

# RAHELEH SANEIE: AN ARTIST PROFILE

ells by Raheleh Saneie

Leleh Saneie is a video artist, a photographer, an academic, and a performer who lives and practices in Ottawa. Much of her work is shaped by what it means to be an Iranian-Canadian woman in our culture today. She uses use of her body and various media to exemplify (and draw inspiration from) contemporary female artists who turn away from painting and other forms of traditional art in order to reclaim both women's autonomy over their own bodies and women's influence in the art world. Rah is a political activist within the arts community in Ottawa and has shown her work internationally. She is uncompromising, honest, fearless. It makes her work uncomfortable, ranging from themes of back-alley abortions to images of hairy testicles placed atop ice cream cones. She has recently refined and focused her work, starting from photography and entering into an extensive phase of experimental video and performance. Her video work exhibits the centrality of her political beliefs to her creative inspiration.

### How was the move from photography to video?

In photography you are limited to one frame, and because I have a lot to say, I find that photography can be limiting. My subject matter can come across as intimidating and difficult to look at or confront, so with video I am able to use a more subtle approach to convey my ideas. Apparently people don't like to be yelled at [laughs] and my photographs tend to do that. I do, however, admire that aspect of photography, where the artist is limited to that single moment and image, challenging you to focus your thoughts and ideas in a single frame.

**Most of the work you're doing is a combination of both video and performance art. Have you considered doing live performance pieces?**

I actually have done some street performance recently.  
On September 7<sup>th</sup>, the Canadian government shut down

the Iranian embassy, which limits accessibility to members of the diaspora community, not so much myself because my family and I have been in exile since we left Iran in 1988. In my performance I stood outside of the embassy dressed in traditional Persian garb and handed out tea. Tea is a big part of Iranian culture; we offer people tea when they come into our homes.

**Is your latest work about your life in exile?**

Yea, it's all about diaspora, it's about my sense of ambivalence and hybrid identity... I find there's a lot of conflict with that, I mean, on one hand I have an Iranian upbringing, but on the other hand I've grown up in Canada surrounded by Canadian traditions. It's a constant battle between East and West. I find a lot of the time the East is represented as exotic, threatening, or romanticized. These are ideas that I would like to challenge, but I'm finding it very difficult. I begin

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Yea, threading is so much better because hair removal is so much easier. It's definitely a skill to have with it. It's also becoming a thing with and being able to do it the way you want is kind of nice. I think, as far as the





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#### **What's your latest work about your life in exile?**

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to think, at what point am I perpetuating these ideologies? I mean, I'm not living in Iran, but I'm making images and videos about Iran without really knowing. I only know what I've read or been told or have seen in the media. However, the title of my work *Oriental Drag* clearly demonstrates that I am at least acknowledging the ideas surrounding self-exotification.

#### **In one of your newer works there are two videos placed side by side, and in one of them you are threading your face. Is this something that you have grown up doing?**

Yea, threading is something that women do together and because hair removal is really big in Iran, we do it often. It's definitely a skill and you can become really precise with it. It's also because we have so much hair to work with and being able to shape your eyebrows whichever way you want is kind of an indulgence for women there, I think, as far as the beauty thing goes.





Last April you showed a video piece at *Saw Gallery* for the show, *Ciphers: Tension with Tradition in Contemporary Iranian Photography*. What was the process of making this video? The music and poses are really interesting.

Well the video is comprised of 1000 images. There's generally 24 frames per second but I extended the lengths of some of the frames so that it goes with the music. It was actually really difficult to get the transitions between poses to flow nicely, which probably took me the most time. As far as the music goes, I composed it with a DJ, you can hear my voice repeating sounds, I did all of the scratching, and the metal sound in the background is actually a fork and a glass clicking together. It was a lot of fun! I really wanted to show the *process* in this work, that's why I left the studio visible in the shots. I wanted to strip it away from being highly aestheticized and too beautiful. The dance poses were inspired by a bunch of things: Iranian dancing, Vogue,

house music, and break dancing. It's kind of a little bit of everything!

You're very passionate and determined about your art and what you want to say. How do you stay motivated? What keeps you inspired?

I think that looking at other art and getting inspired by other artists around me definitely keeps me wanting to keep creating and pushing myself. I'm really into conceptual art, especially the works of Ana Mendieta and Shirin Neshat. I've had a lot of people telling me that they're sick of *identity based art* and conceptual art. I find that, for me, being a part of a marginalized community, I want to talk about these issues. I know that not all art needs to be about politics, but I definitely think there's room for it. For me, art is a form of activism, and my medium of resistance is art. 🏳️



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The Public Service Alliance of Canada is fighting **these cuts** and promote strong, public services for the Ottawa herd.

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