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Installation view of Shirana Shahbazi's "Meanwhile" at the Swiss Insititute



Shirana Shahbazi
Schmetterling-15-2007
2007
Courtesy Galerie Bob van Orsouw and Salon 94



Shirana Shahbazi
Frucht-01-2007
2007
Courtesy Galerie Bob van Orsouw and Salon 94

THE CONTRA IRAN AFFAIR

by Ben Davis

Shirana Shahbazi, "Meanwhile," Sept. 13-Oct. 27, 2007, at Swiss Institute, 495 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10012

There is a keen sense of alienation from images in the works of Shirana Shahbazi at the Swiss Institute -- which is to say that casual viewers might not get that much out of them on their own.

A still-life of ducks, berries and cabbages, a butterfly specimen, a branch of fruit, a stalk of orange flowers, a sculptural chunk of coral -- all of these suspended on neutral colored background in the style of advertising. A scraggly desert landscape, or an empty path through the woods. An abstract color-field that fades from pink to white. A wall-sized photo of a young woman's head, cocked to the side and sort-of reminiscent of Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. This is like high-brow stock photography.

The images are often juxtaposed in pairs, and alternate between sepia, black-and-white and color, creating the sense that there is some esthetic game being played, the rules of which are not quite spelled out. This cryptic sense is not really novel in and of itself (American conceptual photographers like Lewis Baltz, who worked overtime to illustrate the limits of what a photo could show, are a stated influence). What is novel in Shahbazi's case is that this game is part of a wrestling match about identity between different generations of artists from Iran.

Shahbazi's work has certainly benefited from the recent public interest in the Middle East -- in addition to showing at Salon 94 in New York and at the 2003 Venice Biennale, she was featured along with figures like Shirin Neshat, Walid Raad and Shahzia Sikander in "Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking," the Museum of Modern Art's recent survey of supposedly Islamic-influenced contemporary art. Reconstructing Shahbazi's trajectory, however, the style she has developed is as much a reaction to this wave of interest as it is a matter of comfortably riding it. The work at the Swiss Institute fits nicely into the mode that she has settled on recently. It is not, however, the mode that brought her fame.

Born in Tehran in 1974, Shahbazi moved to Germany when she was 11. She studied photography in Dortmund, Germany, and Zurich, Switzerland (where she has been living -- hence her appearance at the Swiss Institute). In 2002, she won the £15,000 Citigroup Photography Prize in London, beating out Roger Ballen, Elina Brotherus, Philip-Lorca diCorcia and Thomas Ruff. Her winning portfolio was comprised of images of Iran.

A woman with a bag of groceries stops to tie her son's shoe. Cars pass along a snaking highway outside Tehran. A bride in a white dress smiles below a flowering tree. A woman in a headscarf is seated pensively at a couch, smoking a cigarette. While Shahbazi's work has always exuded a sense of subtle intellectual choreography, and she has long played around with exhibition formats when showing it, these images are notable for their unforced character and



Shirana Shahbazi

Texas-01-2004

2004

Courtesy Galerie Bob van Orsouw and Salon 94



Shirana Shahbazi

Stas-01-2005

2005

Courtesy Galerie Bob van Orsouw and Salon 94



Shirana Shahbazi's *Verlauf-05-2007* (2007) [left] and *Vögel-04-2007* (2007)



Shirana Shahbazi's *Mineral-07-2007* (2007) [left] and *Orchidee-02-2007* (2007)

sense of ordinary humanity, a quality that makes them unique in terms of contemporary images of Iran -- something the Citigroup judges noted in citing her over her more celebrated peers.

Nevertheless, Shahbazi has stated that she quickly wearied of the way people read into her work statements about Iranian culture and society. Speaking in *Flash Art*, she describes how in conversation, again and again, the image of the woman smoking a cigarette came up: "It seems to strike people as a very touching or moving matter that a woman with a veil should be smoking," she says. "I wasn't aware of how touching it could be for a Westerner to see that. To me it is completely normal."

