

Art (Un)interrupted – The history of visual culture in Iran

By: Marina Lordan



Mazdak Ayari *L'appareil photo en famille*, 2001-2013 Diaporama (600 images, 50 minutes), From the artist's collection, Courtesy of Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris.

Once a leading empire, home to the world's major civilizations, Iran has a history of leadership, decline and resurgence that has repeated itself over centuries, and makes it an unavoidable component of the

modern world's geopolitical equations. During the 20th century, the country witnessed a succession of regimes and conflicts, from the dynasty led by Reza Shah Pahlavi since the end of World War I to the rule

of Ayatollah Khomeini from 1979, marking the Islamic Revolution, followed by the Gulf war, the CIA's coup of 1953 and Ahmadinejad's presidency until 2013. Due to the many changes Iran has experienced since the 1960's – economic reorganization, struggles to control natural resources, leadership transitions – its visual heritage proves extremely rich, whether by the media used or tones and messages expressed. Indeed, Iranian practitioners have a lot to say and their translation of modern issues transpire through photography, cinema, painting, drawing and performing arts. All of these individuals combined are key to understanding the visual culture of Iran, which is complemented by a remarkable tradition of documentary practices. Focusing on Iran's past five decades, *Unedited History*, presented at the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris this summer, explored the history of visual culture as a parallel to the country's socio-political evolution, assembling fragments of the past to reconstruct a historical narrative. Forgotten or overseen for many years, Iranian art and its history are known to the common westerner, or even to the Iranian living abroad, through commercial figures and auction results which make headlines: through art that is far from symptomatic of the country's longstanding tradition of the visual.

The stereotyped ideas spread by the Western media do not help. Meanwhile, Iranian art was and is happening, exporting itself to art hubs such as Dubai for the pleasure of more discerning Middle Eastern collectors.

1960 – 1978

From the early 1960s and up until the revolution, the State led by Shah Pahlavi supported a burgeoning artistic movement, considering it an important component in building a national identity, and, on a more global level, a gateway to westernization. Iran's petro dollar facilitated the acquisition of notable works from both local and international artists, expanding the country's cultural horizons. With the flourishing economic situation, museums, galleries and cultural events started to see the light of day. This boom in cultural infrastructures led to a worldwide recognition of Iranian contemporary artists. One of the main influencers of this cultural expansion was the Shah's wife – Farah Diba. Her active involvement in promoting

young local artists was paired with the aim to publicize Iran's legendary heritage. Visiting and supporting exhibitions and other cultural events, the Empress gave incentives to a multitude of activities encompassing various disciplines and opening the borders to Iranian art. Bahman Mohassess (1931-2010) was one of the most significant figures who represented this western orientation, with strong links to Rome where he studied, lived and created. Painter, sculptor and theatre director, Mohassess produced heavily during his Italian exile. The mix of identities and influences seen in his work is undeniable proof of an internal dialogue between his native country and the one he adopted. The absence of a strictly Iranian identity is also present in the purely abstract works of Behdjat Sadr (1924 – 2009). Allying calligraphy and ideas of movement, her art is the result of European explorations, which lead her to non-traditional experiments such as the use of industrial paint on her canvases lying flat on the floor. Multimedia is a common thread among the pre-revolution artists, who turn to video, photography and caricature to document the harsh realities of everyday life across Iran. In a photographic series shot over two years in Tehran's Sharh-e No brothel district, photojournalist Kaveh Golestan (1950 – 2003) recorded the precarious lives of prostitutes under the Shah's reign. Reporting on subhuman living conditions and daily death threats, Golestan's work acquires a humanitarian dimension. The videos of Parviz Kimiavi (b.1939) are another form of sharing insights into the lives of the Iranian population at the crossroads of documentary and fiction. Supported by national television, Kimiavi travelled across regions to capture Iranian heritage and the way people lived around it. His protagonists are non-professionals, playing their own characters in productions that acquire a cultural dimension. Following on from here came a less traditional discipline, omnipresent in Iran from the early 1970's – graphic arts. Far more than in other countries, it was included in exhibitions and considered as a true visual practice. The works of Morteza Momayez (1935 – 2005) and Ardeshir Mohassess (1938 – 2008) are a perfect example of this dynamic practice. While Momayez illustrated covers of the literary revue *Ketâb-e Jom'eh* [Friday Book], Mohassess drew for dailies and weeklies, and finally moved to illustrating for the New

York Times. Along with the socio-political situation in Iran, during the years leading to the Revolution, both artists saw their work evolve, from satire and caricature towards a more politically engaged tone, linking issues voiced in Iran to the situation in neighboring territories. A result of the Pahlavi dynasty's efforts of westernization, supported by Iran's National Radio and Television, the Festival of Shiraz-Persépolis, played a significant role in opening Iran to the world. Held annually from 1967 to 1978, the summer festival gathered performing arts from the East and the West. Through a variety of programs, it gave access to international music, dance and theatre to a younger generation, opening cultural doors to both wealthy art amateurs and less privileged audiences. Beyond a platform facilitating an aesthetic dialogue between performers and the audience, the festival grew to be an ideological arena over the years. It brought together thinkers and offered them a space to share opinions and ideas. It instigated debate on social and political matters on an international level, and is therefore considered as an important reference point in Iran's visual culture.

