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FRAMING IRAN
How 'politics of perception' inform our view of
Iranian Contemporary Art

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ABSTRACT

This paper will discuss the “exceptionality narrative” that is occurring in today’s discussion of Iranian contemporary art. This paradigm refers to the ways in which Western discourse about Iranian artistic expression presents it as an anomaly in an otherwise restrictive and authoritarian society. The exceptionality narrative situates the work of a selected few artists within political perceptions of the Iranian state rather than analyzing it for its art historical, formal and curatorial merit. This common tendency is one that is projected onto the Iranian artist from the outside world and assumes that, given the conservative nature of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the restrictions on civil liberties, artists must be the defiant exceptions to society. This misconception in turn, creates a false expectation that Iranian art only complains about its society and circumstances. This paradigm then denies artists inside Iran the opportunity to be active players in the international contemporary art community.

I will examine this paradigm critically through an invested account of the Tehran art scene. I draw many of my conclusions from original research conducted in Tehran in August 2014. I aim to put the common Western exhibition practices of Iranian Art in conversation with the vibrant and diverse voices that are at play in the Tehran art scene today. I will interrogate the pervasive practice of having a handful of Iranian artists, selected by the Western art scene, standing in for an entire community of cultural producers. Instead, by focusing my work on artists who have grown up entirely in post revolutionary Iran, I will explore the effect of the real time social and political circumstances on their artistic practice. I will be drawing on personal interviews, first person narratives and literature from Iran (artist websites, publications and catalogues).

Initially, my research question aimed to examine what it means to be a cultural producer inside a country with censorship. My expectation was to encounter an artistic society within Iran that was struggling to carve out a space for itself in light of the Islamic Republic's limitations on civil society and freedom of expression. I understood quickly however, that my research question was misguided. It too had been informed by a pre-imaged idea of what artistic practice in a repressive society meant. Instead, what I encountered was a class of artists and leaders who had succeeded in giving the medium of visual arts in Iran its hard earned independence.

INTRODUCTION

In 1979, the Iranian Revolution overthrew the Pahlavi dynasty of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. Under the support of leftist Islamic organizations, the leader Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini came to power in Iran. This marked the toppling of a pro-Western and US supported monarchy in favor of an anti-Western authoritarian theocracy ruled by Islamic Guardianship (everyone requires supervision by leading Islamic jurists). The Islamic Revolution undermined the idea that Westernization and progress were compatible and instead, proposed the idea of *Gharbzadegi* (that Western culture was a plague to be eliminated). Islam then came to symbolize third world liberalization from oppressive colonial legacies and capitalism. The aim of the revolution was to protect Islam from deviations of Shariah law and, by doing so, eliminate poverty, injustice and the denigration of Muslim lands by foreign non-believers.¹

The 1979 revolution engineered sweeping changes in the social and cultural sphere of Iranian life. Art was greatly affected as ideological Islamic traditions informed the new Iranian modernism.² The artistic policies of the Pahlavi regime were brought to a halt and control of Iranian cultural production fell increasingly at the mercy of state institutions. Khomeini's call for the construction of a good and pure Islamic culture in the Iranian state was central to his opposition to the Shah.³ Speaking from the Azam Mosque in Qom on September 1964, Khomeini declared: "If culture is rehabilitated, then the country will be reformed. This is because the [government] ministries emanate from culture, the parliament emanates from culture, the worker is rehabilitated through culture. You should create an independent culture or let us do

¹ Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent*, NYU Press, 1993. Print. 419. Print

² Hamid Keshmirshakan, "Modern And Contemporary Iranian Art: Developments and Challenges" in Hossein Amirsadeghi, *Different Sames: New Perspectives in Contemporary Iranian Art*. TransGlobe, 2009. Print.

³ Shiva Balaghi. "Art and Revolution in the Islamic Republic of Iran." *The State of the Arts in the Middle East*. Middle East Institute. Web.

so... Give us control over culture.”⁴ The subsequent state that Khomeini helped shape aimed at rehabilitating the tarnished Iranian cultural sphere that had previously been a “main instrument of Western colonial hegemony in Iran.”⁵

The new regime’s belief that modernism was elitist greatly altered the visual landscape of the country. The art created immediately after the revolution upheld revolutionary slogans: “storytelling was to be an articulation of an ideological or political message, as well as social commitment.”⁶ This work was approved, supported and encouraged by the regime and only increased with the advent of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). The majority of artistic production during this period displayed iterations of epic, religious and political themes. In 1980, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance was established to give support to institutions that were committed to the revolutionary cause. Only institutions that were considered to share the revolution’s ideology were given permission to operate. Otherwise, many art institutions and academies were closed and new teaching staffs were appointed by Islamic Propaganda organizations.⁷

It was not until the end of the war in 1988 that a new period of artistic renewal came to be in Iran. Private galleries that had formerly been closed reopened while new ones flourished. By the 1990s, the state was organizing national exhibitions and biennials covering different media in Iranian Art. The Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art hosted conferences on cultural and

⁴ As cited in Shiva Balaghi. "Art and Revolution in the Islamic Republic of Iran." *The State of the Arts in the Middle East*. Middle East Institute. Web.

⁵ Shiva Balaghi. "Art and Revolution in the Islamic Republic of Iran." *The State of the Arts in the Middle East-Middle East Institute Web*.

⁶ Hamid Keshmirshakan, “Modern And Contemporary Iranian Art: Developments and Challenges” in Hossein Amirsadeghi, *Different Sames: New Perspectives in Contemporary Iranian Art*. TransGlobe, 2009. Print.

⁷ Hamid Keshmirshakan, “Modern And Contemporary Iranian Art: Developments and Challenges” in Hossein Amirsadeghi, *Different Sames: New Perspectives in Contemporary Iranian Art*. TransGlobe, 2009. Print.

artistic identity and how “identity could be preserved against the mighty storm of Western Culture”,⁸ Although the formal stance of most Iranian officials was resistance to Western values of liberal democracy, globalization and westernization, their aim was also to find a balance between having Iran participate in the global scene without conforming to Western influences.⁹

The election of moderate president Mohammad Khatami in 1997, the former Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance (1983-1992) sparked a new phase of post-revolutionary art practice in Iran (often referred to as the Iranian “glasnost”). Khatami held a promise that government control over the public sphere in general and the arts in particular would be less restrictive. In his inaugural address Khatami called on “political institutions and organizations, associations, the media, scholars, researchers, academicians and educators, experts and specialists, all men and women of science, letters, culture, and art, and all citizens in all walks of life to help us with their continued supervision and candid presentation of their views and demands.”¹⁰ Thus the visual arts regained a significance they had not seen since the revolution. The Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, under the directorship of Ali Reza Sami Azar saw a relaxation in the control of Visual Arts: “we are being advised to be active in the cultural scene, to end Iran’s political isolation. The doors were closed for two decades after the Revolution, but now, we are opening up and we are facing a generation that longs to know more about recent art

⁸ Hamid Keshmirshakan, “Modern And Contemporary Iranian Art: Developments and Challenges” in Hossein Amirsadeghi, *Different Sames: New Perspectives in Contemporary Iranian Art*. TransGlobe, 2009. Print.

⁹ Hamid Keshmirshakan, “Modern And Contemporary Iranian Art: Developments and Challenges” in Hossein Amirsadeghi, *Different Sames: New Perspectives in Contemporary Iranian Art*. TransGlobe, 2009. Print.

¹⁰ As cited in Shiva Balaghi. "Art and Revolution in the Islamic Republic of Iran." *The State of the Arts in the Middle East*. Middle East Institute. Web.

movements”¹¹ Art publications and commercial galleries multiplied while museums invested in contemporary Iranian art. The “new art” of Iran emphasized identity and self-preservation in a society undergoing radical change.

With the election of Mahmood Ahmadinejad in 2005, another dramatic shift in civil society was felt. Ahmadinejad promoted traditional, Islamic and revolutionary values and encouraged extreme xenophobia towards the West. State patronage and tolerance of the arts decreased tremendously and previously flourishing art institutions were left in a state of limbo. Nevertheless, private galleries, art studios, classes and other artist led initiatives took to supplementing this lack of state support and subsequently kept the art scene vibrant.

Today, although the Iranian state continues to be guided by religious ideology, young generations are increasingly becoming less committed to the revolution and its ideas. Instead, artists today seek to address critically the problems that their societies are facing. Those that I had the pleasure of speaking with are known as the “Golden Generation, for they grew up and made work in the compressor state that is the Islamic Republic. Their talent emerges from the fact that they truly have a desire to succeed despite their restrictions. This pressure has become their main motivation and has pushed them to carve out a space for themselves to do their work. Their inclination towards both imagination and practical activism has created a new form of resistance in Iranian youth culture. It is, for example, entirely for its hard earned independence the visual arts are increasingly threatening to the authorities. They would greatly prefer to see people who are tame and doing religiously committed work. Instead, it has become a badge of honor to be in trouble and to reject the status quo. Iranian artists are learning to express themselves increasingly in subtleties, innuendos and metaphors. Aware of their context, Iranian

¹¹ As quoted in Anna Somers Cocks, “Iran’s Glasnost”, *The Art Newspaper* June 7, 2002. Web.

artists refer to themselves as editors, who have succeeded at disguising and transmitting their messages without disturbing “tradition”. This quality of their work is by far their biggest strength.

Despite the heterogeneity and vibrancy of the Iranian art culture, many shows of Iranian Contemporary Art in the West have formulated a pre-imagined idea of what Iranian art should look like. There is an underlying assumption that Iranian art should complain about the taboos and unwritten rules of its society. This limiting scope of interpretation makes Iranian cultural production seem predominantly inward-looking and bound by tradition. Iranian artists living and producing in Iran are regarded as an exception to the norm, bravely defiant of the constraining circumstances to which they are bound. I argue that the exceptionality narrative that is occurring in today’s discussion of Iranian contemporary art has its roots in the historical legacies and frameworks that describe the broader Middle East as “other” or “oriental”.

Inherent in this common misconception is the consideration of Iranian cultural production as static and grounded in the Islamic and authoritarian nature of the state. Orientalism, a framework put forward by Edward Said, is a distortive lens used to understand the unfamiliar and the threatening. It is a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based in a European and broader Western experience. The West uses the Orient as a contrasting “image, idea, personality and experience”, thus giving the privilege of definition to the West.¹² Since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the majority of what Americans have come to know about Iran is through radio, television and news outlets.¹³ Iran therefore became an entity that was both understood and visualized through an orientalist framework that posited it as ‘other’. The media

¹² Edward W Said. “Introduction”. *Orientalism*. 1st ed. Vintage, 1979. Print

¹³ Edward W Said. “The Iran Story”. *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*. New York: Pantheon, 1981. 81 Print.

contributed to making Iran “known” to the common consumer, regardless of its essentialist and political groundings.¹⁴

In chapter one, my thesis will focus on the “anarchist generation” of Iran-based artists, raging from ages twenty-five to forty. These are the artists that have managed to carve out a space for themselves to work within the compressor that is the Islamic Republic. The resulting creativity and entrepreneurship has allowed for a new form of activism and resistance through art. First, I will present a survey of the Tehran art scene, giving an overview of the art infrastructure in the country. Next, I will address the impact of censorship and state control on artistic production. Through a select number of works of art, I hope to expose the themes of tension and transgression, in their many metaphorical forms. Finally, my case studies of art galleries and institutions and interviews with artists and curators living in Iran: Aaran Gallery, Nazila Noebashari (Founder of Aaran Gallery), The Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, Ali Bakhtiari (Independent Curator), Mariam Amini (Artist), Behrang Samadzadeghan (Artist), will serve to highlight both the most promising angles of the Tehran art scene, as well as the hindrances to its development.

The second part of the thesis aims to diagnose the ways in which we make meaning of Iranian art. The popular framing of the Iranian artist as socially defiant is extremely narrow and pre-imagines the art produced to be a critique of the difficulty of living under a police state. Iranian artists are then single-handedly celebrated for their triumph over hardship rather than as members of the international art community. These chapters will seek to address the following questions: why is there a preconceived notion of what Iranian art should look like? What is the

¹⁴ Edward W Said. “Introduction”. *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*. New York: Pantheon, 1981. 4 Print.

connection between our understanding of Iranian cultural practice and the Orientalist frameworks?

Finally, the year 2009, historic for the Green Movement in Iran, saw a cluster of exhibitions around contemporary Iranian art. Through the lens of two shows *Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East* (Saatchi Gallery London, January-May 2009) and *Iran Inside Out: Influences of Homeland and Diaspora on the Artistic Language of Contemporary Iranian Artists* (Chelsea Museum NYC, June-September 2009), I will seek to evaluate how historical context informed the reception and subsequent reviews of these exhibitions. I argue that an orientalist perspective informs the rhetoric used to describe the artists and works that were showcased on both occasions. They serve as two examples of the ways in which pre-imagined ideas of Iranian art are adopted and projected in Western artistic discourse.

My fieldwork coupled with my analysis of journalistic art criticism of Iranian art attempts to shed light on the many labels that are associated with the Iranian art scene, both domestically and abroad. Understandings of Iranians that undergird much art criticism in the West come from an imposed imperialist or Western model. The power of clichés creates a void in society, whereby people are transformed into either victims or culprits. My work therefore aims to refute this claim, and instead shed light on a class of Iranian artists that defy these preconceived notions.

The insight provided by my survey of the Tehran art scene in August 2014 serves to undo some of the tropes and images that inform our perception of Iranian artistic productions. Far from a class of fear stricken, underground and illicit producers, Iranian artists within Iran have carved out their own public modes of resistance. It would be detrimental to cast them simply as commentators of Iran's current social and political climate. Instead, Iranian artists must be

considered as both contributing to and gaining from the International art scene. Iranian artists are creating their own meaning and value in a period of transformations (social, political, cultural, economic): they aim to showcase their treatment of modernity through the lens of art. The younger generation of artists in Iran is creating work that is antithetical to institutional art and is concerned with self-presentation as imbued through images. New means of communication have led Iranian artists to be exposed to the main contemporary artistic discourse and market pressure. They too are determined to stand alongside their counterparts on the international scene. This desire to be up-to-date and participate in the world of contemporary art is a powerful driving force for these prolific younger generations. Their art is a product of lived experience, one that is dynamic, changing and ingrained in the broader network of contemporary art. This class of Iranian artists provides us with a privileged lens into Iranian society, they are not however a mechanism by which to deny our stereotypes.

PART I: INSIDE IRAN

CHAPTER I: Art Institutions in Tehran

Since Khatami's presidency in 1997, there has been a shift in the place occupied by artists and their work in Iranian society. State censorship and the relationship between public and private spheres in Iran have felt the pressures of artistic identity, the art market and the political implications of art production. In this chapter, I aim to analyze the category of artistic production as it relates to the institutions of power of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran displays a tension between "cultural independence" and "moral virtues" that have "played out in fascinating ways in the three decades since the 1979 revolution".¹⁵ In Article two, the constitution states, "The Islamic Republic is a system based on belief... in cultural independence", venerating the "sciences and arts as the most advanced results of human experience."¹⁶ The next article of the charter demands a "favorable environment for the growth of moral virtues based on faith and piety and the struggle against all forms of vice and corruption." The means by which to achieve such circumstances are to raise "public awareness in all areas through the proper uses of the press, mass media and other means" as well as to strengthen "the spirit of inquiry, investigation and innovation in all areas of science, technology and culture, as well as Islamic studies, by establishing research centers and encouraging researchers."¹⁷ Under the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, civil liberties and cultural production experienced great setbacks. Government control over artistic production

¹⁵Shiva Balaghi. "Cultural Policy in the Islamic Republic of Iran." *Middle East Report*, No. 250. 2009:15. Web

¹⁶ Shiva Balaghi. "Cultural Policy in the Islamic Republic of Iran." *Middle East Report*, No. 250. 2009:15. Web

¹⁷ Shiva Balaghi. "Cultural Policy in the Islamic Republic of Iran." *Middle East Report*, No. 250. 2009:15. Web

manifested itself in the form of permits that resulted in books being denied printing rights, film productions being halted and art shows and institutions shutting down. It is within these circumstances that the contest for political power and voice in Iran has become increasingly pictorial: artistic “independence” in light of “moral values” and governmental restrictions proves that art production in Iran refuses to be partisan with imposed state ideology.

As Talinn Grigor, associate Professor of modern and contemporary architecture in the Department of Fine Arts at Brandeis University, quoted in her book *Contemporary Iranian Art: From the Street to the Studio*; in 1979, Iranian scholar Ehsan Yarshater wrote that “much of Persian painting today remains non-committed and removed from the realities of social transformation, as the revolution came to reveal”. As Grigor herself states, this could not be farther from the truth in the Iran art scene of today. Instead, Grigor adds that “Contemporary Iranian art stands as living proof of W.J.T Mitchell’s proposition that ‘the greatness of artistic achievements will not only survive the juxtaposition with the production of kitsch and mass culture, but become more convincing, powerful and intelligible’”.¹⁸ Today’s contemporary Iranian art scene is extremely active, diverse and especially young, spearheaded by an entrepreneurial and innovative spirit. The artists and gallerists the constitute my study all agree that since the late nineteenth century, Iranian artists have had to define themselves against the “myth of a universal West” in order not to be considered “copyists and faddists.”¹⁹ In the twenty-first century, however, pictorial discourse has provided a means by which to produce, honor,

¹⁸ Talinn Grigor. “The Studio.” *Contemporary Iranian Art: From the Street to the Studio*. Reaktion, 2014. 158-159. Print.

