

30 YEARS OF SOLITUDE

Faryar Javaherian

with contributions by Haleh Anvari

This catalogue was printed on the occasion of the
Exhibition/Film-Festival THIRTY YEARS OF SOLITUDE held
at New Hall, Cambridge University in February and
March 2007

PUBLISHER: New Hall, Cambridge

copyright: 2007, New Hall

ISBN: 09507 10865

Designed by Farshid Mesghali

Printing Supervision by Shahpar Shahlapour

Printed in Tehran by SENOBAR

Sponsored by: Cambridge City Council
British Airways

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Thirty Years of Solitude

This is a labour of love. It was clear to me after a few minutes of my first meeting with Faryar Javaherian in Tehran this spring, that she would create a unique and very illuminating vision of life for women in Iran today, through the works of some of its most talented and extraordinary women artists, both photographers and film-makers. As she says, in the West we know all too little, dangerously little, of Iran, and this is an unmissable opportunity to see for ourselves.

The idea of this exhibition began with Ted Lucie-Smith who, with his global overview of what is going on in the arts was, of course, well aware of the outstanding quality of photography by women working in Iran. Because I was anxious to be sure that an exhibition of their work in the West would be welcome to the women we wished to select, I asked the advice of my friend and colleague Jila Peacock, whose work on the poet Hafez (shown most recently in the *Word Into Art* exhibition in the British Museum), was partly the outcome of a research project based at New Hall. She referred me to Faryar Javarherian, curator of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, and more than that, an architect, film-maker, intellectual historian and wise woman. Faryar had just completed the work of curating a magnificent and deeply thoughtful exhibition in the Museum, *Gardens of Iran: Ancient Wisdom, New Visions*, and was busy with the work of arranging its transfer to fresh venues around the world. Nevertheless, she took on the initial dream we had had that we would show the work of some half-dozen Iranian women photographers in Cambridge, and the extraordinary show brought together in New Hall for February 2007 has grown through her imagination from that first modest discussion looking out over the roofs of Tehran.

Just as the Exhibition, and the Films which accompany it, opens doors on Iran for us in the West, we hope the experience will work both ways. The young and not-so-young directors and photographers shown here deserve to be more widely known and to profit from the reactions of new audiences for their work. Let us hope that this is just one part of an increasing dialogue between Britain and Iran.

Anne Lonsdale

New Hall

16 February 2007

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My deepest gratitude to Anne Lonsdale who had the vision to create such an event and entrusted it to me

My warmest thanks to Jila Peacock who believed I was the best person for carrying out this work

My utter gratefulness to Mary Emma Adams who supported our efforts in Tehran to achieve this work

My sincerest thanks to Haleh Anvari who was much more than an assistant curator, always full of energy and efficient

My special thanks to Dr Ali-Reza Sami-Azar who, although no longer an official, is a pillar of support for any artistic endeavor in Iran

My heartfelt thanks to Satish Sharma in whose house I saw Farzaneh Khademian's "Rowing Women" and so discovered a great photographer

My grateful thanks to Farshid Mesghali who always puts up with my last-minute works and still comes up with great graphics, as well as Shahpar Shahlapour for supervision of printing

Many thanks to the people in Kanoon Informatic and their Directors, Kourosch Shahhosseini and Nasrin Maleki

Many thanks to the people in New Hall who have been involved in the preparation of this event, Sarah Greaves, Liz Pearson, Houshang Ardavan

And also to the people in our Tehran Office who have worked on the preliminary material, Reza Najafian, Massoud Niakouee, Maryam Rahimi Danesh and Mohammad Jorjiani

My thanks to Ladan Taheri of the National Film Archives for helping with Forough Farrokhzad's film as well as Jamshid Akrami in New York

My thanks to Reza Tashakkori of the Farabi Cinema Foundation who advised on how to get some of the films

My thanks also to Reza Ismailnia for helping with the technicalities of shipping

But most of all a million thanks to the artists themselves who are the real content of the work, especially the young ones who embraced this project wholeheartedly. If I hadn't chosen the mystical and whimsical number of Thirty, many others deserved to have been included, especially Mitra Mohasseni and Gelareh Kiazand who both specialize in film-photography

I also want to thank our sponsors, the British Embassy in Tehran, British Airways and the City Council of Cambridge

Finally I want to dedicate this work to my mother, Effat Pezeshgui, who was a very talented woman but never had the chance to express her art except in her housework.

This is her sewing project for 11th grade when she was 17 in the year 1933: I love the way she designed simple geometric forms to underline her flower composition.



HOW CAN WE BE IRANIANS, ARTISTS, AND WOMEN?

In the last thirty years, Iran's history has undergone tremendous changes: the collapse of 2500 years of royalist rule, a social revolution rallying all opposition groups, the emergence of an Islamic Republic, the subsequent purge of all non-Islamic supporters of the revolution, an eight-year war with congenial neighbor, Iraq, the instauration of a fundamentalist Islamic regime, regression to medieval customs and mores, and more and more dramatic political isolation from the rest of the world.

Nevertheless it has also been three decades of momentous changes in the entire world: the break-up of the Soviet block, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of the Cold War, the beginning of globalization, multiculturalism, post-colonialization and reverse colonialization, growing movements of immigration, the beginning of the end of American supremacy in the world which has led to a leveling of all nations, and a sort of vacuum in Western art, and certainly the end of Big Names.

The leveling of cultures and knowledge through too much diffusion of information on the net, especially with image information, is perhaps the most important aspect of globalization which concerns this work. Internet highways, virtual museums online have made the traveling of Art easier than ever in our history, so that we can clearly see that art knows no borders. But is it really free of nationality?

