

## Haggerty Museum's 'Persian Visions' Casts Iran in a Different Light

Art Review

By Angelina Krahn



Thirty years after the Islamic Revolution, "Persian Visions: Contemporary Photography from Iran" brings the work of 20 photographers to Milwaukee (at the Haggerty Museum of Art through Jan. 17, 2010). Despite cultural sanctions imposed by the United

States, the show, organized by a professor from the University of Minnesota and the curator from the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, is the first of its kind to tour the States since the Revolution. For most Americans, exposure to Iran is purely negative, limited to the rants of its president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and George W. Bush's "Axis of Evil" rhetoric. "Persian Visions" facilitates an "unofficial" cultural dialogue that transcends the mutual, "official" enmity and provides a normalized view of the Islamic Republic from within.

Split between the northeast corner of the main floor and the second level of the Haggerty Museum, the predominantly figural works address themes of identity, loss and war. Many photographs deal with memory, bridging the past and present through re-photography. The motif of re-photographed or appropriated images in "Persian Visions" is pervasive, a superimposition of the past onto the present that creates a continuum between these two disparate places across the divide of the Revolution.

In Arman Stepanian's textural C-prints, weathered photographs of the deceased are framed by the distressed surfaces of gravestones. Farshid Azarang's *Scattered Reminiscences (1-12)* comprise three older, pre-Revolution portraits and two contemporary ones, and chart the aging of two women.

Four small photographs by Kaveh Golestan, a photojournalist killed by a landmine in Iraq while on assignment for the BBC, are among the few that overtly address war in the Middle East. In *Baby*, a woman in a surgical mask holds up the charred body of an infant for the camera. In *Ice*,

two men stand over the corpse of a child. The graphic nature of Golestan's photographs is mitigated slightly by swaths of red the color of dried blood. Ghostlike, these four photographs of the maimed and murdered predate his own death by a year.

Bridging the distant past to the present, Sadegh Tirafkan traverses the ruins of Persepolis with a pair of monitors and two still images. Tracked by the camera, he moves both to and from a central point, his modern dress in sharp contrast to the bleached remains of Iran's ancient empire.

Upstairs, Shokoufeh Alidousti, one of two women represented in the show, uses her chador to create negative space in *Self-Portrait 1-4*. The corners of the frames fragment her face; in her hands she holds family photographs. Veiled in her public garb, she re-photographs snapshots of her private life.

From a Western perspective, it is difficult to grasp the artists' risks—inextricably aesthetic and political—without understanding what is proscribed by Islam and Iran's theocracy: criticism of the regime, representation of the living and nudity, to name a few. The 20 photographers, most of who reside and work in Iran and all survivors of the Revolution, must address issues of modernity and identity within these constraints. Though a counterpoint to Western cultural hegemony, the photographs of "Persian Visions" belie the exoticness of contemporary Iran; its universal motifs challenge the viewer to see beyond the obvious political and cultural disparities.