

IRAN

YEAR 38

*This year's **Rencontres d'Arles** photography festival brings together a remarkable contingent of Iranian photographers, reports Simon Bowcock*



Behnam Zakeri
and Morteza
Niknahad. *Public
Place*. 2015. ©
Morteza Niknahad
& Behnam Zakeri

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or centuries Iran has been known for its poetry, a way to say things that cannot be said directly... The modern version of poetry is photography.” These words are from a text by Iranian photographer Newsha Tavakolian, an associate member of the world-renowned Magnum agency, and Anahita Ghabaian Etehadieh, the founder of Tehran’s Silk Road Gallery. It introduces *Iran, Year 38*, their ambitious, sprawling photography exhibition divided into 8 sections, with work from 66 photographers covering the 38 years since Iran’s 1979 revolution.

Iran’s is a rich photographic culture, and a show covering so much ground could well feel overstretched. But it hangs together, and rewards time spent. Those unable to catch this landmark exhibition in France this summer (as part of the giant Rencontres d’Arles photography festival) or in Xiamen in China this winter (as part of another major festival) would do well to spend some time with the beautifully-produced and comprehensive exhibition catalogue.

The show begins with strong images by several Iranian photojournalists. *1979, The Upheaval* is all tumult, fires in the streets, defiance and jubilation. Through their drama and destruction, Kaveh Kazemi’s pictures of the action and aftermath of the Revolution are among the most powerful works at the festival. Its centrepiece is a blow-up of his era-defining photograph of a woman completely covered by her black chador. While one defiant hand is raised to obscure her face, in the other she holds a rifle.

The second section—*War, From Front Line to Living Room*—mixes the journalistic with the staged, placing pictures made during the eight-year Iran-Iraq War next to others dealing with its



Babak Kazemi. *La Sortie de Shirin et Farhad*, 2012. © Babak Kazemi



legacy. Bahman Jalali's monochrome car wrecks look like shards fallen from the sky, and they stand like monuments in a post-apocalyptic nightmare. Gohar Dashti's scene of destroyed automobiles, photographed in colour in 2008 with a new bride and her groom sitting amid the wreckage, speaks eloquently of the enduring effects of this 1980s catastrophe. Different methods convey similar sentiments in Saba Alizadeh's 2011 photograph of an ordinary Iranian living room, where she has projected a dead 1980s fighter onto the sofa.

The third section—*What Should We Be?*—is more contemplative. In Mehregan Kazemi's beautiful *Acrobat Series* (2010), she has transformed a set of ordinary family-archive photographs with a lyrical hand-drawn line, tenderly tracing her own childhood from her pregnant mother like a time-travelling umbilical cord. But as in the show overall, the predominant mood is sombre: in Arash Khamooshi's *Untitled* (2006), smashed-up satellite dishes hint at dark, controlling forces, but its

neutral title means you have to draw your own conclusions. Ambiguity is also central to Poolad Javaher Haghighi's conceptually rigorous *Flag* series (2014), where the unchanging Iranian flag flies plumb in the centre of each scene. But is it a positive force, anchoring Iranian life, or a menacing presence, glowering over everything and everyone?

Tehran (undated), Mehran Mohajer's dark yet documentary pinhole picture, evokes an uncontrollable and inescapable nightmare in the *Dreaming or Awake?* section. Similarly uncomfortable is Amir Mousavi's claustrophobic *Tree, The Bird, Hemmat Highway* (2009), with its nausea-inducing lysergic colours. If these works focus on the feelings of the individual, Newsha Tavakolian's *Look* series (2012-13) pans back a little. It shows series of young solitary adults, united in how they

live in today's Tehran, in high-rise prison cells in introspective isolation. And with her *Untitled Iran* series (2013), Gohar Dashti zooms out further to the collective: a sunken crowd suggests the country is constantly stuck in a hole it can't get out of, neatly summing up the past four decades of revolution, war, sanctions and strife.

There isn't too much formal photographic boundary-pushing in the show, but one exception is Hawar Amini's effaced faces in his found photographs from the end of the Iran-Iraq war, erasing identities. Another is Fatemeh Baigmoradi's *It's Hard to Kill Someone* (2016-17), where literally burned-out faces expunge the past and rewrite history.

Like Tavakolian, Bahram Shabani transcends the Iranian and shows something more universal in *Evening Portraits* (2014), where stressed-out people battle through modern life. They are typical of the *Who Are We?* section's pessimistic tone, which continues unabated into *Climate Crisis*, where smog and pollution are killing the popu-



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A BEACON OF HOPE SHINES AT THE BACK THE HUGE ROOM



Above: Seoul / Du côté
du silence, Nishapur,
région du Khorassan.
Septembre 2015.
© Sina Shiri
Right: Shadi Ghadirian.
Qajar, 1998. Courtesy of
the artist and Silk Road
Gallery
Left: Below: Newsha
Tavakolian. From the
Look series. 2012-2013.
Courtesy of the artist

lace. Death also stalks the pictures in *Staging Reality*, from Azadeh Akhlaghi's consummate panoramic re-enactments of tragic and brutal deaths from Iran's past to Ebrahim Noroozi's mesmerising photographs of fascinated spectators at a public hanging.

But after all the death, destruction and dark legacy, a beacon of hope shines at the back the huge room. The final section, *The Cinema Poet*, pays homage to the late film director Abbas Kiarostami. His own exquisite photographs, the *Snow White* series (1978-2004), sit somewhere

between the masterly simplicity of André Kertész and the abstract lyricism of Harry Callahan. Poetry indeed.

Iran, Year 38 runs at the *Rencontres d'Arles, France* until 27th August and the *Jimei x Arles International Photography Festival* in *Xiamen, China* from 24 November-3 January. The accompanying book, *Iran, Année 38*, is published by *Éditions Textuel/Arte Éditions*. rencontres-arles.com