When Samira Makhmalbaf, our youngest woman-director, was asked why she made a film in Afghanistan, she replied: "We have *Medecins sans Frontieres*, why not *Artistes sans frontieres*?" The answer is quite intelligent, but in the case of Afghanistan and Iran, a bit thin, for the two countries were one for some twenty one centuries (from Alexander the Great to 18th century), and the language is still the same. The Makhmalbaf family is now settled and working in Tajikistan, another country of Farsi language and part of the world of Iranian culture. We shall have to wait for Samira to make a non-Farsi film to really say she has become "an artist without borders."

To give a concrete example of the influence of Language on Art, in the recent exhibition *Word Into Art* curated by Venetia Porter for the British Museum, the curator writes; "...[in] Turkey...the Arabic script was abandoned in favor of the Latin alphabet as part of a raft of modernizing reforms during the Ataturk era. Apart from a few traditional calligraphers continuing...teaching the script, it rarely appears in abstract or other forms of Modern Art..."¹ Whereas Iran and other Middle-Eastern countries, still using the Arabic alphabet, have an outburst of innovative use of Arabic letters in painting and even sculpture.

(1) WORD INTO ART, p.17 Another example of the tight relationship between art and language, is Amir Naderi's work in exile. Naderi, a prominent film-maker from Abadan, now living in New York City, says he feels as much "not at home" in New York as he felt "not at home" in Tehran. It is true that Abadan, in the province of Khuzestan,

was practically more Arab than Iranian, but from there to say that New York City is as alienated from him as Tehran, is a big exaggeration. I have only seen the first film he made in New York, *Manhattan by Numbers*, and was stunned by the poor quality of acting, for a film-director who had made such masterpieces as *Harmonica*, and *The Runner* which had justly won him international acclaim. Obviously Naderi had not mastered the American-English language and had no control over the direction of his actors.

Art knows no borders, for it is universal. Made by man, art is simply human and belongs to all of humanity. Geographical borders, also man-made, are very transient and superfluous to the production of art. But art is limited by language, in all its aspects, linguistic, literal, cultural, social,... In short, Art dwells in Language. Some languages are untranslatable into others, and some lend themselves to good translations: Farsi translates well into Arabic, and vice-versa, but not so well into French or English. And it is the same for the language of art: transposing some works of art into other cultures – transculturalism – is not always easy. In our netscaping age, art has been traveling at the speed of light. What is all this traveling about?

The genealogy of interest in Iranian Contemporary Art² can be quite illuminating. There has been an itch to know about Iran ever since the Revolution. Iran is a hot media subject.

The first travels of Iranian art abroad were sponsored by M. Mir-Salimi, Minister of Cultural and Islamic Guidance of President Rafsanjani, and included only women artists to Dubai and other Gulf countries. The exhibitions had a propagandist aim, exporting women's art works in order to demonstrate

(2) In fact it is also interesting to take a quick glance at the genealogy of Western interest in Iran, in general, which goes back to Antiquity and covers all fields of knowledge: Xenophon – history, Aeschylus – theater, the Swiss Doctors in the Middle-Ages who translated Ibn Sina – medicine, translations of Arabic texts actually written by Iranians, like al-Karaji, of mathematics, astronomy and physics, available in British libraries before Newton's times, Mozart's interest in *L'Enlevement au Serail*, Goethe's interest in Williams' interest in Zoroaster, Sir John Montesquieu's loophole of using a Persian Prince's viewpoint to criticize French society in *Les Lettres Persanes*, James Morier's *Adventures of Haji Baba* – sociology, and a horde of travelers to Persia who have left us an inestimable historic and artistic legacy. Chevalier Jean de Chardin, Pietro della Valle, Flandin and Lacoste, Jules Laurens, Henry Violette, Gobineau and Pierre Loti, and then a host of archaeologists, beginning with the first French mission in Iran, led by Jacques de Morgan, a true "Orientalist" in the Saidi way, ransacking the bricks of Chogha-Zanbil to build a Medieval castle for dard, Girschman, and many others ending with David Stronach just before the Revolution and now being relayed by Japanese and Russian archaeologists. And then Edward Fitzgerald's translation of Khayyam, Nicholson's translations of Hafez, Molana, Attar... Anne-Marie Schimmel and a host of historians and art historians, Lewis, Grabar, Blair, Bloom... Before ending this non-exhaustive list, I have to mention two art-historians who were not Orientalists, Arthur Upham Pope whose contribution to Persian Art is mind blowing, and Donald Wilber, who, though a CIA agent in Iran, wrote the best book yet on Persian Gardens. And then we reach our contemporary period when the interest rises and culminates at the time of the revolution through journalism. We could say that the Islamic Revolution a *fait couler plus d'encre que de sang*. I remember articles by Michel Foucault, Jose Luis Borges, and Roland Barthes. And finally the translations of Molana now so numerous that one of them is always on the best-sellers list in the US.

that women are free to express themselves, and respected and even privileged in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Things changed during the presidency of M. Khatami who appointed a liberal Minister of Guidance, M. Mohajerani, who in turn chose Dr Ali-Reza Sami-Azar as Director of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art.