¹⁹ Talinn Grigor. “The Studio.” *Contemporary Iranian Art: From the Street to the Studio*. Reaktion, 2014. 94. Print.

defend and reclaim Iranian identity for itself: “to produce art is to produce Iranian identity.”²⁰

Today, Tehran, the nation’s capital, can be considered the epicenter of this creative atmosphere.

Nevertheless, in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution, artistic activities were halted and cultural institutions dismantled. Such initiatives were considered to be symbols of “westoxication” (*gharbzadehi*),²¹ a term coined by Heideggerian philosopher Ahmad Fardid in 1940 to mean the loss of Iranian cultural identity through the adoption or imitation of Western models of cultural production and consumption. Consequently, after the revolution, art making became a form of resistance, whereby reproducing the tropes of “westoxication” became a means by which to transgress the imposed social order. The subsequent Iran-Iraq war furthered the gap in art education, activity and institution between 1979 and 1990.²² In the absence of an artistic space or *faza-ye-honari*, generations of practicing missed the crucial upbringing of the studio space. As artist Morteza Darehbaghi is quoted saying “the urban environment does not teach you anything, only the studio. My generation missed this”.²³ While the lack of “faza-ye-honari” was detrimental to commercial and infrastructural artistic practices, it also allowed for the arts to bleed into the domestic sphere and the imagination: the artist population was forced to reconceptualize and revitalize the strict practice of “studio art” via new creative means. The home studio and home showrooms soon became the main spaces of artistic production and display. Central to this phenomenon was the active culture of art consumption as evidenced by increased gallery shows and openings. Under these circumstances, art was no longer a luxurious

²⁰ Talinn Grigor. “The Studio.” *Contemporary Iranian Art: From the Street to the Studio*. Reaktion, 2014. 94. Print.

²¹ Talinn Grigor. “The Studio.” *Contemporary Iranian Art: From the Street to the Studio*. Reaktion, 2014. 94. Print.

²² Talinn Grigor. “The Studio.” *Contemporary Iranian Art: From the Street to the Studio*. Reaktion, 2014. 118. Print.

²³ Talinn Grigor. “The Studio.” *Contemporary Iranian Art: From the Street to the Studio*. Reaktion, 2014. 118. Print.

business venture, but became a platform via which to access a like-minded community. These artists benefited from “a tabula rasa that nullified the Western canon of the arts”, a “year zero”, a new beginning.²⁴ By the 1980s, it could therefore be said that that this young artistic generation could “divorce themselves from the burden of (art) history” and the Western imposed paradigms of a conventional art community and market.²⁵ These artists instead worked outside the conventional spaces of art making via their home studios and salon style classes.

In August of 1997, during his inaugural speech, Khatami vowed to provide a “safe environment for the exchange of ideas... what I mean by freedom is the freedom to think and the security to express new thinking. I call on men and women of...culture and art...to help us with ... candid presentation of their demand and views”²⁶ Here, creative expression is rooted in Khatami’s conceptualization of freedom. Subsequently, Khatami placed culture and art at the core of Iranian politics: “Those were key to allegiance to revolutionary goals, to Imam Khomeini’s vision of modern Iran and to the endurance of the republic as such.”²⁷ Since this period, some three hundred private art galleries, state-run museums and cultural institutions have opened.²⁸ A total of ninety percent of these operations take place in Tehran, where the majority of artists were both born and trained. Historically, Tehran has always been the center of modernization, echoing the Pahlavi origins of art collection in Iran. Today, Iranian society can be

²⁴ Talinn Grigor. “The Studio.” *Contemporary Iranian Art: From the Street to the Studio*. Reaktion, 2014. 119. Print.

²⁵ Talinn Grigor. “The Studio.” *Contemporary Iranian Art: From the Street to the Studio*. Reaktion, 2014. 118. Print.

²⁶ Talinn Grigor. “The Studio.” *Contemporary Iranian Art: From the Street to the Studio*. Reaktion, 2014. 121. Print.

²⁷ Talinn Grigor. “The Studio.” *Contemporary Iranian Art: From the Street to the Studio*. Reaktion, 2014. 122. Print.

²⁸ Talinn Grigor. “The Studio.” *Contemporary Iranian Art: From the Street to the Studio*. Reaktion, 2014. 97. Print.

analyzed and understood through the pictorial discourse of the current artist generation. “To paint, to display, to view, to buy, or talk about art is to desire change.”²⁹

“Today’s boom in contemporary Iranian art testifies to the continuity of an Iranian artistic momentum that started decades before 1979. By consigning it to the closet, the republic endowed studio art with further ideological coloring, precisely because artistic expression was equated with the predicament of identity in the name of which the revolution had taken place.”³⁰

In Tehran today, there are eighty registered galleries, twenty of which are extremely active. Most of these spaces were established and run by women after Khatami’s election and were the catalysts for this artistic boom. Nazila Noebashari, owner of Aaran Gallery in Tehran said: “Women have leisure time to do this, especially since it does not require expertise. But don’t forget that ninety percent of NGOs and charities are set up and run by women. Women labor in difficult conditions to support artists and art activities through their galleries”.³¹ Weekly art openings leave galleries completely full and people are made aware of the gallery scene mainly on Facebook, via flyers circulated in galleries, in newsletters, online and most importantly, by word of mouth. The community of art consumers in Tehran is extremely narrow and, due to the lack of conventional storefront gallery spaces, those that frequent the gallery scene are involved on or curious about art and culture: artists, gallerists, curators, art historians and educators. Art is only available to those who care to see it; it’s lack of direct contact with the masses on the one hand and the negligible amount of state sponsorship on the other diminishes the scope of art consumption.

²⁹ Talinn Grigor. “The Studio.” *Contemporary Iranian Art: From the Street to the Studio*. Reaktion, 2014. 159. Print.

³⁰ Talinn Grigor. “The Studio.” *Contemporary Iranian Art: From the Street to the Studio*. Reaktion, 2014. 95. Print.

³¹ Talinn Grigor. “The Studio.” *Contemporary Iranian Art: From the Street to the Studio*. Reaktion, 2014. 139. Print.

The majority of galleries in Iran are, to the detriment of the emerging artist class, still highly dependent on the secondary art market and the sale of work by Iranian “masters”. As a result of this profit-oriented approach, galleries fail to promote their young artists and more importantly, spend time on their development. Furthermore, in order to mount an exhibition, an official letter and reproductions of the art works to be displayed must be presented and approved by the ministry of culture: “while artists do not practice self-censorship during the act of creation... they do bring in only those works that can be shown”.³² Consequently, many young artists that I spoke to desire not to have their works shown in the gallery setting, but rather, have solo or group shows in their personal ateliers or those of their contemporaries. The artists in question have developed a “salon des refuses” style of work: without state and institutional backing, they have carved out a new place of work for themselves that is increasingly anti establishment. These artists, however, are also not shielded from market pressures and their increased desire to sell their work on the international scale is a testament to their globally minded approach to art making. These market pressures perhaps override the social and political pressure of being an artist in Iran. Interestingly enough, this “push to sell” mentality is one that is dominated by the Western market. In this vain, Iranian artists have entered a larger trend in contemporary art and are no longer isolated or exceptions.

Ironically, Iran was one of the first countries to have art schools. Art education, since the Pahlavi era, had been widespread within the middle classes and today it is rare for a practicing artist not to have received an arts education. However, in the past decade, the increasing cost of private university has created a generation of middle to upper class artists and art students. In the post revolutionary period, art education became a static and dated module. The state appointed

³² Talinn Grigor. “The Studio.” *Contemporary Iranian Art: From the Street to the Studio*. Reaktion, 2014. 144. Print.

professors who were inexperienced while artists were exiled or barred from teaching in state institutions. It was in this climate that old renaissance atelier style art education became more widespread. Artists enrolled in large art institutions to obtain a diploma, but did most of their learning within the studios and ateliers of Iranian masters who had been unauthorized to teach. This legacy is extremely evident today: most practicing artists in Tehran hold a bachelor of fine arts but owe their development to working closely with Iranian masters such as Moshiri or Rokni.

After the revolution, the Iranian aesthetic changed; although the underlying classic style (miniatures, calligraphy) remains very widely used, the art adopted political undertones. The tendency towards propaganda has faded with this new generation of artists, and the resulting work is increasingly genuine. Tehran's art world today is filled with individuals that bare a sensitivity that allows them to create; no longer are their state controlled cultural producers. Their talent drives from the fact that they are motivated to succeed and this pressure forces their hand.

Artists, whether they believe it or not, are representatives of their society. In the Iranian context, the metaphors that artists have used to address their societal concerns, imbues them with a historically contingent creativity. These artists understand that it is their duty to create and are willing to accept the risk associated with not being subservient creators: "The black-and-white nature of the presence of control has colored the closed with a multilayered, grey mode of operation".³³ Contrary to belief, the compressor that is the Islamic Republic of Iran forces artists to depict exactly what ought to be concealed.

³³ Talinn Grigor. "The Studio." *Contemporary Iranian Art: From the Street to the Studio*. Reaktion, 2014. 144. Print.

Interview with Amir Ali Ghassemi, Artist & New Media Archivist

“No one cares unless people are in trouble” is the way in which Amir Ali Ghassemi, a photographer and new media archivist described Western perceptions of art in the Middle East. “Since the general public does not know what is going on in Iran, they look at everything that is happening on the ground in terms of censorship. There is no regular flow of information in the Tehran art scene, because international mass media only makes headlines when people are in trouble, when there is hype”.

While I sat in Amir Ali’s office in his home and drank my refreshing glass of ice mint tea, I realized that I agreed with him completely. My time at Brown had been spent exploring the intersection of word and image and the often dehumanizing nature of western media and politics. “The shows that have happened about Iranian art have been conducted with a particular tendency. They start with a pre-imagined idea of what Iranian art should look like and formulate their shows around this preconceived notion.” Amir Ali experienced this first-hand with his popular photography series Tehran Remixed (Image 1). In these works, he aimed to communicate what the private sphere of Iranian life looked like, how people dressed, how people entertained guests. The demand for this series was high, but he was often forced to refuse having them displayed because of the context that the exhibitor wanted to place onto it. He wanted to avoid that his photographs participate in the Western project of erasure and manipulation.

In his societal context, Amir Ali does not believe that self-censorship is relevant either. “When you are aware of the context then you become an editor. In the creative arts, you can do whatever you want but you have to come up with strategies to transmit your message without disturbing tradition. Keep in mind that Iranian society has never been a direct society; even Persian traditional texts were built on undertones and innuendos. Censorship is an imported

*idea.” Amir Ali doubts the ability of cultural producers to truly advance society since they constitute an “elitist bubble of artists”. His medium of choice, the Internet, allows him to incite more pervasive change, and engage different classes of the population. “It is important to participate, and not lock yourself in your studio, but also not be a consumer and simply agree with what is being fed to you by the status quo.” Amir Ali thus defines himself as a citizen designer, using his elite position and talent as an artists to create with purpose.*³⁴

According to gallery owner Nazila Noebashari of Aaran Gallery, Iranian artists of twenty five to forty years of age are the “golden generation” because they have grown up and made work under the “compressor that is the Islamic Republic. Although censorship sparks creativity, it can also run down your spirit”, Noebashari admits.³⁵ Middle Eastern art has always been labeled as political, but it is important to note that the air that is breathed in many of these countries is political; life cannot simply be detached from politics. This overlap therefore finds itself most evidently in the pictorial and verbal discourse of the most daring and insubordinate. Nazila Noebashari also warns that there is a fine line to be drawn between political art and art that simply “puts the plight of society on a canvas and calls it art”.³⁶ For example, she explained that in today’s neo-orientalist world, the image of a woman in a black chador as a functioning and active member of society is still unbelievable to most. “Chador art”, or the artistic equivalent of social commentary on women’s veiling is extremely overdone, for example. Nevertheless, artists are moving away from this image and seeking to explore new metaphors and ways of meaning.

³⁴ Ghassemi, A. (2014, August 20). Personal Interview.

³⁵ Noebashari, N. (2014, August 26). Personal Interview.

³⁶ Noebashari, N. (2014, August 26). Personal Interview.

Interview with Behzad Khosravi, Professor

“Little by little you have to carve out a space for yourself to do your work, and little by little it will form a resistance that will go into the head of the people.”

Behzad Khosravi is a professor both at Azad University in Tehran and a visiting professor in Stockholm. He holds private salon style discussion based classes at Aria, a local gallery that I had the privilege of attending. His work aims to explore the role of presentation and representation in cultural and artistic production. Within Azad University, Behzad considers himself a “black horse” because he has learnt all too well how to manipulate the system, and teach without having to censor himself. Often, he alters his course titles or does not submit his syllabus to the education ministry. “But sometimes, there might be a specific course that they ask you to teach. And because you can’t change the name of the course or the subject matter, you must pride yourself on changing the way that that same knowledge is actually produced.” When teaching, Behzad does not self-censor, but “it can be argued that if the wrong person is in your class and you say the wrong thing, they will report you. After all, society has been built on informing others.”

*Behzad does not believe that it is a privilege to be a teacher, and aims to break the binary of the student-professor relationship. He invited me on a Wednesday afternoon to attend one of his discussion-based classes. In a cool, underground classroom space at Aria gallery, eager students in their twenties organized their chairs in a semi-circle, ready to discuss the day’s reading: Rancière’s *The Emancipated Spectator*. Each page of the text was read aloud, and then discussed. The majority of the students were young and outspoken women, having no problem challenging the word of their professors. The discussion was not shy of the caliber of discussion that I have engaged in in my time at Brown, and quickly, my Farsi vocabulary was undermined.*

The degree to which these students were eager to learn was inspiring. I realized immediately that it was an insult to consider Iranian youth as victims of the system. Instead, they are curious and heroically defy the limitations that have been imposed on them. "You must always go under the current but keep doing what you are doing by simply not being the loudest." This is exactly what the students in that seminar did by carving out a space for them to engage and gain the access that they were otherwise lacking without overtly disrupting the system: "if I can't come through the door, I will come in through the window."

"When people fail here, they fail forever, it is very difficult to get back up." And Behzad's students understand this concept full well. The greatest detriment to education is the closed society that Iran has become. The gap is not just in education, but also in Erasmus-the fact that they can't go from one university to the other, study abroad, participate in an exchange program, or be a visiting professor. Exchange creates dialogues that are crucial to education and unfortunately, it is lacking for Iranian youth. Their passport is their main source of confinement.³⁷

The biggest obstacle facing the current generation of Iranian artists is that they are suffering from a closed society. This gap does not manifest itself exclusively in education or in the form of censorship, but rather, with regards to exchange and world experience. Art students are largely unable to experience scholarly exchanges between universities, let alone travel to many places around the world. Professor Behzad Khosravi notes "this experience is so crucial for education and art in general-to see another society, live there, engage in new cultural dialogues. The opening of borders is imperative, there is a lack of collaboration, and

³⁷ Khosravi, B. (2014, August 20). Personal Interview

participation not only in the realm of art, but in Iranian society as a whole.”³⁸ Artist and curator Amir Ali Ghassemi adds that because of the introverted nature of Iranian art and society “artists are not always cooperative. Instead of trying to widen the scope they push each other out. People don’t want to network, they think this is business territory and fear that their domain will be threatened”³⁹

“If for years artists and gallery owners had painted and exhibited as a form of resistance, now it was time to resist in order to protect the right to paint and to display”⁴⁰

Case Study: Aaran Gallery, Tehran. Interview with owner Nazila Noebashari

“Voojodeh man kareh to ast” (My existence is your denial)-Chamloo

“It’s a badge of honor to be in trouble”, Nazila told me when I asked about being a gallerist in Iran. Nazila Noebashari, owner of Aaran gallery, occupies an unconventional two-story space in downtown Tehran⁴¹ Her gallery is not a storefront space, but is situated on the ground floor of a walk- up in a small side street. The first floor, where I conducted my interview with her, has a variety of pieces on display and others stacked in a corner (Image 2) These works are what she describes as inventory; pieces yet to be sold to collectors. The bottom floor is where the exhibitions take place, a vast room that leads out into a patio area (Image 3). At that moment and installation was taking place: projectors and suspended screens for a video show that was opening that Friday were being mounted.

³⁸ Khosravi, B. (2014, August 20). Personal Interview

³⁹ Khosravi, B. (2014, August 20). Personal Interview

⁴⁰ Talinn Grigor. “Introduction.” *Contemporary Iranian Art: From the Street to the Studio*. Reaktion, 2014. 11. Print.

⁴¹ Noebashari, N. (2014, August 26). Personal Interview.

