Looking Beyond the Veil: Strategies of Representation in the Works of Contemporary Iranian Women Photographers

Asieh Harati

Department of Art History and Communication Studies

McGill University, Montreal

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Abstract

One of the most dominant tropes in the visual arts from the Middle East, including Iran, is the figure of the veiled woman in the visual arts, among which photography holds sway. The veil has not had a single meaning for the West; a meaning that is rooted in Orientalism. In this study I explore how the three artists I chose decentralize the veil, focusing instead on the presence and the role of women in society, culture, and history by restaging modern Iranian photographs, by inverting and challenging the male gaze, and by using the domestic sphere to tackle identity issues. By drawing on the interconnected theories of postcolonialism and feminism, I further demonstrate how understanding the sociocultural context of Iran is indispensable in reading and interpreting images of veiled women, and how these artists challenge the hegemony of male dominance, a hegemony that is not necessarily religious. Finally, I tackle the stakes in the reception of Iranian artworks in Euro-American settings and suggest that analyzing their reception inside Iran would provide us with an invaluable insight into Iranian art.

Abstrait

Un des tropes les plus dominants dans les arts visuels du Moyen-Orient , y compris l'Iran, est la figure de la femme voilée dans les arts visuels , parmi lesquels la photographie exerce son emprise. Le voile n'a pas eu qu'une seule signification pour l'Occident ; une signification qui s'enracine dans l'orientalisme. Dans cette étude, j'explore comment les trois artistes que j'ai choisi, décentralisent le voile, se concentrant plutôt sur la présence et le rôle des femmes dans la société, la culture et l'histoire en remontant les photographies modernes iraniennes, en inversant et en contestant le regard masculin, et en utilisant la sphère domestique afin d'aborder les questions d'identité. En s'appuyant sur les théories interconnectés du postcolonialisme et du féminisme, je démontre aussi comment comprendre le contexte socioculturel de l'Iran est indispensable à la lecture et l'interprétation des images de femmes voilées, et comment ces artistes défie l'hégémonie de la domination masculine, une hégémonie qui n'est pas nécessairement religieuse. Finalement, j'aborde les enjeux de la réception des œuvres d'art iraniens dans les milieux euro-américains, et suggère que l'analyse de leur réception à l'intérieur de l'Iran nous fournit un aperçu inestimable de l'art iranien.

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Introduction

Iranian contemporary art in the past two decades has found remarkable visibility on the international art scene, ranging from prominent biennials (Sharjah, Istanbul, Venice, Moscow) and auctions (Sotheby's, Christies, Art Dubai) to group and solo exhibitions at renowned museums (Victoria and Albert Museum [V&A], Boston Museum of Fine Arts, LACMA) and galleries (Somerset House, Thomas Erben Gallery, Cicero Gallery). Among the exhibitions on photography, *Light from the Middle East: New Photography* presented at V&A in 2012-2013 is of high importance because of its thematic curatorial rather than regional approach. Divided into three sections, Recording, Reframing, and Resisting, the exhibition explored how some artists "use the camera to record or bear witness, while others subvert that process to reveal how surprisingly the photograph can be."[1] Another important feature of this exhibition was the range of the works from documentary photography to highly stated images.

One of the most dominant tropes in the visual arts from the Middle East, including Iran, is the figure of the veiled woman in the visual arts, among which photography holds sway. The veil has not had a single meaning for the West; a meaning that is rooted in Orientalism, which in Edward Said's words, is "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident.'"[2] This meaning is constructed as part of a whole series of 'interests' by corporate institutions dealing with the Orient with "a certain *will* or *intention* to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is manifestly different," here, the Oriental woman with her mystifying veil.[3]

In *The Colonial Harem* [1986], Malek Alloula investigates Orientalist photographic

[1] "Light from the Middle East: About the Exhibition," Victoria and Albert Museum, November 2012;
[2] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 2.
[3] Said, *Orientalism,* 3, 12.

representations of Muslim Algerian women in postcards taken mostly by Frenchmen. The harem as one of the central icons of Orientalist representations in literature, painting, and photography stands for exoticism, eroticism, and oppression of the Oriental woman. As Barbara Harlow notes, the postcards "no longer represent Algeria and the Algerian woman but rather the Frenchman's phantasm of the Oriental female and her inaccessibility behind the veil in the forbidden harem."[4] The veil, as Alloula indicates, is "seen by the photographer as a sort of perfect and generalized mask…[it recalls] in individualized fashion, the closure of private space. It signifies an injunction of no trespassing upon this space, and it extends it to another space, the one in which the photographer is to be found: public space."[5] The familiar and much-analyzed Orientalist gaze through which the veil is viewed as exotic and the veiled woman as an object of desire was replaced after the Iranian revolution by a Western gaze that unequivocally associated veiled woman with oppression. Finally, after 9/11, the latter was combined with the Islamophobic gaze through which the veil is seen as a highly visible sign of a despised difference.[6] Western galleries and museums have worked on a selective basis to exhibit works that reveal signs of cultural difference to sustain a historical notion of otherness. Although this practice has started to change in the past few years, it is still dominant. The visual appearance of the veil has been the focus of many of the chosen works for the exhibitions outside of the country. In the Western imaginary, the veil is thus most often associated with preconceived notions of Islamic Identity. As a result, these images have created a limited stereotype of Iranian women, which instead of demonstrating a diverse representation of them construct an over-simplified representation or rather,

[4] Barbara Harlow, introduction, in *The Colonial Harem* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), xiv.
[5] Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 11,13.
[6] See Donnell Alison, "Visibility, Violence and Voice?: Attitudes to Veiling Post-11 September," in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (London: Routledge, 2010), 444-451.

misrepresentation.[7] However, we should read these images in the light of the fact that more than ninety percent of Iranians are Muslims, and thus Islam is a factor in understanding the collective identity of Iranian people.

Some women artists, however, have not fully complied with the expectations of the global art market and have refused to conform their images to this homogenized stereotype of the veiled Muslim woman as a sign of the Orient. In this thesis I have chosen three photographers working in Iran[8] who have developed different strategies of representation. Shadi Ghadirian, born in 1974 and based in Iran; Mehraneh Atashi, born in 1980, used to live and work in Tehran but left in 2011; Newsha Tavakolian, born in 1981, based in Tehran. Unlike Ghadirian and Atashi who hold BFA's in photography and exhibited after their graduation, Tavakolian is a self-taught photographer and started her work at the age of 16. Two years later Tavakolian became a photojournalist and now critics describe her work as a mix of social documentary and fine art.[9]

In this study I explore how these artists decentralize the veil, focusing instead on the presence and the role of women in society, culture, and history by restaging modern Iranian photographs, by inverting and challenging the male gaze, and by using the domestic sphere to tackle identity issues. By drawing on the interconnected theories of postcolonialism and feminism, I further demonstrate how understanding the sociocultural context of Iran is indispensable in reading and interpreting images of veiled women, and how these artists challenge the hegemony of male dominance, a hegemony that is not necessarily religious. Finally, I tackle the stakes in the reception of Iranian artworks in Euro-American settings and

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[7] Foad Torshizi, "The Unveiled Apple: Ethnicity, Gender, and the Limits of Inter-discursive Interpretation of Iranian Contemporary Art," *Iranian Studies* 45, no. 4 (2012): 556.

[8] The works I have chosen for this thesis were all made in Iran. However, Mehraneh Atashi who started her work in 2002, left Iran in 2011.

[9] Newsha Tavakolian, "Newsha Tavakolian Photography," Newsha Tavakolian Photography; http://www.newshatavakolian.com/#mi=1&pt=0&pi=2&p=-1&a=0&at=0; accessed August 01, 2014.

suggest that analyzing their reception inside Iran would provide us with an invaluable insight into Iranian art. Throughout this thesis, I will draw extensively on British cultural theorist Stuart Hall's theory of identity. While I refer to *white* feminists such as Julia Kristeva, Sally Kitch, Barbara Creed, and Joan Copjec, I believe that writings by women of color feminism are indispensible to any study of women in the Middle East. As a result my feminist analysis is informed by Meyda Yegenoglu, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Fatima Mernissi, and Fatma Müge, Göçek.

Apart from my interest in their works, my choice of the photographers for this thesis was made based on a few criteria: the exhibition of their work both inside and outside Iran, the work being made inside Iran, their active status as artist/photographer, and most importantly, their strategies of representation. There are a few reasons that I chose works by artists who work or worked inside Iran as opposed to those in diaspora.[10] The artists living inside Iran have a better chance of being connected to and aware of the particularities of Iranian society. Many diasporic artists who have left Iran decades ago either did not go back or, if they did, they did not have a chance to visit Iran regularly. A well-known example is Shirin Neshat, who went back in 1990 but did not or could not continue her visits after 1996.[11] However, I do not mean to suggest that all artists in Iran are aware of or invested in examining the changes in their society. As the art critic, Hamid Severi says,

> There are many who live here in Iran but experience life in Iran less. Their minds are so saturated with here that they even see the issues in Iran less. On the other hand, there are those in Iran who are so

[10] Although the term diaspora has most often been used to refer to African and Jewish populations, its usage has extended to people (especially artists and writers) who experience forced migration in general. As an example see Salwa Mikdadi, "West Asia: Postmodernism, the Diaspora, and Women Artists," Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000; http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/dias/hd_dias.htm; accessed January 05, 2015.

[11] See "A Conversation with Shirin Neshat," in *My Sister, Guard Your Veil ; My Brother, Guard Your Eyes: Uncensored Iranian Voices*, ed. Lila Azam Zanganeh, by Lila Azam Zanganeh (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2006), 44.

> immersed in what is happening outside Iran that they do not have a lived experience in and contact with the space they are surrounded by; they do not follow the local news, nor do they watch the films made here for instance; they're involved in the everyday.[12]

Other differences are important to consider as well. Whereas artists in diaspora were confronted with the familiar Orientalist gaze through which Iran was seen and wanted to be seen, artists inside Iran had to negotiate the Iranian state as well. More often than not, the work of diasporic artists is affected and even overshadowed by their position as exiles. Exiles are different from others wherever they are. They carry the pain for the longing and the separation from their family and land. As William Gass notes, "Under the collective conception, exile is an unmitigated catastrophe for the person expelled, since the entire self would depend upon the definition given to it by the State."[13] The exile is always different; different in a way that evokes sympathy. "To be exiled" as Gass suggests, is not to be flung out of any door, but of your own door, it is to lose your home where home suggests close emotional belonging and the gnarled roots of one's identity."[14] Since Iranian women "embody the political transformation" and are indicative of the "structure and ideology of the government", the position of Iranian women artists in exile is more highlighted; they are regarded as "the speaker of their people" and some, like Shirin Neshat are even "critical of the west in the construction of their identity."[15] Tackling issues of gender are in one way or another related to religion and/or politics. These issues span from the presence of women in the public sphere and their sociopolitical role, their denial of entry into spaces exclusive to men, and their appearance within the private space including the

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[12] All the citations from the following source are the author's translation. Hamid Severi, interview by author, Tehran, June 7, 2014.
[13] William H. Gass, "Exile," *Salmagundi* 88/89 (Fall 1990): 96.
[14] Gass, *Exile,* 97.
[15] *Art in Exile*, perf. Shirin Neshat, TED Talk, December 2010; http://www.ted.com/talks/shirin_neshat_art_in_exile?language=en#t-48398; accessed October 28, 2014.

domestic sphere where gender roles can be more pronounced. In order to exhibit inside Iran, they had to be vigilant with respect to the state policies that are more often than not unclear and based on unwritten directives rather than stipulated laws. Last by not least, I chose artists inside Iran who exhibit both locally and internationally for the purpose of the comparative analysis of the reception of their work. The English literature written by Western critics on Iranian art sometimes fails to address the sociocultural context of these works and merely investigates them and their reception in relation to the Euro-American setting. While doing my field research in Tehran, I studied primary sources including a number of magazines and journals that specialize in art and photography, as well as two master's theses which critically engage with Iranian art and specifically with the work of contemporary Iranian women photographers. I also interviewed an art critic and two of the photographers whose work I explore in this thesis. My field research was indispensable to my thesis, which aims at creating a conversation between primary sources in Persian and secondary, English sources to create a more thorough understanding of Iranian art.

Before I start with the works by these artists, it is perhaps worthwhile to explain why I chose photography as a medium to investigate strategies of representation. The beginning of the history of photography in the Near East, as Perez asserts, "coincides with the general history of the medium" and the first photographic apparatus was given to the Qajar monarch "sometime between 1839 and 1842 by the two colonial powers in Iran—England and Russia."[16] The apparatus was however not used until 1844 when Nasir al-Din Shah, the king of Qajar who was fascinated by photography, learned it from the French educator, Jules Richard, who came to Iran.[17] Unlike Europe where daguerreotype was common among the middle class, in the

[16] Nissan Perez, *Focus East: Early Photography in the Near East (1839-1885)* (New York: Abrams, 1988), 15; Ali Behdad, "The Powerful Art of Qajar Photography: Orientalism and (self)-orientalizing in Nineteenth-century Iran," *Iranian Studies* 34, no. 1-4 (2001): 144.
[17] Behdad, *The Powerful Art of Qajar Photography,* 144-145.

nineteenth-century photography of Iran, "that individual identity who seeks to document his image with a mechanical apparatus, and as a result construct his identity, is the monarch and a few people close to him," and this remains the case until the end of the nineteenth century.[18] As a result, "in a situation where the act of photography is carried out under the supervision of the king and most of the photographs are seen by him, it seems that the camera acts as a surveillance tool, in fact the king's second eye."[19]

Photography in the East was, however, not divorced from the history of Orientalist painting and the way in which Europeans constructed fictions of the Middle East. In fact, photographic images of the Orient borrowed extensively from Orientalist paintings and "late-nineteenth-century resident photographers, like Abdullah Frères, Félix-Jacques Moulin, and Pascal Sebah… furnished their European audiences with erotically staged photographs of the harem and exotic images of street scenes, just as Orientalist painters like Ingres, John Frederick Lewis, Lecomte de Nouy, and Gérôme had done before them."[20] Produced mostly for European consumption, photographs by people like Antoin Sevruguin included exotic images of women posed in traditional dress (see fig. 1) and staged pictures of the harem's supposedly lascivious world (see fig. 2,3).[21] As argued by Ali Behdad, the "indigenous" tradition of photography in Iran is not organic and is "indebted to, and mimetic of, Orientalism's aesthetic values and ideological assumptions more than to its Iranian and Islamic traditions."[22] This mimesis is evident in the photographs that Nasir al-Din Shah took of his harem (see fig. 4,5) and resulted in what Behdad calls "self-orientalizing," i.e., "the practice of seeing and representing oneself as

[18] All the citations from the following source are the author's translation. Zaniar Bolouri, "Ta'amolati Bar Panjah Sal-e Nokhost-e Akasi Dar Iran," *Aksnameh*, no. 36-37 (2013): 67.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Behdad, *The Powerful Art of Qajar Photography*, 143.
[21] Ibid., 144.
[22] Ibid., 145.

Europe's other."[23] Since a photograph is "the site of a complex intertextuality, an overlapping series of previous texts 'taken for granted' at a particular cultural and historical juncture," the early photographs of Iran, either by Europeans or by Iranians were "intertextually linked to Europe's knowledge of the Middle East."[24] What situates and identifies the white male voyeur as the viewer of Orientalist images, in both paintings and photography, is the absence of *white* male individuals, which results in the absence of a confrontation of opposed gazes. As can be seen in figure 3, it is not just a male who is absent, but an authoritative male indicated by racial privilege. The boy in this image, "representing the mysterious figure of the eunuch, is excluded from the domain of eroticism, for he is a safe enabler only there to serve the woman and her intended master."[25] Photography of the Qajar period has been an inspiration for many Iranian artists spanning from 1970s to the present, including but not limited to Ardeshir Mohasses (1938-2008), Naser Oveisi (1934), Bahman Jalali (1944-2010), Shadi Ghadirian (1974), Khosro Hasanzadeh (1963), Ali Alavi (1982), Khosro Khosravi (1965), Behnam Kamrani (1968), Dana Nehdaran (1982), etc. In the following section, I will study *Qajar Series* by Shadi Ghadirian.

Qajar Series

Qajar series is a series of thirty-three portrait photographs by Shadi Ghadirian. The series, made in 1998, was inspired by the studio portraits of the turn of the twentieth-century during Qajar dynasty that are at the Golestan Museum in Tehran.[26] The subjects of these portraits are contemporary women garbed in the costumes of Qajar women but also layered with modern props such as a Pepsi can, vacuum cleaner, radio-cassette player, camera, and contemporary

[23] Ibid., 148.
[24] Victor Burgin, *Thinking Photography* (London: Macmillan, 1982), 144; Behdad, *The Powerful Art of Qajar Photography,* 145.
[25] Behdad, *The Powerful Art of Qajar Photography,* 147.
[26] Melissa Heer, "Restaging Time: Photography, Performance and Anachronism in Shadi Ghadirian's Qajar Series," *Iranian Studies* 45, no. 4 (2012): 543.

newspaper, as well as objects such as a mirror, paintings, a guitar, and an umbrella, which are not necessarily modern. In both cases, the way in which the sitters engage with these objects highlights the anachronism of the series. Not only are women dressed in Qajar outfits, headscarves, short skirts and long, loose trousers; also the painted backdrops reconstruct the studio setting of Qajar portraits.[27] While taking note of the influence of Orientalist art on Iranian photography, and the way in which the West, fascinated by the veiled women outside and the unveiled women inside the harem, portrayed the East, I will argue that Ghadirian's work subverts the Orientalist gaze by restaging Qajar portraits in the contemporary moment. I will demonstrate that, although by using metaphor and irony she manages to deconstruct the subject position of her sitters and represent a new woman, this task is fraught with misrepresentation and misinterpretation for a Western viewer with no prior knowledge about the history of Iran and the dress code during Qajar dynasty.

The sitters, who are mainly the artist's friends and family, are not uniformly dressed in these photos since some of them wear a combination of a long headscarf, a short skirt, baggy trousers and loose-sleeved shirt which is sometimes covered by a jacket, and some others wear black chador and white burka (an Arabic term for the veil that covers the whole face) with their faces at times veiled. [28] While the function of the veil is to conceal, disguise, or obscure, it is defined as "a piece of fine material worn by women to protect or conceal the face."[29] The

[27] Women's interior costume in the late 19th century Qajar consisted of a transparent shirt with a drop-waisted skirt, tight jackets worn with or without "pantalettes" as the Victorians quaintly referred to them. In mid-nineteenth-century there was a dramatic innovation: layered miniskirts with multiple petticoats worn with bare legs or white stockings. Outside, however, women wore chador with face veil with or without wide trousers. For detailed information on clothing during Qajar era see Layla S. Diba, Encyclopaedia Iranica, s.v. "Clothing x. In the Safavid and Qajar Periods," December 15, 1992; http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/clothing-x; accessed September 25, 2014.

[28] Some burkas cover the whole body from head to toe, and some are separate "face veil of net (rū-band), attached at either side of the forehead." Layla S. Diba*, Clothing x. In the Safavid and Qajar Periods*.