Sami-Azar inherited a dead museum, used for exhibiting handicrafts (one time women's knitworks), Koran exhibitions, at best some Islamic Art show or photography festivals. The Museum personnel had no contact with foreigners, the galleries were desert. Sami-Azar, a young architect and art-historian, educated at the University of Tehran and Birmingham University, opened up the Museum's doors to contemporary artists, made contacts abroad, sent artists to Europe on scholarships, organized foreign exhibits in the Museum, and transformed the Museum into an alive and active cultural center, always buzzing with public events of interest to the young. Of all the exhibitions of Iranian Contemporary Art held abroad in his six years of directing the TMCA and made permanent through their catalogues, only two escaped his collaboration.

I believe the first time something is done is always a magical moment, and since analyzing precedents is a safe methodology, I want to review these exhibitions in some detail.

The first exhibition of Iranian Contemporary Art to travel abroad, and of all places the US, "the Great Satan"³, was *A Breeze from the Gardens of Persia*, a collection of 57 paintings, curated by Nancy Mathews. This exhibition, touring the US from 2001 to 2003, was co-sponsored by Search for Common Grounds, setting for itself the political task of making Iranian culture better-known to the American people, and as such, it included a summary of Persian history, poetry and art.

2001, the year of "Dialogue of Civilizations" was also marked by the exhibition *Iranian Contemporary Art* at the Barbican, London, curated by Rose Issa and Carol Brown. This was a much more ambitious and professional work, with a brief history of Iran's contemporary art by Rose Issa, artists' biographies by Ruyin Pakbaz, one of our major art critics, and an essay by Dariush Shayegan on the Persian Psyche.

2001 was also the year of Iranian photography's debut as an art on the international scene, with the exhibition *Regards persans, Iran, une reolution photographique* held in Espace Electra in Paris. Again with an essay by Dariush Shayegan on the Iranian soul, a brief history by Raana Javadi and an introduction by Michket Krifa, the curator. This was a tour d' horizon exhibition of photography, placing Iran's photo-art on the same level as Iranian cinema.

In 2003, Christie's prepared *Iranian Contemporary* this time curated by Sami-Azar himself, with a view to establishing international prices

for Iranian works of art. I think this is in summary Sami-Azar's legacy to Iranian art: since the price of a work of art is the index of its real artistic value nowadays, he helped Iranian contemporary art reach new record prices on the international market. In fact many of these artists had never been on the international market before.

In 2004, Firouz Firouz, an architect living in Iran and Spain, curated *Iran Under the Skin* for the Cultural Contemporary Center of Barcelona, with a loan from the TMCA, but not much collaboration from it, and dwelt on the diaspora artists. The exhibition included photography, video-art and installations.

2004 also saw the Berlin *Far Nea Distance: Contemporary Positions of Iranian Artists* in the House of the Cutures of the World, trying to establish what this new aesthetics of Kiarostami is all about, curated by Shaheen Merali and Martin Hager, coordinated by Rose Issa.

2005: *After the Revolution Contemporary Artists of Iran*, curated by Octavio Zaya for Casa Asia in Donostia, San Sebastian, with a thick and erudite catalogue in Basque, Spanish and English, heavily relying on the diaspora, with no help from the TMCA, and presenting only photography, and a masterly article by Hamid Dabashi who lives in New York and has co-authored works with Peter Chelkowski. The problem with this exhibition, being prepared by people outside of Iran, is that it feels a bit foreign to us.

Again in 2005, *Persian Visions, Contemporary Photography from Iran* curated by Hamid Severy, Pedagogic Director of TMCA, and Gary Hallman, Regis Center for Art, University of Minnesota, scheduled to tour the US until 2008, not a tour d'horizon, but the curators' aesthetic view of Iranian photography.

What all these exhibitions have in common, is the desire to heal the relationships between Iran and the host country. They are goodwill missions trying to give a more human face to a country which has been labeled as terrorist. The exhibitions consecrated to one artist are less political than these group exhibitions which are sometimes curated by "comprador-curators" as Hamid Dabashi calls them, with a financial/political reward usually attached.

There were also countless film-festivals around the world with special sections devoted to Iranian cinema and often to solo retrospectives, as has been usual in the last two decades, so numerous that it is not possible to enumerate them.

All these exhibitions show that the main focus of international interest in Iranian art which was first in cinema now also includes photography. Isn't it strange that in an Islamic cultural context where representation is quasi forbidden, the two art forms most concerned with representation, have achieved a world-class status?

(3)-Even Khomeini acknowledged there was something "great" about the US!

Thirty Years of Solitude also concentrates on cinema and photography, the two media which deal with the capturing of Reality. Both show real images, since in both the camera records something which is really existent, but not necessarily Real, especially since the digital revolution. Both of these media were heavily used to transmit images of Iran for the last thirty years to the outside world. Art critics tend to agree that it was because of the tremendous demand for images from the Islamic Revolution – a lot of cable news networks were non-existent at that time – that photo-journalism and documentary films flourished in Iran. I optimistically disagree with all of them: no one is going to risk his/her life to make dangerous photographs in order to be printed in some famous magazine. The artists who have done this kind of work – Kaveh Golestan, my friend Jassem Ghazbanpour who has lungs damaged by chemical gases from staying in Halabcheh, and who produced the photographs of the three volumes of *SPLENDOR OF IRAN*, or Kaveh Kazemi who was the most prolific photojournalist of the war and who has now turned to photo-art... -- were not motivated by ambitions or greed.

I think the real spirit of contemporary art in Iran has been mostly determined by the traumatic events of the Islamic Revolution and the Iraq-Iran war (1980-88). Art was a way to exorcise all the evils witnessed during the war and the Revolution. After World War II, there was a similar outburst of art, literature and philosophy in Europe.

