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Installation view of "Abbas Kiarostami: Image Maker" at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center

Abbas Kiarostami
From "Snow White"
1978-2003
Iranian Art Foundation

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IRANIAN EVOLUTION
by Ben Davis

Abbas Kiarostami, "Image Maker," Mar. 1-May 28, 2007, at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019; Feb. 11-Apr. 29, 2007, at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, 22-25 Jackson Ave, Long Island City, N.Y. 11101

Iranian film director Abbas Kiarostami is known for the "radical humanism" of his depictions of ordinary Iranians. So, at a time when the news and entertainment media in the U.S. teem with surprisingly one-dimensional narratives about scheming Persians hatching diabolical plots, it is all the more notable that the exhibitions of his work on view at P.S.1 and the Museum of Modern Art contain nary a human face.

At P.S.1, Kiarostami's gorgeous black-and-white photographs focus on the patterns formed by the shadows of trees in the stark white surface of snow, and on roads cutting dream-like through the rugged Iranian countryside. In the distance, one or two figures can sometimes be glimpsed -- but they are details in the larger composition, not subjects to be identified with.

Of the two series of color photos also at P.S.1, one focuses on images glimpsed through the rain-spotted windshield of a car, transforming passing trees and other vehicles into abstract ghosts; the other shows different views of a grove of trees, capturing the contrasts and interplays between their different angles and bark patterns. In a separate gallery, a 10-minute film installation concentrates on the play of shadows on hanging window screens.

Meanwhile, MoMA presents a five-part film installation by Kiarostami in its second floor media gallery, depicting locales around the Caspian Sea, each a seeming meditation on the patterns that emerge from some phenomenon: driftwood captured by the surf, animals clustering in front of the waves, or light flickering on the surface of water. One sequence depicts people as they pass along the boardwalk in rhythmic groups -- but as in the photographs, they seem abstract elements, like the pigeons that pass at their feet. It is all lyrical to the point of being disembodied.

Nevertheless, sometimes what is cropped out can be as crucial for understanding a photo as what is included, and the multilayered picture of Iranian society depicted in Kiarostami's movies, even if it is deliberately absent here, helps grasp the significance of these images. Consider a decisive moment in the Iranian director's best-known work, *Taste of Cherry*: The protagonist, who has been circling Tehran in a car, looking for someone to help bury him after he commits suicide, has picked up an elderly Turkish man. Attempting to talk the protagonist out of killing himself, the man tells him of a time when he himself considered suicide but changed his mind moments before hanging himself from a tree after tasting its berries. The man then launches into a speech about the beauty and diversity of nature. "You want to give it all up?" he concludes, "You want to give up the taste of cherries?"

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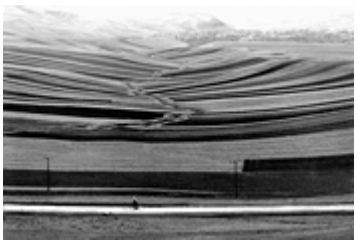

Abbas Kiarostami
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Throughout this key speech, we hear only the voices of the two men, watching the car wind through the arid landscape in long shot. And just as we hear this question, the vehicle passes a screen of trees, artfully planted so that they alternate tall ones with green foliage with shorter red shrubs. This delicate moment of revelation in the landscape offered to the viewer parallels the redemptive delights described. And this is the sense of the spiritual welling up in nature that suffuses Kiarostami's landscape photography.

What is really striking in the speech in *Taste of Cherry*, however, is that as an answer to the question of suicide, it's not particularly satisfactory -- a renewed affinity for life's little details seems rather ineffective next to any of the realities of the other characters encountered by the film's protagonist, from the roadside vendor who survives by selling scavenged plastic bags, to the gentle Afghani priest who has fled his homeland because of its conflicts, or even the Turkish gentleman himself, who agrees to the protagonist's bargain because the cash could help his sick son. Our middle-class protagonist's existential anguish, on the other hand, remains deliberately mysterious, abstract.

The point is that underlying this erethitic eye for the ethereal in Kiarostami's work is a deliberate diversion of the question of material forces. Indeed, corresponding to their lofty, transcendent feel, all the black-and-white images at P.S.1 are dated 1978-2003, as if it was a matter of indifference when any particular one was taken -- itself something of a statement given the monumental events represented by those book-ending dates in the Middle East, spanning the Iranian overthrow of the C.I.A.-backed Shah, on the one end, and the U.S. invasion of Iraq, on the other, with the eight years and one million casualties of the Iran-Iraq War -- during which the U.S. armed Sadaam Hussein in an effort to destabilize the Islamic republic -- in between.

"For many years," Kiarostami writes in an essay about his photos, "I would escape from the city, and indeed feel much better. Observing was a sedative for me." In interviews, he marks his evolution away from the more personal and political statements he made in the years that coincided with the revolution -- the films *Report* and *Case No. 1, Case No. 2* -- as being of a piece with his discovery of landscape photography. It is as if the very intensity of the spiritual meaning he distills from nature is an index of the geopolitical turbulence of modern Iran.

Nevertheless, there is a way that Kiarostami's artworks subtly capture these tensions even as they turn away from them. Again a reference to the movies is key. Critic Jonathan Rosenbaum has identified a theme in the Iranian master's films: the contradictory relationships between humble working-class or peasant folk and worldly, privileged media figures, reflecting the director's own position. Kiarostami's stylistic M.O. embodies this social tension. On the one hand, his approach is ultra-naturalistic, using only non-professional actors and working without a script to give an extraordinary sense for ordinary Iranians -- but also sometimes putting him in an openly manipulative relation with his subjects (in *Taste of Cherry,* to get the reactions he wanted, he convinced his participants that they were in a car with someone who actually wanted to commit suicide). On the other hand, Kiarostami's films project an intense sense of their own filmed-ness, often pointedly (as in the famous conclusion of *Taste of Cherry*, where the director steps into the frame to show himself directing events). These moments of self-awareness are an effort to lay bare, rather than paper over, the contradictions in which his art finds itself enmeshed.

