

BURNT GENERATION:

CONTEMPORARY IRANIAN PHOTOGRAPHY

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Viewer's Guide



Azadeh Akhlaghi

By an Eye Witness, Taghi Arani, 2012

This guide serves as a viewer's supplement to the exhibition *Burnt Generation: Contemporary Iranian Photography* and contains information about the works on view, questions for looking and discussion, and suggested readings.

You may download this guide from the museum's website at mocp.org/education/resources-for-educators.php.

To schedule a free docent-led tour, please complete the form here. mocp.org/education/tours-and-print-viewings.php.



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Introduction

Iran is a country in perpetual transition, one marked by a dichotomy between public and private and the clash of traditional and modern values that shape those spheres. While many Iranians today are not practicing Muslims, the governing Islamic Republic under which they live demands strict conformity to its religious tenants. The *Burnt Generation*, a moniker given to those born between 1963 and 1980, witnessed the profound social and political upheaval of the 1979 revolution that overthrew the Pahlavi monarchy, and the Iran-Iraq war that followed in its wake. Leveraging the revolutionary chaos that instated the Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Iraq invaded Iran in September of 1980 to regain long disputed border territories, ushering in 8 years of armed conflict and trench warfare.

It is this complex history of social and political unrest that provides the context for the photographs in this exhibition. The artists in *Burnt Generation* have experienced these drastic cultural shifts firsthand. While their approaches to photographic storytelling vary, each offers a unique glimpse into daily life in Iran, imparting insights that might otherwise be unfamiliar to a Western audience steeped in the clichés and stereotypes propagated by the media.

Several themes emerge: The cultural threads and time-honored traditions that unite the country in spite of decades of tumult are the purview of Abbas Kowsari and Sadegh Tirafkan. Artists Babak Kazemi, Shadi Ghadirian, and Gohar Dashti work with the personal, political, and social consequences of a war they know well; while Newsha Tavakolian and artistic duo Ali & Ramyar take on the isolation and loneliness of youth at odds with the strictures of the Islamic Republic, and the divide between public and private life that drives their desolation.

This public-private dichotomy manifests itself in every aspect of contemporary life in Iran. For example, women must abide by the Islamic dress code and cover their hair and bodies appropriately. The arts and culture are also censored. Iranian



Gohar Dashti
Iran, Untitled, 2013

rappers, death metal rockers, and punks hold concerts in private houses in which dozens and even hundreds of people partake, but are interrogated for “propagating decadence and tarnishing the image of the holy regime of the Islamic Republic” just as soon as they release an album.¹ For photographers, too, the arts are a site of resistance, reclamation, and imagination. Under any regime where dissent is not tolerated, artistic metaphor becomes a crucial strategy, one that imparts new and unofficial perspectives. *Burnt Generation* moves beyond mediated imagery of Iran and enters directly into the world of the artists who live and work there.

Robyn Day and Anahid Ghorbani

Columbia College Chicago graduate students

Burnt Generation was curated by Fariba Farshad,
Founding Director of Candlestar and Photo London

¹ Malu Halasa, *Transit Tehran: Young Iran and Its Inspirations* (London: Garnet Publishing, 2008), p. 7.

Gohar Dashti

Iranian, b. 1980



Gohar Dashti
Iran, Untitled, 2013

Gohar Dashti 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.

Ali & Ramyar

Iranian, b. 1976, b. 1980



Ali & Ramyar
We Live in a Paradoxical Society, 2010

Ali Nadjian and Ramyar Manouchehrzadeh 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 rigid dualities of public and private life imposed on Iranians under the Islamic Republic. Their series *We Live in a Paradoxical Society* represents the strict divide between domestic and public spheres, the former marked by individual expression and the latter by necessary self-censorship. As 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

Iranian, b. 1981



Newsha Tavakolian
Look

In her series *Look*, Newsha Tavakolian delves into the unseen, private lives of Iranians. Peering into apartments in her building, she presents tenants who have lived within them for more than ten years. These photographs tell the story of middle class youths attempting to cope with their isolation from a conformist 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 the moments that best illustrated her subjects' anxieties and concerns. Her neighbors are caught within the frame of that window, their images echoing the cold, nondescript buildings seen in the distance.