The Islamic Revolution was a socially cruel one with a lot of bloodshedding and violent imagery. I remember the TV coverage of the trials of officials from the Shah's regime, expeditious formalities which ended in death. And the booklet which was subsequently published with the photographs of the corpses of these officials and close-ups of their heads, a ghostly exhibition which foretold of the morbid taste of the future leaders. The annihilation of all opposition groups which had helped the revolution.

And the slogans of "Death to all infidels."

Then the fleeing of the infidels, millions of families, immigrating to the US or Europe (Iran has the largest immigrant population in the world, about 10% of its present population, i.e. seven million people). And barely before anything had settled, Iraq attacking us God knows with what justification.

The eight years of war with Iraq were a period of extreme despair and isolation from the rest of the world. As Anne Lonsdale put it, it was a "lost war." Lost in the sense that no one paid much attention to our grief, no one cared much about the tragedies that succumbed on thousands of families on a daily basis. Lost in the sense that there was so much loss of life. A new cemetery was created for all the *monafeq*, the opposition to the regime, with mass graves, called *laanat abad*, literally land of the cursed ones. The ones whose bodies had been claimed by their families and buried in Beheshte Zahra, the official cemetery in Tehran, had their grave stones continually broken as soon as they were replaced by new ones. Most families were waging two wars at the same time: their young ones on the

battlefront with Iraq and their younger ones in guerilla troops fighting the regime.

For the civilian population of Tehran, like my family, it was an absurd period, an experience of Russian roulette destroying life at random, but also with the distinct feeling of living life to its utmost brim. Each night we would gather in one friend's house and party as long as we could, defiantly watching the missiles in the sky, not knowing if we'll be alive the next day. Anita Nikoos's father was walking at a cross-road of Enghelab Boulevard when suddenly a rocket hit that crossroad and engulfed everyone in a big hole. My cousin's husband never returned from the war and his body was never found. I think his mother is still hoping to see him arrive one day.

It was a lost war because there are no accurate statistics on anything about it. With Haleh we tried very hard to find out how many people were killed, how many times was Tehran bombed? Estimates vary between one and two million deaths on both sides. Hamid Dabashi calls the cemetery of Beheshte Zahra where martyrs' photographs are covered with glass with various decorative elements around them "the first art gallery of the Islamic Republic of Iran."⁴

^{(4)-After the Revolution, p.282.}

But mostly it was a "lost war" because, like all wars, it was a stupid war, lived on a daily basis without any meaning. Entire cities vanished – like Khorramshahr and Abadan – and never became alive again. Khorramshahr is like a museum-city nowadays, a few buildings renovated, but a ghost-city. Everyone fled, and almost no one returned. Abadan had its refineries bombed at the beginning of the war, and they were never rebuilt. The new Abadan is now Assalouyeh.

When the war began, Niki Karimi was seven and when it ended, she was fifteen. Eight years later, Maryam Zandi captures her portrait, at the height of stardom, and yet there is so much anxiety in her eyes. A friend took his two children to Paris for a vacation and they arrived on July 14th. When the fireworks of celebration broke out, the children went and hid themselves under the hotel's bed. A whole nation of children – 40 million people under 30 in Iran – is war-stricken, in a state of perpetual depression, oscillating between various forms of escape: going abroad, drugs, delinquency...

It was also a period of intense isolation, no foreign experts in any field. We were left to our own resources and artists had to tap their "collective unconscious." The art that Iranians produced at that time was a reflection of their innermost private feelings, reflections on the self, in an effort to deal with the anguish and void which were lingering in space and clinging to their skins. Kiarostami made several films during the war, and the artist's outcry "Where is the friend's home" epitomizes his literal utter helplessness in that period: a single dad, raising his two sons, cooking for them, building wooden chests to earn a living, helping his younger boy with his homework and making *Homework* into a film.

The works of art of that period had nothing to do with the West, no one was interested in demonstrating anything to the people outside of Iran's borders, they were politically "pure" and Iranian films had barely begun to travel to foreign festivals.

Likewise, photo-artists, gripped by the existential anguish and intensity of life during war, tried to express themselves poetically in order to survive the devastation they would witness on the front. Shortly after the war, Iranian cinema became omnipresent in film festivals around the world, and photography following a parallel path, got the support of university curricula, a number of galleries specializing in photography (Silk Road among the most prominent ones) and a Photography Museum opened in Tehran (its first Director being Raana Javadi) and many publications on photo art sprung out in Iran. At the same time, new techniques and digital photography developed in the West, quickly reached Iran. Photography is the only technical art which benefits from the state-of-the-art technology available anywhere else, whereas cinema, because of prohibitive costs, is far from that stage.

After the first successes of Iranian cinema abroad, producers pushed for festival-films, actually commercial flops inside Iran, and directors, copying Kiarostami, created the festival-winner genre. Photographers more or less did the same. The pitiful situation in our country is that everything has to be ratified by the West before we acknowledge it ourselves. It's East by West, as though we ourselves did not have clear criteria for what is valuable or not. Personally I believe that art which is created with a specific agenda, cannot endure, since with the passage of time, the purpose of the agenda is lost as well as the value of the work. Only that which is carved out of the unconscious, stuff made of dreams, can give us glimpses of truths that the artist uncontrollably feels the urge to express, and as such, it defies classification.

The categorization of art by race/religion/nation/gender, is a tool used by art historians to simplify their ideas and writings, and otherwise pretty much sterile, especially now that we have reached "the end of History" or "the twilight zone of History" as Dabashi calls it⁵.