Something like the ghost of this strategy persists in Kiarostami's artworks at MoMA and P.S.1. Stylistically, his photos have the

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unforced, direct feeling of his cinema. They are infused with a keen sense of place (every one is taken within 30 kilometers of Tehran). But at the same time, floating in the background is a sense of inner artifice, of distance.

The lush color photos of birds hopping among the trunks of trees would seem to be the very image of nature at harmony with itself. But as one walks counterclockwise around the gallery contemplating different angles on the grove, the final image in the sequence is interrupted with rough, nonsensical characters and glyphs scratched into the trunks -- nature not as self-contained harmony, but as a surface that human will is carved into. In the photos of abstract patterns in rain-spotted car windows, there's the suggestion of the screen as something that both allows access to reality and distorts it -- an allegory of the isolation of the artist from the world he depicts.

Screens are actually the subject of the 10-minute video, *Summer Afternoon*. As we watch, two window shades quake, bending the silhouettes cast onto them by a tree outside. In case there's any doubt where the filmed motion is supposed to come from, an electric fan is stationed in the galleries, turning slowly. This may seem a weirdly unrefined, blunt gesture -- yet it's akin to the moments in Kiarostami's movies where his naturalism is undercut to remind the viewer of the artifice of it all (the giant vinyl wallpaper version of one of his black-and-white trees-in-snow photos that covers one wall at P.S.1 serves a similarly blunt function, breaking up a false, exoticized intimacy imputed to the rest of the series).

Still, the prop of the fan is also a bit of a lure. Carefully observing the play of shadows on the moving screens in *Summer Afternoon*, one realizes that twice, subtly, the trees themselves beyond the window bend in the force of an unknown breeze, causing a completely different displacement of shadows. Again, the installation is a play on the split between two different worlds, the one of the viewer and the one in the film, moving into and then out of synch with one another.

The coincidence and tension between art and nature is also, finally, the key to *Five*, the 72-minute film installation at MoMA. The first four projections each focus on framing something against the rhythmic motion of the waves -- driftwood, people passing on a boardwalk, dogs or ducks -- and the natural, organic patterns that they seem to develop under sustained attention. The soundtrack is mainly silent, except for the rustling of the waves -- and then a decidedly non-natural injection of classical music at the end of the duck sequence, as a cue to proceed to the final piece.

Where the other sequences frame action against the background of the ocean during the day, the final sequence, attained by entering a darkened grotto at the back of the galleries, focuses on the trembling surface of water itself at night, its microscopic movements glimpsed via a reflection of the moon. Instead of the soothing sound of the waves, now we are surrounded by the rowdy sound of life -- insects, birds and frogs. As we watch, clouds cover the moon, leaving us in darkness. A storm breaks, and flashes of lightening illuminate the rain, resembling bursts of digital static. As morning dawns, the edge of the land slowly emerges as a shadow at the corner of the screen, revealing that the camera has moved in the darkness. Here, it is as if Kiarostami finds a basic metaphor for photography in nature: We watch patterns of light register on a surface, and then the rest of the world emerges from the process.

All this is about nature, but equally about becoming aware of how the artist's intelligence shapes our awareness of the natural. The refinement of Kiarostami's art is constructed as a spiritual refuge, but is also filled with a self-awareness of itself as a construction.

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Installation view of "Abbas Kiarostami: Image Maker" at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, with *Summer Afternoon* (2006) at left

Abbas Kiarostami
From *Five*
2006
Museum of Modern Art

Just as it would be wrong to speak of the politics of Iran without understanding how the country has been shaped by international machinations, it is wrong to consider Kiarostami's themes as strictly "Iranian" -- they are the products of a cosmopolitan artist, in dialogue with international images of his country. In 2007, in New York, against the background of escalating international rhetoric, this means his elegance burns all the more brightly as a plea to hold up an alternate, urbane image of Iran, speaking for an internal diversity of the country we don't often see. At the same time, the work's self-awareness, with its roots in a sense of the artist's social isolation, is particularly poignant in the context of political tensions that threaten its delicate symmetries.

Such reflections might seem to burden these images with an outside reference that they themselves deliberately edit out. Yet even the most abstract image is the product of a social background it abstracts from, and as this background grows more alarming, it is bound to reverberate somehow. I leave the final word to the artist himself. In *Roads of Kiarostami*, a film essay the director made about his landscape photos (shown during his film retrospective at MoMA last month), the camera pans slowly over still images of his black-and-white landscapes. On the soundtrack, classical music plays as the director speaks about the poetic significance of the road as metaphor for man's journey. It is an almost perfect sketch of a cultivated, inward-looking artistic consciousness.

At the end of these lyrical reflections, we arrive at a photo of a dog padding through the snow. Without warning, a mushroom cloud blossoms violently, superimposed behind the image. The picture onscreen catches fire at its corner, slowly curls up and melts, leaving only a black void. A Persian poem appears offering a prayer for peace, and then the director pointedly inserts the date of the film's creation, August 2005 -- a reminder that art, no matter how transcendent, can't escape the burden of its political moment.

BEN DAVIS is associate editor of *Artnet Magazine*.

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Abdolrahman Bagheri in Abbas Kiarostami's *Ta'm E Guilass (Taste Of Cherry)* (1997)
Courtesy Zeitgeist Films/Photofest