The rise of photomontage in contemporary Middle Eastern art

By Jareh Das

Hala Elkoussy, Myths & Legends room - The mural, 2010, photographs on photagraphic paper, 48 panel each 75x75cm (total 900x300cm) - Courtesy of Abraaj Capital Art Prize 2010.

Introduction

The Ottoman Empire's beginnings in the early twelfth century represent a moment of significant interest in the development of art and architecture of the Arab world. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there was an unprecedented level of development born out of the cross-fertilisation of European, Middle Eastern and North African cultures, which we now refer to as the MENA region. The region, united by shared cultures, religion and traditions, under the leadership of Suleiman the Magnificent (1520-1566) saw the empire flourish, adding new dimensions to an already rich history. The Middle East has a long-standing history of craft making, most notably: pottery, carpet making, calligraphy, metal work, stone masonry and mosaic. Across the architectural landscape of the Arab world, repeated Islamic motifs adorn buildings, particularly on places of worship. This history can be traced back centuries to the ancient civilisations of Egypt, Persia and Ottoman empires, which were witnesses to a thriving craft making industry. Dating back to the 6th century BC, Persian art in particular excelled and became a definitive style, signatory for its elegant use of colour and characterised by the literary grace of Persian poetry. Contemporary Middle Eastern artists often juxtapose the traditional in contrast with the western. Artists experience this directly or indirectly in their countries of origin or whilst living abroad as Hassan Hajjaj has described as a teenage Moroccan living in the United Kingdom. Today, due to a shared sense of conflict between the old and the new, photomontage lends itself as a popular form of art-making as the shared history of conflicts; censorships and dictatorial regimes are reflected in the work of artists from the region. The art produced articulates the fragmentary and unstable history of the region from history to the present. Photomontage can be understood as a metaphor for the 'piecing together' and making sense of recent socio-political and cultural contexts.

Consider living or being brought up in a culture where folklore and storytelling form an important aspect of conveying traditional values. What happens when Western influences disregard traditional forms and render them inaccurate, or rather as lacking in credibility? In order to make sense of these conflicting interests, artists like Afsoon refer back to history to make sense of the present by seeking alternative modes of representation that may not be immediately available through language, the emotive transfers to the visual sphere. The region today faces conflicts that are an inevitable result of globalisation. Views deeply rooted in history, religion and traditional values come into sharp contrast with the incumbent Western influences that are often deemed threatening by older generations. Photomontage itself is an injection of Western culture that originates from early modernism and the Dada movement. Berlin Dadaist Hannah Höch (1889-1978) is often attributed as the inventor of the medium. The Dadaists emerged from a culture rife with political turmoil amongst the rise of socialism and fascism, the first market crash and fin-de-siècle malaise, they needed not to paint landscapes but to make work that was more political and made social statements. In the words of one of their leaders, Richard Hülsenbeck, 'the highest art will be that which in its conscious content presents the thousand fold problems of the day, the art which has been visibly shattered by the explosions of last week, which is forever trying to collect its limbs after yesterday's crash' .

Considering the current cultural and political climate in the MENA region is it not surprising that photomontage resonates as a popular means of expression adopted by contemporary artists such as Hala Elkoussy. This technique ties together the need for a political voice in art and the meticulous and laborious culture of craft indigenous to Middle Eastern art.

Advancement in technology has seen artists steer towards the digital manipulation of images. Works by Iranian artists Sadegh Tirafkan and Malekeh Nayiny echo the critical engagement found in the earliest works of photomontage, which used the most technologically advanced modes of image production and dissemination to analyse and expose the ways in which some images refashion the world . Akin to how early works of

Ala Ebtekar, Pariya 7, 2009, acrylic and ink on digital pigment print on Hanemühle paper, 76x51cm - Courtesy of the artist and Third Line gallery.

photomontage employed the use of technology; these artists' incorporate modern advancements in technology using the digital tools that are available to them today. Other processes involve a combination of both traditional and modern methods, producing what can be described as 'hybrid photomontage' demonstrated in the works of Afsoon. The artist produces works that involve a laborious physical assembling of images, which then go through a digital printing process.

