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Video still from *Tableau Vivant*



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DEFRAGMENTING IDENTITY

Raheleh Saneie's "Shades of the Orient" resists the Western conception of women of colours

Story by Lital Khaikin / Photography by Raheleh Saneie

Sham





Shades of the Orient



TUNISIAN FRUIT AND VEGETABLE VENDOR MOHAMED BOUAZIZI SET HIMSELF ABLAZE to protest the corruption of Sidi Bouzid officials in 2010, inadvertently becoming a trigger for the Tunisian revolution and inspiring similar acts of protest in Bahrain, Jordan, and Morocco that collectively became the now-historic Arab Spring. It was in photograph that his heroic act was preserved—a photograph largely responsible for the swift recognition and outrage towards Bouazizi's death. For Iranian-Canadian multimedia artist Raheleh Saneie, this image of Bouazizi and its impact represents the eruptive potential of photography to educate and incite potent emotional response.

A recent graduate of the University of Ottawa Bachelor of Fine Arts program, Saneie directs her understanding of visual media as a tool for political agitation toward an inquest on Western oppression of Iranian identity. Saneie does not use hostile imagery to instigate dialogue, however, instead allowing her self-portrayed characters to appear on familiar terms with the viewer. Whether she depicts herself in a dressing room through naked satire or statuesquely cloaked in a chador on Sparks Street, Saneie's objective is to reconstruct an identity that has been perverted by a repressive system.

"I am interested in addressing the misrepresentation of Iranian people in Western visual culture. Edward Saïd's *Orientalism* [written in 1978 by Palestinian-American literary theorist Edward W. Saïd] critiques Western attitudes and depictions of the 'Orient' that emerged in 19th Century art and literature," says Saneie. "During this time, the paintings that represented woman were all harem scenes with concubines, and that whole area of the world was subject to exotification. However, after 9/11 and the growth in Islamophobia, the images we are presented with in Western media are images of violence and terrorism. The Occident [i.e., the West] is yet again constructing an image of the Orient, but now it's one that imposes a threat on the Western world."

Living in Toronto within the diasporic community, Saneie admits to difficulties of shaping an identity that reconciles Iranian and Canadian cultures: "I feel that many parts of my cultural identity have been taken away from me and I am trying to reclaim them," she explains.

Taking an extremely honest approach, Saneie communicates through intimate experience and by asking viewers the very same questions with which she is grappling herself.

"I think it's important to be a responsible and critical image maker," says the artist. "Being a diasporic individual, I often feel, and have been made to feel, that I exist in-between two worlds but that I don't really belong to either. But all this inspires my work, and art provides an outlet for me to share my experiences."

Saneie most recently explored cultural displacement and fragmented identity in her lightbox installation, *Shades of the Orient*, which was part of the "Transformer: The Body Remixed" exhibition at Ottawa's SAW Gallery earlier in November. To shape her photographic story, Saneie composes the fleetingness of movement in transparent layers.

"The multiple exposure technique contributes to the narrative by creating a layering that illustrates the complexities of identity," the artist explains. "In this work, my character is performing an alternative dance that reflects her experiences and, through her creation, she is emancipated."

Within this single yet complex photograph, Saneie captures multidimensional questions of body politics and cultural exotification using the very simple, even gentle character of a dancer.

"The character in *Shades of the Orient* is expressing herself through her fragmented movements and gestures," Saneie explains. "Through her body she creates her own dance, her own rhythm and music, and she uses an alternative approach to engage with her environment."

In the image, sterile white light floods from the left and right, framing and objectifying Saneie's body. Apparatus supporting a black backdrop logically suggests depth, but this expression is interrupted. The dancer's stage is not concealed; that the dancer is being photographed is brought to the foreground, making her almost incidental. Suddenly, the focus is not on the figure performing in glamorised dress, but on the viewer's act of constructing a stereotype and submitting to the prejudices that condition the dancer's aesthetic.

"She is a displaced individual and the viewer sees her environment," Saneie points out. "The studio is visible; one can see the process and the element of masquerade and theatricality. The visibility of the constructed space is synonymous with the construction of identity."