^{(5)-op. cit., page 289} The gender binary polarization is particularly useless: if we are all human, what is the use of differentiating between men and women? If we are doing it, isn't it because we haven't yet achieved equality? Women are faring much better in scientific fields than the arts, for no one ever mentions this or that scientist is a woman, and no one organizes all-women scientific congresses. But this often happens in Art, pointing to the fact that women still need to be patronized and privileged in order to achieve the balance with men.

Thirty Years of Solitude is a gathering of women artists from Iran, having lived and still living and working in Iran, mostly under the age of thirty, and having been in one way or another traumatized by the country's history. Most of them are "serious feminists" as Anne Lons-

dale distinguishes them from "angry feminists." But some of the young ones express their anger at the reality of their lives. They are a new generation of film-makers and photographers who have received university training in their fields and are truly professional. Most of our photographers have had Mehran Mohajer as a Master and therefore have many common aesthetic denominators, as though they all belonged to the atelier of one Master.

The Plates begin with portraits which are an eminent search for identity, then go through the series of losses: loss of identity, loss of loved ones, loss of voice and freedom, later meander through the games of hide and reveal with Ghazaleh Hedayat's peepholes and Haleh Anvari's and Mahgameh Parvaneh's veils, through the feelings of despair and destruction, and finally to reactions to all of these situations. Art is always a reaction to one's immediate Reality, sometimes with anger and violence, sometimes with escapes into Nature, Abstraction, into family life, or into some form of action, like sports, in Farzaneh Khademian's case.

THIRTY ARTISTS/ THIRTY BIRDS/ THE PHOENIX

Attar's most famous text of Persian Mysticism is the *CONFERENCE OF THE BIRDS* in which hundreds of birds, led by the hoopoe, set out to find their King, the Phoenix (Simorgh). After the seven journeys of hardship and ascension – which represent the seven stages of inner perfection through denial of the self and its dissolution into the Eternal, thirty birds reach the King's palace at the top of a mountain, to find it empty and realize that they themselves are the Phoenix. *Si-morgh* literally means thirty birds.

Here also we have thirty artists who have come together, not to give us a better understanding of Iranian society or politics, but as single voices which have reached such a degree of perfection that we can feel their souls lifting from the films or the prints, crying out from thirty years of existential aloneness.

THE FILMS

Although Forough Farrokhzad, our greatest contemporary poet, made her only film, **THE HOUSE IS BLACK** in 1962, I could not resist including her in this anthology of solitude. She is a mystic poet, longing for human values which have perished, sensing her loss of innocence and purity to the marrow of her bones. Imbued with sensuous feminism, her poems are told in a childish language, her voice – she has recorded many of her poems – even more childish.

Her film is a celebration of life, the epiphany of human compassion for a group of pariah, the real scum of the earth, in this case a leper colony in Mashhad. The lepers are isolated from the rest of society, kept in concentrationcamp-like quarters, cast out by everyone except a few doctors and nurses... and yet there is so much life and even poetry in this camp.

The **OLD MAN OF HARA**, by Mahvash Sheikholeslami, is more solitary than Forough's lepers, but in this case, solitude is a self-made choice. The poetic tranquility which pervades in this film slowly becomes contagious to the viewer. The film takes us along with an old man who fishes shrimps and who lives all alone in Ghesm Island, for one whole day of his life. We know that this day is going to be repeated ad infinitum, until the day he dies. The use of near-actual time, the low rhythms of actions, the minimalist content and intrinsic poetry of daily chores of life, bring this film closest to Kiarostami's aesthetics.

Mitra Farahani's **JUST A WOMAN** takes us into the loneliness of a young man who has just had an operation to become a woman. The petty problems she faces are so depressive, but the longing she feels for her mother is absolutely heart-wrenching. The documentary/story format of this film too is reminiscent of Kiarostami's style, especially in **HOMEWORK**.

Marzieh Meshkini's **THE DAY I BECAME A WOMAN** takes an ironic view of the plight of women in three short films. The first one is the arbitrary end of childhood for a girl who turns nine years of age and is no longer allowed to play with her best friend, the boy who is her neighbor. The second one is a strong-willed teenager who wants to participate in a cycling race in spite of her parent's forbidding. And the third is the revengeful buying spree of an old woman who never married but who now has enough money to buy herself a dowry.

A sharp social critique of present day mores, the film exudes so much humor, set in beautiful Kish Island landscapes, that the viewer has no choice but to smile at all the bitterness and absurdity which lies beneath. What we really see is three generations of women who are totally alienated from their selves through unfair and meaningless practices.

Rakhshan Bani-Etemad's **GUILANEH**, co-directed by Abdolvahab, is the first war-film made by a woman-director on the Iraq-Iran war, and in my view the most sensitive and poignant one. It joins two episodes in the life of a woman, Guilaneh: one at the beginning of the war when she is so energetic, taking her daughter to Tehran, to be married, the other fifteen years later, with a son paralyzed from the neck down by chemical warfare lying in bed, her back literally broken, and never any sign of a husband. The film goes beyond the limits of Iranian meanings and reaches the universal theme of self-sacrificing motherhood.

ON A FRIDAY AFTERNOON by Mona Zandi Haghighi who has been Rakhshan's assistant-director in several films, and makes her debut as a film-director, is a sad melodrama: the problems of daily life for a single mother with a teen-age boy, trying to make ends meet by doing hairdressing in her flat, and having nightmares of having conceived her boy after being raped by her uncle during a Friday afternoon picnic in her teens. Here again, this is not just an Iranian tragedy, it could happen anywhere teenagers are abused by patriarchal males.