Techniques in photomontage: The old versus the new
Photomontage starts with the initial concept of Klebebild, translated from German as 'paste picture'. It involves a systematic collision of images from various sources, which results in a layering of meaning. From the beginning to present day, the media, specifically
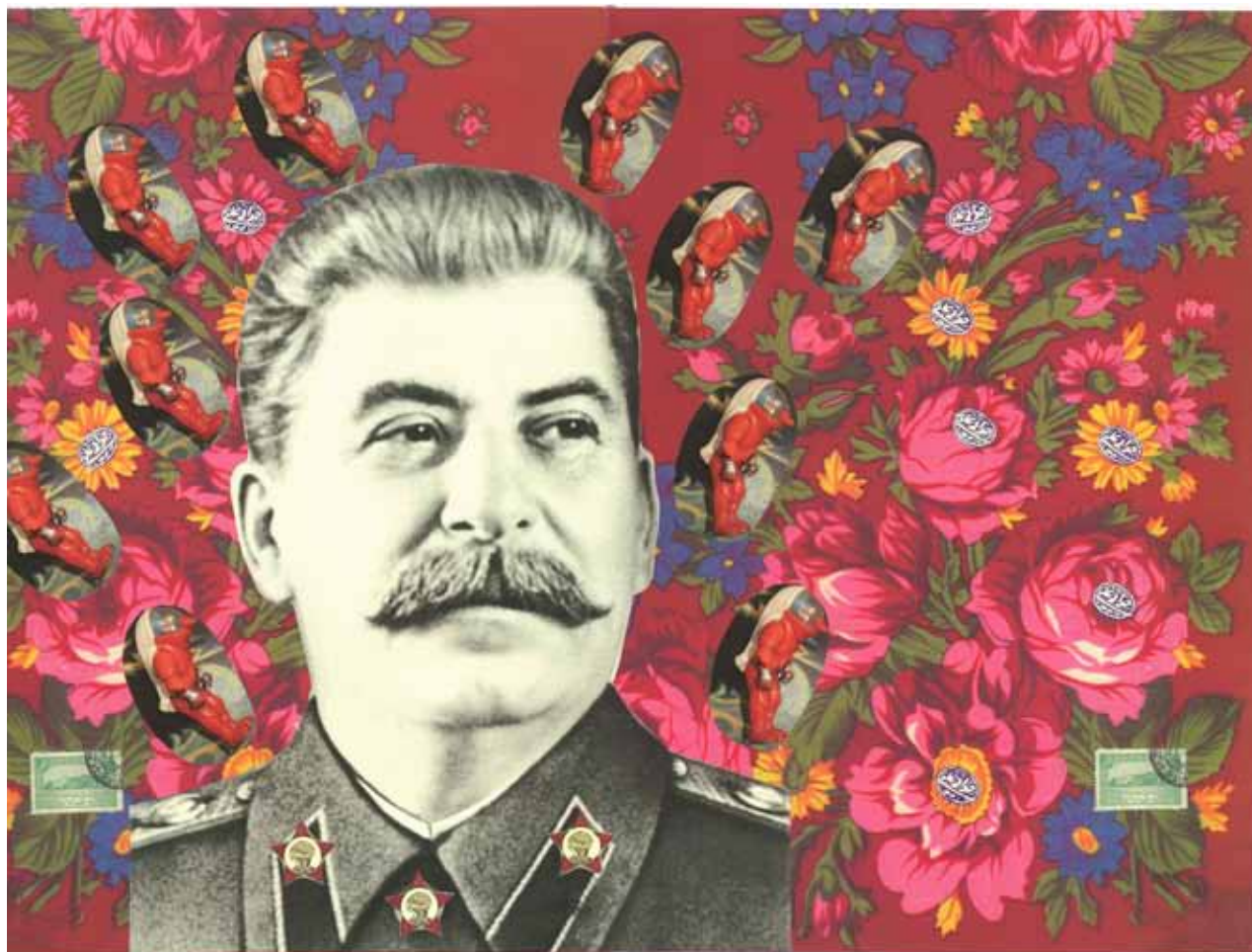
Afsoon, Stalin (Tehran conference, let's play boys), 2009, inkject printed collage on paper, edition of 8 + 2AP, 16.5x23cm - Courtesy of the artist.

newspapers, have been an ever-present subject in photomontage. As a symbol of freedom of speech, or lack thereof, it is a manifestation of modern visual culture. While one could argue that although individual images in a montage are easy to read, the combination of several parts forming a whole makes the overall image less easy to decipher. Objects, people, symbols and text from past and present produce different layers, offering multiple readings within the work. The ability to interpret often depends on contextual knowledge, but also on familiarity with the subject matter. However, today's globalised world makes it easier to access information due to the ever-present Internet and media sources, which aid knowledge dissemination.