[29] Oxford Dictionaries. Oxford University Press, s.v. "Veil," http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/veil?q=veil; accessed August 1, 2014.

complex phenomenon of *hijab* is generally translated into the English as *veil* with its correlate seclusion and *hajaba,* the verbal form of hijab, means to veil, to seclude, to screen.[30] Although references to *chador* is found in early literary references of the 4th century, after the revolution of 1979, chador "designates the loose, enveloping, sleeveless outer garment worn by women in Iran in compliance with Islamic regulations on dress."[31] Even though it does not usually cover the face, literary evidence suggests that chador "may originally have been a face veil or a garment covering the whole body including the face."[32] However, after the revolution in 1979, women reinterpreted the veiling code and came up with distinctive ways and other forms of dress and head covering to wear the hijab. Headscarves, which cover the hair—partially or completely—and not the face, worn with manteaux and accompanied by trousers, are prevalent in Iran. The variation on the clothing is highly important because it distinguishes the domain in which they were worn. This distinction is, to my knowledge, not mentioned by the artist, in the exhibition catalogues, or in the reviews on this work. The black chador and the burka were worn in public, where women had to protect their bodies from the looks of strange men (see fig. 6).

The former combination, which was worn in the private sphere, however, went through a transformation after Nasir al-Din Shah's visit to Europe in 1873, when he became fascinated with Parisian ballet outfits. In the harem, skirts were shortened and baggy trousers were superseded by short, stiffened-out ones, "which did not reach to the knees" and were

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[30] "Although the term for dress or garment in the Qur›an is *libas, hijab* has come to mean the headgear and outer garment of Muslim women. *Libas* is used both literally to refer to physical/material dress and adornments and figuratively as a covering of human shortcomings and vulnerabilities." See Ghazala Anwar and Liz McKay, *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World*, ed. Richard C. Martin, vol. 2 (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004), s.v. "Veiling."

[31] After the revolution of 1979, wearing hijab became compulsory for all women. Following the proclamation by Ayatollah Khomeini in the beginning of March 1979, that women ought to observe hijab in government ministries, middle and upper-class women demonstrated to protest this decision. A counter demonstration followed and finally a vigorous campaign was launched by the Revolutionary Committees to enforce hijab. See Hamid Algar, *Encyclopedia Iranica,* s.v. "Cador," December 15, 1990; http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/cador-a-loose-female-garment-covering-the-body-sometimes-also-the-face#pt3; accessed August 1, 2014.

[32] Ibid.

accompanied by "coarse white stocking or sock" (see fig. 7). This fashion was spread throughout the whole country.[33] Photos taken from the king's wives but not inside the space of the harem show them with black outfits, either with long skirts or chador but without burka (see fig. 8).[34]

The Orientalists did not always take photographs of veiled women in public. More often than not, they brought their models into the studio. In her photos, Ghadirian does the same thing and brings the veiled women into a closed space, a private domain. Whereas Nasir al-din Shah himself took photographs of his harem, the European Orientalists did not usually have access to this space and therefore reconstructed fictional spaces in their studios with painted backdrops. The reconstruction of this backdrop by Ghadirian is therefore the reconstruction of an imaginary Orientalist studio and she allows us to witness this preparation, where one of her protagonists is painting the backdrop (see fig. 9). The other woman in this photo is standing and her hieratic and frontal pose is reminiscent of female portrayals in Qajar photography, which manifested Victorian influence.[35]

Whereas in some Orientalist photographs the gaze is unilateral and dominating, in Ghadirian's *Qajar series* the sitter's gaze is confrontational and not voyeuristic. The women in these photographs are not eroticized and their gaze is not inviting. However they are still exoticized by the way they are fashioned in Qajar costumes that harks back to Orientalist photos of that time. They do not appear to be consumed by the beholder or the photographer; instead they are consuming modernity and acting upon it. The seated woman holds a Pepsi can in her

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[33] Ella Sykes, *Through Persia on a Sidesaddle* (London: J. Macqueen, 1898), 17, quoted in Jennifer M. Scarce, "Vesture and Dress: Fashion, Function, and Impact," in *Woven from the Soul, Spun from the Heart: Textile Arts of Safavid and Qajar Iran, 16th–19th Centuries*, ed. Carol Bier (Washington, The Textile Museum, 1987), 55–56.

[34] There are numerous photos from the king's wives taken either by the king himself or by those whom he trained. As Behdad notes, "The Shah even trained a boy, Ghulam Husayn Khan, as his personal photography assistant to help him take private pictures of himself and his harem; see Behdad, *The Powerful Art of Qajar Photography,* 145, 147.

[35] Donna Stein, "The Photographic Source for a Qajar Painting," in *Performing the Iranian State: Visual Culture and Representations of Iranian Identity*, ed. Staci Gem Scheiwiller (London: Anthem Press, 2013), 25.

hand, a symbol of US consumerism and global capital (see fig. 10). The woman between this anachronistic detail inserted into the foreground of the photograph and a backdrop of the past, can be seen as what the artist intended them to be seen,"[m]y pictures became a mirror reflecting how I felt: we are stuck between tradition and modernity."[36] This reading as Melissa Heer argues, "would imply that the Pepsi can… stands for 'modernity,' and the Qajar period background and dress stand in for 'tradition' in contemporary Iranian society. This taxonomy also suggests that Iran is frozen in the 'waiting room of history' eagerly anticipating a potential encounter with 'modernity,' which appears in the form of a North American product of global capitalism."[37]

It is also simplistic to look at Qajar era as the epitome of tradition. As Severi indicates, "Qajar is not representative of tradition because it is a conflation (syncretism); there are diverse thoughts about this era. We cannot look at Qajar as negative or positive."[38] Ghadirian has stated, however, that she intended to show a suspension in her work, "so that the viewer could not clearly see this as modern and that as traditional."[39] As I will contend throughout this section, it is not always the props that make these photographs anachronistic but the way the sitters perform with them. If the woman in Sevruguin's photo is allowing a glimpse of her face to the photographer by moving the veil slightly aside, and looking coyly at the camera (see fig. 11), the one in Ghadirian's photo looks at the viewer assertively and shows us the camera she is holding (see fig. 12). By doing this, she not only rejects the unilateral gaze and the idea of objectification, but also, by holding the camera as if she is holding a weapon, she implies that she is capable of

[36] Some reviews both by Western and Iranian critics described this work as a clash between modernity and tradition which is rooted in Ghadirian's statement. It is important to note that although 'modernity' is generally understood as an earlier period ending in the late twentieth century, in this work it has been used by the artist and some critics to refer to contemporaneity. Otherwise, what is referred to as 'tradition' in *Qajar Series* coincides with modern era."Shadi Ghadirian: Untitled (Qajar Series)," LACMA Collections; http://collections.lacma.org/node/580927; accessed July 12, 2014.
[37] Heer, *Restaging Time*, 540.
[38] Severi, interview.
[39] Shadi Ghadirian, interview by author, June 8, 2014.

combatting objectification and equalling the photographer. She is doubly returning the gaze, by her uninviting and confrontational gaze and by the presence of the camera. The woman in this photograph is aware of the power of camera and how it functioned in the Orientalist photographs of Qajar period and is cognizant of the fact that "the camera is a symbolic reminder that during Nasir al-Din Shah's regime photography became the most powerful means of representation in Iran."[40]

Ghadirian takes part in this act of representation and is showing the viewer what Qajar women lacked that made them representative objects of the oppressed, backward Orient. The appearance of the apparatus that takes the photograph inside the photograph functions as both a symbol and an index of the representational power of the camera. This portrait is therefore a sign, and its purpose is more "the inscription of social identity" rather than "the description of an individual" because, by claiming presence in representation, the artist and her subject are producing significations that were absent in the photographs of the earlier period; for example, the photograph highlights women's agency.[41] In this photograph the woman appears in a costume that was worn in a public space, but the artist displaces her subject and puts her in a private space. The camera reappears in this series but this time, however, in a setting that used to be a private space of the harem, reconstructed in the photographer's studio (see fig. 13). Ghadirian says:

> For me the studio is not an interior space. If women are wearing chador and burka in my photos, they did it too then when they went to the studio to have a photograph taken of them. These photos did not stay in an album and that is why we can see them today. For me the studio is neither an interior space nor an exterior one, it is a space in between."[42]

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[40] Behdad, *The Powerful Art of Qajar Photography,* 141.
[41] John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 36.
[42] All the citations from the following source are the author's translation. Shadi Ghadirian, interview by author, June 8, 2014.

Of course Ghadirian refers to the later years of the nineteenth century when people willingly stood in front of the camera since photography became ubiquitous only after the constitutional revolution in the early twentieth century.[43] Nevertheless, the women wearing the interior costume in this series wear baggy trousers instead of white stockings or socks that became fashionable after Nasir al-Din Shah's visit to Europe.

The Orientalist's access becomes an important factor in our knowledge of the way women dressed in the private domain. The Oriental woman was inaccessible behind the veil and in the forbidden harem. The harem, Alloula argues, "though opened up by the photographer, must remain symbolically closed."[44] Although contemporary women in the *Qajar Series* are not women of harems, they are placed in a setting that the Orientalist photographer created in his studio. The setting still makes Ghadirian's sitters inaccessible and mysterious. Alloula clarifies the function of this setting in his observation of Orientalist French postcards of Algerian women:

> For the phantasm, a public harem is inconceivable. This apparent contradiction between what the postcard unveils and displays and what desire wants to keep secret is resolved by the photographer through a more elaborate staging. This means that the studio is redecorated with trompe l'oeil or moved to locations that have typical harem "architecture." Both the trompe l'oeil and the natural decor (arcades, colonnades, inner courtyards, etc.) must suggest an inaccessible depth, a mystery beyond what is represented. What the card brings to light, then, may suffice for purposes of jubilation, but it is by no means all. This *all* is, in any case, out of the frame.[45]

In other words, the harem photographs are entirely false "reportage," purporting to reveal something that the European could not see. The appearance of two cameras on each side of the sitter, one old and one new in technology, is telling. By removing the lens cap from the rather advanced camera with her left hand and facing the lens to the photographer with a slight angle, while putting her right hand on the nineteenth-century camera, the woman takes on an active

[43] Bolouri, *Ta'amolati Bar Panjah Sal-e Nokhost-e Akasi Dar Iran*, 67.
[44] Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*, 69.
[45] Ibid.

role. She appears to know how they both function and is aware of the way in which the nineteenth-century camera was used to reiterate the construction of oriental women in the Orientalist paintings.

The juxtaposition of cameras is a sign of the evolution of technology throughout the 150 years prior to the production of this series by the artist. How has this apparatus managed to represent the Iranian woman and how are the artist and her sitter taking part in this representation? It would be simplistic to read these images as self-orientalizing since they function at a deeper performative level. As opposed to Sevruguin's woman, who is posing in the fashion of the reclining nude, and whose eyes are downcast (see fig. 1), the woman in Ghadirian's photo looks directly at the viewer. In another portrait, the same sitter kneels with a framed poster of nude African portrait sculptures (see fig. 14). One can think that she is exoticizing the Africans, the way the Western Orientalists exoticized Qajar women. A photograph within a photograph gives prominence to the reproducibility of this medium and how knowledge of the unknown can be constructed through a photograph of an artwork, an inaccessible sculpture, in another medium. But as Wendy Steiner says, "[p]ortraiture, no matter how much information it transmits about its subject, can transmit it only through *prior knowledge* of the subject —i.e., knowledge that [s]he exists, that [s]he is so-and-so" (italics mine.)[46] If the modern props such as a Pepsi can, a vacuum cleaner and a ghetto blaster are in contrast with the Qajar costumes of these women, the photograph of the African portrait sculptures could have, in fact, technologically fit in a photograph from the Qajar period and therefore it is not anachronistic in that sense. What makes it anachronistic is what it conveys

[46] Wendy Steiner, "The Semiotics of a Genre: Portraiture in Literature and Painting," *Semiotica* 21, no. 1-2 (1997): 113.

symbolically, namely, the woman's knowledge of the complex functioning of the construction of the Orient.

As Said fittingly reminds us in his classic argument about Orientalism, "the Orient is less a place than a topos, a set of references, a congeries of characteristics, that seems to have its origin in a quotation, or a fragment of a text, or a citation from someone's work on the Orient, or some bit of previous imagining, or an amalgam of all these."[47] Ghadirian's photograph is therefore critiquing the Orientalist role in creation and dissemination of this subjective knowledge and questions the supposed 'natural' or 'objective representation, since "the camera invested Orientalism with a claim to objectivity and accuracy."[48] Ghadirian reminds us that photographs of the Qajar period "reproduced, and consequently reinforced, certain Orientalist stereotypes about the Middle East—its 'backward' people, and 'exotic' cultures—stereotypes that provided the ideological rationale for colonizing the Middle East in this period."[49]

The sitters in *Qajar Series* are availing themselves of modernity whether in the form of the consumption of a commodity such as a Pepsi can or in entertaining themselves with a cassette player and making themselves aware of the world around them by the radio (see fig. 15). In another photo two women in chador and burka are standing by a bicycle; one with burka covering her face and the other lifted off (see fig. 16). The significance of the bicycle is twofold. It refers to women's increased role in society in the late nineteenth-century Europe. Susan B. Anthony, the American social reformer who played a pivotal role in the women's suffrage movement states, "[l]et me tell you what I think of bicycling. I think it has done more to emancipate women than anything else in the world. I stand and rejoice every time I see a woman

[47] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 177.
[48] Behdad, *The Powerful Art of Qajar Photography,* 143.
[49] Ibid.

ride by on a wheel. It gives women a feeling of freedom and self-reliance."[50] This freedom of movement was so threatening to the patriarchal society that "doctors wrote in respected medical journals of the dreaded disease 'bicycle face.'"[51] The lifting off of the veil also alludes to the way women objected in public during Qajar era. It all started when "an early manifestation of feminism took place in June 1848 in [Badasht], a village on the border of [Mazandaran] and Khorasan, where Tahereh Qorrat-al-Ayn (1814-1852), the outspoken Babi woman leader, removed her veil before a bewildered audience" and caused controversy within the Babi community.[52] Ghadirian says, "I saw Qajar photos in which women protested in public while lifting their burka. This was quite interesting to me because at the exact time that I was taking these photos, women's cycling in Tehran became forbidden. I showed this protest in my photo since I thought to myself, 'if I do this, I am both relating it to the present and the past'."[53] The jarring juxtaposition of the books on the shelves, reflected in the mirror held by two women wearing a black chador and white burka (see fig. 17), is unsettling in two ways. Although the mirror is held parallel to the plane of the photograph, it does not reflect the photographer or her camera. By reflecting the books back to the viewer, the sitters demonstrate how books provide

[50] Susan B. Anthony quoted in Jeroen Heijmans and Bill Mallon, *Historical Dictionary of Cycling* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2011), 231.
[51] "Imagining the pain of a female sitting astride a bicycle, they warned of a wrinkled face response and the permanence of such disfigurement. The effect of such warnings was to keep women away from this recreational sport." Nadya Swedan, "Foreword," in *Women's Sports Medicine and Rehabilitation* (Gaithersburg, MD: Aspen Publishers, 2001), xvii.
[52] The Qajar era provided several examples of powerful women who influenced court politics and women's roles in the society. An early incident of nationalist protest to boycott tobacco which started in the harem, is an evidence of women's roles in politics. "Bibi Kanom Astarabadi (1858-1920) wrote *Maʿāyeb al-rejāl* (Vices of men), the most extensive feminist text to have survived from this period" in which "she penned an angry denunciation of contemporary educated men with a double standard. She pointed out that these men wrote admiringly of the relative freedom enjoyed by urban middle class European women, while at the same time they upheld traditional patriarchal relations at home." Moreover, the activist women who addressed women's concerns, and the formation of the Association for the Freedom of Women in 1907 are other examples of women's attempts to gain their rights. D. M. MacEoin, *Encylopaedia Iranica,* s.v. "Babism," December 15, 1988; available online at: http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/babism-index; accessed September 24, 2014; Afary, EIr, Janet. *Encyclopaedia Iranica.* December 15, 1999; available online at: http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/feminist-movements-i-ii; accessed September 24, 2014.
[53] Shadi Ghadirian, interview by author, Tehran, June 8, 2014.

them with knowledge. Behind this mask, the veil, lies more than what the Orientalist fantasized about, i.e., the Oriental woman's body to be conquered. What is beneath this veil is threatening and does not feed the voyeuristic gaze of the beholder, and the women in this photo reflect that to the viewer: the knowledge that they acquired, symbolized by the books on the shelves.

The subtlety of the artist in depicting the reflection of the books in the photo instead of the books themselves is laudable, since it alludes to what the Orientalist photographer saw in the mirror inside the camera. No matter how much he wanted to see what is behind the veil and fantasized about it, he could never grasp it. The contemporary women performing in these photographs reflect to the viewer what was not then reflected in the mirror of the camera. The veil acts as a mask and reveals the impossibility to know the "true" identity of these women. These women show how, between that period and now, knowledge has paved the way for women to become active, knowledgeable agents who can negotiate the ways in which they can be depicted (this point is confirmed in another photograph, in which the sitter is reading a somewhat liberal newspaper in Iran while she gazes at the camera as if to confront the viewer with her act of gaining knowledge (see fig. 18)). The mirror has been used extensively in the history of art and, since Surrealism, women artists have availed themselves of this object in self-representation and in defining their identity by using it in creative and almost always subversive manners. As Whitney Chadwick has argued, "[t]he work of historical women artists influenced by Surrealism raises questions about representational strategies that continue to resonate in the works of younger women artists"; Ghadirian's work exemplifies this point.[54]

In another image, a woman is sitting in front of an easel, above which stands a looking glass (see fig. 19). This throws into confusion the function of the easel as a carrier of canvas, on

[54] Whitney Chadwick, "An Infinite Play of Empty Mirrors: Women, Surrealism, and Self-Representation," in *Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism, and Self-representation*, ed. Whitney Chadwick (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 7.

which the artist paints or draws. With her back towards the camera, this woman is depriving the viewer of direct confrontation with her face. The photograph is taken from an angle that disrupts the function of the looking glass, and as a result, the reflection of the woman's face, overcome by that of light, is more like a shadow. One could argue that by replacing the canvas—on which a woman's body was once depicted—with the mirror, the painting symbolizes a shift in power: the woman gazing at the looking glass alludes to the voyeuristic aspect of Orientalist paintings and annuls the once unreturnable gaze; instead of providing her viewers with her reflection, she even deprives them of it. She decides how much of her we can see. The reflected portrait as seen by the viewer only resembles the woman vaguely.

In this photograph, Ghadirian is perhaps hinting at the origins of painting. Gerhard Wolf, in examining this subject refers to Pliny who states that, "the origins of painting are uncertain… though all would surely agree that painting began by circumscribing a man's shadow with a line."[55] Though Pliny's tale refers to tracing the outlines of the shadow on the wall, Ghadirian takes this further and by manipulating the angle of the mirror, almost creates a shadow in it. Is Ghadirian painting the image of her sitter on the surface of the mirror and then photographing the sitter with her circumscribed shadow on the mirror? Drawing upon Philostratos's *Eikones*, Wolf argues that "painting is more than a reflection in a mirror, that, in fact, it works or plays with the power of illusion and that it 'writes' a whole story. We are, nonetheless, exposed to the evocative power of mimetic pictures."[56] The canvas is replaced by the mirror, which promises accuracy, a reflection of what is in front of it, the exact image of a woman. The mirror should eliminate the subjectivity of the painter in his depiction on the canvas with mimetic qualities, but the artist breaks that promise and only provides us with the silhouette of the sitter in front of the mirror.