Niki Karimi's films have been heavily influenced by Kiarostami, a close friend for a decade. After her first long feature, **ONE NIGHT**, which was closely structured as a Kiarostami film – a young woman spends one night out, riding with four men with whom four conversations take place, she has departed from this carbon-copy and explored her own feminine plights in **A FEW DAYS LATER**. The film takes us into three days of the life of a young woman graphic artist who lived with a married man whose wife has just returned from abroad. During these three days of solitude, she wants to make up her mind whether she will continue living with him or not. In the meantime she encounters the usual problems of being a professional woman in Tehran, living alone in an apartment building with macho neighbors, a quick escape into nature, a visit to her lover's disabled child at the sanatorium, and a lot of cigarette smoking in the café where she is an habituée with her own table...What will she decide?

THE PHOTOGRAPHS

The photograph exhibition begins with **Maryam Zandi** who is our veteran photographer. She has published countless volumes of portraits of the Iranian literati, artists, and other celebrities, and elevated the art of portraiture to photo-art. She is technically the most professional photographer of this exhibition, and her portraits tell as much about her subjects as about herself. She is a sensitive, poetic woman who lives alone.

The series of photographs which made **Shadi Ghadirian** famous abroad, and distracted her forever from the Iranian art scene, is **Qajar** (1999), where she puts familiar modern objects in a strange context: Qajar-styled women in epoch photo studios. Ghadirian told me that she borrowed the authentic Qajar backdrop painting from Bahman Jalili (another Master photographer and husband of Raana Javadi) to set up her models, and later on had similar paintings done for her backgrounds. Mixing strange elements in a new context is Ghadirian's point of departure, but she has not dwelt on this concept and is constantly searching for new ones, which is the mark of a true artist.

The series chosen for this Exhibition, entitled *Be Colorful*, border on the limits between paintings and photographs, which I call "paintographs." Besides being images of scratched identity and ambiguity, for me they are portraits of beautiful girls, the blue one reminding me of Vermeer's "Girl with a Pearl Earring," testifying to the acute aesthetic sense of the artist.

Raana Javadi's self-portraits are a poetic elucidation on the passage of time and the waning of youth. Absolutely gorgeous in her youth, she has set herself next to a portrait of her husband when he was also young, and has cleverly assembled the symbolic images of the faded rose and the ticking clock. But most striking are the long lines of shadows crossing two pictures obliquely and the last one horizontally, erasing half of the face.

There is something literal in the way **Hannah Mirjanian** questions her identity and fate, pointing out to the fact that the two are so intertwined. What if I were not born in Iran? And thousands of other "what ifs." The series of eight photographs are a quest for the self telling long tales of self-centeredness, a domain usually reserved for male artists. I am happy that the young generation of Iranian women is catching up!

Houra Yaghoubi also questions the self and ponders on "loss of identity," but in a more political way. In *READING LOLITA IN TEHRAN*, Azar Nafissi wrote that she did not know who she was when she was wearing a veil. So the images of veiled women with white masks are a literal metaphor for identity-less figures. This very image was first used by Dariush Mehrjui in his film *Hamoun*, when the husband looks at his veiled wife in a bazaar restaurant and sees her as a blank mask. For Mehrjui it was a metaphor of estrangement between the couple. But a lot of young artists have used masks and veils to reveal their personal relationship with the veil (as in Maryam Mehrjui's *Bou Bou in Tehran*, a video-art of a veiled woman dancing in the sky trying to uphold the blank mask of her face, or in Zakieh Rahimi's installation where some forty veiled woman mannequins have balls of newspaper as faces,...)

The issue of clothing is very crucial in men-women relations: did not Simone de Beauvoir complain that in men's eyes, "women are but a piece of cloth"? Yet in her own books, her heroines are always worried about what they shall wear, and their clothing is described to the minutest detail! So Houra Yaghoubi is on safe social criticism ground with her veiled women all linked by a thread to the same old Qajar clichés of women. But her other photograph is quite bewildering for such a young artist – perhaps done unconsciously – the woman's mouth is shut – usual diagnosis of loss of voice, loss of freedom – but of all things by a screw and a negative, pointing to the fact that this artistic form of self-expression is nothing but an illusion, itself an alienating activity taking us further and further away from our selves. Could she be so mature?

Anita Nikooee makes a portrait of her mother sitting exactly in the same pose as in an old photograph when she was so much younger, and then again another portrait of her mother and in the background the portrait of her parents, when her father was alive and her mother was so happy-looking. As Georges Bernanos says, "Time damns us. Time saves us." The nostalgia expressed in these two photographs, one for the passage of time and the other the loss of the loved one, evoke a quiet submission to fate and existence which is written all over the face of the mother, giving her a strength often seen in women of the previous generation in Iran.

Newsha Tavakolian's photographs are literal poses of loss of life where the mothers are holding photographs of their martyred sons. The interest in these photos come from the popular aesthetics of the Islamic Republic with all its paraphernalia of religious iconry, summum of Kitsch art.

Another case of loss of the loved ones, but in a more subtle way, is presented in **Jeylan Hashemi-Zenous's** pictures: this is a father's funeral ceremony at home – as Iranians, we immediately recognize the set up – where the mourners have not yet arrived or have departed and the artist is left alone, in the middle of this macabre decoration. The picture of the missing father is hung up in this peasant house with ascetic decoration, pointing to the fact that families are living the same tragedy all over Iran, no matter what their social status is.