Nazila, clad in a long caftan, with her headscarf casually draped over her head, is a strong female presence that demands respect. Her raspy voice from years of cigarette abuse is both calming and commanding and one is instantly drawn to her as I was. Immediately, I understood that the foundational principle of her gallery was love and admiration. She has built Aaran Gallery with a group of like-minded people doing serious work that demands attention and garners international support. All of her artists discuss the tensions that are present in their society, and have the ability to shake your ground, make you uncomfortable and yet, keep you interested.

“Galleries are not what they are in the West. Here they are havens, where people feel free and have the security of being around people who are like them.”⁴² Galleries have become the unconventional meeting hubs for curators, artists, critics, historians and musicians, the “outcasts” by Islamic Republic standards. In fact, the umbrella category of visual arts has a sacred position in Iranian society. It is the most independent medium from the state, and in this atmosphere, it has gained its own hard-earned independence. It is for this reason that the government is so threatened by the power of the visual arts; they would prefer to see people who are tame and adhering to the cultural and material tradition of Iranian craftsmanship and Modernist painting.

Every few months, one of Nazila’s shows is shut down and she has to present herself to the cultural ministry or “Herasat”. Usually, galleries are accused of “siah namayi”, or showing the dark side of society. Really, Nazila told me, there are no specific rules. If they don’t like you then they have the power to get you into trouble. “One time I got called into the ministry at the height of the Green Movement. They shut down my show, took me in to criticize and insult me for

⁴² Noebashari, N. (2014, August 26). Personal Interview.

*forty minutes straight. After a while I started to bark back: 'You want us to hide everything under the carpet. It's impossible because eventually everything will be exposed. Why do you take kids to school at age five, teach them to be critical of the west, and by age twenty, you are trying to arrest them for being critical of their own streets'. After two hours, I told them to stop making threats, to just shut down my gallery and let me go make millions selling works by old Iranian masters. I reminded them, however, that instead, they should issue me a permit for the work I am doing now, because at the end of the day, on opening night, I bring to my gallery 400+ young people who are at least not out doing drugs.'*⁴³

Nazila, like so many others in Iran, knows that by getting into trouble, she has done something right. Despite the threat to herself and her family, she believes in what she is doing: "when people do not pay the cost for what they believe in, that's when there is a problem." Aaran gallery attempts, in this way, to push boundaries until Iranian art production can reach an understanding with the regime that it is not out to destroy them. *"I am not going to show wallpaper now that there is more hope."*

Nazila Noebashari specializes in emerging Iranian artists. With fourteen to sixteen shows a year, and an international network, Nazila measure her success on artist development rather than on sales. Aaran's main customers are situated outside of Iran, mostly comprised of Iranian diaspora communities living in the United States. American museums, including LACMA have also been collecting contemporary Iranian art, mainly photographs, from the artists that she represents. Nazila believes that video art and photography are the strongest mediums of Iranian art today. With a client list that surpasses four hundred people and a mailing list of three

⁴³ Noebashari, N. (2014, August 26). Personal Interview.

thousand individuals, Aaran Gallery is widely advertised via its catalogues and newsletters. Still however, postings on Facebook and other social media generate the largest pull to the gallery.

The basement level of the gallery serves as the main exhibition space. The top floor serves as Nazila's office and greeting area. Works that are not sold in exhibitions are brought to the upper floor to be stored until sold to future clients. Clients are usually informed via emails or show catalogues as to what pieces are available, with key pieces usually on reserve for the special clients whose collections she has helped build. The recent presence of Aaran Gallery at international art fairs has greatly expanded the gallery's network of collectors: "good collectors of today are the ones who explore and ask questions, who arrange to visit different countries", she says. Often, Nazila meets new collectors on her travels that she then brings to Tehran and "converts" to patrons of Iranian art. Yet, despite this breadth of clientele, most of Nazila's artists are not able to live off of their work. The sales are only enough to keep them afloat and to allow them to purchase materials to create art. Consequently, much of the young talent that Aaran gallery represents uses their artistic skills for more vocational daily work such as illustration, videography and non-art photography.

When asked what the common thread of influence was in the works of her artists, Nazila answered, "tension". These works have the uncanny ability to shake your ground and skew your perceptions of normalcy, no matter how simple or minimalist. This tension (political, social, cultural) is what she actively looks for when seeking out new talent. Today, Iranian artists have graduated from the influence of the great Iranian modernists and are instead producing work with a purpose and interrogative quality. Although they often incorporate the traditions of art making in Iran, they have reviewed and revived these techniques to fit the new social and political order. "For me, it is about critical art and from there, everything else takes off. Things that don't have

critiques in them are not interesting. This is the first and foremost ideology of my gallery; we don't show wallpaper.”⁴⁴ Nazila believes that the content and concept of a work is more important than the execution or quality of craftsmanship. Now with greater access to the art market, Iranian artists have the opportunity to produce progressive art that will be accepted by audiences outside the country.

Artists, art school graduates, are actively pursuing show opportunities. When her gallery first opened, Nazila selected some artists to work with. Now, artists bring in reproductions and images of their work to her gallery in the hopes of having a shot. Noebashari sees her art gallery as a means by which to keep Iranian art practice alive. She not only can provide a space for more artists to gain exposure, but “in numbers you gain security, gradually you create a network and a profession that cannot be pushed down by the authorities”. She expressed that it is hard for people outside of Iran to understand that sometimes, after the opening of a show, half the works have to be immediately hidden in order for the gallery to avoid confrontation with the morality police. “It is a tango dance, you push wherever you can, and otherwise you are slithering, scrambling, all while trying to defy the status quo. We have to push the boundaries until we can reach a certain understanding with the system that we are not here to destroy them.”⁴⁵ In Tehran, galleries are not simply businesses but have become havens where citizens and artists alike feel free knowing that they have security in the company of likeminded people. Galleries cannot simply function as for-profit institutions inside Iran, given the societal constraints under which they operate.

“At the height of the Green Movement, I showed an installation by Siamak Filizadeh which featured a pool of fake blood in the gallery's patio. At that point in time, pools of blood

⁴⁴ Noebashari, N. (2014, August 26). Personal Interview.

⁴⁵ Noebashari, N. (2014, August 26). Personal Interview.

were a reality in the streets of Tehran as people were protesting the rigged election. People therefore flooded to see this show because they knew that it would be quickly shut down-they needed to see it, to take inspiration from it and to be encouraged to keep fighting in the streets. Even though the Government asked me to empty the pool, I couldn't. It was my responsibility to show what the state sponsored institutions of Tehran would not.”⁴⁶

The medium of visual arts is the only independent media from the state. Film, for example, is still very much under the discretion of the state through their control of production and funds. In this atmosphere, the visual arts has gained its own independence, because artists have gone through hardship and fought for their right to creative expression. In the ten-year period after the Islamic revolution, art shows were limited and propaganda rampant. Artists had to learn to be independent of the state. The Iranian government, Nazila assures, does not always want to shut down galleries and therefore asks that before every show, all the featured pieces be sent to the ministry for approval. “I cheat”, Nazila, said, “I never send everything, especially if the material is sensitive.”⁴⁷

In the past decade, the contemporary art scene in Iran has gained more visibility. When Aaran Gallery first opened, it experienced a lot of criticism for mixing different media of an artist in one given show: “although I was criticized for it, I believe that this is how you get into the brain of the artist, it is what is most interesting, it is how you understand their complete body of work.”⁴⁸ Most other galleries in Tehran are not pushing the contemporary art scene as aggressively as Aaran gallery. Most Iranian art institutions are still ingrained in a dated and exclusionary appreciation of painting as the highest art form. “When you don't have enough

⁴⁶ Noebashari, N. (2014, August 26). Personal Interview.

⁴⁷ Noebashari, N. (2014, August 26). Personal Interview.

⁴⁸ Noebashari, N. (2014, August 26). Personal Interview.

institutions to support non-commercial art, then there is the danger that galleries will be looking for easy things to sell. The ratio of galleries that are market-oriented to the number of galleries in total is alarming: they are primarily financial institutions so the ‘new art’ they claim they are pushing is really just commercial art.”

In this regard, the biggest gap within the Tehran collector and art consumer base is in visual education. There is a very small percentage of people who have the art historical education to understand and digest the “new art” that is being created inside Iran. The visitors to Aaran gallery are there because they are happy to see new things. In return, Aaran has a responsibility to this audience, to educate them and challenge their eye. “I am not interested in whether this audience buys the work or not”, says Noebashari, “I just want to educate the eye.” Tehran, where the bulk of what is exhibited is commercial, has prevented the art audience from maturing. Collectors abroad, on the other hand, because of their greater access to the art market and institutions, have become more comfortable with non-conventional forms of artistic production. Instead, the nouveau riche class of Iranian society, and the country’s primary art collector base, would never buy works displayed in Aaran gallery for they have not been trained to recognize such works as “art”.⁴⁹

Case Study: Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (TMOCA)

In the Pahlavi Era, Empress Farah succeeded at “amassing the region’s richest collection at TMOCA and in creating an active, albeit small and controlled artistic milieu... determination and generous patronage were sustained by the highly centralized political structure that was in

⁴⁹ Noebashari, N.(2014, August 26). Personal Interview.

place”.⁵⁰ As the most extensive collections of late nineteenth century and twentieth century art outside the Western world, the collection was assembled during the oil boom of the 1970s, at the height of the regime’s economic might. Today, the collection has been valued at 2.5 billion dollars, and features approximately four thousand pieces.⁵¹

Ali Reza Sami Azar, the former director of the museum claims: “you never find great antiquities, objects and artworks from Western Civilizations in Eastern countries’ museum. There is only exception to this, and one only: this collection. You can’t find any collection of this comprehension outside the Western World. It’s one of the most important cultural assets of this country.”⁵² The collection features works by Warhol, Braques, Degas, Man Ray, De Kooning, Matisse, Renoir, Dali, Giacometti, Rothko and Calder to name a few. Most importantly, the collection is also home to Jackson Pollock’s *Indian Red Ground* from 1950, considered the most important Pollock outside of the United States. Although the collection had been catalogued, its lack of display has been a great source of controversy both inside and outside Iran. David Galloway, the first curator of TMOCA under the Pahlavi era, holds the Iranian Revolution accountable for the collection’s current mystery status: “the revolution neared, there were signs that the collection was increasingly seen as a symbol of the West’s support for the Shah... and the museum staff elected to sent the work to the basement with the purpose of protecting it”.⁵³

The need to protect the collection, rather than risk displaying it, is perhaps the most misunderstood aspect of this collection. Galloway notes that Iranian appreciation for art is

⁵⁰ Talinn Grigor. “The Studio.” *Contemporary Iranian Art: From the Street to the Studio*. Reaktion, 2014. 128. Print.

⁵¹ Robert Tait. "The Art No One Sees: A Basement That Symbolizes Cultural Isolation." *The Guardian* 28 Oct, 2007.Web.

⁵² Robert Tait. "The Art No One Sees: A Basement That Symbolizes Cultural Isolation." *The Guardian* 28 Oct, 2007.Web.

⁵³ Robert Tait. "The Art No One Sees: A Basement That Symbolizes Cultural Isolation." *The Guardian* 28 Oct, 2007.Web.

inherent in the culture, and that this collection is considered by most to be a jewel of the nation: “It may be hard for some people outside to know how deeply felt this was, how extraordinarily rich visually this culture was, and what a deep love it had for art in all its forms. The love for beauty, for artistic expressions, ornamentations, design, color”⁵⁴. Francis Bacon’s Triptych *Two Figures Lying in Bed with Attendant* for example, is one of the pieces that has been deemed unfit for showing by the government, due to its “supported homosexual overtones”. In light of this, the museum staff has no choice but to hide the work in storage, in order not to risk its destruction by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance.

Under the Ahmadinejad era, access to the collection became increasingly difficult. Even art students were hardly granted permission to view the collection as part of their curriculum. The government has adamantly stated that due to its political incorrectness, the collection cannot be displayed. It is not then, that Iran is not appreciative of its collection but rather, that it is protecting the works from forces beyond its control. The current director of the museum has said: “I am somewhat offended that you seem to think our paintings are like some big nuclear secret. They are not secret at all”.⁵⁵

The museum institution greatly suffered during Ahmadinejad’s two terms as president. The great mismanagement of funds have brought the museum to a standstill, with no purchasing budget, let alone enough money to keep basic museum salaries and uphold basic facilities needs. The museum is also lacking a larger and more advanced storage facility and needs severe restructuring before it is capable of receiving donations and acquisitions. Since 2007, plans to

⁵⁴ Robert Tait. "The Art No One Sees: A Basement That Symbolizes Cultural Isolation." *The Guardian* 28 Oct, 2007.Web.

⁵⁵ Robert Tait. "The Art No One Sees: A Basement That Symbolizes Cultural Isolation." *The Guardian* 28 Oct, 2007.Web.

build a national gallery to permanently display the modern art collection have been on hold, with still no funding in sight.

During my visit to Iran, TMOCA had the printmaking works of their Modern art collection on display. This was, I was told, the fourth or fifth time that these works had been shown in the museum. I walked in to a large hall with a central spiral staircase, above which hangs a massive Calder mobile (Image 4), the only one to have been completely hand painted by the artist himself. “These are the things that no one outside Iran would believe”, I thought to myself. As I was escorted down to the “gangineyeh kharedji” (storage facilities), the two mandatory portraits of Khomeini and Khamenei hung in the entrance. The two caretakers proceeded to show me all the rolling racks of works belonging to the rest of the Modern Art collection. Later, I was taken outside to see the famous TMOCA sculpture Garden, featuring the two tallest Giacometti statues, a Henry Moore (Image 5), a Magritte and a Calder. It was in this moment that the lack of funding and public support for the museum was evident. Many of the sculptures had been eroded because of Tehran’s dry climate and pollution. The Calder had a massive crack on the side and the Magritte had been completely damaged in attempts to upkeep its bronze color. As I walked around, I could not help but feel both sad and enthralled: “If only people knew about this, they would never believe Iran has these works”.

Case Study: Ali Bakhtiari, Independent Curator

“Sensitivity is the key to art production, it is not something that is taught in school.” Ali Bakhtiari is an independent curator and collector with many connections in the Tehran art world. He took me under his wing for a full day of Tehran art visits during which he described art as having the power to transform ones living space and the quality of ones life. Bakhtiari

describes Iranian art today as being genuine since the generation of propaganda artists in Iran is slowly fading away. The talent behind the emerging Iranian artists of today derives from their impulse to create despite the societal pressures. These artists, whether they like it or not, are representatives of their society, and it is this subconscious responsibility that sparks their creativity. The contemporary art scene in Iran can be best described as following a “Salon des Refusés” model, whereby artists who are not accepted by the institutions and the government are carving out independent spaces of production.

Traveling curators and collectors such as Ali become the important liaisons of the Iranian art scene to the outside world. His career choice was a product of the obsessive pursuit of his sensibility to the arts. Ali is a self-taught curator and is constantly training his by adjusting his personal collection. This collection collection is demonstrative of his curatorial affinities: works of different media and epochs, strategically organized to enter into conversation with one another (Image 6). The work of Iranian masters such as Tanavoli, coupled with emerging artists, allow his apartment to display the vast history of Iranian art production. “Imagine that one day you wake up and art doesn’t matter anymore. You have had to buy something that you love and can live with, that you want to wake up to, that gives you a heart beat. The investment is not the most important part. That is what Iranian consumers have yet to understand.” Indeed, ever since he bought his first artwork in 2005, Ali has actively sought to use his collection to transform his living space and quality of life.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Bakhtiari, A. (2014, August 27). Personal Interview

CHAPTER II: Artistic Practice Inside Iran

Case Study: Mariam Amini, Artist

“I taught myself to unlearn in school,” said Mariam Amini, a young and spunky artist in her mid twenties. I went to visit her in her apartment and studio on the top floor of a walk up in the bustling Tajrish area of Tehran. She was petite, with tamed curly hair and lightly lined eyes, and was more than eager to tell me anything I wanted to know about her. As I walked into her living room to sit down to interview her, the traces of “artist in residence” were on display. Drips and splatter of pink and white paint accented her hard wood floors and white walls, while a stack of large finished canvases found their home in a corner of the rooms (Image 7). These traces of creation were fascinating to me, and as she caught me staring at them she said: “I see that you have found my work space.”

Mariam Amini’s parents did not want her to be an artist. For them, art was a hobby, a pastime for lazy people rather than a craft or a profession. It was only in the last five years, when names such as Shirin Neshat were gaining international recognition, that her parents finally understood that art could be an actual business. “I taught myself to unlearn in school, I discovered new artists on my own and read about them. But I continued in the university system so that I would have a diploma to show my parents that I was doing well. I would recruit nude models myself and draw them in private or secretly show my own work to other professors who were more supportive of me as an independent artist.”

When I asked her to discuss the concept of censorship, she disregarded the idea that limitations are irreversible: “Limitations are around me, but instead of letting them bother me, I used them to set fire to my emotions and ignite my paintbrush.” Limitations, in her mind, allow her to build and grow, presenting her with a challenge that only serves to make her work better.

