



Newsha Tavakolian, *Look*, 2013

Burnt Generation

Contemporary Iranian Photography

April 21–July 10, 2016

Participating Artists

Azadeh Akhlaghi
Babak Kazemi
Newsha Tavakolian

Gohar Dashti
Abbas Kowsari
Sadegh Tirafkan

Shadi Ghadirian
Ali & Ramyar

Burnt Generation is an exhibition of contemporary Iranian photography that surveys the profound impact of decades of political unrest and social upheaval on the Iranian people. The title comes from the moniker given to Iranians born between 1963 and 1980—a generation whose youth was profoundly marked by the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which brought down the ruling monarchy and had major social, political and economic consequences, and the Iran-Iraq War, which lasted for eight years. Featuring an array of approaches to photographic storytelling, *Burnt Generation* has three central themes: the isolation, loneliness and desolation of youth; the common threads that unite the country in spite of decades of tumult; and the personal, political and social consequences of war. The exhibition offers a rare opportunity to move beyond cliché—an invitation to forget the stereotypical images of Iran and enter the worlds of eight highly original, intellectually engaged artists.

Ali Nadjian and Ramyar Manouchehrzadeh (b. 1976 and 1980, respectively) have worked collaboratively in the field of photography for many years. Their practice explores the cultural impact of the Iranian Revolution over nearly four decades and documents the duality imposed on Iranians by their religious and political history. Their series *We Live in a Paradoxical Society* (2010) represents ways life for Iranians is strictly divided into two parts: the domestic

and the public. The artists explain: “Home is considered a safe space to live in which we are free to think, dress and behave the way we want. On the contrary, there’s a life outside our homes full of fundamental and basic differences in which we are attacked for deviations, and pretensions are required in order to survive.”

Newsha Tavakolian (b. 1981) also delves into the private lives of Iranians with her series *Look*. She peers into apartments in her building, presenting tenants who have lived within them for more than 10 years. These photographs tell the story of middle class youths attempting to cope with their isolated society and battling with their lack of hope for the future. Over a period of six months, always at 8 pm, Tavakolian fixed her camera on a tripod in front of a window and tried to capture a moment that illustrated its occupant’s story. Her subjects are caught within the frame of a window, and their images echo the cold, nondescript buildings seen in the distance.

Shadi Ghadirian (b. 1974) addresses the silent, powerful presence of political ideology and war in the home in her series *Nil Nil*. The artist transforms the domestic space by placing military objects inside, and in so doing reminds us that war has a silent but powerful presence in people’s minds and innermost private lives. In *White Square* (2009), Ghadirian has photographed objects of military



Ali & Ramyar, from the series *We Live in a Paradoxical Society*, 2010



Shadi Ghadirian, *White Square*, 2009

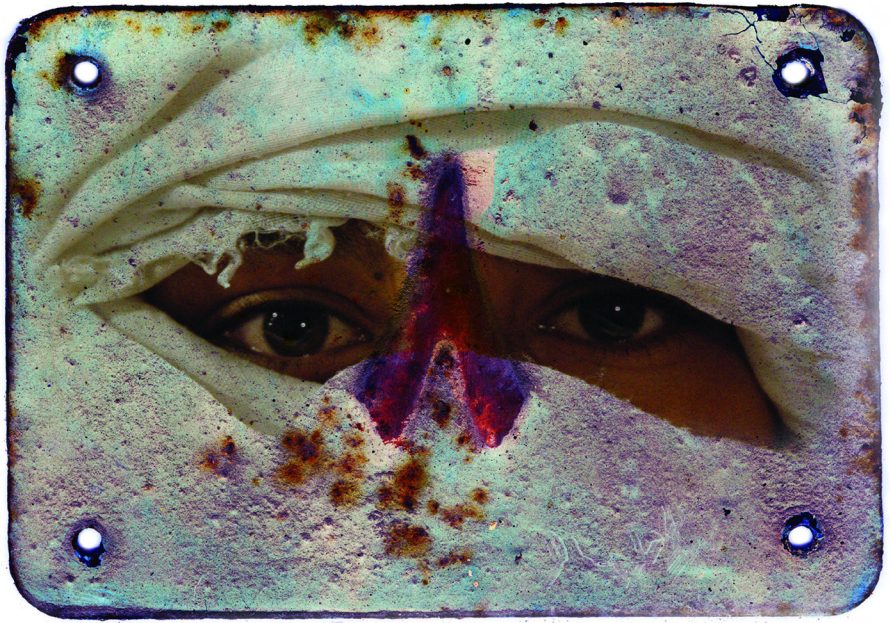
use—a helmet, a canteen, an ammunition belt, a grenade, etc.—that she decorated with a red silk ribbon. Recontextualized, these accessories of war become unfamiliar and appear at once menacing and delicate, their aggressiveness tempered by an element of the feminine.