Mehraneh Atashi's photograph is a collection of pictures from her childhood, of lost innocence – her pedicured toes, of loss of hopes – the bridal dress, but also an affirmation of her self and identity – she is firmly standing on all of these recollections, or is stamping them under her feet? Is this a socio-political comment? Her second picture, of a couple dancing, their heads out of the frame, is definitely a political comment: it would be dangerous to show the real faces of the dancing couple in the Islamic Republic of Iran, again leaving her the only choice of stressing the feet.

Ghazaleh Hedayat's peepholes also have political connotations: in one the script inscribed within the circle is a religious text beginning with *in the Name of Allah*, pointing to the esoterism of all religions, and the other one is a fingerprint, probably the artist's. The same search for identity which is common to many of the works is also present here, but with the sensuous connotation of voyeurism that looking through peepholes would bring out. Isn't the Islamic society all about hiding and making it hard to see anything?

Kimia Rahgozar has also decided to hide her subjects. She has a series of photographs of women taken from their backs, with their hair – this most devilish part of the woman's body—hanging out. Since the faces are not shown, it is safe to do so. And without a face, aren't all women pretty much the same?

Haleh Anvari also photographs her subjects from the back, not one face of a woman in all of her pictures, but here the women all wear colorful chadors, which is the printed veil women wear at home and not the prosaic black veil of public space. Haleh herself says that when she wears a scarf and is all covered-up, she loses track of her femininity. For her, the veil is the number one icon of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and she is trying out various themes to explore the flowery and often joyful patterns of these homely veils.

Mahgameh Parvaneh's subject is also the veil, but in moments of gracious feminine movements which her camera catches in elaborate poses. The woman holding a jug is particularly significant to me because of the philosophical meaning of the daily chores women carry out in order to sustain the lives of their loved ones, or could this be Hafez's and Khayyam's muse carrying a jug of wine?

Eila Golparian's identity is mutilated since half of the face has been torn from this piece of portrait, but somehow it miraculously stands on

the rope.

Abnous Alborzi introduces elements of Persian miniatures – the canary drawing set in the window frame – and her camera catches the reflection of the bird on the woman who is rising through the broken-up stairs with her diaphanous veil full of flowers and birds. The past is clinging to her, in all its glory – Persian painting – and all its pitifulness – the shabby staircase.

The sense of solitude which emanates from **Bita Reyhani's** pictures is made all the more dramatic because of the background of Tehran's megacity. In all this multitude – Tehran's metropolitan area has a population of 16 million – and so many satellite dishes for such a shabby roof, a lonely woman is standing on the roof, contemplating the smog of Tehran. We can't help wondering whether this woman – lower or middle-class – is really linked to the rest of the world with all these dishes. I feel her compelling solitude and the utmost mendacity of daily life in these two roof-top pictures, but these feelings are somehow redeemed in the artistic self-portrait where solitude has a poetic dimension achieved by artistry and clever *ciaro-oscuro*.

Naghmeh Ghassemlou has chosen to photograph a low-class neighborhood of Tehran, Navab, which was demolished in order to make way for a public housing project. The demolition of buildings, with all the associated weight of the past, somehow foretells of the destruction of History. The strangeness of built elements left in the air in the middle of demolition always creates surprise and wonderment: kitchen tiles left intact on a bare wall, a fireplace protruding from another, stairs seen through their sections in mid-air... The artist now combines the already strange jutting out elements with images which seem to challenge us into some form of reconstruction: a Rodin-like statue of *Le Penseur* and a figure which closely resembles Le Corbusier's Modulor (with the Golden proportion).

Hamila Vakili has done hundreds of photographs of Barbie dolls wrapped in burnt cellophane. Is she angry at the image of woman treated as an object in the West, or is she reacting to the fact that she has to cover her femininity? Or is this an image of destruction of womanhood in general and a bit of self-destruction in particular? Or is it a socio-political commentary on the violence done to women in our society, especially the young and pretty ones?

Afshan Daneshvar's work clearly speaks of Shirin Neshat's self-portraits where she juxtaposes written words on her images. But whereas Neshat's texts are closely linked to the image – religious text on her hand reminiscent of Fatemeh's hand and the five holy figures, or a poem by Forough, *Where is the garden?*, in her eye – in Daneshvar's pictures the written text is gratuitous and has no linkage to the imagery. Nevertheless there are other ironic elements in this work, namely the self-censored parts of naked bodies which also point to Shadi

Ghadirian's series on censorship, and the bag over the head – is she a terrorist? – which deserve noticing.

With **Afrouz Nasser-Sharif**, we discover some of the rare women interested in nature and landscapes which are so soothing and mystical in Iran. And with **Mehrva Arvin** and **Maryam Kia**, we take refuge into abstraction, expressionist painting-like photographs which remind us of some of Nasrollah Kasraian's works. And finally we take refuge in the family circle with Hannah Darabi's photographs, where a halo of light projects through the arch on the mother, and the men are plunged in boredom.

The two women in Esfahan, contemplating the Zayandehroud, our most majestic river, may not be alone, but they feel even more solitary in this landscape which ought to be beautiful but instead is heavy with a leaded sky, as though a storm is gathering up. Will the storm destroy our Safavid 33-arched bridge? The women are silently pondering on their own fate, watching the waters flow, the river being the most mystical allegory of life which is passing us by. **Farzaneh Khademian's** pictures are elliptical. This first one is rather exceptional in her body of work, because usually she explores a minimal context with one theme, and my favorite one is her works of women practicing some form of sport.

