

Profile on Pooneh Maghazehe

By Isabella Ellalah Hughes



Cockette's Cusp (Act 1, Scene 2), 2010, digital C-Print, 76 × 101.5 cm, Edition 1/5 5 – Courtesy of the artist.

Pooneh Maghazehe (b. 1979, Brooklyn, New York) is one of those rare artists whose aesthetic and conceptual oeuvre can perpetually catch one by surprise. Maghazehe, who earned her MFA from Columbia University in 2011, first garnered widespread notice in 2009 as part of the Chelsea Art Museum's blockbuster group exhibition, *Iran Inside Out*. Since then, she has generally moved on from addressing Iranian heritage and culture, which were sometimes principal themes in her earlier bodies of work, to investigating ideas, feelings and histories that rarely have anything to do with her own ethnic background. This approach is surprisingly refreshing and distinct – these days, most artists of

Middle Eastern descent pay homage to the commercial interests, awards and exhibition opportunities that abound for those working under the label 'Middle Eastern artist.' When commenting on her experience with *Iran Inside Out*, Maghazehe says, "the *Iran Inside Out* show directly exposed me to an art market and Middle East art scene that I was mostly unfamiliar with at the time. I've been processing it for the past couple years, considering my position on all this. I've arrived in an odd gap now between the Middle Eastern scene and New York that elicits a certain level of anxiety provoking uncertainty, but still a relief. I like the elbow room." Equally broad in her examination of ideas, are the



Cockettes' Cusp (Act 1, Scene 1), 2010, digital C-Print, 76×101.5cm, Edition 1/5 – Courtesy of the artist.

mediums that Maghazehe works in, which again leads her to deviate from being simply categorized as a mere 'visual artist' - she is much more than that. In most of her complex and highly imaginative multifaceted photography, performance and video projects, she takes on a multitude of roles, making her at once some combination of: visual artist, set designer, director, historian, filmmaker, performer and/or fashion designer, quite reminiscent of a young Matthew Barney.

An example of her work best illustrating her ability to take on various roles is seen in *Cockettes' Cusp* (2010), a vivid series of staged photographs set amidst a piercing blue sky in the Bonneville Salt Flats of Utah. *Cockettes' Cusp* exudes theatrical qualities and an interest in the physical movement of the body, both via the costumes that an amalgam of Caucasian subjects, who are actively involved in manual labor, wear (they are outfitted in 21st century incarnations of tribal, nomadic attire typically donned in Central Asia, designed by the artist),

to the way in which the photographs are labeled and presented. Each individual photograph is categorized as different 'acts' and 'scenes.' *Cockettes' Cusp* is based on Maghazehe's research stemming from the history of the Diggers of 1649, which she explains are "the first documented example of an insular, self-regulated agrarian Puritan society. The name was adapted over two centuries later by community activists and improv actors in the Haight -Ashbury area of San Francisco. Following the ideals of the original troupe, the Diggers of '68 arranged places to sleep for the homeless and dispensed free loaves of whole wheat bread. The Cockettes emerged from the San Francisco Diggers, later to become a New York sensation, and arguably set precedent in performance and camp theory."

Elements of performativity, even if the end result is a series of tangible photographs, are amongst the central aspects found in Maghazehe's practice, which she addresses, saying, "performativity or the potential



Elenis Jesus Juice Bowl, 48" x 36" x 56", 2012, Eleni's corner connecting sectional piece, gold leaf - Courtesy of Pooneh Maghazehe.

for a piece to suggest movement has a place in a lot of my ideas. I'm always drawn to the implied stage, the boundary between what is dramatized and reality. The idea of 'putting on' a character is attractive. If there is a notion of performativity in my work, it is an inherent property rather than a later addition. Like, the photos I make feel more like film stills than photos."

Even when working with non-human subjects, such as pre-owned sofas that are stripped and gold-leafed, transformed into eerily familiar, yet at the same time dauntingly confusing sculptures that are then photographed in the *Conduit for the Negativist* (2011) series, suggests a reference to the theatrical. When photographed, the reworked sofas appear as dramatized props in a play, stuck somewhere between reality and fantasy, passive aggressive in their reconfiguration. For Maghazehe, "the sofa can mark the very epicenter of

our lives," she says. Seeing herself as a storyteller, in this series, she explains, "I conflate, dramatize and erase the identity of the object, forcing interdependence between the form and narratives it references. I have a non-committal attitude towards the accuracy of the content I utilize; it is more important for my works to synthesize a condition grander than the individual details - an overall persona."

With performativity and the theatrical being central to her practice, it is no wonder that Maghazehe is an accomplished performance artist in her own right. In her 2012 collaborative performance with Nick Paparone, *Keynotes*, at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, Maghazehe and Paparone used crushed black felt, Fiji brand water, business casual attire, office chairs and an alarm clock over a period of 45 minutes to construct this piece. The performance altered between



PHILLIPINE.LOVE.BED, 58 "x 72", 2012, Chris's newlywed sleeper couch, leather, paint, metal tubing, Courtesy of Pooneh Maghazehe

the two of them being silent and then yelling, sometimes simultaneously, into the crushed black felt that they hang on a wall in front of them during the performance itself about subjects pertaining to corporate, sterile office culture. Maghazehe and Paparone's intensely frustrated yelling operates very much as a cathartic release for all those stuck in the corporate grind, enabling viewers to live vicariously through their actions.

With her endless curiosity and energy, Maghazehe has a host of new projects and collaborations lined up for 2013. After recently wrapping a video shoot in Germany, which resulted in the film *Sandbox* (2012), Maghazehe is currently teaming up with artist Nadjia Frank in forming the music collaboration band "Black Pink Panther," where Maghazehe will be performing short stories. This will debut in January 2013 at This Red Door, a project run by Jomar Statkun and Chris

Stackhouse in New York. Maghazehe is most certainly a young artist to watch, who will continue to create and amaze in a most unusual and refreshingly original approach.

About the writer

Isabella Ellabeh Hughes is a curator and critic based between Dubai and Honolulu.