Also blending markers of conflict and domesticity, **Babak Kazemi** (b. 1983) offers a commentary on the Iran-Iraq War, the longest battle of the 20th century. In *Khorramshahr Number by Number* (2006–2010), Kazemi superimposes photographs of local people and scenes onto house number plates from destroyed homes in the war-torn city of Khorramshahr, located on Iran's border with Iraq. The works symbolize displaced populations and the human and financial costs of war. Kazemi's *Souvenir From a Friend and Neighbour Country* (2006) presents bullets from the conflict, which, photographed individually, take on a strange, chilling beauty.

Also concerned with the legacy of the Iran-Iraq War, the project *Shade of Earth* by **Abbas Kowsari** (b. 1970) documents the trip that hundreds of thousands of Iranians make to the border of Iran and Iraq during the New Year holidays. This journey, known as *Rahian-e Noor*, is a pilgrimage to remember the millions of soldiers who died during eight years of trench warfare. On a more hopeful note, Kowsari's series *Light* is inspired by the centrality of light in all major world religions and the fact that

light is a metaphor for truth, knowledge and enlightenment in nearly every culture and mythology. His radiant pictures reveal that a respect for religious traditions and rituals is very much alive in Iran, particularly in its old neighborhoods, towns and villages. He has taken many photographs over the years on two particular nights of Shiite celebrations, the night of Ashura and the birth of the Twelfth Imam, documenting the decorations, lamps, colored papers and festive installations made by the people in their communities.

Gohar Dashti (b. 1980) explores fraught social and political issues through the carefully staged photographs of her series *Iran, Untitled*. By tightly clustering groups of people such as travelers or soldiers in the middle of a desert landscape, Dashti creates mysterious tableaux that suggest the isolation of specific populations within Iranian society. At the same time, she underscores the insularity of her select groups by providing one element that compositionally binds the people together, such as a bathtub, a rug or orange traffic cones. Dashti describes these images as haikus exploring the relationship between form and content. "It's like objectifying a feeling; that is how an image reveals itself," she explains. Ultimately, her work suggests the universal human need to bond with others, as well as the common urge to seek distance from the unfamiliar.



Babak Kazemi, *Khorramshahr Number by Number*, 2006–2010



Abbas Kowsari, from the series *Light*, 2011

In her series *By an Eye Witness*, **Azadeh Akhlaghi** (b. 1978) creates images of past events for which photographs do not exist. Her process specifically comments on the many dramatic, tragic deaths that mark Iran's modern history. Pairing images with explanatory texts in both English and Farsi, each work is a thoughtful reconstruction of historical events using a combination of archived information, news reports and conflicting accounts from witnesses. Assassinations, torture, accidents, suspicious and natural deaths are all represented in the series; each death marks a moment in Iran's turbulent modern history, crossing political and factional lines, to which all Iranians can relate.



Azadeh Akhlaghi, *Taghi Arani / 4 February 1940, 2012*, from the series *By an Eye Witness*

Finally, **Sadegh Tirafkan** (1965–2013) observes the male role in traditional Iranian

society. His two series, *Bodysigns* and *Body Curves*, are an effort to unite the curvatures of the human body with Persian calligraphy and figurative images from Persian art. To achieve this connection, Tirafkan employed the Mohr technique, which stamps traditional patterns to prints and fabrics.

Burnt Generation is a tribute to the life of Tirafkan, who was an extraordinary artist and generous friend. Like all of the artists whose images are included in this exhibition, his work is a bridge that merges his own sense of identity with imposed political and social ideologies. Refusing easy characterization, all of these artists navigate the contradictions and negotiations that mark Iranian life, while simultaneously considering the shared experiences of a generation defined by war and tyranny.

—Fariba Farshad, Curator and Founding Director of Candlestar and Photo London