Saneie confronts cultural presumption by emphasising the surfaces in her imagery. The body becomes the language. It is difficult to see where one layer of the body is distinguished from the next in *Shades of the Orient*, visually prompting consideration towards intersecting forms of discrimination, oppression, and privilege.

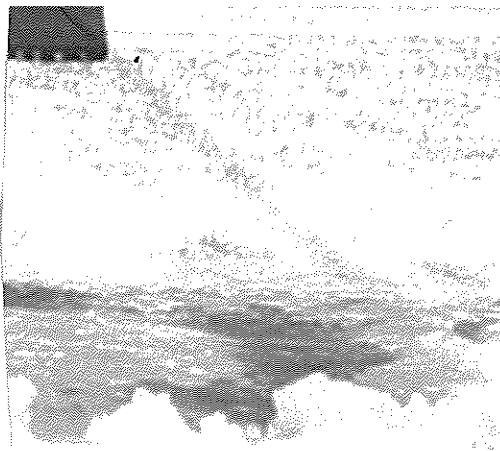
"I often invite the viewer to engage with the body so that they question their relationship with my racialised characters," Saneie says. "My characters return the gaze and they are dominant and in control of their surroundings. This is very different than the depiction of women, especially women of colour, that we are presented with in visual culture."

This hyper-awareness of spectacle becomes an important tool for Saneie to confront the reality that "women of colours' bodies are stigmatized and degraded—and often depicted as barbaric or hyper-sexualized—but my characters, even when they are nude, they are not titillating," Saneie contends. "They are very comfortable in their skin and their bodies are celebrated."

Female gender identity, particularly within the Iranian context, is an enabling aspect of Saneie's metaphor.

"I am not suggesting that all women share the same experiences or rituals, or that there is universal definition of womanhood," she clarifies. "I am aware that gender is a construct and I am critical of its value and legitimacy in our culture."

Rather than generalize, Saneie isolates a particular ritual that is exaggerated and also represents cross-cultural ideals, skillfully guiding the dialogue towards a unifying theme. In her video performance *Sound of Strings* (2012), Saneie juxtaposes imagery of herself in Western clothing with images of her wearing a chador. In one visual stream she threads her face, effectively stripping it down to a Western aesthetic of beauty; in the other she sews the chador



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"My characters aggressively perform femininity and through this performance they assert gender," says Saneie of the video. "However, it is subversive because they confront the stereotypes attributed to femininity through exaggeration."

Complicated response

By building on the themes explored in Saneie's previous work, *Shades of the Orient* is a complicated response to the construction of cultural identity.

"My feelings of otherness stem from not being treated the same, through symbolic annihilation in the media, and my day-to-day encounters," Saneie reveals.

"One day I was leaving the university and a woman approached me and handed me a flyer. She said 'I am so-and-so and I am inviting foreign people to come have traditional Canadian Christmas dinner on Christmas Eve'. Now you can imagine my surprise considering I have lived in Canada for 24 years and my father is Catholic. I told her I am not foreign, I am from here, and I will be having Christmas dinner with my own family. Then she looks at me and says, 'Well, aren't you Iranian or something? Well, please pass the invite along to all your foreign friends, and you're welcome to join as well.' She walked away a proud philanthropist. I walked away feeling displaced, anxious and 'othered'."

Though Saneie speaks from the Iranian perspective, her message can be widely appreciated.

"My work is about creating a positive and new narrative so I need an open-minded audience, one that is willing to unlearn and to let go of preconceptions," said Saneie.

With no abrasive expression in her images, Saneie communicates without overpowering us with a particular aesthetic. Her conversational and approachable works are especially important given the sensitivity required to address dominant Western perceptions of Iranian culture, and particularly of Iranian women. The challenge lies in creating visual stimulus that distinguishes between vocabularies of agitation and of alienation.

"My work does get critiqued for being confrontational or controversial," Saneie admits. "But I like to remind people, too, that as a marginalized individual I have to address these issues so that I can be part of the change I want. Change always starts with the person in the mirror."