1979 - 1988

During the agitated years leading to the Revolution, a transformation in artistic statements is clearly visible. From modern iconography reflecting the growing Persian dynasty, practices evolved into a noticeable illustration of ideologies opposing social classes, symptomatic of an upcoming unrest. Intensified civil resistance and demonstrations lead to the destitution of the Shah in 1979 when the Revolution transformed the country from Persian to Islamic culture, led by Ayatollah Khomeini. The profound socio-political shift had a great impact on culture. The censorship invading all forms of art led faculties, galleries and other institutions to shut down. Beyond the interdiction of images judged "immoral" by the new regime, an increasing safety concern led to the emigration of many artists during the Revolution and in the years thereafter. Facing real ruptures because of difficulties due to their exile, they became marginalized. In the work of those able to carry on with their practice, a certain need for documentation emerged, further enhanced during the Iran/Iraq war. Through incredibly diverse images and videos, artists



Kaveh Golestan Prostitute Series, 1975-1977.

managed to reconstitute fragments of these two historically, sociologically and ideologically inseparable events. In his video entitled *Flowers*, filmmaker Bahman Giarostami (b. 1978) assembled significant moments of the Revolution - its announcement and the chaotic takeover of the national media by the Islamic regime. His practice is deeply rooted into the analysis of sociological and cultural issues, and their complex mutations. Another influential figure of Iran's documentary school, Kamran Shirdel (b. 1939), recorded the growing intensity of revolutionary texts and posters seen on the walls of Tehran, or at the Faculty of Fine Arts exhibition organized by its students. Assembled in a documentary called *Memories of Destruction*, his unedited rushes are evidence of the revolutionary spread. Turning to photography, Bahman Jalali (1944

– 2010) and Rana Javadi (b. 1953) covered the 1979 events in *Days of Blood, Days of Fire*, a book censored shortly after its publication. Jalali's documentary involvement continued throughout the Iran/Iraq war, when he reported the progressive destruction in the city of Khorramshahr. Jalali's active role is also seen in the photographs showing the everyday lives and deaths of the soldiers he regularly visited in their combat zones. The port city of Khorramshahr was common ground for photographer Jassem Ghazbanpour (b. 1963), who built an archive containing thousands of images related to the soldiers living on the front. Ghazbanpour is also known for documenting other key episodes of the war, such as the bombings of Tehran and the chemical attack on Halabja. Beyond the fighters' living conditions, the *Haqiqat* [Truth] television series of acclaimed filmmaker Morteza Avini (1947 – 1993), examined a deeper aspect of the conflict. The focus on the volunteer Muslim soldiers, whose aim is not only to protect the nation but to preserve their religion, reveal that combat was also on ideological grounds as shown in Avini's work.

1989 – 2014

Pre and post Revolution, visual practices are clearly interlinked, despite obvious ruptures. Born from a desire to report the country's transformations, video and photography have evolved into documentary tools, playing a significant role in Iran's visual culture. In the years following the end of the Iran/Iraq war, practices started to lose of their reactionary dimension and progress into conceptualism. In 1997, the ascension to presidency of former Minister of Culture, Mohammad Khatami was a turning point for the art scene. Galleries were no longer restricted in their programming and started showing contemporary artists who dared to test the limits of the current regime. Khatami's efforts to reestablish diplomatic relations with the rest of the world opened the borders for Iranian artists who began to regain freedom of expression. This fundamental change led Iranian visual culture to pick up where it left off in 1979. With the reopening of the cultural borders and strengthened relationships between Iran and the rest of the world, many Iranian artists were exhibited outside of the country. This emergence of Iranian art on the global art market also led to less positive consequences.



Mitra Farahani, *Begir bebar dast az saram bardâr* [Take my head but don't have a run-in with me], 2014, Charcoal on canvas, From the artist's collection, Courtesy of Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris.



Behdjat Sadr Untitled, Oil on canvas, 1974, Private collection, Courtesy of Galerie Frédéric Lacroix.

A number of artists fell into the stereotypical trap of commercial clichés and keen labeling, adapting their practice to the expectations of the western market. The engagement and ideological unity seen during the traumatic episodes of the past decade seemed to fade out as the contemporary practitioners distanced themselves from social responsibility in a certain way. On the other hand, and despite their unquestionable contribution to the modern and contemporary art scene, more engaged artists were overlooked, especially by western audiences. These practitioners refused to observe the rules of contemporary art and its market dictations, preserving instead their strong relation to the social and political history of Iran.

