Iran, Année 38, Rencontres d’Arles—« Lettres persanes »
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Shadi Ghadirian, Qajar, 1998, permission / courtesy Silk Road Gallery
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Written in Farsi on a white box abandoned on the black asphalt of Pahlavi Avenue in Tehran, the day after the Islamic revolution prevailed – on February 11, 1979 – is “The nation is victorious.” This is the first image in the exhibition Iran, Année 38, presented at the most recent edition of the Rencontres d’Arles. Thirty-eight years in images, sixty-six photographers, and, as a backdrop, an emergent country, with its conflicts, contradictions, traditions, and all the poetry of its imagination. Of course, it is not by chance that the curators, Anahita Ghabaian Etehadieh (director of the Silk Road Gallery, Tehran) and Newsha Tavakolian (Magnum Photos), chose to open the exhibition on a documentary note. It is a way of presenting one of the major events in twentieth-century Iranian history, and a way of linking contemporary Iranian photography to a specific historical period. And yet, all we have to do is lift our eyes from this image to glimpse, in the distance, a completely different image at the back of Sainte-Anne church, which is hosting the exhibition. This picture, taken during shooting of the movie Taste of Cherry (1997), shows the celebrated Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami from the back as he peeks through a curiously “closed” gate at an empty landscape.

The exhibition, in which “poetic” never means “distanted from history,” takes place in the gap between these two images. The resulting rich dialogue between documentary and art photography is organized into eight sections. Presented here are not only the major historical upheavals of contemporary Iran – the Islamic revolution (1979) and the Iran–Iraq war (1980–88), along with their political and religious outcomes – but also a country of majestic landscapes threatened by environmental crisis, and, above all, a portrait of Iranian society’s most intimate recesses, tragedies, expectations, and multiple contradictions. In terms of the contradictions, it is the tension between tradition and modernity that provides the most graphically poetic images, in which identity is sought through the Persian poetic tradition and the ancient heritage of the Persian empire. It is in this vein that the exhibition closes with references to Kiarostami and Iranian filmmaking, crucible of traditions and new narratives, the visual quotation of which reaffirms the influence of the poetic over the real.

A successful follow-up to Etehadieh’s first book, La photographie iranienne. Un regard sur la création contemporaine (2011), Iran, Année 38 includes photojournalism pictures that speak to both the exhibition’s panoramic scope and the desire to survey the country’s history through photography, including, for the first time, images taken during the Iranian revolution.
Abbas Kowsari, de la série / from the series L’Ombre de la terre / The shadow of the earth, Talaiye, 2008

Azin Haghighi, Sans titre / Untitled, 2015
C’est de cette difficile relation du régime avec les images que nous parlons d’ailleurs le cliché de Kazemi (12 février 1979) où l’on voit la main d’une femme armée et en tchador, membre des forces révolutionnaires, se lever contre l’appareil photo. Traduction visuelle de l’interdiction de plus en plus fréquente de la prise d’images ou de leur diffusion.


Photographs by Kaveh Kazemi, Bahman Jalali, Maryam Zandi, and Rana Javadi reveal all the ferment and commitment of Iranian young people during demonstrations, as well as the strong repression exerted during the months preceding the birth of the Islamic Republic proclaimed by Ayatollah Rouhollah Khomeini. It is this difficult relationship between the regime and images that a shot taken by Kazemi (on February 12, 1979) portrays: we see the hand of an armed woman in a chador, a member of the revolutionary forces, held up against the camera. It is a visual translation of the increasingly frequent bans on recording or distributing images.

It was in part in reaction to the desire to control images, which resurfaced in 2009 during the “green revolution” against the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–13), that art photography began to develop, a sign of the need to create spaces for expression and “staging reality,” in a context in which the production of images remained heavily supervised. According to Newsha Tavakolian, being an artist in Iran is like walking in a minefield, as artists have to comply with a series of constraints in order for their images to circulate in public and be exhibited in the many Tehran galleries. Many codes structured the conception and production of photographic images, including the choice of subjects, and artists are constantly trying to find ways around them. For example, representation of the human body is still taboo and for women the veil remains a constant, both in life and in pictures.

This has not kept photographers from offering their interpretation of the country, often by casting a critical gaze at it and unveiling its most private features. To do this, real and symbolic reference to the space of the home is very present not only during the making of images, but also as a medium for inscribing in the present the visual remains of past events. This is the case for Babak Kazemi’s series Khoramshahr numéro après numéro (2008), in which dramatic images from the Iran–Iraq war are transferred onto address-number plates on houses in Khoramshahr, a border town particularly affected by the conflict; in Saba Alizadeh’s series La lumière et la Terre (2011), the war “re-enters” the home in the form of documentary images projected on a sofa in the living room. The result is emotional – silent symptoms of the mourning that still haunts Iranian families. Still linked to the space of the home, Shadi Ghadirian’s Nil Nil series features juxtapositions, both simple and upsetting, of daily objects (high heels, a plate, a bed and its bedclothes) against objects of war (weapons, bloody boots); here, Ghadirian makes room for women’s view of the conflict.