Shadi Ghadirian

Iranian, b. 1974

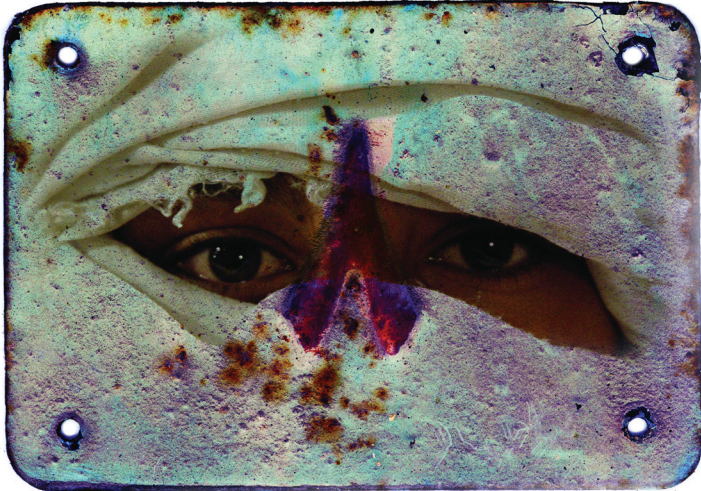


Shadi Ghadirian
White Square, 2009

Shadi Ghadirian's *Nil Nil* series addresses the symbolic presence of political ideology and war within the home. Transforming the domestic space with the addition of military objects, she reminds us that war has a silent but powerful presence in people's minds and innermost private lives. In *White Square*, Ghadirian has photographed objects of military use—a helmet, canteen, ammunition belt, or grenade—that she decorates 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.

Babak Kazemi

Iranian, b. 1983



Babak Kazemi

Khorramshahr number by number, 2006-2010

Combining markers of conflict and domesticity, Babak Kazemi offers a commentary on the Iran/Iraq War, the longest battle of the twentieth century, and the second longest violent conflict after the Vietnam War. In *Khorramshahr Number by Number*, 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. Openly blaming the nearby oil fields for the political upheaval he witnessed, Kazemi prints his photographs in petroleum products. The works symbolize the 75,000 displaced residents of the city, bringing into view the human and financial costs of war. Kazemi's *Souvenir of a Friend and Neighbor Country* (2006) presents bullets from the conflict, which, photographed individually, take on a strange, chilling beauty as a memorial to Khorramshahr.

Abbas Kowsari

Iranian, b. 1970



Abbas Kowsari

Light, Tehran/5th July, 2012

Concerned with the legacy of the Iran/Iraq War, Abbas Kowsari's *Shade of Earth* series documents the pilgrimage that hundreds of thousands of Iranians make to the border between the two countries during the New Year holidays. This journey, known as *Rahian-e Noor*, commemorates the millions of soldiers who died during eight years of trench warfare from 1980 to 1988. It is paired here with Kowsari's hopeful series *Light*. Inspired by the centrality of light in all major world religions, which serves as a universal metaphor for truth, knowledge, and enlightenment, Kowsari photographs the green-hued illuminations of Islamic rituals. His radiant pictures reveal that a respect for religious traditions 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.

Azadeh Akhlaghi

Iranian, b. 1978



Azadeh Akhlaghi

By an Eye Witness, Taghi Arani, 2012

In this project, Azadeh Akhlaghi 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 based on 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—whether of a political activist, intellectual, or journalist—marks a turning point in Iran's turbulent modern history, crossing political and factional lines, to which all Iranians can relate.

Sadegh Tirafkan

Iranian, 1965 - 2013



Sadegh Tirafkan

Body curves, 2003

Figurative images are a mainstay of Persian art, but rarely are they presented nude. Sadegh Tirafkan has long been inspired by the human form. In researching his projects, Tirafkan encountered ancient Iranian art depicting the naked bodies of the Secaha tribe and noble pre-Achaemenians Kings, who painted their torsos and limbs with abstract and figurative forms. Observing the male role in traditional Iranian society from this historical standpoint, Tirafkan continues this rare practice, embellishing his body with decorative wood blocks using the Mohr technique, which stamps traditional patterns onto prints and fabrics. His two series presented here are an effort to unite the curvatures of the human body with Persian calligraphy and figurative images from ancient Persian art, which more freely depicted the nude.

Questions for Looking and Discussing

1.

How does the portrayal of contemporary Iranian culture in *Burnt Generation* compare with your impressions of Iran in US media? Do you see any parallels or similarities in any of the works on view with your own experiences or conceptions of Iran? Or do you find the history, politics, and culture of Iran as represented in these works dissimilar to your own views?

2.