Consider the monumental montage by Egyptian artist Hala Elkoussy, Myths & Legends Room – The Mural, 2010. This is a work that draws on historical wall paintings and consists of forty-eight framed photographs, which tell a story about the history of Egypt. The piece operates through a grid system and can be understood by reading individual photographs, but looking at the overall image there are three main parts that standout: the central one-legged military figure, the skyline and river which run above and below this domineering male figure. These elements are the focal point of the mural, with the military figure being most prominent as it is centrally placed. Approaching this work without prior knowledge of the artist or the subject matter, one is immediately drawn to the central figure, a somewhat fallen soldier. His imposing scale also commands the view of power, or one that was previously in power and whose presence still dominates

the landscape of the work. Who is this man and why is he still present and authoritative even though he looks incapable of commanding any authority? His face is blackened and he is missing a limb. His stance is stoic but defiant as he wears his non-descriptive medal with pride and holds up a net in his right hand as a substitute for a lethal weapon. There is a telling sign of a puppeteer's string propping him up or supporting his upright stance. On closer inspection, his face is covered in what can be described as badly applied face paint or make-up, his medals devoid of any meaning, he is part man, corpse and machine-like with a prosthetic bull leg. The role of 'The Black Soldier' is one of myth and reality, he represents the oppressed and the oppressor because he represents someone taking orders from above as well as inflicting suffering on people beneath him .

Reading the mural from left to right, focusing on the upper level, the skyline changes dramatically from blue to grey, and from dawn to dusk. There are skyscrapers and modern buildings which slowly shift to more historical buildings and pyramids on the left, demonstrating a traversing of time and history. This sets the tone for the overall meaning of the work, the present and the past, and one cannot help but think of the idiomatic expression 'the sands of time', as an overall theme for this work by Elkoussy.

Elkoussy conceived this work on the basis of a proposal submitted for the 2010 Abraaj Capital Art Prize. This work precedes the on-going political situation of the Egyptian Revolution and anticipated the current climate in Cairo. The piece proved to be prophetic of current events, adding more layers to this already complex body of work. In his essay on Avant-Gard critical studies, Stephen Foster defines photomontage as being 'the impetus for and not the genre of, the transformation of a traditional concept of space (including photographic space): that became reflections of the abstractions we call world-views and the site for the formulation of new cognitive models by which we came to know and transact the cultural world. If this seems objectionably theoretical, it is because photomontage itself is highly theoretical'. Elkoussy deals with modernisation as a loss of tradition, as well as a challenge to inscribe a sense of the past, which is contained in habits, traditions and urban legends within the current visual language of film and photography. This mural also highlights the fact that our cultures and traditions are composed of many overlapping stories. It also raises the point of a singularity in history and warns that if we adhere to a single story as given, we risk a critical misunderstanding .

British-Moroccan artist Hassan Hajjaj incorporates popular elements of African studio photography with found objects, drawing subtly on the amalgamation of tradition and popular culture. Hajjaj is renowned for taking on the European stereotypes of his native North Africa and turning this into a visual celebration. His works represent a collision of cultures and is at times autobiographical. Bouchra In Orange, 2010, is a simple hand painted photograph of a woman in designer clothes and headscarf, against an orange background with a frame made out of black rubber tyres. It is not uncommon to see modern Muslim women, in traditional Islamic clothing made from designer fabrics; in fact, it is an image synonymous with today's acceptance and use of luxury goods as a status symbol. With this simple gesture, he is able to juxtapose branding with the raw materiality of a tyre frame. The tyre frame represents a popular mode of transport, used by people in Morocco and other parts of the world to navigate around heavily congested cities. Hajjaj successfully highlights the coexistence between old and the new, which he describes as a celebration of 'his' culture.

