

Press Release

Zurich, 28 February 2011

Staging Identity – Performance and Irony in Contemporary Photography from the Middle East

10 March – 16 April 2011

Haleh Anvari, Gohar Dashti, Osama Esid, Sissi Farssat, Asad Faulwell, Shadi Ghadirian, Malekeh Nayiny

Curated by Jolaine Frizzell



Gohar Dashti, *Today's Life and War*, 2008, 70 x 105 cm, color photograph



Sissi Farassat, *Passport #17*, 2009, 20 x 30 cm, color photograph with sequins

The photograph has a long tradition of fashioning identity and shaping one's self-presentation to the world. In *Staging Identity*, Galerie Kashya Hildebrand focuses on artists from the Middle East who use photography's performative aspects and ironic potential for the creation of identity in order to consider how each artist consciously utilizes them to stage a particular experience. The historical legacy of culture, society, and politics plays a role in the work of these artists – both those who live in the Middle East and those in the Diaspora. However, in this exhibition, we do not examine the general effects of these legacies on the artists' work. Instead, we explore how the theatricality of the photographs creates a space where artifice is laid bare and directly confronts viewers and their expectations. The result is innovative, daring statements about authenticity and about the tensions between individual selves and their cultural

context. The artists' struggle to assert their individualism allows for the production of works that give us insights into the artists' intimate worlds.

By concentrating on the staging of identity, the intention of this exhibition is to present a more nuanced and layered understanding of the forces bearing on the artists' relationship to the Middle East. The staged, ironic, and performative aspects, which link all these works together, are compelling because of the way they enable a construction of realities that offers a safe way to critique regimes and discourses without making overt political statements. These constructions act as a neutral place to challenge stereotypes, defer truth, and imagine other realities. The theatrical artifice helps form interventions of the imagination as an effective 'under-the-radar' approach to deal with social critiques of the state.

Opening: Thursday, March 10, 2011, 6–8 pm

Gallery hours: Monday to Friday 11–6.30 pm, Saturday 12–4pm or by appointment

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For further information please contact:

Jolaine Frizzell, Galerie Kashya Hildebrand, Talstrasse 58, 8001 Zurich, Switzerland
Tel: 044 210 02 02 Fax: 044 210 02 15
jolaine@kashyahildebrand.org www.kashyahildebrand.org

Press release and images may be downloaded under:
<http://www.kashyahildebrand.org/zurich/press/stagingidentity/index.html>

THE ARTISTS:



Walking the Wall, 2005, photography, 40 x 60 cm

Haleh Anvari feels that the black chador has become an icon for Iran. It has been used very effectively by two very opposing camps, both the Islamist government of Iran and the Western media. The government uses it both for religious considerations but also because the image of a black clad woman became the trademark of the Islamic Republic. It was the most visual way of telling the world after the revolution, that something had changed in Iran while the Western media uses it as a proof of the repression of the Islamic state on its citizens. Yet for Anvari, both sources exploit the chador for their own purposes and neither show the true picture of the life of Iranian women. In Anvari's series *Chadomama*, she wanted to show that black chadors do not speak for the women of Iran – and instead created colorful chadors and luscious environments. In the *Chador-dadar* series, Anvari takes her colorful chadors to play outside in locations around the world. In these spaces, the intervention of these chadors with the people and location of the places she visits reveals as much about our ideas about what the chador represents as it does to challenge the viewer to imagine the women of Iran with lives as colorful and playful as the situations in which they find themselves.



Today's Life and War, 2008, photography, 50 x 70 cm

Gohar Dashti is part of a new wave, a storyteller of social and cultural issues. Her practice explores people – their private selves and public lives – in her native Iran. Unsurprisingly, growing up in the rich, complex and rigorous culture of Iran, not to mention its turbulent recent past, has had a major effect on Dashti's practice and development as an artist. Her photographs reveal the scars of her generation's war torn childhood and confront issues of gender, secularism and religious tradition in contemporary Iran. In the series 'Today's Life and War' Dashti questions how the violence of war symbolically impacts the life and collective memory of her generation. There is a distinctly cinematic feel as they are staged with the elaborate attention to detail of a fashion or lifestyle magazine shoot. The images in this series combine mundane moments of a young couple's life, such as a meal or watching television, with locations and props better suited to armed conflict. In *Me She and Others* Dashti illuminates the complexity of life for the contemporary Iranian woman through a series of portraits depicting the presentation of self in everyday life. The photos represent three situations (from left to right): the workplace; indoors and in society.