Media circulating within and coming from Iran, including artwork, is under the tight control of the Islamic Republic. Given that, how do the artists in *Burnt Generation* represent their own experiences in ways that shed light on the realities of contemporary Iranian society? Do you think they have found strategies to convey freedom of expression despite the censure of the government?

3.

Is it essential to know the political and historical context within Iran to understand the works on view in *Burnt Generation*? Do some of the suggested reading and viewing. How do your interpretations of the photographs change as you learn more about the country?

4.

How do the artists in *Burnt Generation* convey their personal experiences within a particular geopolitical region and culture to a global audience that might have limited knowledge of the circumstances they encounter in their daily lives? Does the meaning of their works change with the audience? Or do you think the reception is the same within Iran as it is here in the United States or elsewhere?

5.

What visual strategies do **Newsha Tavakolian** and artistic duo **Ali & Ramyar** use to illustrate the divide between the public and private lives of Iranians? What is the emotional tone of their work? Compare and contrast Ali & Ramyar's *We Live in a Paradoxical Society* with Tavakolian's *Look*. What can we infer about public life in Iran from their series? How about private life?

6.

Do you experience a duality between public and private life in your own culture? How? Do politics and religion affect your daily life?

7.

What does **Newsha Tavakolian's** series of portraits suggest about youth in Iran? How do you read the expressions, gestures, and posture of her subjects? How does Tavakolian's choice of background and framing convey a specific feeling or idea about her generation?

8.

Sadegh Tirafkan pairs the masculine role in traditional Iranian society with the smooth, graceful curves of the male body and forms drawn from the Persian alphabet and ancient art. What do you think is his intention in doing so? What does he suggest about artistic traditions?

9.

What beliefs about masculinity does **Sadegh Tirafkan** portray in his images? Does he appear to challenge stereotypes or embrace them or both? Why do you think so?

10.

Despite the fact that many Iranian citizens are secular, there is a respect for tradition and ritual that runs deep in Iranian culture. How does **Abbas Kowsari** depict this faith in his photographs? What do you think is the significance of the metaphor of “light”? What is the difference, in your opinion, between the rituals Kowsari depicts and the religious laws of the Islamic Republic?

11.

Compare and contrast the representation of war in the works of **Babak Kazemi**, **Shadi Ghadirian**, and **Gohar Dashti**. Which is your favorite approach? Why?

12.

Gohar Dashti describes her work as “objectifying a feeling.” What feelings do her works convey and what do they suggest about human nature? What do you think the desert represents in her images? How does she use metaphors in her work?

13.

Why does **Babak Kazemi** use house number plates from destroyed homes and a petroleum printing process? What do these choices symbolize? How do you experience the effects of war through his works?

14.

Why do you think **Shadi Ghadirian** decorates the objects and materials of warfare with red ribbons? What does this choice signify? Why does she photograph these objects in domestic settings? What might that tell us about the Iran-Iraq war?

15.

Compare and contrast **Azadeh Akhlaghi's** reconstructions of specific historical events with **Gohar Dashti's** similarly staged, but unspecific scenes in the desert. Both series reflect on the political and social turbulence of Iranian society in very different ways. How? Which body of work do you think is more successful? Why?



Ali & Ramyar
We Live in a Paradoxical Society, 2010

Suggested Reading and Viewing

Kader Abdolah. *My Father's Notebook: A Novel of Iran*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2007.

Michael Axworthy. *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic*. New York: Penguin, 2013.

Arthur Danto. *Shirin Neshat*. New York: Rizzoli, 2010.

Shirin Ebadi. *Iran Awakening: A Memoir of Revolution and Hope*. New York: Random House, 2006.

Asghar Farhadi. *A Separation*. Sony Pictures Classics, 2011.

Malu Halasa. *Transit Tehran: Young Iran and Its Inspirations*. London: Garnet Publishing, 2008.

Rashid Khalidi. *Sowing Crisis: The Cold War and American Dominance in the Middle East*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2009.

Hooman Majd. *The Ayatollah Begs to Differ: The Paradox of Modern Iran*. New York: Anchor, 2009.

Afshin Molavi. *The Soul of Iran: A Nation's Struggle for Freedom*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2005.

Azar Nafisi et al. *My Sister, Guard Your Veil; My Brother, Guard Your Eyes: Uncensored Iranian Voices*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2006.

Shirin Neshat. *Women Without Men*. Indie Crush, 2009.

Marjane Satrapi. *The Complete Persepolis*. New York: Pantheon Graphic Novels, 2007.