What I found commendable in Mariam's philosophy was how devoted she was to staying in Iran, and to not escape the circumstances that some might argue, hinders the creative process. She turned down a chance to study in Canada: "I chose to stay in Tehran because I wanted my work to be real." She described Tehran and Iranian society as a base, but her fundamental influence is herself. "I cut myself off from the society and work from myself, devoted to represented by emotions in a particular circumstance." In this regard, Mariam is uninterested in being seen as an Iranian artist, and very rarely uses explicitly Iranian motifs or subject matter in her works. "I don't care to be an Iranian artist. Iranian artists usually work in what is fashionable, but I work with something that interests me in a particular moment."

She is unable and unwilling to distinguish between her apartment and her studio, because to her, art and life cannot be separated. "I am looking for a mess that will bring peace, for light in the darkness. This anxiety is even translated in the way I live. In my apartment, I like to live in fear. My front door is always open and I enjoy the anxiety that at any moment, someone can come spilling into my house. You have to live naked, because no matter where you hide, something will find its way back to you. It is a product of this land of paradox that I live in, just like the fact that my apartment feels safe, and yet my front door is open to danger." This tension is evident in her work: as she pulled out different canvases for me to look at, the imagery of truncated heads, limbs and broken parts was evident. "I was hit by a car once. I broke many limbs and was in a coma for some time. That must be where this comes from; I like to work with things that are broken, in pieces." Often small icons appear in the corners of her works. I found myself fixated on the recurring image of a bicycle. She explains those icons as being things she always wanted but never could have; and after her accident, riding a bike became a distant memory.

Mimi also greatly emphasized that she has to work quickly: “Immediately, when something enters my brain, I have to get it onto the canvas before I overthink it, before I change my mind, so that it stays pure.” Magic marker has become an important medium for her: it does not require drying time and facilitates her improvisational style of working. “People say: but you’re a painter, you need to work with paint. What they do not understand is that I am foremost an artist, I can work with anything.”

Amini’s confidence in her ideas and art practice is one that must be revered. In the face of shallow Iranian art consumers, she refuses to make her ideas smaller so that more people understand them: “My work is beyond that.” She is uninterested in only selling her art and is weary of those who are looking for a piece to decorate their apartment with. “I am never in a rush to sell, I just want my work to go in a place where it belongs.”⁵⁷

“Mariam Amini keeps a very intimate journal on large paper and canvas in her own personal codification and that is the reason her work has so much white empty space, because they are sketchy notes and not complete sentences. Women, when they are being intimately honest, in this time and space in Iran, have to express themselves in notes and codes, and sometimes the notes begin to form full angry sentences; otherwise, the empty space gives an exterior sense of calm and control. So, it’s all about inventing a language to scream in while whispering.”⁵⁸

At age fourteen, Mariam or Mimi as she is often referred to, decided that she wanted to be an artist. Her parents, although supportive of her talent, were skeptical to allow her to pursue it as a profession. Without their knowledge, Mimi applied to the Fine Arts Academy of Isfahan, a southern city of Iran where she is originally from. There, she studied the discipline of Persian miniatures and was increasingly bored with the practice: “I was just copying old works”, she

⁵⁷ Amini, M. (2014, August 29). Personal Interview

⁵⁸ Aaran Gallery Website

said. In order to reach her goal of attending the School of Fine Arts in Tehran, Mimi trained herself to become a better artist. At the School of Fine Arts in Tehran, students were required to take foundation and theory courses for their first year. After the foundational year, students must take entrance exams to be placed within different artistic mediums; Mimi chose painting.

The art academy in Iran has always been extremely old fashioned and theoretical. Unless students sought out new avenues by which to pursue an art education, school was extremely limiting. “I taught myself to unlearn in school. I discovered new artists, the ones they didn’t teach in school, and learned about them and their practice.”⁵⁹ Amini was forced to continue this four-year program for the sake of receiving a degree and proving to her parents that she was accomplished. Iranian programs in painting are one dimensional, pushing students towards abstract expressionism instead of developing their personal talent and artistic aesthetic. “In art history classes, it was as if contemporary art did not exist. We studied up until the modernist movements and stayed there. I found out for myself that when I was producing in 2005, I was working in a post modern era.”⁶⁰ Western art, she claimed, stopped for them at masters such as Picasso and Hockney and Iranian art history did not surpass the early modernists. “Freedom is what we were missing”, Mimi says. Artists who were skilled and wanted to show work that deviated from this conservative model would be sent to *herasat* (ministry of culture). “I myself worked with nude models, but I would show my work in hiding only to professors that were supportive.” The teaching staff at the university was composed predominantly of government appointed painters. As a result, they taught a government-endorsed curriculum that sought to connect artistic practice to religious edification.

⁵⁹ Amini, M. (2014, August 29). Personal Interview

⁶⁰ Amini, M. (2014, August 29). Personal Interview

Iranian society has not always been supportive of an individual's decision to become an artist. In the last five years, with the emergence of prominent Iranian artists on the international scene such as Shirin Neshat, people in Iran have finally come to understand art as a business, and therefore, as a profession. "People, including my parents, used to see art as a hobby, a pastime for the lazy, and not as a craft, job or state of being." As a result of this enlightenment, the new generation of Iranian artists is exposed to so much more: "I pursued the thing that interested me first and foremost. That was to be an artist. Today, many people produce very little work and have one solo show a year. They just want to be names and call themselves artists, while not devoting all of their time and energy to the craft."⁶¹

Mariam has always worked with limitations, but she credits these same obstacles with contributing to her growth as an artist. In her work, Mariam likes to create a mess that will bring inner peace: "in the darkness, I am looking for light". She puts concepts of *ravan* (the heart and soul) and *ehsan* (goodness) together in order to make this paradox possible. Mariam's work attempts to be an artistic representation of the place of women in Iranian society: "The position of women in Iran is going to [hell]. I am trying to show that women should not be expected to be an element of consumption."⁶² Mariam considers such a circumstance to be a "darkness" from which she has to emerge. Instead of letting herself be brought down by this danger, she chooses to demonstrate the strength it takes for one to overcome circumstance. In this way, by choosing to remain living in Tehran, Mariam creates work that she believes is "real" and contingent on her circumstances. All of Mariam's work is improvisation: the minute an idea enters her brain, she needs to transcribe it onto the canvas before she has a chance to overthink, change the idea, and risk losing the purity of the thought "sometimes I see the form in my head and then I head to the

⁶¹ Amini, M. (2014, August 29). Personal Interview

⁶² Amini, M. (2014, August 29). Personal Interview

canvas to draw it. My canvases might not get done in one day, but I add as I go along, making sure I am always creating in the moment.”⁶³

The fragmentation also present in Amini’s work results from the trauma of being hit by a car and breaking most of her limbs: “I like to work with things are that cut up, broken because I was in a major accident once, broke many of my limbs and ended up in a coma. Maybe that’s where the impulse comes from. The presence of seemingly random symbols and images also alludes to this life experience. When I asked her about them she said, “sometimes I depict things I always wanted but couldn’t have. The bicycle-I used to always love to ride bikes, and then, after my accident, after I had surgery on my legs, I couldn’t do that anymore. I depict that sense of loss.”⁶⁴

Mariam stressed that she finds inspiration for her work from within, rather than being influenced by her socio-political context. Tehran might be her base, but her art is an extension of the feelings and emotions that this base generates. “I don’t really care to be an Iranian artist. In Iran, people say my work is “western” in appearance, and abroad, they ask why I am not painting “Iranian” subjects.” Iranian artists have been plagued with working in the medium or aesthetic that is fashionable in a moment in time. Mariam, however, is different in this regard for she only pursues subject matter and media that interest her. “I don’t restrict myself to artist circles. At first, when we were starting out, we had to pave the way together. Now, I am more isolated. If I don’t work that way, I might become a different artist.”

^ In her last term at university, Mariam was part of a group of students that exhibited their work together. They took their work to a gallery by the name of Elaheh, because it was the only institution at the time that supported and exhibited young people. During one of her exhibitions,

⁶³ Amini, M. (2014, August 29). Personal Interview

⁶⁴ Amini, M. (2014, August 29). Personal Interview

Fereydoun Ave (early modernist artist) bought all of her works. This was a turning point for her career-she became his artist and from there, other patrons discovered her work. Fereydoon Ave had a very informal gallery space, in which he let Mimi display even her nudes. “He was brave, he recognized that I did good work and let me show it.” After her tenure at that Ave’s gallery, Mariam began working with Aaran for its reputation and exposure to Western patrons. “The first thing that was important to me was to work with a gallery that had global connections. I knew that my work would not sell or do well in Iran and Nazila was my outlet.” Audience is extremely important to Mimi and she tries to show her work in places around the world where she believes it will best be understood. “I am focusing on audience more now, no matter who they are. I want them to have *tahamol* (tolerance) and understand the concepts that my art addresses for themselves, rather than trying to decode my message. I am happiest when my audience, in some way, sees themselves in the work.”⁶⁵

Mariam Amini laments that Iranian society is stuck on the idea that art should be framed and hung on a conventional white wall. Iranian audiences don’t understand conceptual art, and there are not very many galleries that promote this “new art”, it is simply not accepted. In one of her installations, Amini printed a page of her artist book on a large curtain, for people to go through it and interact with; “people in Iran would have preferred to have that same page in a frame to hang on their wall. The Iranian consumer is shallow; they are only concerned with where to hang their pieces. I am not going to make my ideas smaller in the hopes that more people will understand it. My work is beyond that. I am never in a rush to sell, I just want my work to go in a place where it belongs.”⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Amini, M. (2014, August 29). Personal Interview

⁶⁶ Amini, M. (2014, August 29). Personal Interview

Case Study: Behrang Samadzadeghan, Artist

“Just like when you are looking at a landscape, you won’t see the creatures that are resting in the shadows, only those that are in the light. Image is the same, it only shows you the visible, but are you capable of convincing your audience of the shadow parts?”⁶⁷

Behrang Samadzadeghan met me in his apartment on a Wednesday afternoon. I walked in to find a triptych laid out on the floor of his living room. He proceeded to explain to me that it was a piece that he was currently working on, too large to prop up on his studio worktable. He asked me whether or not I recognized the two figures he has drawn from the back. It was, quite visibly, the Shah and Farah speaking to an eager group of reporters before leaving Iran for good. Immediately, I had to ask if he didn’t run the risk of being in trouble with the authorities for depicting the Shah. He simply replied that their backs were turned, and therefore, he could argue that the two figures could be anyone.

His work is interested in depicting what is lost when history is re-written. He aims to bring the privilege of writing Iranian history back to the Iranian people. Most important to him in his work is questioning who is allowed to speak of the images of Iranian society. He then takes it upon himself to insert the untold or deliberately omitted narratives.

In the two hours that I spent in Behrang’s company, we discussed the privilege that comes with writing history as well as the image that the West has constructed around the Iranian identity. Often, we found ourselves laughing at the comments of one another, mainly because our thoughts were incredibly similar. In that moment it truly felt as if we both found the like-minded people that we had been lacking in our respective societies. For him, a young Iranian living abroad, yet taking the time to pose such questions was unusual and amusing. I, on the other

⁶⁷ Samadzadeghan, B. (2014, August 26). Personal Interview

hand, finally found someone who understood my passion and my academic interests, who knew what I was talking about without needing me to explain. We clicked. Most demonstrative of this was Behrang's discussion of his Tin Tin inspired series of work (Image 8). "When I was growing up, Tin Tin used to be my hero. But, as I got older and reread them, I realized that Tin Tin was actually a privileged blonde European, a 'civilized' person who went to 'barbaric' lands and miraculously solved their most pressing problems."⁶⁸ Consequently, Behrang inserted Tin Tin into his numerous paintings on the subject of Iranian history as a metaphor for this Western perspective that he then refutes through his art.

Behrang was a student of the Iranian art education system and is now a professor at the Tehran University of Art but also teaches private classes at Aria Gallery. As a student, he referred to himself and his peers as the "anarchist" generation, setting out to restructure and rebel against the module of Iranian art education. "I attended university because I thought it would be a post modern structure. Instead, I discovered that it was a modern dictatorship that was forcing me to work as an abstract expressionist."⁶⁹ This experience forced him to work and learn independently. Reading became crucial to his self-education because university professors did not want their students to read or ask questions. Education was always about being obedient and slave to existing structures. In studio practice, students were not allowed to have live models and in response developed a network of underground studio practices. These independent studios gave student artists the opportunity to practice with live models, and learn from cutting edge professors who had otherwise been banned from teaching in the post revolutionary era.

These experiences that Behrang was denied in the classroom, however, make him a much better professor of the arts today. He warns his students against simply translating the ills of

⁶⁸ Samadzadeghan, B. (2014, August 26). Personal Interview

⁶⁹ Samadzadeghan, B. (2014, August 26). Personal Interview

*society into decorative pieces. “I tell my students, that as an Iranian, having grown up in a society of metanarrative, they are dangerously encouraged to only think about the subject matter of their works, rather than what those symbols and symbolisms represent.” Evidently, anything considered to be an unwritten rule of society, a taboo, will be more intriguing to young artists. This is a problem, because the outside world expects Iranian art to complain about these same tensions. That is a trap.*⁷⁰

“From the perspective of a third world artist, and a protégé of post-colonial era, I look at my time, history, and place as well as art. Art, in my belief, is not politics, as it has no dominant role in relations of power. Furthermore, it cannot be considered as entertainment either, inasmuch as art in many modes keeps its’ distance from tastes of the masses. Thus, it cannot be entertaining. From my point of view, art can observe what happens in the world and through the history and can raise questions, but cannot change anything. It can only tease the “systems and hierarchies”, the ones which are ascendant in realms of art, history, society and power. In fact, I attempt to respond to the history, to the historical continuum of being subjected by systems. I try to reveal the unseen experience of the lived history, and expose the silent side of it. Nevertheless, I do not succeed! Since my work is incapable of representing anything. It is, indeed, trying to bring something to present that is here and is not. I disregard rules of the art scene and use any kinds of ready-mades. I change their essence and create my own interpretations.

My art is impotent! It cannot change anything, nor protect anyone. However, it may be able to hint at dark ditches between truth and reality. It may also be able to mess with the systems; from deterring systems of art scene to “meta-narratives” of power and history, which can be teased in ironic approaches, instead of being accepted incontrovertibly.

⁷⁰ Samadzadeghan, B. (2014, August 26). Personal Interview

The result may seem ironical, but indeed it is nothing but a huge absurdity. In fact, if I would endeavor to represent one thing, that would be the “absence”; the historical schism in links between fact and truth.”⁷¹

Behrang Samadzadegan studied graphic design at the University of Fine Art in Tehran. At the University of Tehran, ones education was based on a modern art ideology that was imposed by professors with no knowledge of the theory behind it. “Art education is a module, it is all about structure and no one is allowed to change it. Some professors might but there is no underlying belief to branch out of this out of date system.”⁷² Art education was solely structured around art history and studio practice, with different courses in art analysis, practice and methodology. However, the scholarship was always extremely outdated; the most recent books that were introduced in classes were all about twenty years out of date: “in 1998 we were studying books from 1972. All of them started with prehistoric art, and by the end of our four years in university, we had only gotten to Alexander Calder.”⁷³

Behrang himself went to university because he believed that it was a postmodern structure. Rather, he said, he found a “post modern dictatorship” that was imposing a modern abstract expressionist aesthetic on all students. This obsolete system generated a new class of art students who wanted to create a new anarchism in the structure of art in Iran. This “anarchist generation”, of which Samadzadegan was a part of, sought new channels by which to supplement their art education. Literature and philosophy were crucial aspects of their movement “we decided to read because we were never asked to read in school, no one wanted us to read, it was all about being obedient.” As an art professor himself, Behrang wants his students to understand

⁷¹ Aaran Gallery Website

⁷² Samadzadeghan, B. (2014, August 26). Personal Interview

⁷³ Samadzadeghan, B. (2014, August 26). Personal Interview

art in conjunction with changes in the society, religion, politics of a given time and place. This understanding of art in tandem with historical contingencies is what his own education was lacking. “ We were taught in the following manner ‘this is cubism, this is what it looks like’, with no indication of why and how the movement came about.”

His anarchist generation also wanted to reconcile the illegality of live models in studio practice. He and his contemporaries worked in underground studios outside of school to have nude models and gain the experience that they were otherwise lacking. They also worked closely with professors and artists who had been banned from teaching after the revolution. Today, as a professor, Behrang is passing on this anarchy to his students “I allow my students to do anything, I have very little boundaries in the classes that I teach.” Although he is required to present his syllabus to the department heads at the beginning of each semester, and is forbidden from having nude models or showing nude images in his courses, he continuously breaks the rules “it is risky, but I have to teach with integrity.” ⁷⁴

Behrang conceptualized the problem of censorship in Iranian artistic production in a new way. He does not believe that it hinders the creative process but rather, that censorship makes subject matters that are considered “taboo” more appealing to the new generation of artists. “This causes a problem because now, from both inside and out, Iranian art is expect to complain about these same taboos-everyone is only interested in what aspect of society a given work criticizes.” Behrang tries to tell his students that they always have to be aware that as Iranian artists, they have grown up in a society of metanarrative. It becomes even harder to avoid this trap, when, because of their passports, they have limited opportunities to experience the rest of the art world for themselves: “Information is the thing that stands most in the way of Iranian art students.”