Ala Ebtekar's Pariya 7, 2010, is part of a series of work which explores iconic contemporary Iranian figures. Ebtekar starts by painting directly on the surface of the photograph; in this work a woman is wearing a white helmet, adorned with a mist like veil that does not conceal her face. The photograph portrays her as a warrior, but also as an enchantress as her beauty is still apparent in her semi-concealed state. Although the woman in this series is contemporary, everything else about her is ancient. He represents her as a celebratory figure for Iran's youth who are vocal for change, as a figure from Persian mythology, and, in other words, a woman as a modern day warrior or freedom fighter.

Ebtekar describes this series as 'a visual narrative, a simultaneous deconstruction and reconstruction of time and space – a visual glimpse of crossroads where present day events meet history and mythology' . By

painting directly on the surface, he is constructing a new narrative of an existing image by adding subtle references from the past. His use of ink and acrylic on photographs renders his characters as iconic figures and illustrates parts of Iranian heritage that may not be immediately visible but are always present.

Digital photomontage
Digital photomontage developed in tandem with advances in technology, allowing the use of digital platforms to incorporate and, in some cases, to replace what was made by hand. The process often relies on the use of 'found' imagery on the Internet, or the use of digital images by camera, as a steady decline in the use of photographic film has occurred. Although Iranian artist Sadegh Tirafkan's recent photographs are produced predominantly digitally, he has a history of working with and assembling photographs by hand. In his earlier series, most of the works were made manually by intertwining calligraphy and ink stamps to the surfaces of photographs. In the last six years, Tirafkan adopted a digital approach to making as it provided an unprecedented opportunity for creativity and made working a quicker process. He feels that a digital process provides a lot of readily available tools to create a vast body of work over shorter periods of time. Tirafkan also emphasises that if an artist doesn't have the competence for creating art, working physically or digitally renders creating useless .

Camilla in Wonderland #1, 2011, is an ode to the charity work and iconic imagery of Camilla Batmanghelidjh, founder of Kids Company. Batmanghelidjh, some would say, is responsible for single handilly revolutionising the perception of impoverished children in London plagued by violence, abuse and other horrors which have caused children from certain backgrounds to turn to crime and other misdemeanours. Her charitable work helps to rehabilitate and integrate children in inner city areas of London with the wider community. Tirafkan's work also celebrates Batmanghelidjh's vibrant personality and signatory dress sense by weaving her portrait into a background of varying patterns. Some of these textiles are notable Persian motifs, perhaps commenting on her Iranian heritage.

The depiction is reminiscent of biblical representations of saints, akin to stained glass windows, but here it is given a more contemporary twist due to Tirafkan's use of colour and pattern. The central figure is superimposed onto an elaborate background.

Tirafkan creates a montage also reminiscent of the traditional Persian rug in its composition. He appropriates in a contemporary manner and celebrates someone who propagates change and the well being of the future generations.

This specific piece, created solely by a digital process, sees the artist experiment with a variety of images, which draw inspiration from many sources such as traditional carpet-making techniques. He weaves the image of Camilla Batmanghelidjh into a carpet type frame. Tirafkan felt she would make a welcome addition to his portraiture series and draws on a famous literary reference, Alice in Wonderland, a character created by the author Lewis Carroll who entered the wonderland by accident, falling through a rabbit hole in the popular tale. Akin to this chance encounter, Batmanghelidjh enters into Tirafkan's practice almost at random.

Malekeh Nayiny's autobiographical piece, Traces, 2010, employs the use of digital techniques similar to the processes described above. The difference here is that Nayiny's work is tied to the personal loss of loved ones, in this case, the artists' parents. Nayiny created Traces through a process of scanning photographs and letters from her parents and adding these elements to a photograph of herself. Having moved to New York to complete her studies, during the Islamic Revolution that took place in Iran in 1979, the artist had hoped to return to her country after this period spent abroad. As the situation took a more severe turn, this became less possible and in 1993 her mother passed away in Tehran whilst she was still in America.