[55] Gerhard Wolf, "The Origins of Painting," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* No. 36, no. Factura (Autumn 1999): 61.
[56] Ibid., 68.

Given this story, one could read Ghadirian's photograph as critiquing the painter's act of painting as narcissistic. As Wolf notes, "Alberti's poetic etiology of painting refers to the act of painting as a 'narcissistic' embracing of a void surface. It is an etiology of the making of a picture that shows the artist in a process of self-reproduction: the artist immerses himself in the inclusion of a self-portrait but, in a more general sense, in the performance of a metamorphosis on the surface of his paintings."[57] What the image shows is also more of a play with the artist's prop that is also a symbol of women's vanity and a clever distortion of vision that causes us not to trust what we see.

In another photo where one woman is seated beside the same easel and mirror, and the other one is standing behind her, there is no reflection of them in the mirror at all (figure 20). Instead, they gaze at the viewer, and the mirror only reflects light. Why not a blank canvas but a light-saturated mirror? It is as if nothing, not even a mirror is capable of demystifying these women. Ghadirian plays the mirror up by using it in different modes. By slightly changing the angle of the easel in another photo, she renders the reflection of the two women sitting beside the mirror visible (figure 21). The women themselves register the presence of the viewer and do not shy away from making eye contact. In their reflection, however, they avert their eyes, gazing in another direction. By disrupting the function of the mirror, either by reflecting nothing but light or just a silhouette, as well as by showing the averted gazes of the sitters, Ghadirian undermines the identification of women with narcissism ("[i]n Western culture the image of the mirror has signified the social construction of femininity as specular consumption and the narcissistic identification of the woman with her reflected image").[58] The women sitters defy this narcissistic identification in yet another photo where they don chador but have lifted their burka (figure 22).

[57] Ibid., 69.
[58] Chadwick, *An Infinite Play of Empty Mirrors,* 9.

On the right of the standing woman is the seated woman who is holding a mirror on her lap with her hands beneath the chador. Both women gaze at the viewer, and the mirror, which is almost parallel to the ground, reflects their skewed images. The refusal to look into the mirror is a conscious choice to undermine the attribution of narcissism to women. If, as Simone de Beauvoir says, a man "does not recognize himself in his immobile image… [because] the man's body does not appear to him as an object of desire," the women in this photo do not want their bodies to be an object of desire either.[59] They refute the dynamic of female objectification Beauvoir describes: "the woman, knowing she is and making herself object, really believes she is seeing *herself* in the mirror: passive and given; the reflection is a thing like herself."[60]

Ghadirian's use of anachronism in these photos highlights the extent to which her sitters (can) perform their contemporary identity by critically revisiting the image of Qajar women in the modern era. Melissa Heer explains this clearly when she writes, "the strategy of anachronism employed in Ghadirian's photographs does not reproduce a 'negative mirror' image across an East/West axis, but rather serves as a space through which to performatively enact time in order to interrogate the very production of temporal distance."[61] The way in which these photographs function goes beyond what Ghadirian herself thought (or thinks) of them: "[w]hen I was working on this series of photographs… the duality and contradiction of life at that time provided the motive for me to display this contrast: a woman who one can not say to what time she belongs; a photograph from two eras; a woman who is dazed; a woman who is not connected to the objects in her possession."[62] These two sets of comments show the complexity of how an artwork

[59] Simone De Beauvoir, "The Narcissist," in *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (London: Vintage Books, 2011), 669.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Heer, *Restaging Time*, 540.
[62] Shadi Ghadirian, "Shadi Ghadirian," Women in Photography; http://www.wipnyc.org/blog/shadi-ghadirian; accessed July 28, 2014.

functions; the stated objective of the artist does not determine the different ways it can be interpreted and received. Ghadirian reasserts in an interview, "the contrast in the lives of this new generation drew my attention to traditions of which we selectively chose part while discarding the rest. The result was that, in contact with others, who, on their part, had chosen different parts of this tradition, a space full of contradictions and clashes was created."[63]

In these statements Ghadirian speaks to her lived experience and how she expresses her concerns in her work. The reception of *Qajar Series* in the West was nevertheless different. If "[f]or an Iranian audience, the contemporary props are seen as ordinary objects in an extraordinary costume drama… for a Western audience—with no knowledge of the history of Iranian dress—the contemporary props disrupt what appears to be a timeless ethnographic portrait of an Other culture."[64] This contrast exists because of the long history of Orientalist art that constructed the knowledge and representation of the Orient as the Other, a fact that cannot simply be ignored. Ghadirian noted about her exhibitions in the West:

> People asked me about clothing inside Iran. They understood that the costumes in these photos are from an earlier period; it had similarities with the photos of Victorian era. But those who wanted to know about Iran based on these photos, made mistakes. Some thought that Iran is still the same. Then I thought to myself that we live in a much more constrained environment but we know very well what is going on in Paris and London. It is their fault if they don't know about us. I didn't expect them to know to the same extent but they should've known to some extent. That's why the interviews that happened after the shows always helped.[65]

What Ghadirian expects is not much. Despite the limited access to foreign information, people, especially the youth in Iran, find their ways to know and learn about the West. In fact, the

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[63] All the citations from the following source are the author's translation; Shadi Ghadirian, Mehran Mohajer, and Iman Afsarian, "Shadi Ghadirian in Conversation with Iman Afsarian and Mehran Mohajer,"*Herfeh: Honarmand [Profession: Artist]* 33 (Summer 2010): 59.

[64] Jananne Al-ani, "Acting out," in *Veil: Veiling, Representation, and Contemporary Art*, ed. David A. Bailey and Gilane Tawadros (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 97.

[65] Ghadirian, *Shadi Ghadirian in Conversation with Iman Afsarian and Mehran Mohajer,* 57.

Iranians' knowledge of the West goes far beyond what "goes on in Paris and London."[66] Although satellite dishes have been confiscated sporadically since their arrival in Iran in the late eighties, people continue to buy new ones. The increasing number of VPNs (Virtual Private Networks) and circumvention systems such as Psiphon, which allows users to bypass the content-filtering systems imposed by the government, is an indication of people's desire to access information.

Ghadirian does not address, however, the hegemony of the West over the East that still continues in the postcolonial era. The constructed knowledge of the Orient is so ingrained and "so authoritative a position did Orientalism have" that as Edward Said rightfully asserts, "I believe no one writing, thinking, or acting on the Orient could do so without taking account of the limitations on thought and actions imposed by Orientalism. In brief, because of Orientalism the Orient was not (and is not) a free subject of thought or action."[67]

In addition, the attribution to the veil of oppression and backwardness is nothing new and is even corroborated by some curators and critics who present these works. The authoritative position of Orientalism that Said talks about has caused, to use Zineb Sedira's metaphor, "veiling-the-mind" by which she means "the (mis)reading of cultural signs."[68] Sedira describes the complexity of cultural signs: "[t]he veil has never been a simple sign, but one which always elicited a multitude of readings, both visible and invisible."[69]

How can or should the artists from Muslim countries represent the veiled woman with many variations spread throughout place and time? How can they "represent the unrepresentable,

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[66] Ibid.
[67] Said, *Orientalism*, 3.
[68] Zineb Sedira, "Mapping the Illusive," in *Veil: Veiling, Representation, and Contemporary Art*, ed. David A. Bailey and Gilane Tawadros (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 58.
[69] Ibid.

unrepresentable due to over-exposure or lack of exposure?," asks Jayce Salloum.[70] If the women in *Qajar Series* were presented as entirely representative of Iranian women, this would be problematic. For a Western viewer (with no prior knowledge of Iran) this reading, however, is a common one since the photographs confirm the resemblance to the "original" Orientalist photographs and might thus confirm the pre-existing knowledge of the viewer. Resemblance is significant since "the true definition of representative art is not that the artefact resembles an original…but that the feeling evoked by the artefact resembles the feeling evoked by the original…When a portrait is said to be like the sitter, what is meant is that the spectator, when he looks at the portrait, 'feels as if' he were in the sitter's presence."[71] Although the viewers might "feel as if" they were in the Qajar period, some of the contemporary props would disrupt that feeling. While Ghadirian's work does show the paradoxes between modernity and tradition, the anachronism in *Qajar Series* functions at a deeper level and calls into question the origins of painting, functioning as a critique of the unilateral gaze and objectification of women by male Orientalists. By elaborately manoeuvring the mirror and inserting the camera(s) into the photograph, she demonstrated that the contemporary woman is aware of the intricacy and operation of these objects in representation. She turns the very method of representation by Orientalists on its head.

On the surface, Ghadirian's approach in *Qajar Series* can be seen as what Hamid Keshmirshekan calls self-exoticism: "Self-exoticization usually means when the artist himself makes himself exotic or represents his work as an exotic commodity."[72] However, Ghadirian created this series for her graduation project and first exhibited in Iran, not for a non-Iranian

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[70] Jayce Salloum, *Intangible Cartographies: New Arab Video,* exhibition catalogue, Worldwide Video Festival, 2001.
[71] Robin George. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (New York: Galaxy Book, 1958), 76ff.
[72] Hamid Keshmirshekan, "The Question of Identity Vis-à-vis Exoticism in Contemporary Iranian Art," *Iranian Studies* 43, no. 4 (2010): 501.

audience. If Ghadirian's sitters merely posed in Qajar costumes, one could argue that they were self-exotic. This work, however, could not be seen as self-exotic since the presence of the familiar present-day props disrupts the exoticism inherent in Qajar costumes and the painted backdrops. Ghadirian was not a known photographer at the time and this series was not crafted primarily for Western audience, although a university professor from London saw her work in Iran and helped her exhibit them at the library of Guildhall University; the consequent critiques of her work by some renowned art magazines resulted in her work being shown in other parts of Europe.[73] The series is a site for negotiating identity and gender status via continuities and disparities between tradition and contemporaneity. It interferes with the notion of artist versus subject and photographic accuracy in portraying objective or objectified subjects and therefore the series can be seen as astutely critiquing Orientalism.

Bodyless

One of the other tropes seen in works of Iranian artists who question elements of the cultural past is the *zurkhanah* (house of strength), a traditional gymnasium of urban Persia and adjacent lands, where religion, tradition and conceptions of virility are all mixed. Artists such as Bahman Jalali (1944-2010), Sadegh Tirafkan (1965-2013), Mehraneh Atashi (1980), Asad Naghshbandi (1957), and Siamak Filizadeh (1970) have explored the sociocultural and religious aspects of the *zurkhanah* in their works. In this section, I will study *Bodyless,* a series of photographs from 2004 by Mehraneh Atashi. I will argue that Atashi challenges patriarchal society, by positioning herself not as a passive victim of oppression but rather as a subject with

[73] London Guildhall University, London, February, 2000; Ghadirian, *Shadi Ghadirian in Conversation with Iman Afsarian and Mehran Mohajer*, 56.

agency and control. Furthermore, I will demonstrate how she reverses the positions of self and other by becoming the voyeur, controller, and subject of the gaze.

Bodyless was exhibited in 2007 at Cicero Gallery in Berlin as a part of *Made in Tehran: Six Women's Views* exhibition, which was composed of the works by six women photographers from Iran. Kate Connolly wrote, "[t]hese women are using photography to investigate aspects of Iranian society, rather than simply to document it… In Germany in the 1920s and 30s, many women photographers used the camera as a tool, to help them define their place in a rapidly changing society."[74]

The images were taken from within the space of the *zurkhanah.* The conventional wisdom is that *zurkhanahs* "originated in the underground resistance activities of Persian patriots against Arab and later Mongol invaders."[75] It was a space where men could practice and keep their bodies trained and ready for war. H.E. Chehabi notes that "[w]hile references to wrestling and wrestlers can be found in classical Persian literature," there is "no mention of the institution in Persian texts before the end of the seventeenth century" during the reign of Safavid dynasty, "which would also explain the close connection between [zurkhanahs] and popular…Shiism."[76] I suggest that since the Mongol invasion was between 1206 and 1227 and "the Safavids began in about 1300 as a mystical order," it is possible that the *zurkhanah* dates back to 1300.[77] H.E. Chehabi and Philippe Rochard suggest the appearance of zurkhanah to be around the same time of the wrestling profession, "the true driving force of the zurkhanah," between the thirteenth and

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[74] Kate Connolly, "The Secret Lives of Us," *The Guardian* (January 2, 2008); available online at: http://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/jan/02/iran.kateconnolly; accessed August 1, 2014.
[75] Houchang E. Chehabi, *Encyclopedia Iranica,* s.v. "ZUR-ḴĀNA," August 15, 2006; http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/zur-kana; accessed July 25, 2014.
[76] Chehabi, ZUR-ḴĀNA; Philippe Rochard and H. E. Chehabi, "The Identities of the Iranian Zūrkhanah," *Iranian Studies* 35, no. 4 (2002): 321.
[77] Rudi Matthee, *Encyclopedia Iranica,* s.v. "Safavid Dynasty," July 28, 2008; available online at: http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/safavids; accessed July 25, 2014; Liu Yingsheng and Peter Jackson, *Encyclopedia Iranica,* s.v. "Chinese-Iranian Relations iii. In the Mongol Period," December 15, 1991; available online at: http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/chinese-iranian-iii; accessed July 25, 2014.

fifteenth centuries.[78]

Whereas Orientalist photographs of this space are not always taken inside the *zurkhanah* but, as with Qajar harem photographs (see fig. 23, 24), are staged in the studio, Atashi takes her photos within the space of the *zurkhanah.* In all the photographs of this series, Atashi is present through the mirror that reflects her image as well as that of the semi-nude men who practice, pose and perform for her. One of the key points in this series is the presence of a woman in *zurkhanah*, a male-dominated space, which traditionally forbid her presence. Not only were women refused entry to this space, so were "non-Muslims and prepubescent boys."[79] The hierarchy of the *zurkhanah* is not only among those who do and do not have access to this space, but also among athletes (*pahlavans)* who were divided into groups in ascending order of seniority, the novice (nawchah), the beginner (nawkhastah), and the *zurkhanah's* most senior member, the *pishkisvat.*[80] To start the exercise, they form a circle around the session's exercise leader, the *miyandar,* who stands in the center.[81] According to Chahabi and Rochard, "[t]he word *pahlavan* has four meanings: hero, courageous, champion, and athlete," the first three of which "apply directly to the mythological heroes of the *Shahnamah, [The book of Kings]"* but *"*in Islamic Iran the word *pahlavan* meant only wrestler."[82] They wore leather breeches (*tonban*), which were sometimes embroidered, "on special occasions and for competitions."[83] The standard attire for the athletes was the *long,* "a cloth wrapped around the loins and passed between the legs," but worn differently at each grade, showing the sign of hierarchy.[84] This revealing way of dressing would expose their bodies while they practiced and could be one of the

[78] Rochard and Chehabi, *Zūrkhanah*, 321.
[79] Chehabi, ZUR-ḴĀNA.
[80] Rochard and Chehabi, *Zūrkhanah*, 314.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Rochard and Chehabi, *Zūrkhanah*, 331.
[83] Rochard and Chehabi, *Zūrkhanah*, 313.
[84] Chehabi, ZUR-ḴĀNA.

reasons that women were not allowed in this space.

Atashi recently noted in an interview, "my mind was occupied with issues of history, woman and identity. I found the zurkhanah to be the place where I could investigate these issues."[85] After persisting for a few months to gain access to the zurkhanah, she succeeded.[86] As a documentary photographer, she started taking photographs of men, practicing in tracksuits. After about six months, she was allowed to take photographs of men practicing while they wore only their breeches. It was only then that she introduced a mirror in the photos: "the concept of [the] mirror was quite important to me. The camera itself has a mirror," she said, "I wanted to bring a mirror from outside, but there was already one there, not to mention mirrors on the walls. Mirrors have been in zurkhanahs so that the athletes could see how prepared their bodies were," she continued.[87]

In 1999 the Polish artist Katarzyna Kozyra entered into a men's bathhouse in Budapest to explore the concept of otherness and identity. Following her project in the women's bathhouse in 1997, Kozyra transformed herself for the men's bathhouse piece by "becoming a man in appearance (with the aid of make-up, facial hair, and a penis) to enter a masculine sanctuary."[88] While the mirror was essential for Atashi to question the institution of zurkhanah, disguising as a man was Kozyra's "passport into the male sanctum" and they both demonstrate "an otherness positioned along the axis of the male-female dichotomy."[89]

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[85] Mehraneh Atashi, telephone interview by author, November 22, 2013.
[86] Maria Zimmermann Brendel, "Made in Tehran – Six Women's Views," Ciel Variable Archives, November 2007; http://cielvariablearchives.org/en/component/content/article/1272-made-in-tehran-six-womens-views.html; accessed July 29, 2014.
[87] Atashi, interview.
[88] Hanna Wroblewska, The Men's Bathhouse: XLVIII International Biennale of the Visual Arts, Venice, 12 June-7 November 1999 Polish Pavilion, trans. Arthur Zapalowski (Warsaw: Zacheta Gallery of Contemporary Art, 1999), 7.
[89] "A Passport into the Male Sanctum: Artur Zmijewski Interviews Katarzyna Kozyra," in *The Men's Bathhouse: XLVIII International Biennale of the Visual Arts, Venice, 12 June-7 November 1999 Polish Pavilion*, trans. Artur Zmijewski (Warsaw: Zacheta Gallery of Contemporary Art, 1999), 75.

According to Atashi, the reason that in the end they allowed her to take their photos in their wrestling breeches, was that it was important for them to have themselves and their reflections documented in those moments of practicing the art of chivalry.[90] Atashi is present in all the images, controlling the scene and its protagonists with her lens. She is both the subject and the object of her images and asserts her presence behind the camera. We cannot rid ourselves of her gaze, neither can the virile men trapped in between the lens and the mirror. The mirror, however, is not always in between them since the artist does not situate herself in a single position; she is everywhere, in front of, in back of and at the side of the men.

In all the images, the artist is in the *gowd*, an octagonal sunken area about one meter deep at the center of the room in every zurkhanah in which the exercises take place. The *gowd* is sacred and a man has to be ritually clean, as well as "bare-chested and barefoot, symbolizing the irrelevance of outside hierarchies and distinctions," in order to enter it.[91] This intention of disregarding the outside hierarchies, however, is in contrast with what I mentioned earlier about the hierarchical space of the zurkhanah, manifest in the division of the practicing men into grades and the different ways they wore their *long.* Once inside, the athletes "showed their respect for the hallowed space by kissing the ground, which in practice took the form of touching the floor with their fingers and then raising these to their lips."[92] The spectators stood around the *gowd* and watched the rhythmic practice of the athletes accompanied by the drumming and chanting of the *morshed* (guide or director) who sat on a podium (*sardam)*.[93] Getting into the gowd was another challenge that Atashi had to confront. This is a remarkable achievement compared to photos of

[90] Atashi, interview.
[91] Chehabi, ZUR-ḴĀNA.
[92] Ibid.
[93] "Since the early 20th century, the drummer has been called *moršed*, a title previously reserved for the most senior member of the group." See Chehabi, ZUR-ḴĀNA; Rochard and Chehabi, *Zūrkhanah*, 314.

the zurkhanah in which the photographer, always a man, was outside of it: "She is inside the 'sacred gowd', with a mirror that turns around as a result of her performance."[94] She had not only trespassed zurkhanah, but also went into its most sacred space and with a camera. Thus, her presence there is doubly illegitimate.

