

## Ciphers: Tension with Tradition in Contemporary Iranian Photography

You can learn about Iran on most any newscast on any day, but what, really, do you know of Iranian people? Iranian culture? Iranian art?

We see anti-American protests in the streets of Tehran, or we see the president of Iran giving endless, hateful speeches that reliably ramble into incoherence. That's about all we see of Iran, and of Iranians.

"What we think in North America of Iran is burdened by media images, by news stories that are all about politics and about very difficult things," says Andrea Fitzpatrick, an assistant professor in the visual arts department at the University of Ottawa, and curator of a new exhibition of contemporary Iranian photographs and video at SAW Gallery. "In this exhibition you will not see those issues. It's not that the exhibition is a clouding over or white-washing, but the art is . . . not about political issues."

If that seems a political opportunity lost, consider the alternative value of seeing everyday Iranians doing the everyday things that consume most of their lives. This is the quotidian Iran, the real Iran, an insight into the private lives of the Iranian public.

It's also a bridge, in that the photographic concepts, techniques and styles on display are universal, and therefore drive home the understanding — perhaps for some viewers the revelation — that Iranians aren't that much different from us in the west. Only the motifs and themes make the photographs and videos distinctly Iranian, and they are more easily digested by western viewers precisely because they are wrapped in familiar aesthetics.

"It's basically," Fitzpatrick says, "how artists are representing ancient Persian history or those traditions, some of which are pre-Islamic, using contemporary digital technology . . . in a way that is aesthetically sophisticated and could be understood by international art audiences."

The best example of this may be *The Emperor's New Clothes*, by Melika Shafahi, an Iranian expat who lives in Lyon, France. (All other artists are from Tehran, except for Raheleh Saneie, a young video artist from Ottawa.)

Shafahi's photo, in addition to alluding to a Western folktale, is compositionally inspired by Caravaggio. Anyone who saw Caravaggio's masterful paintings at the National Gallery last summer will see his influence in the noir-ish lighting, and in the theatrical poses of the people who all lean dramatically into the centre of the frame. This is a blend of the Muslim east and the secular or Catholic west, and one that would never be shown in a public gallery in Iran, due to the exposed skin of the woman at the centre of the trio.

Some photos rely on digital trickery to achieve their results, and they sometimes challenge Fitzpatrick's desire to keep politics out of it. Sadegh Tirafkan's *Multitude #3* shows a crowd of women enjoying the rare opportunity to attend a soccer match. Tirafkan has superimposed over the women an ancient pattern of Persian carpet — which to me says, "see how so much time has passed, yet still Iran represses its women."

Other photos are less posed, with no obvious digital modification, and as a result perhaps give the most genuine and intimate view into the daily existence of average Iranians. Najaf Shokri takes us into a bachelor pad, where single men lounge amid the familiar accoutrements of any western man-cave — a flat-screen TV, a computer with a dating site displayed on its screen, and posters of Al Pacino and Che Guevara on the walls.

Where the bachelor photos differ starkly from western norms is in the physical intimacy the Iranian men show to each other, in ways that are homoerotic by western standards but are not seen as such in Iran. "Men are much more affectionate to each other in Iran, so here there will be different readings," Fitzpatrick says.

Some photos in the exhibition are printed in large format — four feet in length — and have tremendous visual impact. Mehrdad Asgari-Tari has digitally inserted a woman in scarf and sunglasses in seven poses, all set on a vast salt flat, with day-trippers in the background. The narrow and wide expanses of blue sky and white salt are vivid and arresting.

What does the photograph mean? I can't tell you, maybe nothing. Like Jalal Sepehr's photo of a Persian carpet fluttering downward — as if it fell out of the domed and ornate ceiling above — it is beautiful. It's as if we westerners can

### Najaf Shokri

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