Photographing domestic space is not only about “making room” for family memories, for the absence of those who have left the country, or for depicting a refuge where all forms of outside control can be evaded. For Newsha Tavakolian, the interior of an apartment becomes a set for staging Iranian society during the era of “torpor” that occurred under Ahmadinejad’s presidency – a particularly difficult phase for the middle class because of the hardening of international sanctions that resulted from the republic’s nuclear ambitions. In her series Regard (2012–13), displayed in the exhibition in the form of video installation, we see precisely this “torpor” on numbed, deadened faces, the features immobilized by suffering in a country that is also immobilized, and the setting...
Arash Khamooshi, de la série / from the series Geste de pardon / Gesture of forgiveness, 2014

Solmaz Daryani, de la série / from the series Les Yeux de la Terre / The eyes of the earth, 2015
Babak Kazemi transfers the dramatic images of the conflict Iran-Iraq (1980–1988) onto plaques which indicate the number of Iranian homes in Khorraramshahr, the city front-line, particularly touched by this conflict, or still even of the La lumière et la Terre (2011) of Saba Alizadeh where the war «rents» in the homes with the forms of images documented projected onto the canapé of the salon. It all comes from the echoes of the museum, the series Nil Nil of Shadi Ghadirian characterized by the juxtaposition of simple objects and boulevardien artifacts (shoes, a bed, a curtain and its couvertures), to objects of war (weapons or boots) and everyday objects (high heels, a plate, a bed and its bed-covers) and she is a place to put the images, the image of the women of this conflict.

Or, photographing the domestic space does not mean to simply «donner lieu» to the memories of the families, to the absence of those who have left the country, or to describe the interior of a refuge where one can escape from all external control. For Newsha Tavakolian, for example, the inside of an apartment becomes a place to perform a ritual where the women become the centre of the scene of the Iranian society pending the end of the «torpor» era, which has been observed during the presidency of Ahmadinejad, a phase in the society of Iran characterized by the concept of «torpor» and the need to create spaces for expression and «staging reality», in a context in which the production of images resurges to control images, which emerged strongly and also infiltrates the visual field. As we can observe in Ghazaleh Hedayat’s Judas (2006), which shows a blown-up detail of an Iranian passport, photography bears witness to this questioning and gives shape to identity-related tensions in Iranian society, which is dealing with an ancient heritage and an aspiration to modernity. The poetry that surrounds these images comes from the mobilization of traditional decorative objects or motifs placed in new contexts by the photographers to give them new meaning. This is the case for Jalal Sepehr’s Zone rouge (2015), in which the carpets layout in the desert describe the “red zone” that is the Middle East, which, according to Sepehr, “begins where roads stop, where time, space, and norms are shattered.” In Babak Kazemi’s photograph, the carpet enwraps but also separates the floating bodies of a couple in a portrayal of the ancient Persian legend of Shirin and Farhad and their star-crossed encounter, which becomes a metaphor for the difficulties that couples today have with expressing their relationship freely. A Persian legend is also portrayed in the veil that covers the face of the young woman photographed by Sadegh Tirafkan, although the decorative veil seems to rob her of any possibility of speaking. On the other hand, Shadi Ghadirian’s series Qâjar (1998) reveals that as a sign of protest women of this era (1779–1925)
qui entoure ces images vient de la mobilisation d’objets ou de motifs décoratifs traditionnels que les photographes re-contextualisent afin de leur accorder une nouvelle signification. C’est le cas de Zone rouge (2015) de Jalal Sepehr, où les tapis alignés dans le désert décrivent cette « zone rouge » qu’est le Moyen-Orient et qui, d’après le photographe, « commence là où les routes s’arrêtent, là où le temps, l’espace et les normes volent en éclat ». Chez Babak Kazemi, par contre, le tapis enveloppe, mais aussi sépare les corps flottants d’un couple, figuration de l’ancienne légende persane de Shirin et Farhad et de leur rencontre impossible, qui devient une métaphore des difficultés actuelles qu’éprouvent les couples à vivre librement leur relation. Il est question d’une légende persane aussi sur le motif du voile qui couvre le visage de la jeune femme photographiée par Sadegh Tirafkan, où la décoration semble toutefois vouloir lui enlever toute possibilité de parole. En revanche, la série Qâjar (1998) de Shadi Ghadirian nous apprend que c’était en signe de protestation que les femmes de cette époque (1779–1925) soulevaient leur voile pour montrer au moins leur visage. D’où le choix de la photographe de reprendre ce thème, la même couleur sépia des images de l’époque, les mêmes poses et les mêmes gestes de ces femmes, mais avec l’ajout d’un objet symbolique qui les reconnecte à l’actualité, radio, vélo, aspirateur, journal, instrument de musique. Objets modernes, que l’image photographique relie à une forme de protestation ancienne.

Finalement, c’est peut-être dans ces tensions et dans la richesse du questionnement qu’elles suscitent que réside l’essentiel de la photographie iranienne contemporaine. Le portrait de société qu’elle nous propose nous renvoie au célèbre film Shirin de Kiarostami, repris par l’image de Gelareh Kiazand, 100 Portraits (2007), où la caméra s’attarde sur le visage de 108 femmes assistant à la projection de ce célèbre drame de la tradition persane. C’est de la même manière que cette exposition a réussi à capturer le visage de cette pays, en nous donnant à voir ses drames et comment la beauté que cette exposition a réussi à capturer le visage de ce pays, drame de la tradition persane. C’est de la même manière que les photographes re-contextualisent afin de leur accorder une nouvelle signification.

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1 Iran, année 38. 66 photographes iraniens, Rencontres d’Arles, Sainte-Anne church, July 3 to August 27, 2017. A publication has also been published in French by Éditions Textuel in 2017: Anahita Ghabaian, Newsha Tavakolian, Iran, année 38. La photographie contemporaine iranienne depuis la révolution de 1979, Paris, 192 pages, 200 photographies.

A postdoctoral student and lecturer in the department of art history and cinematographic studies at the Université de Montréal, Claudia Polledri is also the university’s academic coordinator of the Centre de recherches intermédiales sur les arts, les lettres et les techniques. She holds a doctorate in comparative literature from the Université de Montréal; her dissertation subject was photographic representations of Beirut (1982–2011). Currently she is conducting research on the relationship between image and history in Lebanese documentary cinema.