Cairo Street Workers series: The Fantastic Jawa, 2005/2006, photography and mixed media, 111 x 81 cm

The work of **Osama Esid** is a visual manifest of the relationship between the “West” and the Arab World at the turn of the 21st century, investigating the social preconceptions and stereotypes that have been created on either side in the past, and which in some way still persist in our collective unconscious. The inquiry into “Orientalism”, with its exotic and sensual connotations, from an artistic contemporary point of view generates a huge range of creative and theoretical possibilities which reveal the existing contradictions in the creation of clichés. For Esid, the image of Orient constructed by the West also penetrated the East, “the oriental fantasy exists on both sides”. Furthermore and here is where Esid’s motivation and inspiration lies, one can inquire into a stereotype to create new interpretations using its own language and mechanisms and feeding on those same inner contradictions, without needing to pigeonhole a culture.



Majahidat No. 8, 2009, mixed media, 122 x 92 cm

Asad Faulwell paints decorative, floral arabesques reminiscent of Islamic textiles, manuscripts and ceramics, which serve as the armature for cut-out black and white press photos of key figures within the turbulent social and political history of the Middle East. Faulwell’s intricate mixed-media works, which intertwine digitally manipulated photographs of historical figures from the Middle East among floral and geometric patterning reminiscent of that found in the Islamic world, hearken also to the Pattern and Decoration (P&D) movement in American and European painting of the 1970s. But while P&D flaunted its indulgence in decorative codes and motifs from cultures far and wide chiefly as a designed affront to the dominance of masculinist and reductivist late-modern Western aesthetics, Faulwell goes a step further, making decorative objects for consumption in an internationalist context, but with focus on a canon of sociopolitical history that ranges from celebrating Algerian women freedom fighters to mapping the political histories of Iran and Afghanistan.



Laura Teppich #2, 2008, color photography with sequins, 40 x 60 cm

Sissi Farassat's sequined pictures investigate and reflect essential aspects of perception and the aesthetics of the photographic image. She isolates the photographed subject, mostly a person but at times also objects, by covering the large surrounding surfaces around the figures with a semi-transparent, dazzling sequined carpet. Thus the context is eliminated and the subjects are captured in an abstract surrounding covering all references to time and space with a glamorous hand-embroidered texture. Moreover, Farassat makes reference to early icon painting, where genuine gold leaf was used to represent light in the background of these sacred images. Due to their abstract sequin surfaces, Farassat's photographic works are with a spiritual aura placing them in the long tradition of iconic images.



Like Every Day, 2002, color photographic paper, 50 x 50 cm

Shadi Ghadirian was inspired by the type of studio portraiture first introduced to Iran in the late nineteenth century, under the Qajar dynasty (1794-1925). In order to recreate the earlier setting, Ghadirian employed appropriately painted backdrops and dressed models and friends in borrowed vintage clothes. She adds modern anomalies to these traditional scenes by posing the model with for example, a Pepsi can, a boom box, or a vacuum cleaner. Women and their role in present-day Iran are a focal point of Ghadirian's work. In electing to concentrate on women she has chosen, perhaps, one of the most difficult subjects, as all images of women in the Islamic Republic of Iran must be shown attired in hijab regardless of context. Ghadirian has transformed this seeming constraint into the very theme of her images, not only in her "Qajar" series but in a subsequent group entitled "Like Everyday." In this later series the Iranian *chador*, as much a symbol as a garment, becomes focus of each of the photos; but these are *chadors* and where the face would be is instead a house-hold utensil, a teapot, an iron, a broom, and so forth.



Updating the Family Album - Friday at my Grandmother's House, 2004, photography, 44 x 37 cm

Malekeh Nayiny's cosmopolitan background is reflected in the work she makes, however, she claims a strong Iranian identity and cultural allegiance. Nayiny's work draws on Persian mythology and poetry. Her projects include *Updating a Family Album*, consisting of highly personal, vintage family portraits refashioned into strangely modern photographs of which Nayiny writes: "By the use of anachronisms such as collaging modern stamps on the clothes of some of my ancestors, and by inventing backgrounds that are obviously out of context with them, my aim was to see them in a new light and to transplant them into a different time, a different place". *Past Residue*, are a series of C-prints depicting the remnants of pre-revolutionary advertisements featuring women. All are more carefree and modern than their contemporary counterparts. Of this project Nayiny states: "There always remains a trace and a remnant of what has happened before even if that was an idea as abstract as self-image. The imagery in this new series springs from demolition sites with the superimposition of advertisements, magazine covers and mass media from my life before the Revolution in Iran, when women were encouraged to be liberated and westernized. Then came the Revolution. This collective memory from the past cannot be totally erased, however hard the demolition process is at work."