This last statement must surely be more a challenge to the public than statement of fact -- having spent her mature life in Europe, schooled in the Bernd and Hilla Becher line of German photography, Shahbazi makes photos that are elegantly constructed to capture an interplay between the expectations of her intended, Western audience and concrete details of Iranian life (in fact, it is only recently that this work has become interesting to dealers in Iran, and then only after international success has given them an aura of significance). What the above statement clearly expresses, however, is the dilemma of Shahbazi's position, stemming from the fact that the very conditions of her success -- an opening for artists from Middle Eastern countries -- often seems to have less to do with an informed interest in other cultures than it does with a hunger for easily digested commentary on the "Clash of Civilizations."

The same interviewer in *Flash Art* asks Shahbazi about Shirin Neshat, a more established artist by far, but a fellow Iranian who left her native country as a young woman. Of Neshat's slow-mo video essays of women in veils, Shahbazi is blunt: "[W]hat she is doing is not good for our country -- in a way it's very American and it goes very well with what you can see on CNN about Iran." Neshat insists that her works are "personal," yet Shahbazi thinks that they make it "easy to put 20 countries together and say, 'This is about the Islamic woman;'" Neshat's "work is highly arguable -- and I don't see how she takes responsibility for it." Here is the core of a debate about performing one's own identity, and Shahbazi's take is clearly informed by hard experience.

Her development since 2002 takes on its full force when viewed as a reaction to this experience. Her project has been to go on the offensive, to turn the mirror back around at her implied Western audience. Thus, her new photos specifically capture images -- from landscapes, to still-lives, to the stiffly posed portraits, to even the abstraction -- that seem to mime typical genres from the canon of Western imagery, without actually being any sort of citation. You see yourself seeing them, through your preconceptions. At Artforum.com, a critic remarks of the current show, "One wishes that the relationships between photographic archetypes, printing techniques, and the subjects' geographic origins were more clearly articulated." But what is this but a checklist highlighting that the photos successfully provoke a consciousness of issues Shahbazi wished people would be aware of when looking at her Iran photos -- to examine the conventional images that keep them from seeing the actual subjects, to view the works as creative expression rather than as "statements," to grasp the specifics of an actual culture rather than vague generalities.

This line of attack also, finally, unlocks the other axis of Shahbazi's art since 2002 -- her habit of having anonymous craftspeople remake her photographic images (at MoMA last year, she was represented by several carpets bearing Western-style portraits and still-lives, while several of the images at the Swiss Institute are available at Salon 94 in carpet form). In the current exhibition, one wall is occupied by a



Shirana Shahbazi's *Sango-04-2007* (2007) [left] and *Ania-07-2005* (2005)



Shirana Shahbazi

Ania-09-2007

2007

Courtesy Galerie Bob van Orsouw and Salon 94



Shirana Shahbazi's *Stilleben-16-2007* (2007), painted by anonymous Iranian artists



Detail of Shirana Shahbazi's *Stilleben-16-2007* (2007)

large painting -- a still-life of flowers, grapes, pearls and oyster shells, with a skull off to the side, set against a black background -- executed in the style of a painted billboard. The paint handling is brushy, meant to come together from a distance. It is an interpolation of one of Shahbazi's photographic images.

The visual effect is not salutary, losing the lucid clarity of her photos. Again, there is a kind of negativity towards the image. Most important is the fact that the one relevant detail about the people who crafted the work that we are given is that they are "a team of Iranian artists." The gesture of having her works remade as naïve craft objects thus mirrors the way Shahbazi seems to feel her previous photos were read, not as a complex artistic composition, but simply as something by someone who is ultimately from Iran. It physically enacts the loss of artistic texture when the work is treated in this way. As if to say: "If you must define things by nationality -- well, here you go."

Identity has become a consuming theme in contemporary art, and much is lost in Shahbazi's reaction against it -- in particular, we lose the fragile, empathetic human content of her earlier work. But it is important to note that the sense of alienation one feels in front the images at the Swiss Institute stems from the sharpness by which Shahbazi has felt it necessary to eject this content, and thus of the violence of the times, the ubiquity of the dim rhetoric about Iran. Very much an artist with an individual voice and concerns, but obliged by history to justify her heritage, Shahbazi has opted to resolve the contradiction via a kind of anti-testimony. Its message to her viewers is that they have to work through their own issues before they make assumptions about hers.

BEN DAVIS is associate editor of *Artnet Magazine*.



Image from Shirana Shahbazi's
"Goftare Nik" series (2000/01)



Image from Shirana Shahbazi's
"Goftare Nik" series (2000/01)