⁷⁴ Samadzadeghan, B. (2014, August 26). Personal Interview

When Behrang travels for his art, he tried to take pictures of artwork abroad to show his students, but even so, they are forced to guess everything from the dimensions, to the physicality to the message of a work of art that they will most likely never have the chance to see. “I admire my students for their knowledge-there is something untouchable still about seeing works in real time. They read enough on their own, much more than other students because they have to overcome so many more challenges. They cannot afford to be lazy.”⁷⁵

Today, the population of art students is much larger than it used to be, and market pressures have greatly skewed the quality of art that is being produced in Iran. When Behrang was a student, his generation had to break down borders and market themselves because the art industry was not yet interested in Iranian natives. Now, art students see sales as the only marker of their accomplishments. In this way, many fall plague to the image that the outside world projects onto Iranian artists, that precise socio-political narrative that they expect to see when considering Iranian art works. “For example, the image of the Iranian woman is one topic that is always expected of female Iranian artists. I always tell my female students to be careful about things like that, the subjectivity of the Iranian women is reduced to an image, and that image creates a cliché of the Iranian women. This image is false, it is a post pornographic image of Iranian women, that is antithetical to the strong women I engage with everyday.”⁷⁶

In his own art practice, Behrang continues to see himself as an activist. He has taken his student rebellious movement and aspirations for change and channeled them into his work: “In my work, I am always complaining about social and political issues. I have a critical vision, being the radical left person that I am (not that I am communist).” At first, without really thinking about the politics of representation, his art consisted of taking a social or historical event

⁷⁵ Samadzadeghan, B. (2014, August 26). Personal Interview

⁷⁶ Samadzadeghan, B. (2014, August 26). Personal Interview

and depicting it in his painting. After he began collecting images of state news agencies and analyzing the images that they were showing of Iran, he became interested in the lost narratives of history. Now, in his work, he tries to represent the forgotten and the unseen of any historical event he is depicting. The question of how Iranian history is being looked at by others became a crucial aspect of his artistic agenda. His most recent work has explored the idea of who is allowed to talk about the image of Iranian history, especially that of the 1979 revolution.⁷⁷

In his solo exhibition *Art of Impotency* at Aaran Gallery in May/June 2013, Behrang inserted the image of Tin Tin into his large-scale paintings. As a child, Tin Tin was introduced to him as a hero. But, in retrospect, Tin Tin has come to stand in as a symbol of orientalism: as a blonde, European, “civil” person who has the privilege of going to “barbaric” lands and solving their most pressing problems. Tin Tin is in this manner a symbol of those who are entitled to write history, those who are allowed to judge other peoples and nations.

Samadzadeghan does not, however, consider himself to be a representative of his society. His aim is to continue a sense of anarchism in his painting. He does not do what the market is asking of him and even pushes back against these same market ideals. Art, he says, is neither politics nor entertainment. It is separate from politics because it holds no role in relations of power. It is also not entertainment, because, if it entertains, it becomes kitsch. Art serves as an intermediary, it has no power to change or to entertain but it can tease, force one to question, and create a rebellion that is internal to the piece. “Art cannot make an changes”, Behrang said, but it can break rules. It is powerful because it forces people to think and to break taboos.”⁷⁸

In the Middle East, the market is quite limited and the galleries don’t have many contacts. While gallerists understand the importance of the intellectual value of a work of art, they are

⁷⁷ Samadzadeghan, B. (2014, August 26). Personal Interview

⁷⁸ Samadzadeghan, B. (2014, August 26). Personal Interview

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equally obsessed with its commercial value as well. In Tehran, because the market is extremely narrow, conceptual art is little accepted. Behrang now works very closely with Aaran Gallery because Nazila is both brave and encouraging and treats her artists as authors and creators. She is more interested in the process and methodology of a work of art than its aesthetic or commercial value.

PART II: FRAMING IRAN

The “exceptionality narrative” in today’s discussion of Iranian contemporary art situates the work of a selected few artists within political perceptions of the Iranian state rather than analyzing it for its art historical, formal and curatorial merit. This common tendency is one that is projected onto the Iranian artist from the outside world and assumes that, given the conservative nature of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the restrictions on civil liberties, artists in Iran are forced to hide their defiance. Such a framing has its roots in the historical legacies and frameworks that consider the Middle East as “other” or “oriental”. Inherent in this common misconception is the view of Iranian cultural production as static, and grounded in the Islamic and authoritarian nature of the state.

Since the end of the eighteenth century, “modern Occidental reactions to Islam have been dominated by a radically simplified type of thinking that may still be called Orientalist...dividing the world into two unequal parts, the larger ‘different’ one called the Orient, the other, also known as ‘our’ world, called the Occident of the West.”⁷⁹ Orientalism, an interpretative framework put forward by Edward Said, is a distortive lens used to understand the unfamiliar and the threatening. It is a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based in a European, Western experience. The West uses the Orient as a contrasting “image, idea, personality and experience.”⁸⁰ The privileged status of the West in this binary has its roots in the historical legacy of imperial conquest: “the Freedom of intercourse was always the Westerner’s privilege: because his was the stronger culture, he could penetrate, he could wrestle with, he could give

⁷⁹ Edward W Said. “Islam as News.” *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*. New York: Pantheon, 1981. 49. Print.

⁸⁰ Edward W Said. “Introduction”. *Orientalism*. 1st ed: Vintage, 1979.1. Print

shape and meaning...”⁸¹ As a result, the Orient came to be known as barbaric, backwards, irrational and antithetical to the civilized and rational West. Perhaps most alarming about Orientalism is it’s transformation into a body of theory and practice which has received considerable material investment. Orientalism, as an entire system of knowledge was the principal means by which the “Orient” came into contact with Western consciousness. This discourse, as a regulated system of producing knowledge has now become codified. The lack of an American colonial legacy in the Middle East makes the relationship much more indirect and based on abstraction. Only since the Iranian Revolution have American interests in the Middle East become much more substantial, thus contributing to a new hyper politicized form of Orientalism.

Today, the concentration of mass media “constitute[s] a communal core of interpretations providing a certain picture of Islam and, of course, reflecting powerful interests in the society served by the media”⁸² Mass media must be understood as a process by which opinions and news are made rather than as occurring naturally. They are coded with “human will, history, social circumstances, institutions...”⁸³ Since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the majority of what Americans have come to know about the Iran is through radio, television and news outlets.⁸⁴ Iran therefore became an entity that was both understood and visualized through an orientalist framework: “Orientalism in its various forms highlighted the iconographic status of foreign lands

⁸¹ Edward W. Said “Chapter 1”. *Orientalism*. 1st ed. Vintage, 1979. 43-44 Print

⁸² Edward W Said. “Islam as News.” *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*. New York: Pantheon, 1981. 49. Print.

⁸³ Edward W Said. “Islam as News.” *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*. New York: Pantheon, 1981. 49. Print.

⁸⁴ Edward W. Said “The Iran Story”. *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*. New York: Pantheon, 1981. 81. Print.

in the production of new domestic consumers”⁸⁵ The media made Iran “known” to the common consumer regardless of its essentialist and political grounding.⁸⁶

Most problematic here is the distance that is created between caricatured descriptions of the Middle East (via the academy or the media) and the particular realities found on the ground. Said argues that facts get their importance and meaning from what is interpreted of them. Interpretation itself, however, is not without its own precedents of pre-imagined ideas. In this way, “knowledge of other cultures is especially subjected to ‘unscientific’, imprecisions and to the circumstances of interpretation.”⁸⁷ Interpretation, in itself, becomes a form of making, that, when codified, becomes a commonly accepted truth: “knowledge of the social world, in short, is no better than the interpretations on which it is based.”⁸⁸

A very serious consequence of this is that Americans have come to view Iran and Iranian cultural production reductively, coercively and oppositionally. Whatever Iranians themselves say about their vision of their own societies seems irrelevant. What is instead important, to many Western consumers, is how a given artistic manifestation confirms or rejects common tropes about Iranian art and society. The rhetoric that is used to describe Iranian contemporary artistic production has not ceased to place the Iranian artists as “other” or “exception” in an otherwise authoritarian and closed society. The production of these systems of knowledge have secured “the West’s imaginative command over the Middle East” The binary created between Iranian

⁸⁵ Melani McAlister. “Introduction.” *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East since 1945*. Berkeley: U of California, 2005. ?? Print. (FIND PAGE)

⁸⁶ Edward W. Said. “Introduction”. *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*. New York: Pantheon, 1981. Li. Print.

⁸⁷ Edward W. Said. “Knowledge and Interpretation.” *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*. New York: Pantheon, 1981. 162-163. Print.

⁸⁸ Edward W. Said. “Knowledge and Interpretation.” *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*. New York: Pantheon, 1981. 168. Print.

society and the West informs the view that Iranian cultural production is predominantly “inward-looking or bound by tradition.”⁸⁹

This implied homogeneity could not be farther from the truth. Instead, I posit that Iranian artists must be considered as both contributing to and gaining from the International art scene. Iranian artists are creating their own meaning and value in a period of transformations (social, political, cultural, economic): they aim to showcase their treatment of modernity through the lens of art. Although the state might be marked by religious ideology and revolutionary fervor, the younger generation (which accounts for more than seventy percent of the population) “appears to be neither committed to the Revolution nor very ideological in any conventional sense”.⁹⁰ Many of them advocate for a “hybrid, unfixed, negotiable identity. Artists of this generation address critically the actual problems and issues of their society, and shy away from the depiction of local characteristics”.⁹¹

Even under the constrained conditions of post ‘79 state-sponsored artistic movement, Iranian art had its own developmental dynamics. Far from representing indigenous cultural landscape, “Iranian Contemporary art is a nationally and internationally based collection of art practices that, in some instances, draws upon the legacy of modernism in Iran, and yet does so through the lens of a globalized cultural context and through its diasporic constituency.”⁹²The

⁸⁹ Edward W. Said. “Knowledge and Interpretation.” *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*. New York: Pantheon, 1981. 168. Print.

⁹⁰ Anthony Downey. “Diasporic Communities and Global Networks: The contemporaneity of Iranian Art Today” in Hossein Amirsadeghi, *Different Sames: New Perspectives in Contemporary Iranian Art*. TransGlobe, 2009. Print.

⁹¹ Anthony Downey. “Diasporic Communities and Global Networks: The contemporaneity of Iranian Art Today” in Hossein Amirsadeghi, *Different Sames: New Perspectives in Contemporary Iranian Art*. TransGlobe, 2009. Print.

⁹² Hamid Keshmirshakan. “Modern And Contemporary Iranian Art: Developments and Challenges.” in Hossein Amirsadeghi, *Different Sames: New Perspectives in Contemporary Iranian Art*. TransGlobe, 2009. Print.

younger generation of artists in Iran is creating work that is antithetical to institutional art. They are concerned with self-presentation as imbued through images. New means of communication have led Iranian artists to be exposed to the main contemporary artistic discourses and are determined to stand alongside their counterparts on the international scene. This desire to be up-to-date and participate in the world of contemporary art is the biggest concern for these prolific younger generations. They are responding to the changing political climate of their country “alternately challenging boundaries, documenting contradictions or reinterpreting cultural heritage and social realities”.⁹³ Their art is a product of their lived experience, one that is dynamic and follows the global contemporary art movement. What this artistic class is not is static and exceptions to the norm.

⁹³ Hamid Keshmirshekan,. “Contemporary Iranian Art: The Emergence of New Artistic Discourses.” *Iranian Studies Journal* Vol. 40 No. 3. (2007): 335-366. Web.

CHAPTER III: The 2009 Moment

Iran's Green Movement mobilized long before protests of June of 2009. The *mowj-e-sabz* (Green Wave) began as a campaign to support the bid of reformist presidential candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi. As an architect and artist himself, Mousavi amassed great support among cultural workers. An architecture student at Melli University in Tehran in 1960, he was well versed in eastern philosophy and theory of Western Modern art and worked as an abstract expressionist painter. In 1968, in a pamphlet for an exhibition of his art he wrote: "the paint brush will never take the place of the communal struggle for freedom. It must be said that the expressive work of any painter or artist will not minimize the need to perform his social responsibilities. Yet it is within the scope of these responsibilities that his art can provide a vision for a way of living in an alternative future."⁹⁴ It was this complete understanding of the power of art and culture to shape society that made him a favorable candidate for presidency.

From 1981 to 1989 Mousavi served as the prime minister of Iran and is remembered for having led the country through the devastating Iran-Iraq war by "creating a ration system that allowed a fair distribution of basic goods". In the midst of the war, Iran also undertook 'The Sacred Defense,' "the mobilization of the home front that drew heavily on cultural production -- films, television serials, wall art and posters, painting and literature -- to create support for the long and painful war that devastated so many Iranians' lives."⁹⁵ By August 1989, Mousavi had shifted his focus from political office to domestic cultural activities. He was appointed head of the Iranian Academy of Arts in 1998, whose purpose was to "carry out the policies and implement the strategies to safeguard and promote Islamic national art and cultural heritage and

⁹⁴ Shiva Balaghi. "An Artist as President of the Islamic Republic of Iran?" *Middle East Research and Information Project* (2009). Web.

⁹⁵ Shiva Balaghi. "An Artist as President of the Islamic Republic of Iran?" *Middle East Research and Information Project* (2009). Web.

to ‘confront the threats of the invading culture’”.⁹⁶ The Iranian Academy of Arts represents the traditional arts, cinema, music, philosophy, architecture and also supports research in anthropology and Iranian cultural studies. It publishes books and journals on various aspects of Iranian culture and organizes important exhibitions of Islamic art worldwide.⁹⁷

Given Mousavi’s experience as both a cultural producer and administrator, many young Iranians were hoping that his presidency would bring another “glasnost” for Iran. Furthermore, Mousavi’s fiery denunciations of his opponent Ahmadinejad and the participation of his wife on the campaign trail were emblematic disruptions to the status quo. His wife, Zahra Rahnavard, an artist herself, describes her family’s approach to politics as being more poetic and free as a result of their artistic character.⁹⁸ When describing her home life, she has said: “The atmosphere in our family is very complex -- art, religion, politics, sports and happiness co-exist.”⁹⁹ This exact coexistence the forces that constitute Iranian social, political and cultural life was what Mousavi’s supporters had hoped for their country.

The 2009 election between Ahmadinejad and Mousavi mobilized thirty nine million people (about eighty five percent of the population's eligible voters). According to the government, Ahmadinejad received 62.6 percent of the votes while former Prime Minister Mousavi received only 33.75 percent, long before all domestic and international polls had closed. Furthermore, many denied the accuracy of these results due to the visible sweeping support that Mousavi had gained throughout his campaign. Soon after, Mousavi called for the nullification of

⁹⁶ Shiva Balaghi. "An Artist as President of the Islamic Republic of Iran?" *Middle East Research and Information Project* (2009). Web.

⁹⁷ Shiva Balaghi. "An Artist as President of the Islamic Republic of Iran?" *Middle East Research and Information Project* (2009). Web.

⁹⁸ Shiva Balaghi. "An Artist as President of the Islamic Republic of Iran?" *Middle East Research and Information Project* (2009). Web.

⁹⁹ Shiva Balaghi. "An Artist as President of the Islamic Republic of Iran?" *Middle East Research and Information Project* (2009). Web.

the elections, arguing that they had been rigged. His supporters in Tehran and other large cities filled the streets chanting, “Where is my vote?” which ignited widespread protests under the premise of the Green Wave.

The goals of the movement were to take the presidency and executive powers of government from hard-liners whose term in office had been marked by “economic incompetence, foreign policy adventurism, and an ideological doctrine that included new limits on civil rights... unsuited for Iranian interests in the 21st century”.¹⁰⁰ Instead, the Green Movement was interested in restoring the civil liberties that had been promised by the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The movement can be summarized as having three main principles: Iranian’s national interest and sovereignty, a reconsideration of Velayat-e-Faqih and a sensible foreign policy for Iran with the rest of the world.¹⁰¹ With regards to Iranian’s national interest, the protesters called for more transparency, especially in Iran’s relationships with Hezbollah and Hamas. They demanded a balance between spending money to support these groups while also addressing the economic needs of the nation. This became most evident in slogans that were uttered in the Grand Bazaar in Tehran, when protesters called for “ending support of the Syrian regime and giving special attention to the economic hardships suffered by Iranians as a result of sanctions”.¹⁰² The reconsideration of Velayat-e-Faqih (the political theory in Iran that invests absolute power in the Ayatollah) was perhaps the most controversial aspect of the movement. Mousavi called for the position to be reconsidered as a valid political theory of governance all together. With this declaration, the Green Wave lost considerable support from regime officials and caused a split in the movement. The Iranian government took advantage of this setback to

¹⁰⁰ Akbar Ganji. "Iran's Green Movement Five Years Later -- 'Defeated' But Ultimately Victorious." *The Huffington Post*. 08 Sept. 2014. Web.