The woman boxing is an image of so many layers of meaning: I want to be as strong as men, I want to be able to defend myself, I want to get rid of all the anger that has gathered in me, I want to act and do something and be good at it... and I am doing it all on my own. The woman playing squash behind the glass is also on her own, her back to us. The irony of these women's clothing is not lost on any of us, although very mildly projected in these photographs. Some of her other works, women swimming or fencing, can really be ridiculous. But the issue of clothing is really transcended in the last photograph where the women are rowing, so far away from us that it is of no importance. Here is a photograph which does not imply solitude, but I had to end the exhibition with a glimpse of hope: somehow the women keep rowing on, through all the vicissitudes of life in Iran, and maybe someday, who knows, they'll be leading the boat.

Forough Farrokhzad, the Visionary Poet

Goli Taraghi

Forough Farrokhzad, like all the great artists, is a visionary poet. She delves into the mysterious worlds concealed beneath the apparent reality. She probes the depths of all dreams, the realm of the unknown, the "source of all being". Her poetry is full of symbols and mythological imagery, pregnant with secret meaning. Sitting on the wings of the wind, she flies away to the heart of darkness, to the timeless beginning, to "the dawn of eternal growths and blossoming".

Lets us look at her works as a whole, five volumes of poetry : *The Captive, The Wall, Rebellion, Rebirth* and *Let us have faith in the beginning of the cold season*. The totality of her poetic experience, from her first book to the last one, is a journey of initiation and transformation, a passionate quest, at times painful, demonic, for self-realisation. While most of her contemporary poets lament on social or political injustice or on personal deception in love and destiny, Forough's magical words refer us to the regions beyond the ordered world of human life. She allows us a glimpse into the secret garden behind the wall:

*Everyone knows,
everyone knows
that you and I have seen the garden
from that cold sullen window
and that we have plucked the apple
from that playful, hard-to-reach branch.*

We can divide her psychic and poetic experience into three stages. In her first three books, she is a fragmented being, a partial self, who plunges herself into the dark ocean of primitive passion and sexual pleasure. Her ecstasy goes often to the border of self destruction . Death is her lover.

*Oh, Death give me an eternal kiss
From those sweet lip of yours.*

Unsatisfied and deceived, she finds herself captive in the prison of her own desires. Her cry is full of rage and anguish. She throws herself into the fire of hell, kisses the sad eyes of Satan , and like Kali, the mythical Goddess of Death , wishes the total destruction of the Universe. Her poetry at this stage is the manifestation of her psychic conflict, her inner revolt, and a desperate yearning for another dimension of existence, another mode of being. Her descent to the forbidden regions of the underworld, and her symbolic death proclaims her eventual rebirth. She has touched the bottom and now, like the sacred lotus coming up from the depth of the primordial waters, she starts her return. At this stage, her individual ego is transformed into a collective "I". This is the time that she writes her book *Rebirth*, which is the testimony of her psychic development and her transformation into another being. She is no more a single woman in search of personal fulfilment, but the Eternal Feminine in union with Nature. She is the Magna Mater, the Mother Earth:

*I clasp to my breast
the unripe bunches of wheat
and breastfeed them
And again, we hear her cry :
... and I am the hot
Lust of the Earth
That sucks all the waters
Into herself
To make fruitful all the fields.*

Rebirth is the celebration of the Eternal Feminine and an unconscious eulogy of the old embracing Mother Nature. Forough's poems must be read and understood in her transpersonal context, which transcends her personal conscious experiences. Her poetic expression extends into an era of existence that is beyond time and rational human measurement. She speaks not for herself but

re-echoes the song of the Great Lady of the human soul, whose enchanting image has hunted mankind throughout the centuries. In the conscious world of the Father, where rational and masculine values dominate, the Great Mother of Being is exiled to the forlorn land of oblivion, and it is from there that she calls her forgetful children:

Listen to my far distant voice in the heavy mist

Of pre-dawn incantations

And look at me in the silent face of all mirrors

And beware how I touch

With the remains of my hands

The dark depth of all dreams

Forough's journey does not end here:

Why should I stop. why?

the birds have gone in search

of blue direction.

The horizon is vertical

and movement fountain like;

at the limits of vision

shining plants spine.

Why should I stop?

In her last book, symbols of sun and light, the spiritual horizon of the upper world, take the place of the unknown regions underground, the mysterious depths of darkness and the magical perception of the Night. Mother Earth joins the spiritual Kingdom of the Sun God, the Father. Sound, the sacred OM of Indian mythology, and Light, both

the immaterial entities, are the ultimate enduring truth.

The ultimate extent of powers

is union,

is joining with the origin of the sun

and pouring into the perception of light.

At this stage we are witnessing the Sacred Marriage of Earth and Sky, the lower and upper levels of existence. Forough's poetry in her last book is the expression of a mystic experience, where Unconscious and Conscious, the Feminine and Masculine forces, the Darkness and Light, are united parts of a whole which forms the totality of the Universe. What else remains to say? With this step taken, her creative mission is complete.

She dies before the publication of her last book. But, is it the end? Of course not. She is part of the Universe, she is the Mother Earth and the Lady of Night. She is part of the Moon and of the Sun. Her journey is the journey of eternal return and perpetual rebirths. Hasn't she herself promised us:

I will come back,

I will, I will

And I shall salute the earth

Whose feverish womb is full of green seeds,

Fertilised by my passion for eternal rebirths

I will come back and salute her once again.

Her film, *The House Is Black*, is a part of her creative poetry. Here again she probes the uncanny recesses of the human soul. Her eyes see what is concealed behind the surface. She discovers beauty behind those injured half rotten faces. There is life and love and growth in the Black House of Death. Her poetry and film are the celebration of life and beauty, hidden in the depth of darkness and death.

F I L M S