In Figure 25, there is nothing between her and the mirror; the men are behind her, oblivious to her presence. Here, *she* is the focused object of her image and engages us with her dominant gaze through the lens of her camera, which here, more than any other photo in this set, makes us aware of her presence as the subject as well. She is not sitting on both her haunches, rather half squatting in front of the mirror, so close to it that her distance from the spectator at present observing the photo, and in fact, the reflection, is minimal. She is visible in the image and in the mirror. It is, however, the mirror that represents the image; therefore, she is doubly visible. Yet she is also invisible because we do not see her directly, we just see her reflection in the mirror; we are deprived of her actual presence in the image; we are looking at an image in which the photographer is in turn looking out at us. She is at the same time the model, the photographer and the spectator.

In this way, the photograph harkens back to *Las Meninas,* the enigmatic 1656 painting by Diego Velasquez, in which there is a complex network of gazes, hinting the position of the artist as someone who, with his bravura, negotiates his power as a painter with the sovereign by positioning the viewer in the place of the sovereign. In his famous writing on *Las Meninas*, Foucault writes, "we do not know who we are, or what we are doing. Seen or seeing."[95] Similarly, here, in Figure 25, we are in front of the artist, being observed by her and at the same time at her place, observing. We are thus subject of the gaze, while we are also being gazed at;

[94] Homayoun Sirizi, "Kare Ayneh Nazoki Darad (1/3)," *Shargh* (Tehran), May 17, 2005..
[95] Michel Fourcault, "Las Meninas," in *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 5.

we are inside and outside of the scene; we become the object being looked at while Atashi also positions herself as an object for us to look at. The artist is at the edge of the interior and the exterior of the image represented to us, the spectators, but at the same time she is also at the edge of the line which separates her from the mirror, which in turn represents to her, what she intends to represent to us and to herself. Thus her representation in the mirror is reciprocal. The mirror separates us not only from all that is reflected in it but also from the image, which itself is a reflection. The mirror also separates the artist from her objects, the men in the zurkhanah. It acts as an unyielding barrier that the closer she gets to it, the wider the gap becomes between her and her objects; as Homayoun Sirizi has argued, this effect of the mirror "represents her relation to men."[96] The mirror imposes a triple limit: the limit on the distance the artist can have from her reflection, from the reflection of the whole scene which she intends to represent, and finally, from the objects of the scene, the men.

Atashi is in charge of the scene. In the center of the room whose walls are replete with photos on all sides of *pahlavans,* the professionals of this zurkhanah. Photos and paintings in the context of zurkhanah are quite important. Religious images include portraits of the Shiite Imams, Ali and Hosayn, as well as paintings of the *Battle of Karbala*, a prominent event in Shiite beliefs. Also significant are paintings portraying an epic story of *Shahnameh, The Book of Kings*, which is usually the story of the tragic wrestling match in which Rustam, the legendary Persian hero (the most important figure of *pahlavan* in Persian literature), not knowing with whom he was fighting, killed his own son, Sohrab. The distinct images of the supreme leaders, however, only appeared after the 1979 revolution and are not specific to zurkhanahs.

[96] Homayoun Sirizi, "Kare Ayneh Nazoki Darad (2/3)," *Shargh* (Tehran), May 18, 2005.

In Figures 26 and 27, Atashi shifts her angle in the direction of the men and in doing so, she deflects our gaze from herself and redirects it towards them, hence she eliminates the reciprocal relationship between herself and us, the spectators. Now, obviously the men are the objects of her gaze as well as objects under our scrutiny; they are the ones she is pointing at; they are being looked at both by us and by the artist. In both of these images we are explicitly aware of the presence of the mirror. In Figure 26, the right of the image is circumscribed by the edge of the mirror. The border of the mirror is visible on the top right corner as well, but it gradually disappears, showing just some part of a phrase in Arabic stuck on its surface. It seems the artist intended to just hint the presence of the mirror in this image as opposed to Figure 27 in which almost the whole of the looking glass is visible, emphasizing the borderline for the spectator, between the real and the reflected image, between the artist and her objects, between a woman and men, and finally between the self and the other. If she was always the other and the passive object of the gaze, now she reverses all those relations and becomes the self and the subject of the gaze. The text above the mirror, which was just partly visible in Figure 26, is completely visible in Figure 27: "Peace be upon you, Fatimah Zahra." This sentence is a greeting addressed to the youngest daughter of Muhammad, the prophet, who is revered by Shiite Muslims. For Atashi, this was a crucial point, "it meant that another woman had entered this space before me,"[97] she said. Then why is woman's breath as well as her presence forbidden in the zurkhanah? This exposes a contradiction in the exclusion of women from the zurkhanah.

So far, the images I discussed were somewhat documentary, in a sense that the men were not posing or performing, but rather, getting ready to start their practice of "Varzesh-e-Pahlavani," the art of chivalry, the sport of *pahlavans.* In Figure 28, the confrontation is between

[97] Atashi, interview.

the artist and one man, yet the man is doubly portrayed: himself and his reflection on the mirror behind him. Not only do we see the double paisley motif—a traditional Persian motif—on the front side of his breeches, but also we see the symmetrical reflection of the two paisleys on his back. He is the predominant object, being in the center, between the artist and the mirror, while the lens is zoomed on him to give the impression of the minimal distance between him and the artist. The man's body is quite symmetrically posed in the middle of the image; the reflection of his legs are so finely shot that if it was not because of the presence of the edges of the mirror, and the small reflection of Atashi, the viewer could be misled into seeing another man behind this man, with the same pose. But the presence of Atashi's controlling gaze on the lower part of the looking glass, emphasized by its position in the middle of both the image, and the reflection, ensures the viewer that there is only one man in the scene. If the woman has always been the object of the man's gaze, now she is the subject of the gaze; seeing him, yet not directly but through another mirror in the camera. It is important to note that there is always this barrier between the artist and her objects. In the first three images, the artist was taking photos from the *reflection* of the men in the mirror; in this image, although the man is standing between her and the mirror, she is still looking at him through the mirror inside her camera. Therefore, her voyeuristic gaze is always not on the bodies of the men but on the reflection of or the reflection of a reflection of their bodies. The centrality of both the man as the object, and the artist's reflection below his crotch as the subject of the gaze is accentuated by their central position both in the frame of the mirror and that of the photo.

The two men between the artist and the mirror now above the *gowd,* are holding each other's hands while posing for Atashi (see fig. 29). However, it is the man on the left that is looking directly at us. It is in this image that we can finely observe the tightness of their

breeches, above which they wrapped their *long.* A head scarfed woman in front of semi-nude men wearing breeches, allowing the shape of the male genitalia to be visible, makes this photo striking. Atashi remains in the center of the mirror, and again between the legs of the man in the center, who is wrapping his *long* around his waist while the two men on his side, already in push-up position, are waiting for him to start the practice together (see fig. 30). Above him, we can see the photos of the masters of the zurkhanah though surprisingly not in their practicing outfit but in suit. Once master and elderly, the portrait in suit guaranteed them due reverence in this hierarchical space. The physical proximity between the men becomes more prominent in Figure 31 where their buttocks touch one another. They are doing push-ups (*shena*) while moving their bodies to the rhythm of *zarb,* a Persian goblet drum, which is played by *morshed* in zurkhanah. Choosing to go inside the *gowd* when she was technically capable of shooting from the location of a normal spectator above the gowd, and be on the same level as the men, not only in the physical sense but also in the symbolic sense of zurkhanah, shows how astute Atashi was to overcome the traditional gendered and spatial hierarchy. What the mirror reflects is "her observation of the relation between her and the zurkhanah. In other words, her gaze is directed towards the code (convention, mores) that has always disdained and contemned her gender."[98] The show goes on (see fig. 32) where one of the men swings *kabbada,* "a heavy iron bow on the cord of which heavy rings are strung," above his head.[99] To perform this individual exercise in the zurkhanah, "members came forth in ascending order of seniority, and so, uniquely in Persian social convention, humility was shown by trying to go first."[100] Once again, the fact that "an athlete would ask the *miyandar* for permission" to come forth, is another instance of the

[98] Homayoun Sirizi, *Kare Ayneh Nazoki Darad (2/3).*
[99] Chehabi, ZUR-ḴĀNA.
[100] Ibid.

hierarchy inside zurkhanah.[101] On the right we see dark green *mils* (Indian clubs), which athletes swung after doing push-ups (*shena)* and before practicing with *kabbada.* The plethora of images, both photographs and paintings, is once again demonstrated in this photo. Not only do we see the same mirror now stood on its long side to show the full body of the man, but also we become cognizant of the presence of mirrors on the cylindrical wall in the background. Men's display of brotherhood comes to a climax where the three of them hold both their hands together (see fig. 33). Their bodies are so close to each other and their reflection is so negligible that for a moment we become unaware of the presence of the mirror behind them until we catch sight of the ceaseless reflection of the artist in the only available spot on the mirror, between the man on the right and the one in the center of the image. How calculated she was in including her reflection even in this image! As Foad Torshizi notes, Atashi at the same time refers to a convention that "has marginalized women and held men in the center, and her presence in the space of the zurkhanah, is determinant in terms of its quality, but is inconspicuous in quantitative terms."[102]

As mentioned earlier, using a mirror to identify and represent oneself as a woman has a history in the practice of Surrealist women artists. They began to "explore the complex and ambiguous relationship between the female body and female identity."[103] If for Surrealist women the challenge was to define their identity that was always represented by men, representation of Iranian women has also been "othered" by western colonialism through a history of orientalism. As Yegenoglu notes, "the presumption of a hidden essence and truth behind the veil is the means

[101] Ibid.
[102] Foad Torshizi, *Woman's Image in the Works of Post-revolution Iranian Women Photographers*, Master's thesis, The University of Art, 2006 (Tehran, 2006), 149, (translated by the author).
[103] Whitney Chadwick, "An Infinite Play of Empty Mirrors: Women, Surrealism, and Self-representation," in *Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism, and Self-representation*, ed. Whitney Chadwick (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 4.

by which both the Western/colonial and the masculine subject constitute their own identity."[104] The image of the oriental woman as eroticized object of the gaze has been superseded by the image of the oppressed, third-world woman, fettered by her tradition and in need of rescuing. The veil, as the main signifier of her oppression, acts as a sign of cultural difference, the obsession with which "is now being institutionally legitimized through the construction of the 'postcolonial other' that is allowed to express itself only as long as it speaks of its own Otherness."[105] So, if an artist does not want to reiterate the so-called "given identity" (of the homogenized stereotype of the veiled Muslim woman as a sign of the Orient) and react against what is expected of her to represent, i.e., something that ensures her uniqueness merely by being different from her Western counterparts, she has to come up with different strategies of representation.

In *Bodyless* Atashi decentralized the headscarf to focus on her presence in a spatially hierarchical and gendered institution in which she could negotiate gender relations within the frame of history, tradition and religion. In so doing, she constitutes her identity "within, not outside representation," to use Stuart Hall's words.[106] For Hall, "identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language, and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' or 'where we come from,' so much as what we represent ourselves."[107] In the case of Atashi, becoming an active agent of control and the subject of the gaze rather than being an oppressed victim of the headscarf imposed upon her by the religious system achieves this goal. She uses symbols and spaces that epitomize patriarchy to attack the dominant image of

[104] Meyda Yegenoglu, "Veiled Fantasies: Cultural and Sexual Difference in the Discourse of Orientalism," in *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, by Reina Lewis and Sara Mills (New York: Routledge, 2003), 11.
[105] Khaled D. Ramadan, "The Edge of WC," in *Peripheral Insider: Perspectives on Contemporary Internationalism in Visual Culture* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum, 2007), 27.
[106] Stuart Hall, " Introduction: Who Needs 'Identity,'" in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Gay Paul. Du (London: Sage, 1996), 4.
[107] Ibid., 4.

male power. Identities "relate to the invention of tradition as much as to tradition itself, which they oblige us to read not as endless reiteration but as 'the changing same': not the so-called return to roots but a coming-to-terms with our 'routes.'"[108]

Hamid Keshmirshekan highlights the wariness of some artists regarding politics of representation:

> Among artists mainly from the new generation (born from the 1980s onward) who acquire an avant-garde status—precisely at the juncture when it goes outside the institution of art—and critics active in major Iranian private art scenes and journals, some have been wary of this Perso-Islamic stereotypical label, alleging that it may perpetuate stereotypes about Iranian cultural production and art in particular; invoking similar politics of representation as in Orientalist works of art.[109]

Atashi does not reiterate the past to self-exoticize. She does not come to terms with Neo-Orientalism, which "is grounded on how the cultural East comes to terms with an Orientalized East."[110] Instead, she finds her way to overcome the limitations and identifies herself as an actor within power relations by means of resistance. Foucault suggests "a new economy of power relations" that consists of "taking the forms of resistance against different forms of power as a starting point… so as to bring to light power relations, locate their position, find out their point of application and the methods used."[111] By choosing the zurkhanah as the quintessential site of a male-dominated society and resisting the conditions against female entry, she located the position of power relations. Once inside the space, her expertise as a photographer put her in a position, although after six months, to negotiate her power to photograph the men who wanted to

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[108] Ibid. Hall refers to Gilroy's book, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1994).
[109] Hamid Keshmirshekan, "Reclaiming Cultural Space: The Artist's Performativity versus the State's Expectations in Contemporary Art," in *Performing the Iranian State: Visual Culture and Representations of Iranian Identity*, ed. Staci Gem. Scheiwiller (London [u.a.: Anthem Press, 2013), 152.
[110] Ibid.
[111] Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed. Hubert L. Dreyfus (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 211.

have a document of their demonstrations of power, virility, and brotherhood. Her resistance, as Foucault suggests, allowed the possibility of change, which resulted in achieving her goal. If "many works by women surrealists both create and resist the specular focus and voyeuristic gaze of Western representation, [and] others reimagine the surrealist woman as a figure of agency and transformation," *Bodyless* does both and so the woman "is recreated through [her] eyes as self-possessed and capable of producing new narrative of the self."[112] In *Bodyless* Atashi inverts the male gaze, both of Iranian man by choosing to photograph his semi-nude body, and of western man, by disallowing him to reimagine her as the oppressed, passive object of his gaze. She not only possesses a voyeuristic gaze but also, by being behind the camera, surveils. By including her reflection in all the photos, she reminds the viewer, whomever that may be, that she is not only looking at the men in zurkhanah, but also at the viewer.

To the men in the zurkhanah Atashi is present; to us, the viewers, however, only her reflection is present. Therefore she has the absent presence of a surveilling body. As a result, she asserts her agency as subject of the gaze, a subject who controls the scene and documents what women were conventionally not allowed to see in a space they were not allowed to enter. In *The Meaning of Spatial Boundaries,* Fatima Mernissi writes, "[a] woman is always trespassing in a male space because she is, by definition, a foe. A woman has no right to use male spaces. If she enters them, she is upsetting the male's order and his peace of mind. She is actually committing an act of aggression against him merely by being present where she should not be."[113] The zurkhanah is a microcosm of a unipolar, patriarchal society. Atashi shows her sarcasm to this society; throughout history, it was always men who gazed at women, now she is returning the

[112] Whitney Chadwick, "An Infinite Play of Empty Mirrors: Women, Surrealism, and Self-representation," in *Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism, and Self-representation*, ed. Whitney Chadwick (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 11.
[113] Fatima Mernissi, "The Meaning of Spatial Boundaries," in *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Reina Lewis and Sara Mills (New York: Routledge, 2003), 491.

gaze, in zurkhanah, the house of strength, "an institution that exalts the ideals of traditional masculinity."[114] *She* is now the one with voyeuristic eyes who enjoys the semi-nude, muscular bodies of men performing for her. If men have penetrated women's bodies with their gaze, by situating her reflection between the man's legs in Figure 28, *she* is now penetrating the center of his masculinity.

In *Cutting Up,* feminist visual theorist Joan Copjec argues that the "Lacanian aphorism—desire is the desire of the Other" is problematic and says that it "is often taken to mean that the subject fashions itself in the image of the Other's desire."[115] The problem that Copjec finds is reflective:

> For when this assumption is combined with the uncovering of a masculinist bias in the ordering of social relations, then woman can only be comprehended as a realization of male desires, she can only be seen to see herself through the perspective of a male gaze. Lacan's answer to this mistaken interpretation of his formula is simply that we have no image of the Other's desire (it remains indeterminate), and it is this very lack which causes our desire. It is first of all an *unsatisfied* desire that initiates our own, one that is not filled up with meaning, or has no signified. That desire is *unsatisfiable* is a secondary truth resulting from this primary condition.[116]

If the social and historical background underlying this photographic series is hidden for a western viewer or even more broadly, for a non-Iranian viewer, the voyeuristic aspect and inversion of the subject of the gaze are clearly visible. Not only is the artist in *Bodyless* not "seen to see herself through the perspective of a male gaze," but also she sees the males' bodies from her perspective, through her *own* lens. She also sees herself, a woman, in the mirror, gazing at the males' bodies from the perspective of a female gaze. The work is more *Faceless* than *Bodyless.* Although there is no access to the female body, it is the facelessness of Atashi at the

[114] Rochard and Chehabi, *Zūrkhanah*, 318.
[115] Joan Copjec, "Cutting up," in *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Teresa Brennan (London: Routledge, 1989), 238.
[116] Ibid.

center, which she creates by always positioning the camera in front of her face and denying the viewer access to a portrait of her. The men demonstrate their brotherhood and physical closeness, put their muscular bodies on display, and move them to the rhythm of the music and the poetry that exalts their masculinity, all to express their invincibility in a community of men.

When a society opts for sexual segregation, and therefore impoverishes heterosexual relations, it "fosters 'homosocial' relations."[117] Atashi's presence in a homosocial space (a space where power is distributed *among* men and its demonstration through their bodies is *for* men) disrupts its social order. As Mernissi notes, "[b]oundaries are never established gratuitously… The institutionalized boundaries dividing the parts of society express the recognition of power in one part at the expense of the other" and "any transgression of the boundaries," she continues, "is a danger to the social order because it is an attack on the acknowledged allocation of power."[118] There was resistance to allowing Atashi entrance to the zurkhanah for the very same reason. She was attacking the power of tradition and patriarchy.