¹⁰¹ Hooman Majd. "Think Again: Iran’s Green Movement." *Foreign Policy*. 6 Jan. 2010. Web.

¹⁰² Hooman Majd. "Think Again: Iran’s Green Movement." *Foreign Policy*. 6 Jan. 2010. Web.

call on society to take a stand against the pariah that the movement had become. Finally, the Green Movement sought to take decision-making powers on Iranian-American relations away from the Supreme Leader, who had otherwise had a monopoly on foreign policy.

Over time, the government's brutal and violent repression of the protests incited some Iranians to consider toppling the Islamic regime altogether. In the Western media, Iranians clamored for an "Iranian", rather than Islamic republic or chanted 'death to the supreme leader'.¹⁰³ The revolutionary guard, responsible for suppressing the movement, viewed the Green Movement and its leaders as a threat to the revolution and to the position of supreme leader. In approximately nine months they put down the Green Movement, resulting in ten thousand arrests (many facing charges), at least one hundred and ten deaths, torture and forced confessions, and botched trials.¹⁰⁴

The Green Movement did not accomplish its original demand for the cancellation of the 2009 elections. Ahmadinejad continued as Iran's president and after eight years, was unsuccessful at ameliorating the political or economic situation in Iran. The regime was successful at rooting out the ideas of the movement by adopting a zero tolerance policy and refusing to allow it to influence the structure of the state. Furthermore the movement failed to maintain an Iranian-based leadership and protesters became disgruntled with their lack of support. Finally, to be a protestor was a statement of privilege: the movement targeted large cities and not the poorer rural areas that made up Ahmadinejad's constituency.¹⁰⁵ However, the movement did not leave the regime unscathed. Resorting to force against peaceful protestors, on

¹⁰³ Hooman Majd. "Think Again: Iran's Green Movement." *Foreign Policy*. 6 Jan. 2010. Web.

¹⁰⁴ Akbar Ganji. "Iran's Green Movement Five Years Later -- 'Defeated' But Ultimately Victorious." *The Huffington Post*. 08 Sept. 2014. Web.

¹⁰⁵ Abdul Q Tafesh. "Iran's Green Movement: Reality and Aspirations." *Al Jazeera Center for Studies*. (Nov. 2012): Web.

the one hand, reinforced the idea that the elections had been rigged. Furthermore, Mousavi and Karroubi, the two opposition leaders, became national heroes and public pressure to have them freed from house arrest increased. Finally, the Green Movement created a network of active citizens, who by the power of mutual trust had become an important social force. Although the movement did not aim to topple their government, it affirmed that Iranians “are no longer resigned to the undemocratic aspects of a political system that has in the last three decades regressed... in affording its citizens the rights promise to them under Iran’s own constitution.”¹⁰⁶ Over the long term, the hard-liners in power will no longer be able to silence the opposition, ignore their demands or rig another election.

During this period of unrest many popular commentators noted that the Green Movement wanted or even needed foreign support. As Hooman Majd stated: “Dead wrong. Nothing could be further from the truth. It is insulting and patronizing to suggest... that without foreign help or support the green movement cannot be successful, that Iranians on their own are incapable of commanding their own destiny.”¹⁰⁷ The Green Movement survived and even gained momentum in the absence of foreign support. It was a testament to the capacity of Iranians to maintain a civil rights movement in their own right, without external support: “One aspect of the Islamic Revolution... [is] that key events... have happened independent of foreign influence.”¹⁰⁸ Many have come to understand the Green Movement as an extension of Mohammad Khatami’s presidency, culminating in a full fledged civil rights movement that will continue to pressure the regime.

¹⁰⁶ Hooman Majd. "Think Again: Iran’s Green Movement." *Foreign Policy*. 6 Jan. 2010. Web.

¹⁰⁷ Hooman Majd. "Think Again: Iran’s Green Movement." *Foreign Policy*. 6 Jan. 2010. Web.

¹⁰⁸ Hooman Majd. "Think Again: Iran’s Green Movement." *Foreign Policy*. 6 Jan. 2010. Web.

The 2009 movement was also extremely impactful for its visual quality. Mass protests, rioting and various expressions of discontent were brought to the attention of the world in real time via social-media networks and online videos. The Green Revolution gave rise to a class of citizen journalists with the authority and agency to tell their own story. Twitter lists, streams of situational updates, videos and images were picked up by international news outlets and broadcast to the rest of the world. Raw, unedited and dramatic footage emerged of people throwing rocks, vehicles aflame, riot police delivering savage beatings and murdering innocent civilians. Yet, categorizing the movement as a “Twitter Revolution” would be greatly diminutive. Journalistic commentators, such as Radio Free Europe’s Golnaz Esfandiari, challenged this idea since it assumes that Twitter was the lifeline of the Green revolution. Instead, she claims “the opposition primarily utilized text messages, email, and blog posts to organize the protests, while [word of mouth] was most influential for coordination opposition. Social media tools like Facebook and twitter were not ideal for rapid communication among protesters... Western journalists who couldn’t reach or didn’t bother reaching people on the ground in Iran simply scrolled through the English-language tweets poster with tag #iranelection...Through it all no one seemed to wonder why people trying to coordinate protests in Iran would be writing in any language other than Farsi.”¹⁰⁹ Nevertheless, although failing as an organizational tool, social media brought the violence in the streets of Tehran to the international stage. The movement was also the first major world event to be broadcast almost entirely via social media: “Given the extent of the Iranian regime’s repression, the amount of

¹⁰⁹ Jared Keller. "Evaluating Iran's Twitter Revolution." *The Atlantic*. 18 June 2010. Web.

information publicized real-time through social networks allowed the international community an unprecedented peek into the turmoil afflicting Iran.”¹¹⁰

With the 2009 moment, Iranians employed their sovereign right as a people to stand before their leaders in the name of justice. The Green Movement was a colorful drama with an extensively visual impact. The backing of Mousavi by important Iranian cultural figures was extremely evident and vocal: the Oscar nominated director Majid Majidi made the official campaign video, over 800 filmmakers and actors signed a public letter supporting Mousavi’s candidacy and a ten minute YouTube video campaign, featuring prominent Iranian artistic figures, urged Iranians to vote.¹¹¹ Finally, the mass demonstration of protestors clad in green was in itself, was an artistic and performative statement of solidarity.

¹¹⁰ Jared Keller. "Evaluating Iran's Twitter Revolution." *The Atlantic*. 18 June 2010. Web.

¹¹¹ Shiva Balaghi. "An Artist as President of the Islamic Republic of Iran?" *Middle East Research and Information Project* (2009). Web.

CHAPTER IV: Exhibiting Iran

This next chapter focuses on the ways in which Iranian contemporary art was exhibited, framed and discussed outside of Iran during the “2009 moment”. *Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East* (Saatchi, London) and *Iran Inside Out: Influences of Homeland and Diaspora on the Artistic Language of Contemporary Iranian Artists* (Chelsea Museum of Art, NYC) are two shows that project onto Iranian art preconceived notions of what it should look like. Both curatorial accounts present Iranian art as “other” and adopt a touristic gaze by which they attempt to make Iran comprehensible to a Western audience. Adopting an orientalist framework, journalistic art criticism either greatly failed to disassociate these works from the repressive cultural and political circumstances of Iran, while “experts” commenting on the 2009 movement ignored the plurality of voices and social movements that these same works of art were addressing. This fleeting and inattentive account by the media created a false division between art and politics and entirely disregarding the ways in which these concepts overlap.¹¹² Many of the motivating forces behind the Green Movement were on display in these works and yet, art criticism greatly missed this by being preoccupied with their categorization. To reiterate Nazila Noebashari’s earlier point, Iranian art is inherently political because the air they breathe is political.

***Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East* (Saatchi Gallery London, January-May 2009)**

In his new Chelsea space, Charles Saatchi has devoted an exhibition to almost ninety works by twenty-one artists from Iran, Iran, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria and Algeria. Most of these artists are in their twenties and thirties and present a mixed range of media from instillations to paintings and photography. Only eight of the artists in the show live in the Middle East, and of

¹¹² Hamid Dabashi. "The Nature and Political Consequences of the Green Movement." *The Green Movement*. New Jersey: Transaction, 2011. 49. Print.

the seven women represented, the only two that are based in the Middle East. The rest of the artists make their art in Paris, Berlin or New York. With the help of a small group of advisors, Charles Saatchi has created a show on Middle Eastern art in his image by curating with a pre-defined idea of what Middle Eastern art ought to look like. This show should not be considered an expansive curatorial survey of the region. Rather, it is a snapshot derived from the personal collection of Saatchi himself, thus vastly limiting the scope and breadth of art displayed.

Spread across three floors, the show separates serious political works (ground floor), sculpture (second floor), and large-scale paintings (last room). The underlying theme in the show is the protest of daily constraints on freedom. These artists use their work to re-arrange their cultures, and defy the clichés that have put their respective nations on the map. Iranian standouts Ramin Herizadeh, Tala Madani and Shirin Fakhim present the tensions and contradictions that plague their society. Herizadeh's photomontage *Men of Allah* shows bearded figures pouting and lounging among intricate Persian patterns. The sensuous and sexually ambiguous semi-nudes represent what the artist has called his "closet queens". It is a critique of gender norms in Iranian society, and subverts the official rhetoric of the state that openly denies the existence of homosexuality in Iran. Tala Madani shows parables of life in Tehran (hairdresser scenes, crowds of men in hammams, suicide bombers) while Shirin Fakhim's playful and crude life size dolls represent the 100,000 prostitutes on the streets of Tehran. These artists are not trying to resolve the region's problems, but translate the anxieties of the state into artistic metaphor.

Unveiled upholds the visual aesthetic of other Saatchi shows. The signature presentation of large sculptures and installation, echoing Damien Hirst's archetypal shark tank, finds itself in this show as well. Show stopper *Ghost* (2007) by Algerian born Kader Attia is a single room installation that gallery visitors may only enter from behind. Upon entry the viewer is faced with

what look like 240 lumps of crumpled aluminum foil. When they make their way to the front, the figures emulate kneeling chador-clad hollow faced Muslim women at prayer. Small differences between the figures (some mournful, some intent, some speaking to each other) gives them their individual personalities despite the homogeneity of their external appearance and facelessness.

The show received considerable media attention, including sixty-eight reviews that are listed on the Saatchi website. These critiques range from Western journalists who have fallen into the trap of reifying cultural stereotypes, and others who have been critical of the descriptions of these works as “other”. The main source of contention, however, was the haste with which this show was assembled, while it was been advertised as a comprehensive display of Middle East Contemporary Art. Far from giving a curatorial survey of the art in the region, as the title of the show would suggest, the works derived from the personal collection of Charles Saatchi. Of the nineteen artists that were featured, more than half were of Iranian decent. Countries such as Egypt and Israel, were not represented despite their vibrant contemporary art scenes. Almost all of the artists lived and worked outside of their countries of origin and were almost all under forty years of age.¹¹³ Nigel Hurst, the gallery’s chief executive was quoted saying: “I only learned while this show was being put together that Tehran has over 100 commercial art galleries. There aren’t things you necessarily associate with that region.”¹¹⁴

Comments about “that” region, or rather the sense of disbelief or blasé ignorance of the flourishing Middle Eastern art scene was resounding in the feedback of the show. The title alone, “Unveiled” falls trap to the Orientalist framework that serves to distinguish “them” from “us”. The veiling analogy not only reifies the trope of the Muslim veiled woman, but also plays into

¹¹³ Henry Chu. "'Unveiled: New Art From the Middle East' at London's Saatchi Gallery." *LA Times*. 11 Feb. 2009. Web.

¹¹⁴ Henry Chu. "'Unveiled: New Art From the Middle East' at London's Saatchi Gallery." *LA Times*. 11 Feb. 2009. Web.

the same orientalist categorizations of the Middle East as a place of mystery, one to be discovered and made known by the privileged Western observer. And yet, the catalogue introduction blatantly dismisses European perceptions of the Middle East as a place synonymous with “political oppression, religious intolerance, and terrorism”, marking such clichés as detrimental to our understanding of the diversity of Muslim societies.¹¹⁵ The title of the show, however, single handedly undercuts this altruistic ambition. “Unveiled” not only plays into a trope of the Middle East, but also suggests that Middle Eastern contemporary art was, until this show, completely unimaginable and unseen. Furthermore, the title “Unveiled” is meaningless for its lack of geographic, formal or thematic framing, thus giving greater validation to the arbitrary curatorial feel of the show.

Richard Dormont of *The Telegraph* commented that, based on the art work presented in the show, the artists must be in complete disagreement with the “sunny take” on the Middle East that the show catalogue suggests. Instead, he states: “The evils Westerners see from a distance are the everyday context in which many of these painters and sculptors make their work...”¹¹⁶ Once against, Middle Eastern countries are cast as the distant “evils” that oppressed artists are desperate to leave behind. Dormont continues: “Their art...[is] about suicide bombers, religious police, unending war and the denigration of women in Islamic societies.”¹¹⁷ Such an opinion begs the question: is that what their art is really about? Or rather, is it what the Western viewer chooses to reduce it to?

¹¹⁵ Richard Dormont. "Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East at the Saatchi Gallery." *The Telegraph*. 26 Jan. 2009. Web.

¹¹⁶ Richard Dormont. "Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East at the Saatchi Gallery." *The Telegraph*. 26 Jan. 2009. Web.

¹¹⁷ Richard Dormont. "Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East at the Saatchi Gallery." *The Telegraph*. 26 Jan. 2009. Web.

The Iranian artists that garnered the most attention were Ramin Haerizadeh, Shirin Fakhim, Tala Madani and Sara Rahbar. Haerizadeh presented a series of digitally manipulated photos *Men of Allah* (Image 9). In them, the artist mocks the sexuality of the bearded clerics, who have otherwise taken it upon themselves to control the moral purity of their population. Each photo shows the artist posing as a Mullah, completely effeminate and engaging in crude behavior. From afar, the color palette and patterns resemble Persian miniatures.¹¹⁸ Yet the satire depicts these religious authorities as “half –naked, prick to tongue, bum to bum, if not quite in the very act itself: a harem of bearded mullah voluptuaries.”¹¹⁹ The work of Haerizadeh is a social critique on the seeming fascination of the Islamic Republic’s clerics with the intimate lives of their people. Similarly, Shirin Fakhim’s outspoken series *Tehran Prostitutes* (Image 10) seeks to expose the prevalence of sex-workers in Iran despite the regime’s blatant disregard of this reality. Her life sized, mix media doll-like structures feature “melons...for the breasts of women and the bits of old rope that poke out of the crotches of the pre-operative transsexuals.”¹²⁰

The crude, avant-garde and highly critical nature of these works, produced by artists living and working inside Iran, was impressive to many. However, it was not as a result of the powerful imagery that their art conveyed. Instead, once again, critics were at awe that these artists were “free” to produce such work while living in Iran, thus complicating what “we are often led to believe” about Iranian society.¹²¹ Once again, the “we”, as the Western authority, stands antithetical to Iranian society, and continues to, with these remarks, perceive Iran as a static entity.

¹¹⁸ Laura Cumming. “The Veil is lifted on Hidden Talent”. *The Guardian*. 31 Jan. 2009. Web.

¹¹⁹ Laura Cumming. “The Veil is lifted on Hidden Talent”. *The Guardian*. 31 Jan. 2009. Web.

¹²⁰ Dormont, Richard. "Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East at the Saatchi Gallery." *The Telegraph* 26 Jan. 2009: Web.

¹²¹ Dormont, Richard. "Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East at the Saatchi Gallery." *The Telegraph* 26 Jan. 2009: Web.

Journalistic art criticism also attempted to understand the work of the Iranian artists by making them either familiar or sensational. By this, I mean that in order to understand the visual aesthetic of the works of artists such as Sara Rahbar and Tala Madani, critics sought to compare them to the work of well-known Western artists. For example, Rahbar's Flag #19 (Image 11), which features an American flag that has been decorated with Persian fabrics and motifs, was compared to the flag of Jasper Johns.¹²² The Independent reviewer Charles Darwent thus reduces Rahbar's work to being "about Jasper Johns... its subject is American cultural hegemony."¹²³ By making this claim, Darwent is not only disregarding the artists own statements about her piece, but also, stating that in the globalized times, to be an artist is to be a Western artist and adopt their material and techniques. Sara Rahbar's flag, in this manner, cannot be understood independently of Western considerations. Similarly, Tala Madani's painting *Tower Reflections* (Image 12) is described as "modern Caprichos", referencing Spanish painter Goya, for their passion and audacious nature.¹²⁴ The triptych depicts the interior of the planes hijacked on 9/11, an attack on Islamists at prayer and a representation of Guantanamo prisoners in orange jumpsuits kneeling before their captors. Although these blatant political statements comment on the state of deterioration between US-Middle East relations post 9/11, it does not warrant an explanation of Madani's art as "fueled by anger and drip[ing] with hatred."¹²⁵ Such a characterization grounds the work in the Orientalist perspective of the barbaric and blood seeking Muslim and denies it room for critical engagement and self-reflection on both sides.

