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'Persian Visions' brings work of top Iranian photographers to C.R. Museum of Art

CEDAR RAPIDS — Most Iranians do not hate the United States.

That's the main thing Gary Hallman learned when he was in Iran curating "Persian Visions," which features images from 20 of the Middle Eastern country's top photographers.

EXHIBITION

The 60-piece exhibit will be at the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art from Saturday to May 10.

"Even though our governments don't agree on many things, most Iranians I met were very pro-American and pro-Western," says Hallman, an associate professor of art at the University of Minnesota. "The photographers in this exhibit are very international in their perspective and sense of place in the art world."

While the thought of a photography exhibit from the Middle East might conjure images of war, poverty or censorship in many Americans' minds, that's not the case with "Persian Visions."

Most of the photos in the exhibit are artistic as opposed to journalistic, with many of the photographers experimenting with unusual angles and lighting while others use digital techniques to manipulate their captured images.

"Photojournalism tends to be abundant in regions where there is social and political strife, so we wanted to show a different side of things," says Hallman, who curated the traveling exhibit with Hamid Severi of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art in Iran. "We wanted the work to be more reflective of the artistic and poetic imaginations of the photographers and the traditions of art in Iran."

Sean Ulmer, curator at the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art, says he had been familiar with "Persian Visions" for several years and jumped at the chance to bring it to Cedar Rapids. "Persian Visions" is the first survey of contemporary Iranian photography to travel to the United States.

"Here in America, usually the only photos we see from Iran are taken by Americans, so this exhibit shows us Iran through a different set of eyes," Ulmer says. "On the level of everyday people, these photographs show that the differences between Americans and Iranians are not very substantial."

One of the exhibit's lead images is an untitled photo collage by Ahmad Nateghi that shows a large eye illuminated on an otherwise silhouetted face.

Strangely enough, Nateghi actually is one of the few photographers in the exhibit with an anti-Western stance. Many of his images are indictments of Western consumerism.

"He's very critical of the materialist veneer and gloss of American cities," Hallman says. "But he's a really good photographer, and that's a striking image."

"Persian Visions" was put together in 2003 and has been touring the United States ever since. Hallman

says he first got the idea for the exhibit when he met two Iranian filmmakers who were in Minneapolis for a film festival. Both of the filmmakers also were interested in photography, which is Hallman's specialty. The Iranian filmmakers passed Hallman's name on to the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, which invited Hallman to show his work at the museum. He accepted, and he also started planning "Persian Visions" to return the favor.

Hallman learned that artists in Iran rarely are censored, although most shy away from making politically provocative statements with their work. However, plenty of the country's artists have been known to make subtle statements that are left open to interpretation.

Now that "Persian Visions" has been touring the country for several years, Hallman says he believes the exhibit has made at least a slight difference in the way Americans view Iran.

"I think the exhibit really humanizes the people of Iran," Hallman says. "It shows they have the same longings and desires that we have."