In an attempt to understand the frames of *Bodyless,* it is worthwhile to use Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of the logic of framing in Immanuel Kant's aesthetic, in particular Kant's concept of the parergon. In *The Pure Judgment of Taste*, Kant divides a work of art into inside and outside. He refers to the intrinsic form or meaning as ergon and to all those things attached to it as parergon. Thus what is parergonal for Kant is hierarchically inferior; it is a supplement to the intrinsic beauty of the artwork; it is its border but not part of it. In *The Truth in Painting,* Derrida deconstructs the definition of the ergon as intrinsic and untouched by its frame, arguing that separating the inside and outside of an artwork creates binary oppositions. For him, although parergon is situated on the outside, it infiltrates and helps define the inside. In *Bodyless,*

[117] Mernissi, *The Meaning of Spatial Boundaries,* 491
[118] Ibid., 489.

except for Figure 25, the frame of the mirror is partially or completely visible. What is within the frame of the mirror is as essential to the meaning of the photos as what is outside of it. Kant's definition of ergon and parergon here becomes highly problematic. The frame of the mirror separates the reflection from that which is reflected by the camera. What is outside of the frame of the mirror is inside and intrinsic to the photo. The frame of the mirror acts as the second frame but by no means it is secondary to the image. We cannot separate it from what is in front of it. The work or "ergon" is not divided between the inside and the outside. The frame is part of the work. Atashi obfuscates the boundaries between the Kantian parergon and ergon and thereby deconstructs the hierarchy between them.

In *Bodyless*, the artist dealt with several issues. The subtle use of the mirror produced it as an agent in the negotiation of gendered space. While the artist asserted her position as the active subject of the gaze in a historically male-dominated space, she succeeded in changing power relations through resistance. She challenged the passive and victim position of women in patriarchy and rejected the national and regional confines of women's representation by identifying herself as an active agent. In the end men performed for her and entered willingly into the representation. As Afsaneh Kamran notes, "[t]he obsession to become an image is so alluring and gratifying that men too step down from their constructed historical roles and renounce to a woman photographer their desire to control in a masculine space."[119]

The Domestic Sphere: *Look* and *Like Everyday*

The domestic sphere has been an inspiration for many artists in diverse ways. In this section, I will do a comparative analysis between *Look* by Newsha Tavakolian and *Like*

[119] Afsaneh Kamran, "Mehraneh Atashi," Pahlevoon.ir, September 1, 2014; http://pahlevoon.ir/blog/mehraneh-atashi/; accessed September 2, 2014.

Everyday by Shadi Ghadirian, aiming to investigate the ways in which these artists used the domestic sphere to tackle identity issues, with regard to familiar binaries linked to the home, as identified by the architectural critic, Kim Dovey: private and public, self and other, identity and community, and finally, insideness and outsideness.[120] I will argue that, in *Like Everyday*, Ghadirian focuses on gender identity and deals with woman identity as a static concept that has not changed from one generation to the next, whereas in *Look,* Tavakolian challenged the privacy of the home by transforming her bedroom into a dynamic space where the interaction between the people in her close neighbourhood and the bedroom giving onto a cityscape, creates a new place in which contemporary identities of a specific class can be shaped.

When in 2000 Ghadirian came up with *Like Everyday*, a series of photographs demonstrating women's labour in the domestic sphere, "she began to be openly criticized by some Iranian public institutions, which found the work too critical of women's traditional roles."[121] In Iran all exhibitions have to be approved by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Works displaying a woman without hijab are not accepted although the Ministry does not provide a reason for disapproving a work that does not violate this rule. Ghadirian could never fully exhibit this work in Iran. As she has stated in a conversation with art critic and photographer Mehran Mohajer and artist Iman Afsarian, "only three of the photos were allowed to be used in a group exhibition, although the work was widely exhibited in Paris, London, Japan, etc. It wasn't seen inside Iran nor is any review written about it here…My concerns are

[120] Kim Dovey, "Home and Homeliness," in *Home Environments*, ed. Irwin Altman and Carol M. Werner (New York: Plenum Press, 1985), 33-64.
[121] Rose Issa, *Shadi Ghadirian: Iranian Photographer* (London: Saqi, 2008), 11.

about Iran and my work talks about Iran. In fact this is the first time that my work is being talked about seriously in my own country. I'm very glad about it."[122]

What is striking in this series is not the chador-clad women per se, but the hidden faces of women substituted with kitchen and cleaning utensils: tea cup, iron, kettle, besom (a broom made of twigs tied around a stick), pots and pans, cleaver, tea-pot, colander, grater, slotted spoon, coffee pot, bowl, dish-washing glove and ladle. This use of utensils might be linked to the fact that Ghadirian has stated that her marriage was her inspiration to create this work. Rose Issa writes that, after her marriage, Ghadirian "had to face the daily chores of domestic life… (Like many women who want their children to study and succeed, Ghadirian's mother spared her domestic duties at home)."[123] Ghadirian says:

> When I wanted to get married, the first thing my mother did like all Iranian mothers was to buy my dowry. It was then that I first realized than I'm going to a new house with a bundle of domestic utensils. Friends and family also brought me domestic tools as my wedding gift, never a book or an artwork. In the west it happens in a different way but still a domestic tool. So I made an association between the domestic utensils and marriage. After marriage although my husband and I are both photographers, it was mostly my responsibility inside the house to cook and keep the house arranged.[124]

The women in *Like Everyday* are faceless: we do not see them; we do not know if they are sad or happy, angry or pleased. Veiling the face and the body in these images connects these women with the photos of Qajar women veiled in chador and burka who became a black volume with no visible individual identity.[125] These women are masked. Their identity is hidden behind the domestic objects they hold in front of their faces; that is how they are identified, with the

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[122] Ghadirian is referring to the conversation that took place in 2010. See Ghadirian, *Shadi Ghadirian in Conversation with Iman Afsarian and Mehran Mohajer,* 61.
[123] *Ibid., 10*
[124] Shadi Ghadirian, interview by author, June 8, 2014.
[125] Hadi Azari, *Women's Representation in the Post-revolutionary Photography*, Master's thesis, Tehran University, 2011 (Tehran, 2011), 116, (translated by the author).

routine tasks they perform on a daily basis. These tasks are familiar to us yet these women unsettle us. Why is it that these homely objects give us an "unhomely" feeling? What is in the visual arrangement of these photos that makes them "dismal" and makes us feel "uncomfortable"? To answer these questions, let us turn to Freud who "developed ideas about the fear generated by the familiar [heimlich] becoming unfamiliar [unheimlich, or uncanny]."[126] In his essay in 1919, Freud defined "the uncanny" or "unheimlich" as "something, which is secretly familiar, which has undergone repression and then returned from it."[127] In other words, the uncanny is "what ought to have remained repressed and unconscious but which alarmingly resurfaced and generated anxiety in the conscious mind."[128] The domestic objects of *Like Everyday* are unhomely because, although they are everyday objects, they bring to the conscious mind their association with female identity and here, with faceless women.

By positioning the domestic objects in front of the women, Ghadirian deprives her sitters of the most basic form of recognition and agency and, in so doing, transposes the agency entirely onto the viewer. The faceless women become the objects of the gaze and not only are they identified with domestic labour but, because their chador identifies them with Muslim societies, the images confirm an identification of Muslim women with domestic labour. The women in *Like Everyday* are uncanny, but also they are produced as abject—two psychoanalytical notions that, as feminist film theorist Barbara Creed argues, have certain similarities. To make this clear, it is helpful to use Julia Kristeva's definition of abjection as that which does not "respect borders,

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[126] Fiona Carson, "Uneasy Spaces: The Domestic Uncanny in Contemporary Installation Art," in *Motherhood and Space: Configurations of the Maternal through Politics, Home, and the Body*, ed. Sarah Hardy (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 243.
[127] Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*., trans. James Strachey and Anna Freud, comp. Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, vol. XVII (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 245.
[128] Carson, "Uneasy Spaces: The Domestic Uncanny in Contemporary Installation Art," 245.

positions, rules," that which "disturbs identity, system [and] order."[129] Creed establishes the connection between the uncanny and the abject: "the uncanny feeling associated with a familiar/unfamiliar place disturbs the boundary which marks out the known and the knowable…the uncanny and the abject share common features for 'uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar'."[130]

The fact that Ghadirian faced domestic work *only* after her marriage and hence, the association she made between marriage and domestic utensils, should not be considered a general truth since there are many Iranian families in which housework is distributed if not among all the family but at least among its female members. The experience of an individual or a group, although important, cannot and should not be read as a general and all-encompassing experience. As historian Joan Scott argues, the concept of experience can be problematic particularly in contexts where difference is an issue; she notes that the concept "weakens the critical thrust of histories of difference…[since it] takes as self-evident the identities of those whose experience is being documented and thus naturalizes their difference."[131]

What becomes problematic in images like these is representation because in the global art market the images are read in different contexts and so the artist should be more careful not to generalize her experience to all (in this case Iranian) women. As Sally Kitch notes, "the real focus of the category *representation* is the process itself, the way in which the media and texts produce rather than simply mimic gender, inequality, difference, and identities."[132] The problem with representations like these is that they treat identities as immutable rather than in process and

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[129] Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.
[130] Freud, *The Uncanny,* 219, quoted in Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993), 53.
[131] Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 27.
[132] Sally L. Kitch, "Feminist Interdisciplinary Approaches to Knowledge Building," in *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis*, ed. Sharlene Nagy. Hesse-Biber (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2007), 24.

as "universal" across the culture represented, i.e., Iranian women. As Kitch suggests, representation "entails both the history of and the possibility for challenging and reconstructing these representations to produce equity and agency… it intersects with *gender, power and social change,* because social opportunities and resources are inevitably shaped by media and texts in both local and global cultures."[133] With regards to gravitating toward "local or mininarratives based on subjects' everyday life experiences or socially lived knowledge*,"* we should consider what feminist postmodernists and poststructuralists asked us to be wary of, namely the "theory as overly universalistic, totalistic, and stifling of difference."[134] I am not suggesting that Ghadirian silence her experience in her work, rather, I am adding the caveat that understanding the meaning of such representations cannot be possible without contextualizing the history of their production. While Scott suggests that we should bring historicity to experience, Fatima Gocek and Shiva Balaghi argue that we have to "contextualize it spatially [in this case, to Iran] and epistemologically (to the dimensions of tradition, identity, and power)…since tradition, identity, and power are either used hegemonically by the West, or critically by the Third-World."[135]

Elements of Iranian, Muslim culture that are misrepresented in the reception of works such as Ghadirian's, particularly in the West, become part of the meanings circulating around them, contributing to the history of representation attached to women from Iran. Defining the identity of Iranian woman as stifled and traditional has two ramifications. It implies that Iranian women do not have agency and the power to emancipate themselves. And, by becoming a sign of backwardness, this definition legitimizes the colonizer to speak for her.

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[133] Ibid.
[134] Susan Archer. Mann, "Postmodernism, Poststructuralism, Queer and Transgender Theories," in *Doing Feminist Theory: From Modernity to Postmodernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 218. Archer refers to Grant, see Judith Grant, *Fundamental Feminism: Contesting the Core Concepts of Feminist Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 147.
[135] Fatma Müge Göçek and Shiva Balaghi, "Introduction," in *Reconstructing Gender in the Middle East: Tradition, Identity, and Power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 5.

If domestic labour, this familiar act with which we all grow up, resurfaced in such an uncanny way in Ghadirian's work, perhaps we should think of it in terms of identity or more broadly, cultural identity. Hall defines identities as "the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past."[136] Where does Ghadirian position herself within this work? If because of her personal experience she sees herself and the women of her generation "sentenced to a lifetime of cleaning, ironing, and preparing food for their family" as suggested by Issa, where does her identity lie as a contemporary Iranian woman who also happens to be a photographer?[137] If the women in *Like Everyday* represent the generations of women before Ghadirian, can we venture to say that the domestic labour performed routinely and to some degree, 'unconsciously' by these women created repressed dissatisfaction and using Carson's words, "alarmingly resurfaced and generated anxiety in the conscious mind" and manifested itself as uncanny? Which women does Ghadirian speak for?

Hall suggests that, "though we speak, so to say 'in our own name', of ourselves and from our own experience, nevertheless who speaks, and the subject who is spoken of, are never identical, never exactly in the same place."[138] Iranian women, like any group of people from a particular culture, have a cultural identity that, as suggested by Hall, can be viewed from a position which "recognizes that, as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant *difference* which constitute 'what [they] really are'; or rather since history has intervened—'what [they] have become'."[139] Historically, the domestic sphere and its labours have been identified with women as the *Other,* and men, defined as solid, stable and

[136] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 225.
[137] Issa, *Shadi Ghadirian: Iranian Photographer*, 10.
[138] Hall*, Cultural Identity and Diaspora,* 222.
[139] Ibid*.,* 225

essential against all the others who do not qualify, have a role in maintaining the otherness of women. As postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha suggests, "identification is the process of identifying with and through another object, an object of otherness, at which point the agency of identification—the subject—is itself always ambivalent."[140] It is unclear whether the artist identifies herself or the Iranian woman with these sitters. Even if it is the latter, which Iranian woman, of the past, or the present? Ghadirian says in an interview, "I found that there were all these modern inventions like steam irons but the woman's life was still stagnant. We repeat and repeat the same chores every day, the same things, every day is like yesterday, and there is no creativity."[141] What is problematic here is that Ghadirian is trying to create a "one true self" for Iranian women that regards them as "'one people', with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of [their] actual history."[142]

The domestic objects in *Like Everyday* reinforce a sense of otherness, which for the Western viewer, is doubly present: "the veiled woman is already othered in her own culture, gendered in and by a particular form of dressing, but she is other to the Western subject in a way that differs from her position relative to the dominant male subjects of her culture."[143] The women in *Like everyday* are also doubly veiled, by the domestic objects and by the chador. If the veiled Oriental woman was considered "as not yielding herself to the Western gaze and therefore imagined as hiding something behind the veil," here, it is not the chador that obscures her face, it

[140] Homi Bhabha, "The Third Space," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 211.
[141] Ruchira Gupta, "Shadi Ghadirian," Tasveer, 2009; http://www.tasveerarts.com/photographers/shadi-ghadirian/interviews/; accessed September 05, 2014.
[142] Hall, *Cultural Identity and Diaspora,* 223.
[143] Meyda Yegenoglu, "Veiled Fantasies: Cultural and Sexual Difference in the Discourse of Orientalism," in *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, by Reina Lewis and Sara Mills (New York: Routledge, 2003), 544.

is the domestic object.[144] However, the significant difference is that she cannot even see. With the veil the Oriental woman had the agency to see without being seen; with the chador and domestic objects in front of her face, however, she becomes entirely the passive object of the gaze. As we have seen the depiction of Middle Eastern Muslim woman as "voiceless and abject, suffering behind the folds of the veil" has a long history in Orientalist visual culture and the double veil of Ghadirian's sitters reinscribes that abjection and voicelessness.[145]

One of the basic questions that comes to mind is that of why women wear chador at all when they are within the confines of their home, their comfort zone. Without knowing the social context, these photos may be misinterpreted and read as documenting a form of oppression that Iranian women have to endure even inside home. At the same time, Ghadirian does not use the black chador seen in so many pictures of Iran but "rather the richly patterned, colourful, feminine and soft chadors that women traditionally wear inside homes to receive guests."[146] In Iran, past and present, it is a custom to welcome guests by serving them with tea, therefore the picture of a woman wearing the domestic chador, holding a teapot (see fig. 34) is not a far cry from reality. That said, it is not the case that a traditional woman wears or has to wear the chador when she irons (see fig. 35), chops meat (see fig. 36), cooks (see fig. 37), or washes the dishes (see fig. 38). Ghadirian's statement that these are the chadors "that women *always* use inside their houses" (italics mine) should not be taken literally since, as I mentioned earlier, a traditional and/or religious woman does not wear a chador within the domestic sphere when she is surrounded by her immediate family members [i.e., her husband, sons, brothers as well as her nephews,

[144] Ibid., 547
[145] Nima Naghibi, *Rethinking Global Sisterhood: Western Feminism and Iran* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), xii.
[146] Issa, *Shadi Ghadirian: Iranian Photographer*, 11.

grandsons or grandfathers, and surely her female family members.][147] Ghadirian said in an interview that the chador-clad woman in *Like Everyday* is "defiant—she has a pot, a pan, a kitchen utensil instead of her face" and in another instance argues that the very act of taking a photograph is a sign of defiance.[148] It is hard to understand how a woman with a pot instead of her face is defiant. One can argue that there are no women in the images to be defiant, since the fabric of the chador could just as easily be draped around an inanimate object. Therefore, the images objectify the women. However, I agree with the second part of her statement, since by taking photographs she shows that she does not confine herself to the domestic chores.