¹²² Charles Darwent. "Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East, Saatchi Gallery, London." *The Independent*. 1 Feb. 2009. Web

¹²³ Charles Darwent. "Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East, Saatchi Gallery, London." *The Independent*. 1 Feb. 2009. Web

¹²⁴ Laura Cumming. "The Veil is lifted on Hidden Talent". *The Guardian*. 31 Jan. 2009. Web.

¹²⁵ Charles Darwent. "Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East, Saatchi Gallery, London." *The Independent*. 1 Feb. 2009. Web

Janet Rady, a prominent art dealer, was quick to respond to the shortcomings of these reviews. She too believes that they described the artists' works unashamedly as 'the other' and fell into the trap of perpetuating common stereotypes of the region.¹²⁶ Critics focused too heavily on literal readings and interpretations of the politically charged scenes, social commentaries on censorship and the freedom of women. Furthermore, the criticism emphasized the artistic tendencies of diasporic artists on the one hand, and, on the other hand, focused on the need for discretion and secrecy by artists practicing within the confines of the Middle East. The uneven caliber of artistic criticism that resulted from this show showcased the many pre-imagined ideas of what Iranian and Middle Eastern art should be. This is extremely detrimental not only to the artists' vision but also to their agency in choosing to either address, or not, their religious and socio-political realities. Iranian art is not intended to complain about its social circumstance, but by expecting it to do so, critics create a Western imagining of Iranian contemporary art.

***Iran Inside Out: Influences of Homeland and Diaspora on the Artistic Language of Contemporary Iranian Artists* (Chelsea Museum of Art NYC, June-September 2009)**

Iran Inside Out at the Chelsea Museum of Art in New York City displays thirty-five artists living and working in Iran alongside twenty-one other living in the diaspora. The result is fifty-six contemporary Iranian artists that are challenging clichés of Iranian art and society and showing a new image of Iran on the world stage: a country bursting at the seams with a lively civil society. The show offers insight into the energy of this contentious society, and implicates a generation that is caught between geographic and social constraints and artistic expression. The show is organized into five loose thematic sections: In Search of the Axis of Evil; From Iran to

¹²⁶ Janet Randy. "Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East." *The Middle East in London*. April 2009. Web

Queeran and Everything in Between; The Culture Shop: Special Sale-All Must Go!; Iran Recycled: From Vintage to Vogue; Where in the World: City Quiz.

Iran Inside Out was not planned to coincide with the outbreak of the Green Movement in Iran. However it is impossible to look at the show without considering the new socio-political context. The timely and momentous political events in Iran greatly increased popular curiosity for the exhibition. On the opening night, a line stretched down 22nd street in Chelsea, NY with eager art consumers intent on bypassing the guest list. Furthermore, the museum had originally intended to bring half a dozen artists from Iran to engage with the public and talk openly about their artistic practice. Yet, given the political unrest, only Farideh Lashai was able to make the journey.

This show, curated by Sam Bardaouil and Tim Fellrath, attempts to eradicate the stereotypes of Iranian culture that describe it as primitive, over religious or traditional. Instead, *Iran Inside Out* greatly compliments the discourse of freedom and social justice that the Green Movement has allowed. This museum show, most importantly, serves as a reminder of the one important commonality between these fifty six artists on display: no matter their geographic location, they all seek to establish an individual artistic identity, free from categorization and cliché.

The five thematic categories of the show are far from fixed in their interpretations and are certainly not without dialogue between diaspora and homeland art. In the section “In Search of the Axis of Evil” for example, Behdad Lahooti’s men’s urinal (Image 13) sprawled with words such as “youth, housing, jobs, inflation, employment” addresses his disaffection with Iranian society. On the other hand, Arash Hanaei’s photo tableau (Image 14) restaging Abu Ghraib scenes with action figures is a social commentary on US detainment practices in the post 9/11

era. In conversation, these two works counter 2009 commentary of Iran as wanting to shape itself in the West's image of liberal democracy. Instead, these pieces address internal grievances but also celebrate accomplishments on both sides. While Lahooti does not deny the problems that are present in Iranian society, Hanaei's reminder about American infringements on justice prove that Iran is in fact not looking for American recommendations for restructuring its society.

Similarly, in the category "From Iran to Queeran" there is a dialogue between Berlin based Shahram Entekhabi and photojournalist Abbas Kowsari. Entekhabi covers the women on escort service pamphlets with hijabs (Image 15) while Kowsari's images document the first graduating class of female police cadets in Iran-wielding guns, engaging in car chases, and escalating building facades (Image 16). In this manner, the artists engage the viewer in a debate about female agency in Iran-on the one hand, we have the secrecy of sexual life and on the other, the most demonstrative account of female power.¹²⁷

The curatorial statement of the show *Iran Inside Out*, written by curator Sam Bardaouil, characterizes Iran as a country of contradictions. In the middle of a global controversy, the show seeks to explore the human spirit both inside and outside of the country.¹²⁸ By promoting the common humanity that binds people of different cultures together, the show wants to allow viewers to formulate their views on Iran through the medium of the visual arts. The year 2009 marked the thirtieth anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, a historical moment that has continued to divide Iranian society until this day. The inclusion of artists living in Iran (35 of the 56) and diaspora Iranian artists showcases two different sets of struggles: Iranian artists within Iran struggle with a restricted civil society while diasporic artists struggle with their exilic loss

¹²⁷ Ben Davis. "Iranian Art Now." *Artnet*. 2009. Web.

¹²⁸ Sam Bardaouil, Till Fellrath, and Anthony Downey. *Iran Inside Out - Influences of Homeland and Diaspora on the Artistic Language of Contemporary Iranian Artists*. New York, NY: Chelsea Art Museum, 2009. Print.

and subsequent lack of a sense of place and true identity.¹²⁹ Tim Fellrath, the museum director, considers Iran to be a “case study” in the exploration of identity. He aims to create a “statement against cultural prejudice and misconceptions on all sides.”¹³⁰ The rhetoric of “insight” is omnipresent in the curatorial statement and various essays that constitute the show catalogue. In the preface, Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller says that the show is meant to “expose the beauty of Iran to Western Audience”. Furthermore, Anthony Downey adds that Iranian art was outside the Western canon for it was considered geographically indigenous. As a result, he calls for Iranian cultural practices to do what “politics has failed to do”-open a dialogue of exchanged between Western and Iranian societies.¹³¹

Many young Iranian artists have rightfully become the main critics of their societies. The show tackles many important themes of contemporary Iran such as: governmental repression, the role of women, homosexuality, global engagement and identity. Sam Bardaouil aimed to create a show that didn’t fit neo-orientalist stereotypes of calligraphy or the trope of the veiled woman that have unfairly come to describe Middle Eastern art: “No more ‘behind the veil’ or ‘taking off the veil’ or titles like that. No more veils.”¹³² The Green Revolution also gave the pieces in the show an entirely new dimension. Their semantics became more powerful and even more

¹²⁹ Sam Bardaouil, Till Fellrath, and Anthony Downey. *Iran Inside Out - Influences of Homeland and Diaspora on the Artistic Language of Contemporary Iranian Artists*. New York, NY: Chelsea Art Museum, 2009. Print.

¹³⁰ Sam Bardaouil, Till Fellrath, and Anthony Downey. *Iran Inside Out - Influences of Homeland and Diaspora on the Artistic Language of Contemporary Iranian Artists*. New York, NY: Chelsea Art Museum, 2009. Print.

¹³¹ Sam Bardaouil, Till Fellrath, and Anthony Downey. *Iran Inside Out - Influences of Homeland and Diaspora on the Artistic Language of Contemporary Iranian Artists*. New York, NY: Chelsea Art Museum, 2009. Print.

¹³² Randy Kennedy. "In Chelsea, Art Intersects with Reality of Iranian Conflict." *New York Times*. 26 June 2009. Web.

accessible to the unknowing art observer. The timing of the show also made it a symbolic visual aid to the Green Movement as well as a form of peaceful rebellion.

Upon entering the show, the viewer comes face to face with a bright photoshopped self portrait by Tehran based artist Vahid Sharifian. The artist shows himself donning a big Afro, sideburns, lying intimately in the middle of the freeway with a relaxed lion (Image 17). The lion is an important symbol in Iranian history, for it was one of the emblems of the Iranian monarchy before the revolution. Bardaouil has described Sharifian as the “Jeff Koons of Iran”, saying that his work “grabs the attention of Americans who probably have a hard time envisioning Koonisian temperament in work in Tehran-particularly these days.”¹³³ Inherent in this comparison to Koons is the need to make the work of Iranian artist Vahid Sharifian legible to Western audiences. By creating a point of comparison, it discredits the work of art as an entity to be understood independently of Western explanations and justifications. It is only through association with the familiar that Vahid can be understood. Similarly, the pre-imagined idea that Iranian art is inherently political also plagues the understanding of this series of work. Sharifian comments in the show catalogue:

“As soon as I replace the receiver, the phone rings again. It’s from BBC Persia. They want to talk to me about my work. They say: you are playing with political ideas in your work, right? I say: in which pictures? They say: in your ‘Queen of the Jungle (If I had a Gun)’ series. I say: what political ideas are you talking about? They say: Iranian politics. I say: Iranian politics has nothing to do with my life. They say: how is that possible? Don’t you live in Iran? I say: no, I live in my own house. They say: what about the issue of identity then? I say: it stops in my room. They say: can you explain? I say: imagine that the population of New York is one person-in that

¹³³ Randy Kennedy. "In Chelsea, Art Intersects with Reality of Iranian Conflict." *New York Times*. 26 June 2009. Web.

situation what meaning does identity have?... They ask: who has influenced you most in your work. I say: God. They say: seriously, let's stop joking. I say: I've been serious from the start..."¹³⁴

Shirin Fakhim, a Tehran based artist as well, presented her series *Tehran Prostitutes* (2008). Using a range of found objects and discarded items of clothing, Fakhim creates life-sized dolls that are made to look like prostitutes. While absurdly caricatured, they are a sad allusion to the fact that, despite governmental secrecy on the matter, Iran has approximately 100,000 prostitutes working in the capital city.¹³⁵ "Fakhim farcically combines Western hooker fashion with the codes of Islamic demur, torsos and heads made from cooking implements adorned with makeshift veils and chastity belts."¹³⁶ Her sculptures are both comfortingly domestic and provocatively crude, making the viewer uncomfortable not because of the depiction of prostitution, but rather, because of the taboos these prostitutes are subject to. Her "image of sexual prowess [is] conspicuously ill-fitting, painful and tragic."¹³⁷ It is this satirical humor against a seemingly morally conservative country that provides the most telling insight into the Persian working girl circuit.

Tehran Shopping Malls by Saghar Daeeri, another Tehran based artist, provides the viewer with paintings in vibrant colors, depicting women in seemingly fantastical landscapes:

¹³⁴ Sam Bardaouil, Till Fellrath, and Anthony Downey. *Iran Inside Out - Influences of Homeland and Diaspora on the Artistic Language of Contemporary Iranian Artists*. New York, NY: Chelsea Art Museum, 2009. Print.

¹³⁵ Robert Ayers. "Chelsea Museum Hits the Mark with Iran Inside Out." *Blouin Art Info*. 29 June 2009. Web.

¹³⁶ Sam Bardaouil, Till Fellrath, and Anthony Downey. *Iran Inside Out - Influences of Homeland and Diaspora on the Artistic Language of Contemporary Iranian Artists*. New York, NY: Chelsea Art Museum, 2009. Print.

¹³⁷ Sam Bardaouil, Till Fellrath, and Anthony Downey. *Iran Inside Out - Influences of Homeland and Diaspora on the Artistic Language of Contemporary Iranian Artists*. New York, NY: Chelsea Art Museum, 2009. Print.

“My works are about showing Tehran’s girls’ connection and communication with each other through fashion, the way they dress, choose their clothes. I’m talking ‘paradox’ in Iran, about the subtle manifestations of the ‘underground’ in public spaces. In my paintings, girls exhibit their feelings in a manner that comes across as modern and up to date with the latest trends, in a way that subdues the ever present Islamic dress code.”¹³⁸ Marissa Bronfman of the Huffington Post commented that the heavily made up faces, lacquered nails and the bleach blonde hair of the figures depicted in these paintings made her understand that Iranian women were influenced by American ideals of beauty.¹³⁹ It is only through this sense of familiarity with the figures in the work that Bronfman seeks to understand the statement being made by Daeeri. It would be detrimental to consider the fictional women in these works as seeking only to be Western. Instead, one must understand, that because of the compulsory veil, these women are forced to express themselves through superficial means such as overdone makeup and hair. If nothing else, such a manifestation can be considered a microform of resistance that tests the waters between veiling and visibility. This is a quality that is uniquely Iranian, and not, as Bronfman’s comment suggests, a way to appeal to non-Iranians.

Diasporic artist Shiva Ahmadi’s *Oil Barrel* series (Image 19) transforms used oil barrels from Texas into sculpture. The barrels are painted black and then ornamented with designs that resemble Persian miniatures. Ahmadi was influenced by her memories of the Iran-Iraq war that erupted when she was just six years old. She became incredibly sensitive to the suffering of others and the experience of war. When she moved to the United States, the first US-Iraq war

¹³⁸ Sam Bardaouil, Till Fellrath, and Anthony Downey. *Iran Inside Out - Influences of Homeland and Diaspora on the Artistic Language of Contemporary Iranian Artists*. New York, NY: Chelsea Art Museum, 2009. Print.

¹³⁹ Marissa Bronfman. "Iran Inside Out Shocks and Provokes at the Chelsea Art Museum." *The Huffington Post*. 13 Sept. 2009. Web.

broke out, invoking Ahmadi's personal memories of war. The paintings on the oil barrel depict through animalistic metaphors, the economic hardship, instability, uncertainty and suffering inherent in conflict: deformed shapes, destruction, blood and headless horses allude to the violence of war. The oil barrel itself is a stand in for what Ahmadi believes is the "number one reason behind current conflicts": oil. She sees the current problems in Iran as being rooted in the curse of having valuable natural resources that the international market seeks to exploit at all costs. "These narratives somehow resemble my own life story and how wars, revolution and immigration turned into pieces and how I am struggling to put them back together to define who I am. My art is what unifies these parts and creates a new language that enables me to communicate to other people in different cultures."¹⁴⁰

Similarly, Sara Rahbar artwork is evocative of her constant questioning of the "who am I?", "what and where is home?", "why am I here?"¹⁴¹ Her works reflect the image of her life, her geographic location, her history, her environment and her memories. Rahbar's series takes American flags and weaves over them with Iranian tapestry fragments, outlines of the map of Iran or lines of Persian poetry. Her aim is to play on the duality and the conflicting nature of her two identities. Yet, by allowing symbols of each of her worlds to overlay, she seeks to illustrate their reconciliation. Unfortunately, Rahbar falls victim to the theme of kitsch and faddism by limiting herself to the visual binary of "occident" and orient" and depicting diasporic life as contingent on geographic locale.

¹⁴⁰ Sam Bardaouil, Till Fellrath, and Anthony Downey. *Iran Inside Out - Influences of Homeland and Diaspora on the Artistic Language of Contemporary Iranian Artists*. New York, NY: Chelsea Art Museum, 2009. Print.

¹⁴¹ Sam Bardaouil, Till Fellrath, and Anthony Downey. *Iran Inside Out - Influences of Homeland and Diaspora on the Artistic Language of Contemporary Iranian Artists*. New York, NY: Chelsea Art Museum, 2009. Print.

Iran Inside Out was most problematic for the touristic gaze with which it approached Iranian Contemporary art and contributed to its self-orientalization. The show showcased a variety of interpretations of stereotypes with which the West imagines the East. The groups of diaspora and native artists were often presented as either sources of individual creativity or exiled and oppressed identities. The titles of each section of the show did not seem to reflect curatorial concerns or artistic context. Instead, the recycling of terms such as “Axis of Evil”, “Special sale on Stereotype”, for example, only reinforced the tropes of Iranian culture that have entered Western psyche. By playing into these pre conceived notions, and, I would argue, endorsing them, the show simply gave them a new visual vocabulary rather than a rectified one. Furthermore, the title of the show *Iran Inside out-Influences of Homeland and Diaspora on the Artistic Language of Contemporary Iranian Artists*, implies that the organizers were familiar with Iranian art from every possible aspect.¹⁴² Furthermore, the phrase “Inside out” embodies a “tourist gaze”¹⁴³ that gives the show curators the privilege of exploring the mystery that is Iranian artistic production. Iranian Contemporary art was nevertheless presented as a “corporate identity” to appeal to diaspora communities.¹⁴⁴ Beyond the geographical marker of Iran, the underlying organizational and thematic structure of the show was quite vague. The most coherent groupings were works that focused on the body in order to question modes of identity production.