Following this vein, photography as a documentary practice has continued to evolve with artists such as Mohsen Rastani (b. 1958), a former war photo reporter. For the past twenty years, Rastani has travelled Iran with a white backdrop, taking photographs of the population in scattered villages or dense cities. His

Iranian Family series are portraits highlighting social diversities post revolution, hinting at the same time at cultural homogeneities among the population. From strangers to habitual figures, Mazdak Ayari (b. 1976) photographs his friends and close family members. He creates an intimate journal of portraits and private moments, giving an insight into what life in Iran has been like for the past ten years. The works of Tahmineh Monzavi (b. 1988) seem as a link to Kaveh Golestan's socially engaged photographs during the 1970's. With exclusion or marginalization as central topics, she explores women's lives in Tehran, showing images of safe houses for the homeless and for drug addicts. Other more contrasting series unveil the cheerful bustle of young men creating bridal gowns inside dilapidated workshops, or underground fashion shows organised in Tehran. Between photography and modern images, Mitra Farahani's (b. 1975) hyper realistic drawings are an extension of documentary practices combined with hints of cynicism. The characters she portrays, whether

soldiers or civilians, hold doubles of their heads loose in their hands. This provocative work distances Farahani from the conformism of commercial art seen among the young generation. Contemporary years also see the emergence of artists turning to experimental media and practices, not taught in Iran at the time.

Narmine Sadeg (b. 1955) is one of the pioneers of this movement. Her installation of migrant birds, titled *Office of Investigation into Diverted Trajectories*, is a reinterpretation of *The Conference of the Birds*, by 12th century Iranian poet Farid al-Din Attar. Telling the journey of the world's birds to find their leader, Sadeg's installation is an allegory of a life in exile and of the search for identity. Her work is an exploration of borders, whether real and delimitating countries or imaginary and sectioning territories in conflict.. Also turning to unconventional methods, Barbad Golshiri (b. 1982) creates tombstones. He commemorates the victims of oppression, who died in unclear circumstances, or simply pays tribute to historical figures he admires, giving both a new voice with inscriptions engraved into the stone. Chohreh Feyzjdjou (1955 – 1996) is one of the artists he honors, using her favorite media - wax and walnut stain – as a nod to her practice resulting from a reflection on the passing of time. Feyzjdjou used to classify her own works and stored them inside jars, wallpapers or trunks, in an effort to document and preserve her own existence. Her exploration of time was paired with a critique of consumerism and art market tendencies. She designed products out of cheap materials under the label “Product of Chohreh Feyzjdjou”, ironically hinting at the transformation of practices in contemporary Iran to satisfy the western market's demands. In 2005, Iran's borders to the Western world closed again and those artists who remained in Iran saw a new wave of censorship strike their practices. While Islamic traditional art was strongly encouraged, other forms of more contemporary art remained under the veil of censorship. After eight years of oppression, hopes were high in 2013 with the newly elected, moderate government. Cultural institutions, such as the Iranian House of Cinema, reopened their doors and publishing houses regained their licenses. But this apparent effort to rebuild freedom of expression, giving artists their voices back, was followed by encouragements for more positive

forms of art, instead of reflections on past repressions. The conjunction of censorship in its various forms over the last decades, alongside profound transformations during the Revolution, war and subsequent regimes, have created ruptures in Iran's visual culture. Artists who remain within the local context today still experience the pressures of creative restriction, paired with a lack of in-depth feedback and critical responses to their work. Many others are between local and exile, their nomadic lives exempting them from censorship constraints. And yet, intersections in Iran's visual culture remain visible with those artists who stayed true to their practice, pursuing their creation of reflexive and singularly engaged pieces. The exploration thereof opens the door to a debate, and at the same time offers a platform to rediscover and reflect upon the history of Iran, rather than just showcasing the art scene, no matter how prolific. While politics unavoidably defined their art, actors within Iranian visual culture became reporters rather than protesters. Throughout successive regime shifts and conflicts, their work is motivated by a desire and necessity to document their country's evolution. Narrating significant historical moments witnessed during the course of their existence, they preserve the tradition of their predecessors and manage to reconstitute fragments of modern Iran. Instead of obsessing over a tumultuous past, their work brings hope to people and, in a way, becomes a form of peaceful resistance. The common thread seen across documentary practices and their various forms is an absence of personal interest, revealing an engagement and commitment beyond individual artistic aspirations and personal ambitions. For this reason, Iranian art becomes more accessible, democratic and progressive, gaining an educational dimension thus enlightening audiences about the country's tumultuous socio-political evolution, that has influenced visual culture in many ways.

About the Writer

Marina Lordan is a freelance writer, editor and art consultant based in the United Arab Emirates. She regularly contributes to a number of publications, which all have Middle Eastern culture as common thread. Her most recent articles were published in Aesthetica Magazine, Global Citizen Magazine, and Buro 24/7 Middle East. In her blog, My Velvet Instant, she explores the art scene in and out of Dubai, focusing on contemporary art from the Middle East and Arab world.