Look, which is a mix of photo and video installations, was exhibited at Aaran Art Gallery in Tehran, in December 2012. At the center of the gallery space stood a 2 x 4 meter installation of the buildings that Tavakolian views from her bedroom (see fig. 39), "the central idea of the exhibition" in her own words.[149] From the ten windows in the picture, connected by wires, are ten video screens showing movies of the subjects on the ten large portraits fixed on the walls of the gallery space (see fig. 40). "They are all neighbours with a connection to the buildings," Tavakolian says, "but not the exact people in the exact apartments."[150] For this work, Tavakolian was inspired by an Egyptian movie, *The Yacoubian Building* (2006)[151]. Initially she started the project by going to a friend's home in an apartment complex to get acquainted with some new people. She went into their homes and took pictures of them for six months but was not satisfied

[147] *The Hidden World of Shadi Ghadirian*, prod. The Kitchen Sisters and Lacy Roberts, The Kitchen Sisters, 2012; http://vimeo.com/38114659#; accessed September 5, 2014.
[148] "Shadi Ghadirian."
[149] Newsha Tavakolian, "Newsha Tavakolian's Still Life in Tehran," interview by Nathan Thornburgh, Roads & Kingdoms, January 4, 2013, accessed September 1, 2014, http://roadsandkingdoms.com/2013/newsha-tavakolians-still-life-in-tehran/.
[150] All the information about the stages of the project was obtained from the artist's talk in the short movie about her work. *Look*, prod. Mehran Afshar Naderi, dir. Siavash Naghshabadi, perf. Newsha Tavakolian, Pendar.net/hafteh; http://vimeo.com/59719541; accessed September 1, 2014.
[151] Directed by Marwan Hamed, this movie is based on the novel of the same title by Alaa Al Aswany. It is set in 1990 at about the time of the first Gulf War and is a scathing portrayal of the Egyptian society since the coup d'état of 1952.

with her work in the end. She then decided to photograph in her own building where she has been living with her husband for ten years. She thought that because she knew many of the people who lived in the building, having grown up with them, the work would be more intimate. "Most of these people that you see in these photographs are my childhood friends, my neighbours… my cousin… my brother; I know their stories," says Tavakolian.[152] She started taking photographs of them in their own apartment but again near the end of the work she saw it as a failure. Finally, she restarted the project in her room. In the description of this project, she wrote:

> The project was my desire to look deeply into the lives of those whom I have known for over ten years and who live in my building. I wanted to bring to life the story of a nation of middle class youth who are everyday battling with themselves, their isolated conformed society, their lack of hope for the future and each of their individual stories. Over a period of six months at 8 P.M, I fixed my camera on a tripod in front of the window where I had watched the same view of the city for ten years. I have tried to capture a moment of each of their stories within the frame of a window that looks out onto the cold concrete buildings which surround us daily.[153]

Tavakolian's choice in making her apartment into a studio where she carried out her project can be investigated from different angles. She not only made her apartment into a studio; she also made the most intimate part of the apartment, her bedroom, into a studio. By doing so, she blurs that boundary between the outside and the inside, public and private sphere, between her professional role as a photographer and her role as a wife, between working space and living space, creative work and labour. The grand window of the bedroom that offered her a view of the city for ten years was undoubtedly a decisive factor in the execution of her work, since it is this window that, as she has said, "opens on to many other windows that are all closed and I cannot

[152] Ibid.
[153] Newsha Tavakolian, Newsha Tavakolian Photography; http://www.newshatavakolian.com/#mi=2&pt=1&pi=10000&s=0&p=1&a=0&at=0; accessed September 1, 2014.

see into."[154] Behind the closed windows are those who live in the same city and the same neighbourhood, and each has their own stories. Had it been technically feasible for Tavakolian to see through those windows, and if she had known the people behind them, perhaps she would have chosen to tell their stories instead. It is the building from which another building, this erect icon of urban space is visible and although the multitude of spaces within buildings separates one from others, it connects them at the same time. This brings us to the concept of neighbourhood within the urban space that Michel de Certeau explains relation to what he calls the "practices of everyday life":

> Because of the empty space inside constrained concrete layouts -the walls of an apartment, the facades of a street- the act of arranging one's interior space rejoins that of arranging one's own trajectories in the urban space of the neighbourhood, and these two acts are the cofounders of everyday life in an urban milieu: to take away one or the other would be to destroy the conditions of the possibility for this life. Thus, the limits between public and private, which appears to be the founding structure of the neighbourhood for the practice of a dweller, is not only a separation, but constitutes a separation that unites: the public and private are not both disregarded as two exogenous, though coexisting, elements; they are much more, constantly interdependent because, in the neighbourhood, one has no meaning without the other.[155]

Tavakolian did not feel satisfied with the first two trials of her project although they were both within the confines of a neighbourhood. Neither the space of her first trial was in her own neighbourhood, nor did she have a personal connection with the people of that neighbourhood, except for her friend. Those people were almost strangers and Tavakolian did not have ties with them, as with the people in her own building, whom she knew from childhood and with whom she grew up. Certeau highlights the importance of childhood in recognizing a space, "[t]he

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[154] "Tehran Gallery to Exhibit Works by Iranian Artist Newsha Tavakolian." *Tavoos Online*, December 12, 2012. Accessed September 1, 2014. http://www.tavoosonline.com/News/NewsDetailEn.aspx?src=21128.
[155] Michel De. Certeau, Luce Giard, and Pierre Mayol, *The Practice of Everyday Life: Living and Cooking* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 11.

practice of neighbourhood is, from childhood on, a technique of recognizing space as something social."[156]

Tavakolian's neighbourhood is "neither intimate, nor anonymous" and although "untouchable because it is distant," it is "recognizable through its relative stability."[157] As one lives in a neighbourhood, it becomes a known, familiar space, a social space where socials relations take place. Through living and everyday use of neighbourhood, "a known area of social space in which… [one knows oneself] to be recognized," one gains a mastery of social environment. She was searching for more than a neighbourhood, a community. Having the people with whom Tavakolian grew up since childhood and with whom she had developed a sense of affinity, in the same building—itself a microcosm of the neighbourhood—accelerates "the reciprocal habituation resulting from being neighbours, the processes of recognition—of identification," a sense of belonging to a community.[158]

In order to understand why the artist was not satisfied with her second trial, it is necessary to know the significance of the notion of place. In her book *A Place Called Home*, philosopher Doreen Massey reconceptualizes its meaning: "a 'place' is formed out of the particular set of social relations which interact at a particular location. And the singularity of any individual place is formed in part out of the specificity of the interactions which occur at that location (nowhere else does this precise mixture occur.)"[159] By photographing her subjects each in his or her respective apartments, the artist operated within already formed places. Although each of these places could be a reflection of the personalities of her subjects since "[a] place inhabited by the same person for a certain duration draws a portrait that resembles this person

[156] Ibid., 12.
[157] Ibid.
[158] Ibid., 9.
[159] Doreen Massey, "A Place Called Home," *New Formations*, no. 17 (1992): 12.

based on objects (present or absent) and the habits that they imply," her second trial did not allow the artist to include her own reflections on the life inside a building, a neighbourhood, and a city. The missing link was the window, the same window in all the photos. It is this window and not the ten other windows in the apartments of her subjects that gives the artist an agency to reflect on her anxieties about the city she does not know if she loves or not, of the future of a nation of middle-class youth to which she and her sitters belong.[160] By bringing her subjects into her own bedroom, she created a new place, and transformed her bedroom into a transitional space, "a place for creative action, providing enough protection to encourage experimentation (if not outright exploration) without being overly confining."[161]

The window overlooking the buildings of her neighbourhood is the background of all but one of her ten portraits. The man with shaving foam on his face, sitting at a table instead of being in front of the mirror in the bathroom (see fig. 41); the anxious woman sitting on the bed with two mobile phones on her side and a piece of paper in her hand which probably bears a telephone number (see fig.42); the girl sitting in front of her birthday cake while its candles are still burning (see fig.43); and finally the sad woman in transition, who is hesitant about going out or staying in after taking a shower (see fig. 44): they all clearly convey a sense of indecision. While the facial expressions and the transfixed stare of the subjects of all these portraits emanate insecurity, the teary-eyed woman in Figure 45 is the epitome of despair. These portraits show how "home is a place of security within an insecure world, a place of certainty within doubt, a familiar place in a strange world, a sacred place in a profane world…These oppositions can be subsumed under the rubric of order/chaos."[162] To situate her viewers inside her bedroom and to give them a more

[160] "Tavoos Online."
[161] Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-world* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 122.
[162] Dovey, "Home and Homeliness," 46.

concrete image of her experiment, Tavakolian confronts them with the grand view of the window at the center of the gallery space; it is as if we are in her room, looking at the city, seeing what she sees everyday. The ten screens fixed on this grand installation, showing videos of her protagonists, give a temporal aspect to this work, and involve us in the process. In *Look,* Tavakolian deals with the phenomenon of home embodied in an "ordered structure that is at once spatial, temporal, and sociocultural."[163]

Tavakolian is interested in the dynamics of identity formation within a group to which she belongs. However, instead of looking at identity, "constructed through the process of identification [as] a claim for absolute sameness, a coincidence and matching with the desired object, group, or person (perhaps a historical identity located on the historical past,)" she wants to explore what Carolyn Steadman calls the "process of individuation, the modern making of individuality and a unique personality" and how individuals within a group who lived in the same neighbourhood, man or woman, come to identify themselves in the space of the home.[164] Instead of focusing on difference alone and "the normative aspects it implies: different *from* some standard," *Look* encourages the viewer to also see diversity among a group of people in a society.[165] According to Sally Kitch, "'diversity' alone suggests a nonhierarchical pluralism…but linked to 'difference,' [t]he juxtaposed terms… invite simultaneous exploration of both specific groups and identities and their historical…[and cultural] interconnections."[166] By including the people within a community of friends and family, regardless of their gender, Tavakolian seeks to tell the stories of the people of the same social class and almost the same generation. She rejects

[163] *Ibid*.,38.
[164] Carolyn Steedman, "Living Historically Now?," *Arena*, 1991st ser., 97, no. 49, 7.
[165] Sally L. Kitch, "Feminist Interdisciplinary Approaches to Knowledge Building," in *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis*, ed. Sharlene Nagy and Hesse-Biber (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2007), 133.
[166] Ibid.

the reinforcement of "binary divisions between men and women" and limiting the "definition of the female subject to gender identity [that] completely [bypasses] social and ethnic identities".[167]

In this section I analyzed two works by two Iranian women photographers to elucidate how they conceive of the home, as a place, which has historically been associated with woman. I looked at certain aspects of the home such as identity and community, self and other, private and public, insideness and outsideness and showed that through different strategies, the home orients and connects both artists "with the past, the future, the physical environment, and [their] social world" though in quite different ways.[168] On the one hand, in *Like Everyday*, Ghadirian used domestic objects to emphasize the identification of the domestic sphere with women. In *Look,* Tavakolian used her bedroom as a site within which she could negotiate spatiotemporal as well as sociocultural aspects of home through manipulating the boundaries between the private and the public as well as the inside and the outside. Ghadirian deprived her sitters of any sort of agency by double-veiling them. The use of chador in her images, even the patterned chador worn by traditional women inside the domestic sphere on certain occasions, can be easily misread without considering its social context, and thus misrepresented by directly relating the domestic labour to Muslim women. Identity is at stake in the women of *Like Everyday* since according to Dovey, "the personal and the social are inextricably interwoven…representation of identity in the home stems from both social structure and our quest for personal identification within it. The home is both a 'statement' and a 'mirror,' developing both socially and individually, reflecting both collective ideology and authentic personal experience."[169] Tavakolian on the other hand touched on issues of identity and community by using home as what Wikstrom defines, "a point

[167] Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes," in *Colonial Discourse/postcolonial Theory*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), 207.
[168] Dovey, "Home and Homeliness," 44.
[169] Ibid.,40.

of departure…an opportunity to mutually create space… a sequence of events, and a part of neighbourhood."[170]

Conclusion

I have explored works by three contemporary photographers and illustrated how they incorporated different strategies of representation in their work. I showed how all these artists investigate identity politics and challenged the hegemony of male dominance. Whereas the heart of Atashi's work is not her headscarf but her trespassing a gendered space, the veil becomes an indispensable part of Ghadirian's layered work. Tavakolian approaches the domestic sphere by engaging herself with the community she belongs to. Her approach is holistic because she explores her identity with reference to a group. Ghadirian's *Like Everyday* is prone to being easily consumable. As Mohajer indicates, in *Like Everyday*:

> The colourful chador or prayer chador is used that seems to be gradually put aside and not even seen much in public; these prayer chadors more or less allude to personal rites and on the other hand they were what women used to wear when they went shopping, which refers to the public space. There are subtle marks of individuality in these chadors.[171]

However, I agree with Afsarian that, with regard to a western viewer, "the reflection of ethnic and gender identity that is borne by the artist also weighs on the photographs. There is something in the photos that does not allow the viewer to see those subtleties. The weight of the 'Iranian woman portrait' prevents the viewer from coming closer."[172] The viewer's clichéd reading of *Like Everyday* is even more consolidated when the description of this work on the artist page of

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[170] Thomas Wikstrom, *Between the Homes and the World: Space and Housing Interaction in Housing Areas of the Forties and Fifties.* PhD diss., Lund, 1994, 318 cited in J. Douglas Porteous and Sandra Eileen Smith, "Home: A Landscape of the Heart," in *Domicide: The Global Destruction of Home* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 31.
[171] Mohajer, *Shadi Ghadirian in Conversation with Iman Afsarian and Mehran Mohajer,* 57.
[172] Afsarian, *Shadi Ghadirian in Conversation with Iman Afsarian and Mehran Mohajer,* 57.

Saatchi Gallery website frames the domestic labour as "women's roles within an Islamic state" or "within the ancient codes of Sharia law."[173] What has Sharia law to do with women's cooking and ironing? Should we read this description as such, that non-Muslim or maybe Western women do not do domestic labour? Or that in non-Muslim societies domestic labour is assigned to men? Even *Qajar Series* as a more nuanced work is not safe from misrepresentation. For instance, the curator Rose Issa writes about the props in *Qajar Series,* "These object are 'forbidden,' yet slip through customs into black market and people's homes while others are restricted –only women are forbidden to ride bicycles."[174] "Forbidden" becomes a catchword for Issa as she writes in another source, "[w]omen born during the revolution, live with lots of things that are forbidden. Forbidden to dance, to listen to music, to drink alcohol, or even drink Coca Cola or Pepsi Cola."[175] These generalized and often stereotypical attributions of Iranian women's oppression to Sharia law or to Iranian society under the Islamic regime are quite problematic and do not really enlighten the person who wants to know the meaning and the history behind these photos. The vacuum cleaner, Pepsi, and television, for instance were neither forbidden nor restricted! Women were forbidden to dance or drink alcohol, but so were men: such prohibitions were not based on gender.[176] During a period after the revolution music was forbidden but for all,

[173] "Shadi Ghadirian," Saatchi Gallery, accessed September 5, 2014, http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artists/shadi_ghadirian.htm?section_name=unveiled.
[174] Rose Issa, *Shadi Ghadirian: Iranian Photographer* (London: Saqi, 2008), 10.
[175] "The Hidden World of Shadi Ghadirian," The Hidden World of Girls, accessed September 29, 2014, http://www.kitchensisters.org/girlstories/the-series/the-hidden-world-of-shadi-ghadirian/.
[176] After the revolution of 1979, the use of music has been circumscribed by religious authorities and public performances by female musicians has been proscribed. Though much progress has been made since 1979, public performances by male artists are sometimes cancelled without notice and even on the day of the event. However, people are constantly testing the boundaries. Alcohol has also been banned and its distribution or consumption punishable by law. See Bruno Nettl, "Persian Music," Encyclopædia Iranica, December 15, 2006; available online at: http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/iran-xi-persian-music; accessed December 22, 2014; Willem Floor, "Judicial and Legal Systems v. Judicial System in the 20th Century," Encyclopædia Iranica, September 15, 2009, available online at: http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/judicial-and-legal-systems-v-judicial-system-in-the-20th-century; accessed December 22, 2014; Parviz Saney, "Criminology," Encyclopædia Iranica, December 15, 1993, available online at: http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/criminology; accessed December 22, 2014.

not just for women. These statements and descriptions will only reinforce the othering of Iranians.

In the art network, from production to dissemination and finally to reception of artworks, there are different people involved. As Severi notes, "the market has exceedingly dominated art and it's obvious that the market does not always choose the best. Art that is more coherent with the familiar motifs and preconceived notions from Iran is chosen."[177] The fact that Iranian art has gained prominence in the art market means that these chosen artworks seem coherent because they purvey symbols that the West sees as part of Iranian culture. The international art market "that counts for an important part of the Euro-American economy, despite assigning a more limited financial share to Asian and African countries, does not share art policymaking with them and plays the main role based on its long-term political and cultural goals."[178] At the center of this market is a "western eye, a super observer" but the fact that "some artists look at their own art from the eye of a westerner is neither good nor bad; and it is both good and bad but inevitable."[179] What can be done in the face of this imbalanced relation? What is the solution to over-simplification, homogenizing, exoticizing, and as a result self-exoticizing? Mohajer suggests that "looks must be exchanged, there should be no fear of the fusion of looks. Sometimes it is in this fusion that *we* can also create meanings" (italics mine.)[180]

Curators, art critics, and sometimes gallery owners can have an important role in the reception of artworks. These people can help the audience better understand the sociocultural

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[177] Severi, interview.
[178] Samila Amir Ebrahimi, "Yek Negah," *Herfeh: Honarmand*, no. 44 (Winter 2012): 82, (translated by the author).
[179] Mehran Mohajer, "Akkasi-e Honari Dar Iran Pas Az 76," *Herfeh: Honarmand*, no. 40 (Winter 2011): 106 (translated by the author).
[180] Ibid.

context of non-western art. Mohajer proposes that inside Iran "an open critical space should be opened. Discovering and scrutinizing the layers… can challenge the imposed reading [of artworks]."[181] However, the problem is not limited to the situation inside Iran. It is common that the people who critique Iranian art outside Iran, are not Iranians and these intermediaries, curators and gallery owners, are rarely Iranian and often do not have an accurate understanding of Iran and its culture, hence writings on and exhibitions of Iranian art outside of Iran have been problematic. I believe that the lack of Iranian art critics and curators who have knowledge of Western theories and can represent the situation inside Iran more accurately and realistically adds to this problem. To overcome this issues, Severi suggests:

> The artists with their statements and critics with their explanations can surpass this simplistic atmosphere. Because many Iranian artists have become indolent and want to become famous fast, they naturally create works that are easily consumable. Outside Iran, [the critics and curators] do not feel responsible to follow the complexities of Iran. On the other hand when they want to go too deep and complex, they will have metanarratives that neither make sense nor follow from what is in the mind of the artist.[182]

In this thesis I pursued a goal to investigate the strategies of representation in the photographic works by three prominent artists by engaging different primary sources. I shed light on the main stakes of Iranian contemporary art and offered some suggestions. I hope this research can be used to critically engage with Iranian contemporary art.

[181] Mohajer, *Shadi Ghadirian in Conversation with Iman Afsarian and Mehran Mohajer*, 57.
[182] Severi, interview.

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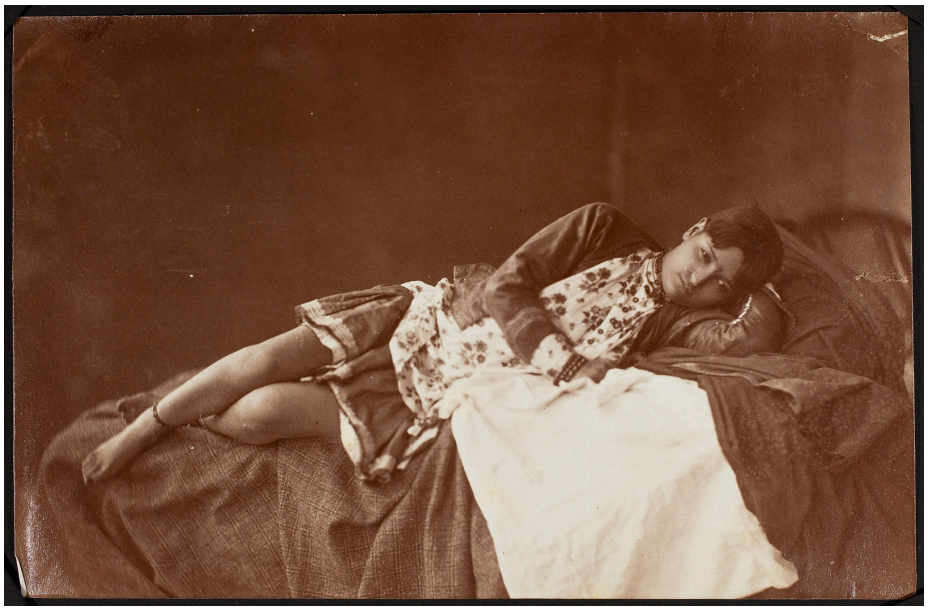

Figure 1. Antoin Sevruguin, Photograph of a Reclining Woman, 1880-1930. 1 albumen print : b&w. 20.2 cm. x 13.1 cm. Stephen Arpee Collection of Sevruguin Photographs. Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives. Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., 2011, #B47.

Figure 2. Antoin Sevruguin, Portrait of a Reclining Woman: Impressions of Iran, 1901. glass negative. Museum Volkenkunde, Kerncollectie Fotografie, negative #A6-2.

Figure 3. Antoin Sevruguin, In the Harem, ca. 1900. Gelatin silver print. Myron Bement Smith Collection, Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Archives, Smithsonian Institution. Gift of Katherine Dennis Smith, 1973-1985, negative #A.4.6.