When Nayiny returned to Iran, her mother was buried which she describes as 'vanishing from her life'. Two years later, her father passed away and all that was left for her were traces of their lives in the form of letters, pictures and objects; in her words, evidences of their one-time presence in this world. The artist felt imbued by these references that surrounded her of her parents as they would always be present in her mind and in physical objects, which became a point of departure for making Traces.

Hassan Hajjaj, Bouchra In orange, 2000, hand painted photographic print with tyre frame, edition of 10, 66x56cm - Courtesy of the artist & Third Line gallery.

Traces as the title of the work suggests, forms a piecing together of the symbols of the artist's relationship with her deceased parents. Nayiny is the central figure in the work, which consists of two parts, a vector and view with a stream of falling photographs, all taken from what appears to be an old family album of her parents with texts in Farsi across the image. The second image is identical to the first, but here the photographs are piled up at the foot of the artist, and now facing the viewer.

Hybrid photomontage

Hybrid photomontage, for the sake of this essay, is a form of montage which stresses the laborious and succinct nature of creating, i.e. cutting and gluing, before taking it through a process of digital printing. The artist spends a considerable amount of time carefully piecing together photographs, text and other elements before printing onto a different surface as a final piece.

Iranian artist Afsoon stresses the time-consuming nature of the process and emphasizes that the work is created by hand, in keeping with the traditional Dadaist ethos of cut and paste. Afsoon starts the creative process by deciding on a background, which for Stalin (Tehran Conference. Let's Play Boys), 2009, is a traditional headscarf often worn by working class peasant women. The headscarf is a symbol of the masses and is often used by workers and farmers. Its red colour represents the mass extermination that occurred during and after World War II under Stalin's regime.

The main focus of this work is the infamous Tehran

Malekeh Nayiny, Traces, 2000, digital print, edition of 6, 100x73.5cm - Courtesy of the artist.

Sadegh Tirafkan, Camilla in wonderland #1, 2011, digital print, edition of 6, 101x77cm - Courtesy of the artist.

Conference of 1943 between Joseph Stalin, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill. She likens this situation to child's play or rather, 'a meeting of three leaders who are like little kids playing with people as kids play with toys' . She replicates an image of a toy astronaut as a symbol of the then USSR and Stalin's sponsorship of travel into space. All the other elements of the collage are added later and once completed, each section is scanned and copied repeatedly before finally being printed. Although other members of the conference are notably absent from the work, Afsoon uses the title as a way to comment on how world leaders throughout history, and in present times, meet to decide on matters that affect current and future generations.

She positions this image as a space for political engagement by adding recognisable elements into important moments in history.

Conclusion

Photomontage can be described as the production of allegorical images, expressing at times a visual language as symbolic fictional figures or actions of truths. Due to its fragmentary nature, it questions generalisations about human existence and experience by proposing a space for critical engagement of past and present histories. Michelle Langford proposes that the 'tableauisation' of space prevents the presentation of a homogenous spatio-temporal continuum, and rather involves the opening up of independent spatio-temporal periods or sections, moments which themselves become the locus of diverse temporalities: past, present, future, memory, hope .

The MENA region's history has in part relied on storytelling and the passing of traditions from one generation to the next. Today, there is currency for

retelling or reinterpreting histories as foundations of the past are being questioned in the wake of the on-going Arab Spring. Prior to this uprising, there was a younger generation who continually questioned the ways of older generations and now have a voice for change and freedom of expression. Photomontage lends itself a useful tool in communicating history in the making. As our lives become stories for a future generation, this genre-defying process becomes a critique of how our lives become stories by acting as a space for questions and reconciliations. Its popularity lies in its ability to propose a space for investigation and experimentation, as opposed to one that offers a single meaning. It is the language for and of contested spaces.

About the Writer

Jareh Das is a young curator who currently works on Communications and Artist Liaison in a Dubai gallery. She has worked between London and Middleborough at MIMA (Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art) and holds an MA in Curating Contemporary Art from London's Royal College of Art. Recently curated exhibitions include: Ubi sunt, a group exhibition of UK and international emerging and established artists which created an experiential environment in a disused chapel in South London. She has also worked on curatorial projects at 176 Zabludowicz Collection, ACME Project Space, London and participated in the Manchester International Festival, 2011. She has written numerous article sin various publications in UK & UAE.

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