Some of the artists themselves were not blind to the shortcomings of the project. Hassanzadeh, for example, calls himself an “Occidentalizer”, for he studies what appeals to the

¹⁴² Yulia,Tikhonova. "Self-Orientalise: Iran Inside Out.".Web.

¹⁴³ Yulia,Tikhonova. "Self-Orientalise: Iran Inside Out.".Web.

¹⁴⁴ Kamran Rastegar. "Iran Inside Out." *Arab Studies Journal* 2010: 344-48. Web.

West and emulates them in his work.¹⁴⁵ He deliberately plays into Western stereotypes, allowing himself to fluctuate between the mutually exclusive “occident” and the “orient”. As Tikhonova makes explicit in her review, the occident and orient are mutually dependent: the Orient helps define the West and its imagination of itself and ironically, feeds Occidentalism. Furthermore, photographer Ghandchi states in the show catalogue that she is aware of the exotic demarcations that underlie the show and called it both “pigeonholing” and “reductive”. Similarly, Barbad Golshiri understands that “...exoticism has little to do with being exotic; it is rather a trend that operates within an ideological apparatus”.¹⁴⁶

Finally, the rhetoric of the show was anthropological at best, introducing Iran to the West as a means by which to counter stereotypes and defend the value and integrity of Iranian culture. However, Iranian culture does not need the West to either recognize or defend it. By focusing highly on distinctions of dress, sexuality, body type, ancestry, belonging, history, the work in the show falls short of showing Iranian artistic production as a dynamic force. Instead, the artists are partisan in their orientalisation: they are acting as a “camera obscura for the polluting Western gaze.”¹⁴⁷ The show becomes an exhibition of Western clichés through exotic and sensational motifs. The show falls into the trap of attempting to match the viewers’ expectations by curating with a pre-imagined idea of the themes Iranian art should address. Once again, the artists were reduced to the ethnic, geographic, cultural and political realities that made their artistic identity.

Although *Unveiled* and *Iran Inside Out* framed the Green Movement chronologically, their curatorial practices were not entirely dissimilar. Both shows approached Iranian art with a touristic gaze that privileged the Western onlookers perspective. It attempted to make Iranian art

¹⁴⁵ Yulia, Tikhonova. "Self-Orientalise: Iran Inside Out." Web.

¹⁴⁶ Yulia, Tikhonova. "Self-Orientalise: Iran Inside Out." Web.

¹⁴⁷ Yulia, Tikhonova. "Self-Orientalise: Iran Inside Out." Web.

legible to an unknowing yet curious audience. The rhetoric of both shows via journalistic art criticism and gallery publications emphasized the “mystery” that was Iran and used Western artists and frames of reference to make the art more comprehensible.

The altruistic mission of giving viewers insight into Iranian culture also failed due to some structural flaws in the two shows. *Unveiled*, on the one hand, was far from an expansive and all encompassing account of Middle Eastern art. The fact alone that the works were from Saatchi’s personal collection greatly limited the scope of the exhibition. Furthermore, the title of the show, like the show itself, lacked a geographic, formal and thematic framing, thus further making the dialogue between the works more difficult to understand. Similarly, *Iran Inside out* was overhung across two floors and not coherently curated; other than the referent “Iran”, it was increasingly difficult to understand how the works entered in dialogue with each other. The overly expansive nature of the show resulted in a strong dissonance between the different subsections and the works within them. Finally, the unfortunate circumstance of Iranian artists being unable to travel to the show, hampered the possibility for discussion and more informed critical engagement with the art.

Moreover, the overlap in artists between the two shows confirms the idea of an unchanging framing of Iranian contemporary art outside Iran. Once again, a handful of artists were recycled and cast as stand-ins for not only the Iranian contemporary art community, but also as examples of what Iranian art is expected to look like. Although impressive in the quality of work displayed, these two exhibitions were products of the lack of expansive knowledge on Iranian art that both curatorial parties had.

It is therefore not with great surprise that the resulting journalistic art criticism took a particularly headline news and sensationalist media approach when analyzing the work in these

two settings. In many accounts, the political status of the Islamic Republic of Iran was imposed onto the artwork, with barely any mention of the artist's intention or narrative. The journalistic criticism that resulted from these two shows fell into the trap of the "exceptionality narrative". The works were often situated in political perceptions of Iran and omitted art historical analysis that would otherwise position these works in the legacy of art making inside Iran.

The 2009 moment had a great impact on both the visual arts and the subsequent representations of Iranian artistic production. In this vain, many commentators looked for the Tehran that they were seeing on the news in the art. Greatly absent from these discussions was the connection between Green Movement leader Mir Hossein Mousavi and the Iranian cultural and artistic apparatus. There was a great lack of emphasis on the hope for a new Iranian "glasnost" and cultural expansiveness. Instead, popular criticism stressed the ways in which the art represented popular grievances in Iranian society, grievances that were, at best, imperialistic impressions of what Iranian civil society was lacking. Considering that art is a privileged window into a society, this reading was greatly anthropological in its singular consideration of the theme of politics as manifested in art.

Instead, Iranian artists should be considered active participants not only in Iranian society but also on the global contemporary art market. It is detrimental to assume that given the conservative nature of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the restrictions on Iranian freedoms of expression, that artists working in Iran are complaining about the conditions under which they work. In light of the points made in part I, Iranian artists are actively carving out a space for themselves in society and creating a flourishing and vibrant contemporary art scene for themselves. Although the magnitude of their scope does not equate art institutions abroad, their affinity for market pressure is, just like contemporary artists elsewhere, their primary anxiety.

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However, by imagining their works as political or social criticism, Iranian artists are denied the opportunity to be equal players in the international art movement. We must ask ourselves: would we turn to a Jeff Koons retrospective to gain insight on the state of affairs in the United States?

CONCLUSION

When I first set out to do my research, I expected to encounter an artistic society that was struggling to carve out a space for itself in light of the Islamic Republic's limitations on civil society and freedom of expression. What I soon realized was that I came equipped with all the wrong questions. My initial research question: what does it mean to be a cultural producer in a country with censorship, I understood, was informed by a pre-imagined idea of what artistic practice in a repressive society meant. What I encountered instead was a class of artists and leaders who has succeeded in giving the medium of visual arts in Iran its hard earned independence from the state.

Iranian artists, much to the surprise of many, are not fear stricken, or illicit producers. Their practice is not underground and they assume the risks of their situation in order to do what they love. The restrictions to their visual vocabulary contribute to their creativity: they speak in the language of metaphors, sometimes so sophisticated that the authorities are unable to decode their true messages. They consider themselves to be editors, rather than subject to self-censorship and their art is a mode of practical activism and resistance. This framing restores their sense of agency and gives an additional face to the metanarratives of Iranian society that are otherwise so pervasive. These Iranian artists are also particularly humble, and do not think that they can or wish to change their societies. They are simply seeking to express themselves and not only to refute the many cultural tropes that have been imposed on them. If we limit our interpretation of Iranian art to the taboos that we expect it to address, then we risk portraying Iranian art as introverted and bound by tradition. Yet, Iranian artists gain from and contribute to the global art scene in a similar manner to their Western contemporaries.

These artists, although challenged by their situation, are ultimately victorious. Living in the “State of Hopelessness”, they have overcome many odds and further ignited their need to persevere and create. Their concerns are not particularly grounded in their lack of complete civil liberties. Instead, many of these artists were upset to be bound by place. The incapacity to travel, to participate in exchange programs or study abroad is perhaps most detrimental to their practice. Although they are well educated, well read and overall well informed on the international art scene, they are, in most cases, unable to access it in real time. Furthermore, the lack of local and state patronage greatly limits the expansion of art institutions and academies. In light of this, the Iranian art community has learned to be independent. Artists are teaching themselves to unlearn in the formal state run art academies and have organized independent salon style studio and theory classes. Furthermore, galleries in Iran are greatly profit driven, and due to the competitive nature of the market, are hardly united entities. This circumstance is greatly detrimental to young emerging artists as galleries prioritize the sale of internationally recognized and celebrated Iranian masters.

Outside of Iran however, we continue to present Iranian art with a pre-imagined idea of what it should look like. This circumstance is greatly informed by the limited knowledge of Iranian society that is accessible outside of the country. Iranian art is constantly showcased as a stand-in for the entire society, with a mission to disobey or destroy stereotypes. Such an attitude assumes that Iranian art must defend its society, that it is laced with a didactic purpose and should, in some way, educate “us”. Iranian art, however, should not be a tool by which the occident seeks reconciliation with the Orient. This idea is, in itself, orientalist: it assumes that Iranian artists must produce work that is legible to Western consumers, to help them understand and identify with Iran. The artists I interviewed in Iran resented and scoffed at the way in which

neo-orientalism was still informing Western perceptions of Iran. They complained that often they feel defeated when the messages of their works are altered or blatantly disregarded by a West that seeks to define them. Instead, Iranian artists showcase their unique treatment of modernity through their artistic practice. They are products, like artists anywhere, of a lived experience that is dynamic and ever evolving. They are motivated to rise above the constraints on their practice and engage with the global art community.

The 2009 moment was a momentous occasion that was often simplistically portrayed as an Iranian affinity for liberal democracy. It underestimated the visual impact of the Green Movement and Mousavi's promise for a new Iranian "glasnost". The Green Movement was not a revolution for democracy as much as it was a uniquely Iranian movement for social empowerment and civil liberties. The analysis of *Unveiled* and *Iran Inside Out* seeks to challenge Western attempts at describing and understanding Iranian art in its own image. The popular reception of these exhibitions sheds light on the stark discrepancies between Iranian art production and its subsequent reception. The orientalist lens with which we view the Middle East is far from being dismantled. The popular journalistic criticism that emerged from these two shows equated the political situation of Iran with its visual culture. The "exceptionality narrative" was ever present, and consequently, it diminished or blatantly omitted the voice of the artists in question.

The biggest gap in understanding Iranian art is communication and education. The lack of direct contact between Iran and the majority of the Western world, and the ensuing curiosity of life inside Iran, sets the stage for metanarratives and tropes to be created. One must nevertheless be a critical consumer of mass media and pay closer attention to what the artists themselves have to say about their work and how they engage with the global art market. It does not suffice to

frame Iranian art in the West's image: we are better suited to celebrate Iranian art for its hard earned independence from the state and to acknowledge the unique visual impact of such a feat.

APPENDIX



Image 1: *Tehran Remixed* (2005) by Amir Ali Ghassemi
Source: Artist's Website



Image 2: Aaran Gallery, First Floor
Source: Personal Photograph



Image 3: Aaran Gallery Opening, August 2014
Source: Personal Photograph



Image 4: Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, Main Staircase
Source: Personal Photograph



Image 5: Henry Moore in TMOCA Sculpture Garden
Source: Personal Photograph

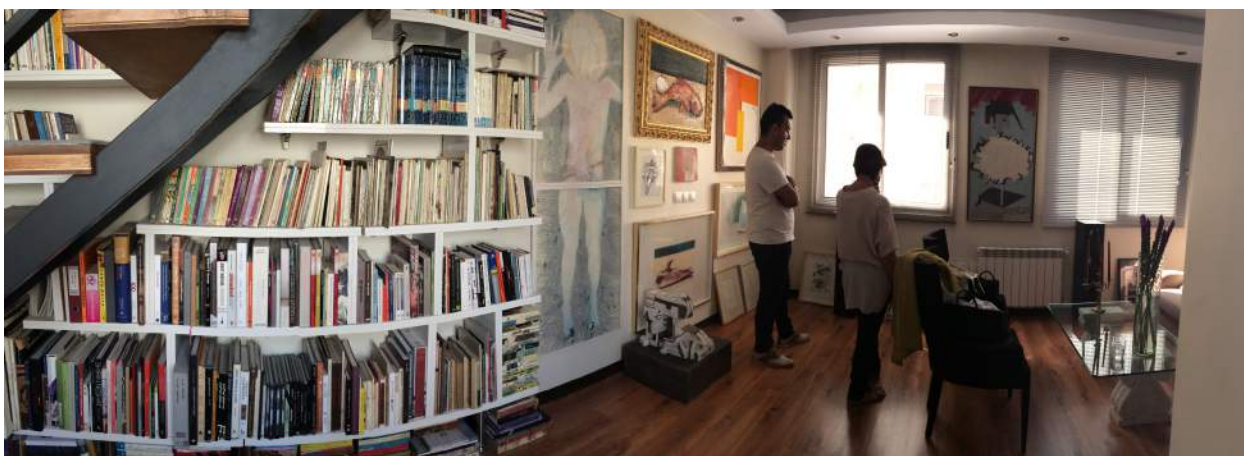


Image 6: Ali Bakhtiari's Apartment
Source: Personal Photograph



Image 7: Mariam Amini's Home Studio
Source: Personal Photograph



Image 8: Behrang Samadzadeghan, *Strong Fist* (2013)
Source: Aaran Gallery Website



Image 9: Ramin Haerizadeh, *Men of Allah* (01) (2008)
Source: Saatchi Gallery



Image 10: Shirin Fakhim, *Tehran Prostitutes* (2008)
Source: Saatchi Gallery

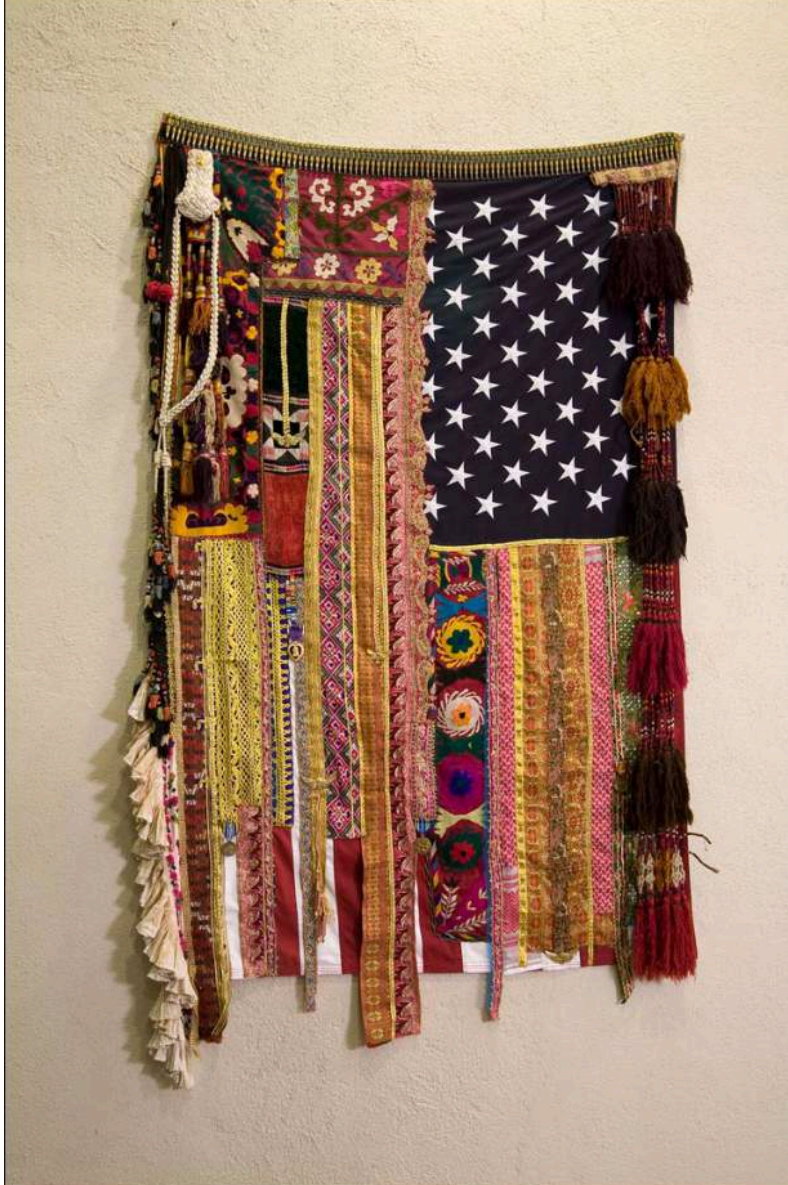


Image 11: Sara Rahbar, *Flag # 19* (2008)
Source: Saatchi Gallery



Image 12: Tala Madani, *Tower Reflections* (2006)
Source: Saatchi Gallery



Image 13: Behdad Lahooti, *A Cliché for Mass Media* (2008)
Source: The Wall Street Journal



Image 14: Arash Hanaei, *Abu Ghraib (or How to Engage in Dialogue)* (2004)
Source: ArtNet



Image 15: Shahram Entekhabi, *Islamic Carding* (2007)

Source: Artist's Website



Image 16: Abbas Kowsari, *Shade of Earth* (2008)
Source: Artist's Website



Image 17: Vahid Sharifian, *Untitled from the series Queen of the Jungle (If I Had a Gun)* (2007-2008)

Source: White Hot Magazine



Image 18: Saghar Daeeri, *Shopping Malls of Tehran* (2008)
Source: Artist's Website



Image 19: Shiva Ahmadi, *Oil Barrel no. 4* (2009)

Source: The Wall Street Journal

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