Figure 4. Nasir al-Din Shah, Women, 1878, 13.2cm x 9.8cm. Golestan Palace, Visual Documentation Center, album #289, photo #8-1.

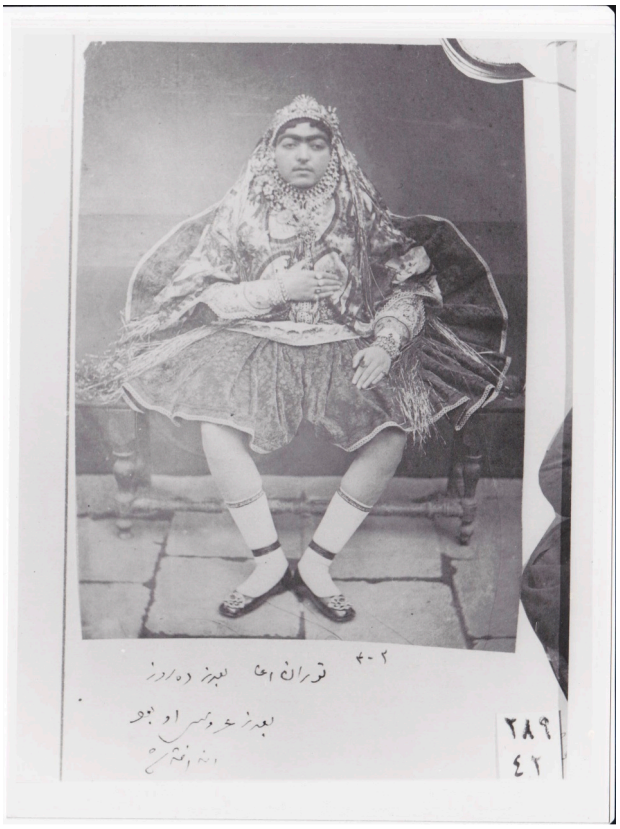

Figure 5. Nasir al-Din Shah, Turan Agha 1879, 14cm x 10cm. Golestan Palace, Visual Documentation Center, album #289, photo #4-2.

Figure 6. Photographer unknown, Women with Chador and Veil Along with Men Next to a Ferris Wheel During the Qajar Era, 1906, Institute for Iranian Contemporary Historical Studies (61725-275).

Figure 7. Nasir al-Din Shah, (untitled), ca. 1875-1885. Golestan Palace, Visual Documentation Center, album #210-88, photo #30.

Figure 8. Photographer unknown, Aziz al-Soltan and Group of Women, ca. 1885-1895. Golestan Palace, Visual Documentation Center, album #210, photo #1-4.

Figure 9. Shadi Ghadirian, Untitled #12 from the Qajar Series,1998. C- Print. 60*90cm & 30*40cm.

Figure 10. Shadi Ghadirian, Untitled #1 from the Qajar Series,1998. C- Print. 60*90cm & 30*40cm.

Figure 11. Antoin Sevruguin, Portrait of a Veiled Persian Woman Standing in a Courtyard, ca. 1890-1900. Glass negative. Myron Bement Smith Collection: Antoin Sevruguin Photographs. Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives. Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C. Gift of Katherine Dennis Smith, 1973-1985, negative #26.11.

Figure 12. Shadi Ghadirian, Un#tled from the Qajar Series, 1998. Gela1n- silver bromide print. 24 x 16 cm.

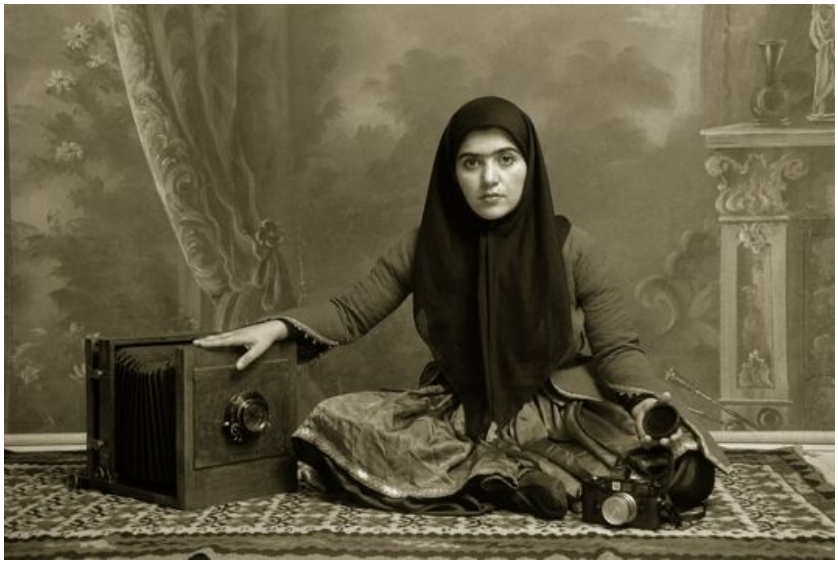

Figure 13. Shadi Ghadirian, Untitled #19 f from the Qajar Series, 1998. C- Print. 90*60cm & 40*30cm.

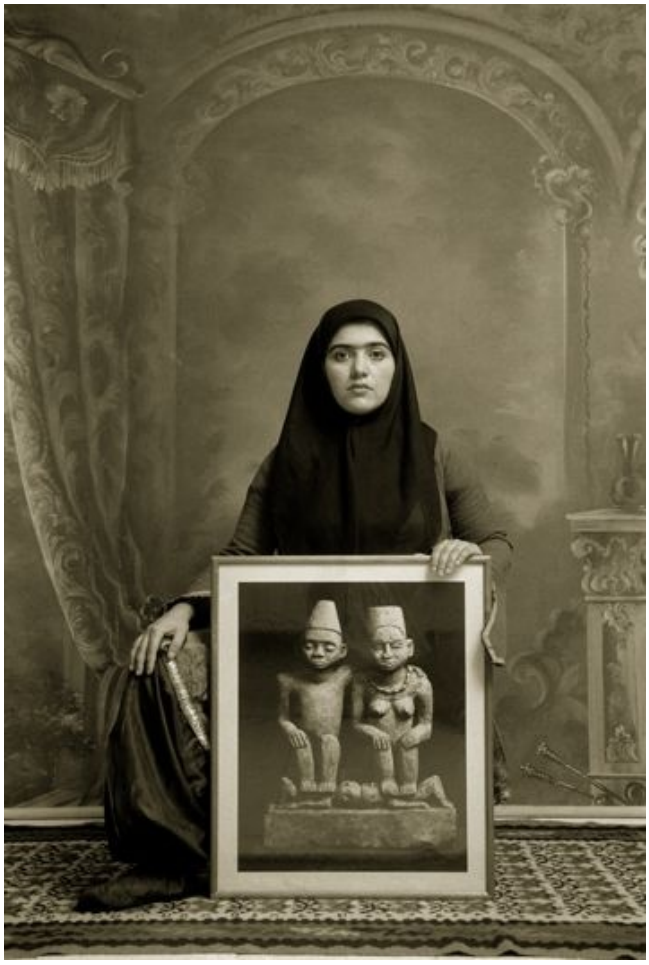

Figure 14. Shadi Ghadirian, Untitled #20 from the Qajar Series,1998. C- Print. 60*90cm & 30*40cm.

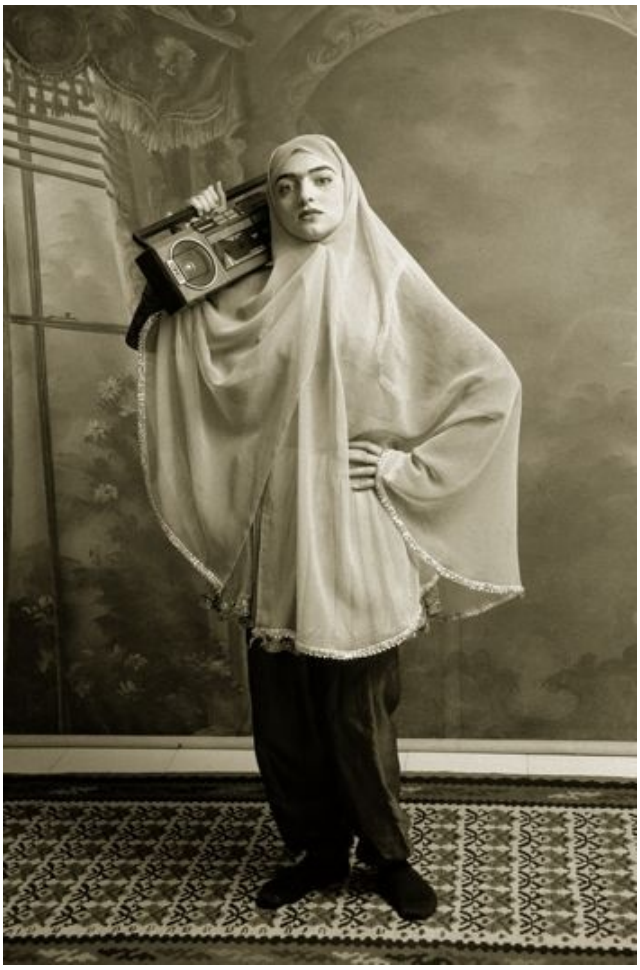

Figure 15. Shadi Ghadirian, Untitled #3 from the Qajar Series, 1998. C-Print. 60*90cm & 30*40cm.

Figure 16. Shadi Ghadirian, Untitled #5 from the Qajar Series, 1998. C-Print. 60*90cm & 30*40cm.

Figure 17. Shadi Ghadirian, Untitled #2 from the Qajar Series, 1998. C-Print. 60*90cm & 30*40cm.

Figure 18. Shadi Ghadirian, Untitled #2 from the Qajar Series, 1998. C- Print. 60*90cm & 30*40cm.

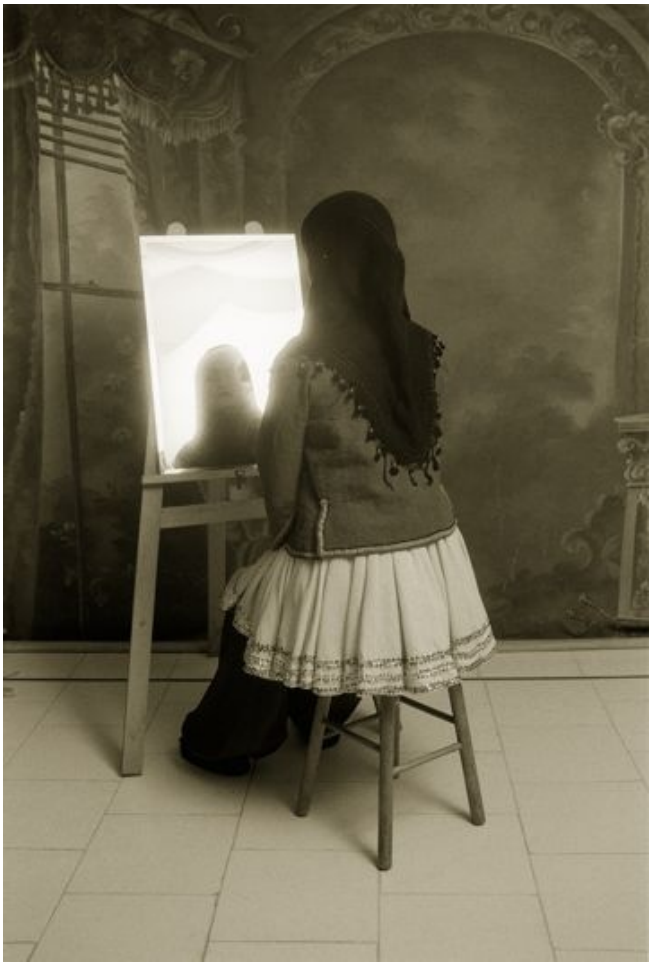

Figure 19. Shadi Ghadirian, Untitled #25 from the Qajar Series,1998. C- Print. 60*90cm & 30*40cm.

Figure 20. Shadi Ghadirian, Untitled from the Qajar Series, 1998. Silver bromide print. 24 x 16 cm.

Figure 21. Shadi Ghadirian, Untitled from the Qajar Series, 1998. Silver bromide print. 16 x 24 cm.

Figure 22. Shadi Ghadirian, Untitled #23 from the Qajar Series,1998. C- Print. 60*90cm & 30*40cm.

Figure 23. Antoin Sevruguin, Studio Portrait: Two Wrestlers Taking the Pose, 1880-1920. glass negative : b&w ; 11.9 cm. x 16.3 cm.
Myron Bement Smith Collection: Antoin Sevruguin Photographs. Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives. Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C. Gift of Katherine Dennis Smith, 1973-1985, negative #21.01.

Figure 24. Antoin Sevruguin, Studio Portrait: Three Wrestlers Taking the Pose, 1880-1910. glass negative.
Myron Bement Smith Collection: Antoin Sevruguin Photographs. Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives. Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C. Gift of Katherine Dennis Smith, 1973-1985, negative #26.06.

Figure 25. Mehraneh Atashi, Bodyless, 2004. Digital print, 120 cm. x 80 cm.

Figure 26. Mehraneh Atashi, Bodyless, 2004. Digital print, 120 cm. x 80 cm.

Figure 27. Mehraneh Atashi, Bodyless, 2004. Digital print, 120 cm. x 80 cm.

Figure 28. Mehraneh Atashi, Bodyless, 2004. Digital print, 120 cm. x 80 cm.

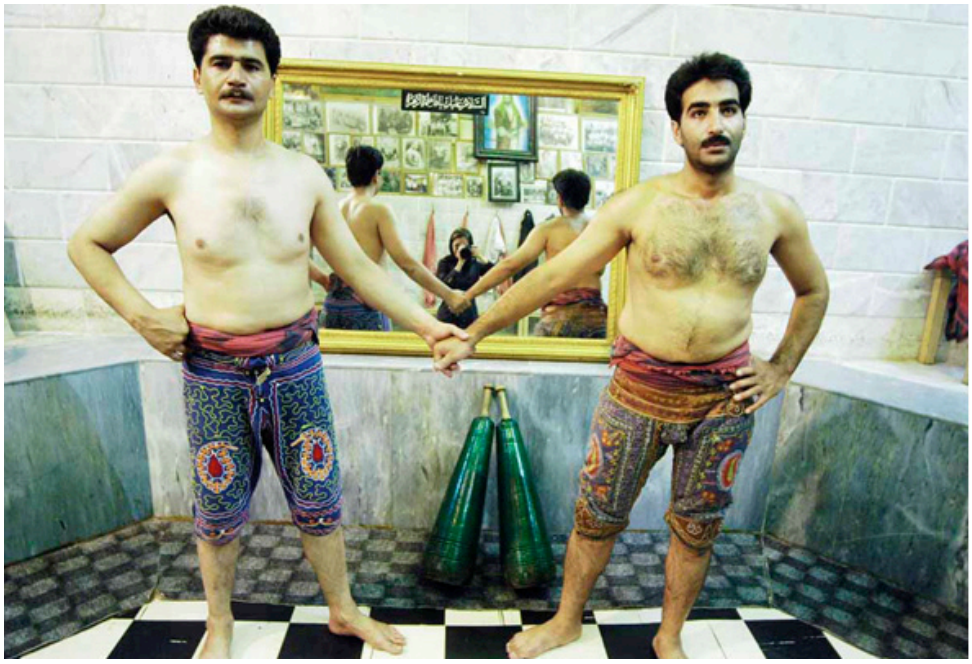

Figure 29. Mehraneh Atashi, Bodyless, 2004. Digital print, 120 cm. x 80 cm.

Figure 30. Mehraneh Atashi, Bodyless, 2004. Digital print, 120 cm. x 80 cm.

Figure 31. Mehraneh Atashi, Bodyless, 2004. Digital print, 120 cm. x 80 cm.

Figure 32. Mehraneh Atashi, Bodyless, 2004. Digital C-print, British Museum. Art Fund Collection of Middle Eastern Photography at the V&A and the British Museum.

Figure 33. Mehraneh Atashi, Bodyless, 2004. Digital print, 120 cm. x 80 cm.

