirages of people" are a kind of 'human reality in soft focus'. This is modern portraiture far removed from the delicately idealised and abstracted, archetypal vision of Iranian miniatures. Sophistry, here, is of modern psychological nature. The haze that occupies the colossality of the portraits points to the ephemerality of what is most real to us—our own human life (existence). His portrait of a bald woman (*Untitled*, 2008) is an example of a work whose dimensions interact powerfully with the context of its exhibition. Such an image, unintentionally, assumes a provocatively political dimension in a society where a woman's hair is banned from public display or representation.

As existential investigations, Laleh Khorramian's chance paintings are "psycho-physical dreamscapes"—violent lacerations across tectonic layers exposing infinite storylines embedded at the core. Whether forgotten, repressed or ignored, the tensions, memories and energies brought to light bring the viewer into an ambivalent intimacy with the possibility of eternal histories and ultimately his own mortality.

Away from the epic and transcendental, in her iconic and ongoing home movies, by always sporting the black veil, the protagonist Ghazel adopts an officially sanctioned near mythical and narcissistic persona, which is absurdly at odds with the self and the personality's actions. She is at once an incongruous hybrid of individual longing and collective control. So long as the struggle for basic rights and gender divides go on in Iran, these series of veiled adventures in the home and outdoors will remain poignant in their political wit.

Page 287 left and right: Rokni Haerizadeh, *Fictionville* (video stills), 2010

Photos courtesy the artist and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, Dubai  
Below: Ramin Haerizadeh, collage from the limited edition book accompanying the exhibition  
*But I prefer dogs with uncropped tails*, 2012

Photo courtesy the artist and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, Dubai



Straddling the interface between the self, the collective and the psyche, Bita Fayyazi's "theatre of life" deconstructs and reinvents fragments of the self. Here personal anxieties, conflicts and instincts are displaced, sublimated or directly expressed in a playful attempt to master, contain and psychically order the chaos of repressed materials, taboos and the ravages of time. The conflict of the internal and external worlds, and that of exposure and containment of fantasies, is symbolised by the final appearance of a phallus clawed by giant cockroaches. Socio-political critique and a comment on the nature of power is the driving force behind the video vignettes of Shahab Fotouhi. In his *Direct Negotiation* (2008), a cat claws incessantly at a closed window. Impotence is made more pronounced by the transparency of the dividing barrier.

Similarly, Mahmoud Bakhshi Moakhar series called *Industrial Revolution* (2008) inverts the tragic, albeit with darker humour, taking the reality of the contemporary Iranian historical process to direct scrutiny. His installation displays a set of eight red neon lights designed as a hybrid form, representing a stylised red tulip (a revolutionary symbol of the martyr) as well as the emblem of the republic (the stylised Allah as it appears on the national flag). Propped up on tin bases and wired into the mains, the electronically operated and lit tulips gyrate at different speeds, 'bringing to light' the very wounds inflicted on the individual and society by the painful realities of a tumultuous recent history—funfair that parodies the very iconography of the Revolution with all its controversial associations.

It is clear that the artists' voices not only reach beyond perceived national, political, linguistic, religious or social stereotypes, but they are also a testament to the hybridisation, fragmentation and diversity of the contemporary Iranian reality. They manifest a powerful drive for plurality and individual expression and symbolise the radical transformation that contemporary Iranian culture is undergoing. As symbols of transformation, these fantasies of the imagination are at once both the driving force and the product of cultural change through a time of complex internal and external conflicts.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> Daryush Shayegan, *Le Miroir de L'Âme d'un Peuple*, Paris: Le Regard Persan, Espace Electra, Les Musées de la Ville de Paris, 2001

<sup>2</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, London: Penguin Books, 1977: 173