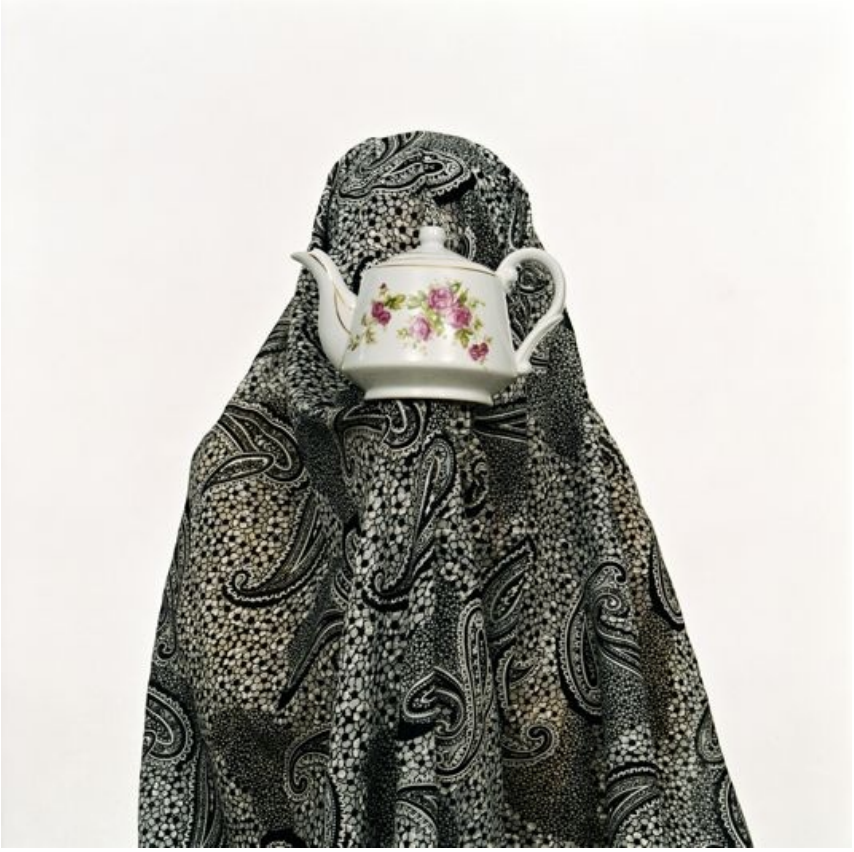

Figure 34. Shadi Ghadirian, Like Everyday #8, 2000. 50 cm x50 Cm

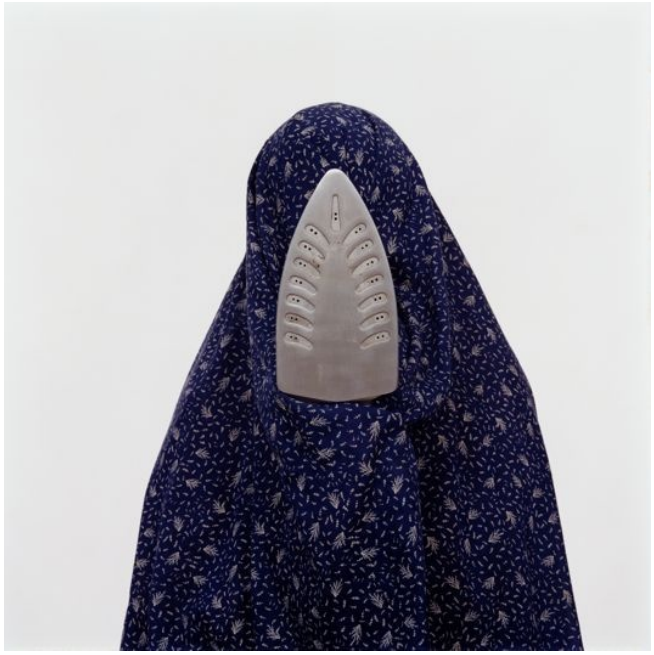

Figure 35. Shadi Ghadirian, Like Everyday #2, 2000. 50 cm x50 Cm

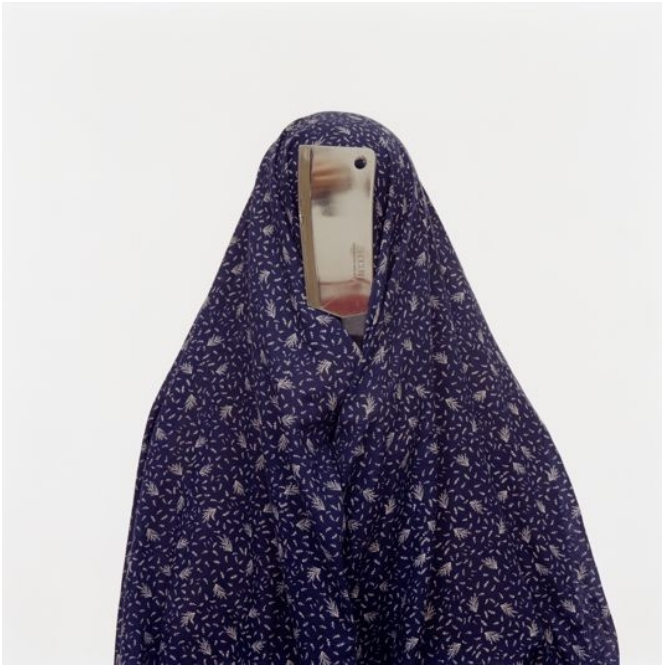

Figure 36. Shadi Ghadirian, Like Everyday #7, 2000. 50 cm x50 Cm

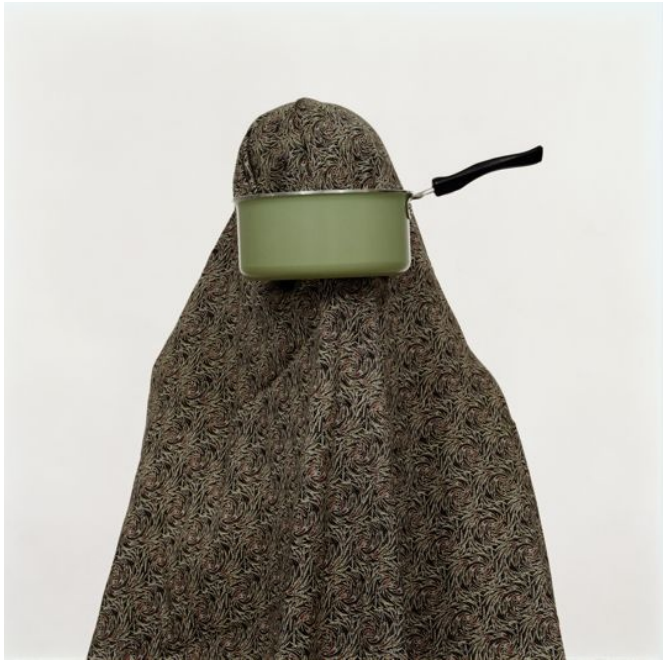

Figure 37. Shadi Ghadirian, Like Everyday #5, 2000. 50 cm x50 Cm

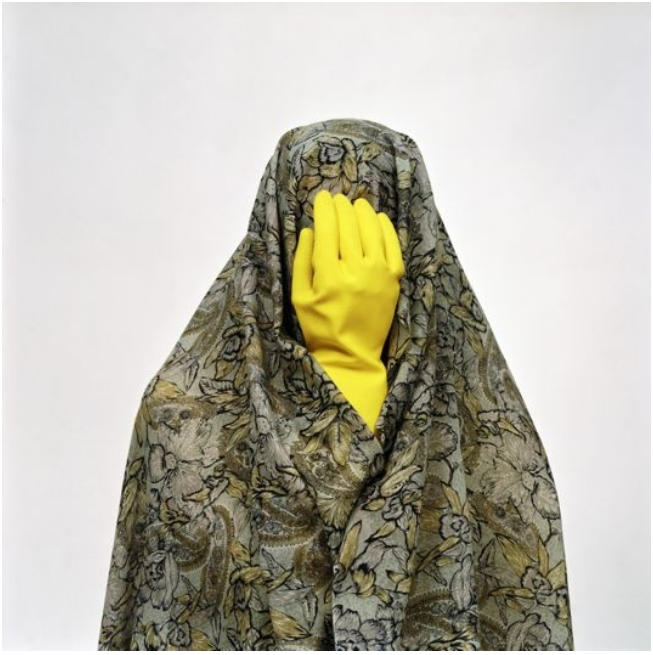

Figure 38. Shadi Ghadirian, Like Everyday #16, 2000. 50 cm x50 Cm

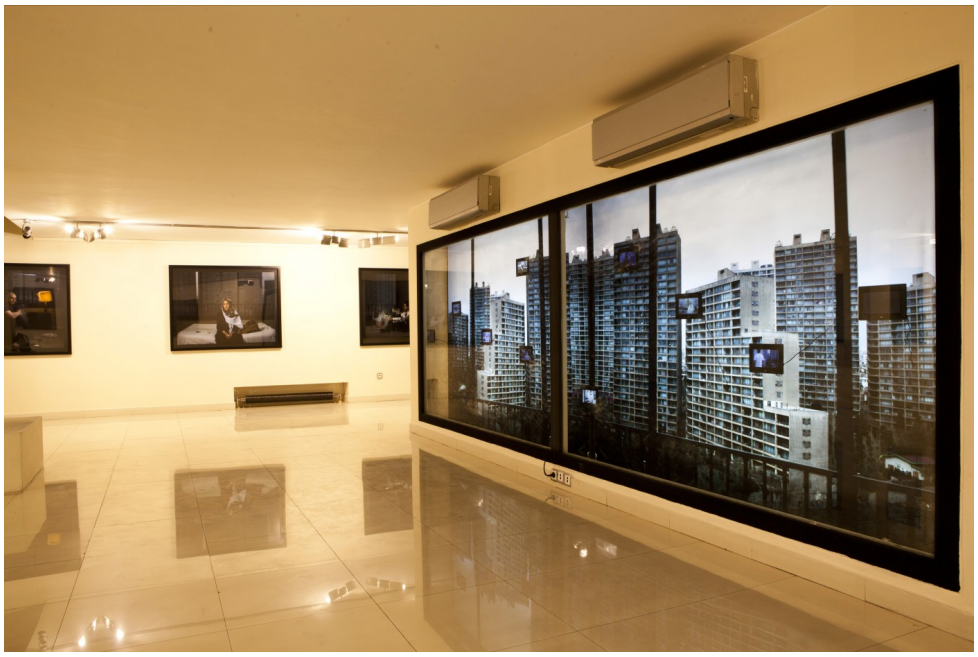

Figure 39. Newsha Tavakolian, Look (exhibition view at Aaran Gallery), 2012.

Figure 40. Newsha Tavakolian, Look (exhibition view at Aaran Gallery), 2012.

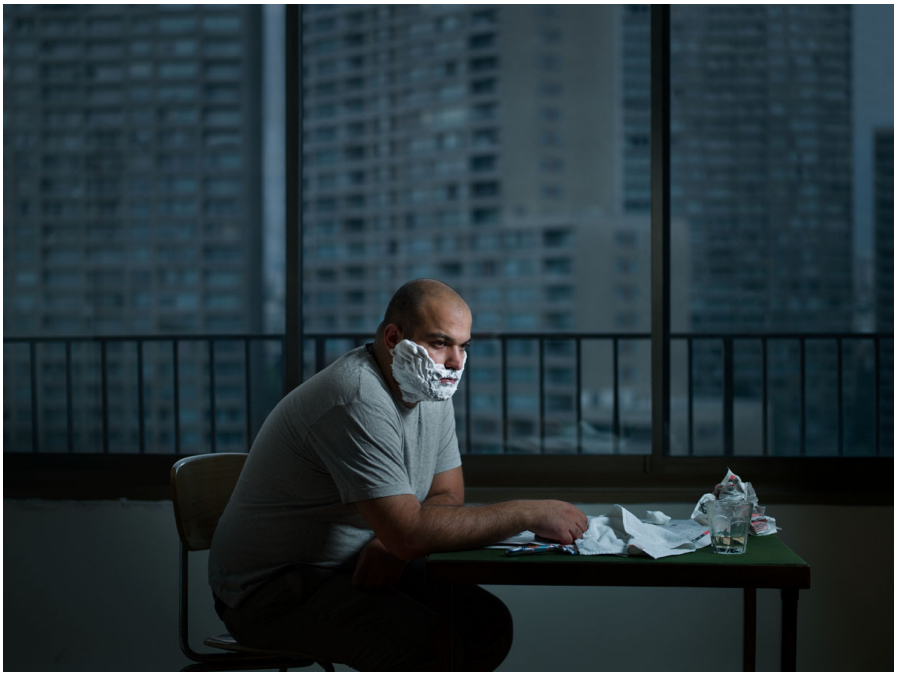

Figure 41. Newsha Tavakolian, Untitled from Look, 2012.

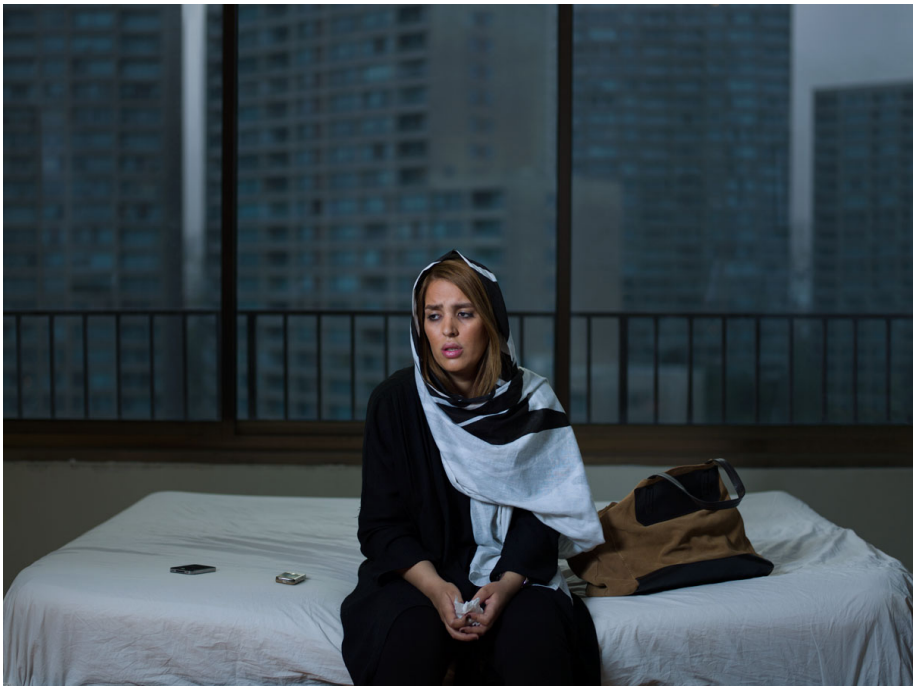

Figure 42. Newsha Tavakolian, Untitled from Look, 2012.

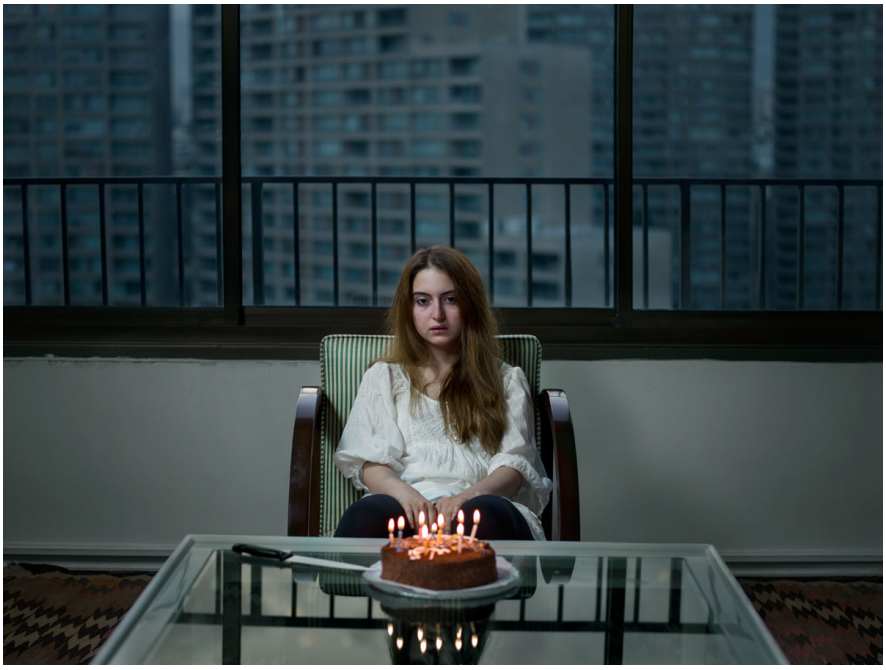

Figure 43. Newsha Tavakolian, Untitled from Look, 2012.

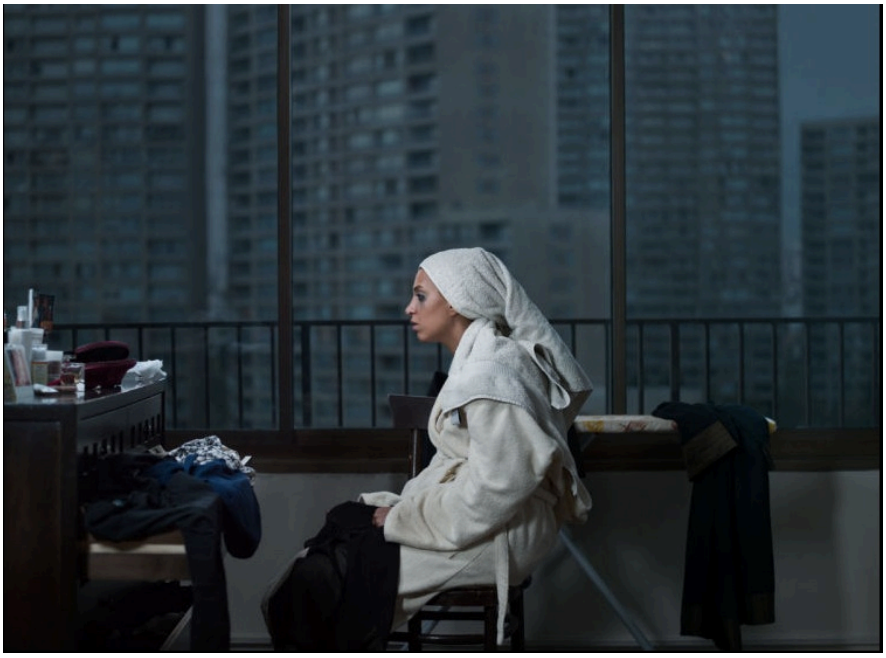

Figure 44. Newsha Tavakolian, Untitled from Look, 2012.

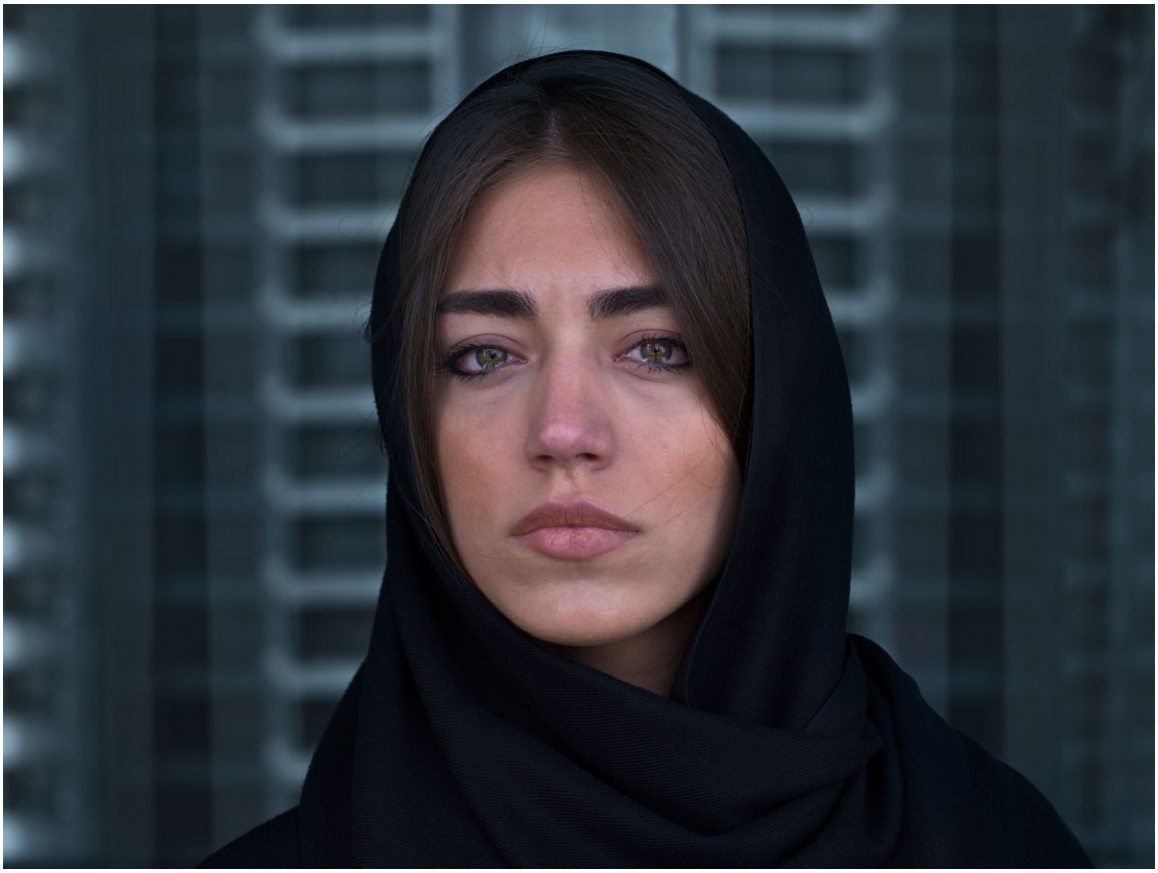

Figure 45. Newsha Tavakolian, Untitled from Look, 2012.