

The persistence of trauma in Post-war Iran: Gohar Dashi and *Today's Life and War*

In *Today's Life and War*, Gohar Dashti presents ten photos depicting a complex relationship between the daily experiences and the internal psychic experiences of a young Iranian couple. Her works initiate a multi-layered viewing process, beginning with a seemingly innocuous glimpse at the mundane activities of this couple and extending to the disconcerting realization of the presence of military tanks, bunkers and soldiers. Dashti does not suggest that the couple is living in a war zone; instead, she uses the battlefield imagery, coupled with the domestic environment, to elucidate the trauma that results from the violence of war.

Dashti provides us with a unique perspective on contemporary Iran. Rather than the Iran of extremists and media propaganda, we have the opportunity to see a young couple as they make their way in the world. Dashti introduces us to her domestic world in order for it to become familiar—reading a newspaper, eating a meal, and going for a walk—activities that are easy to relate to as universal, everyday, un-extraordinary occurrences. She explains that *Today's Life and War* emerges from her experiences of the eight-year Iran-Iraq war. According to Dashti, she depicts a “post-war couple” that is “symbolic of [her] generation” who are “entangled in the memories and realities of war as a background to their daily life.” In this project, Dashti’s practice has moved from a documentary intention to an exploration of the performative possibilities of photography. With a self-reflexive and unpretentious narrative, Dashti questions how the violence of war symbolically impacts the psychic life of her generation, and she documents the human side of history.

Hovering just beyond the frame of Dashti’s photos is a history that comes to bear on the images we see. The Islamic Revolution erupted in Iran in 1979; it was a defining event that created Iran as an Islamic republic, and it is an event that had and continues to have an impact in the Republic of Iran. Born in 1980 after the Islamic Revolution, Dashti and her generation could know of that period of revolt only as stories passed down and knowledge acquired second hand. The political instability of Iran during the Islamic Revolution encouraged Iraq’s newly-elected leader Saddam Hussein to challenge Arab and Persian relations in the Gulf region, and he instigated the Iran-

Iraq war that lasted from 1980 to 1988. The costs of the war were enormous with the total Iranian casualties of the war estimated to be between 500,000 and 1,000,000 people. For Dashti and her generation, this war took place during their childhood and the psychic impact of this war is only now being realized. In this way, her voice throughout this project reflects her unique position as a post-war Iranian artist and it is important to consider her specific depictions of trauma, war and contemporary life in this light.

Contemporary artists, such as Shirin Neshat or author Marjane Satrapi (i.e. *Persepolis*), have introduced western audiences to artistic representations of Iran and its history by similarly presenting stories of the social, political and psychological dimension of women's experiences in Iran; however, there are some important distinctions between these artists and Dashti. First, both Satrapi and Neshat were born before the Revolution and lived in Iran while it was taking place. How their lives have intersected with the Islamic Revolution, the resulting Republic, and the Iran-Iraq war foster a very different response not only of individual perspective but also of generational perspective. Dashti, whose childhood took place during the eight-year war with Iraq, contrasts both Satrapi, who was away in Austria for four years of the war, and Neshat, who had left Iran during the Revolution. Also, both Satrapi and Neshat have chosen to permanently reside and work outside of Iran, in Paris and New York respectively, because the sexual and political content of their work is not possible in Iran. Although the subject of their practice reflects the discrepancies experienced pre-Revolution and post-Revolution Iran, they speak with a voice of the exiled artist. Dashti, on the other hand continues to live, work and teach in Iran.

In *Today's Life and War*, Dashti becomes our storyteller with a narrative that is distilled like a figurative painting, whereby each photograph represents the pregnant moment in a story. This work is a series, but each work has its own pictorial narrative, or tableau vivant, dramatizing the sense of place and narrative into a single frame. Using a film location in a suburb of Tehran where the Iranian movie industry produces war scenes, Dashti sets up the shots to contrast everyday activities with war imagery. She constructs and stylizes the photos to produce a layered reading—the effects shift from mundane to curious to unsettling. For instance, upon first approaching the photo of the couple in the car, one sees the couple, who appear to be festively dress as though they are posing for a wedding portrait; then, one notices that, while they are

sitting in a car that is decorated for a celebration, the car is old and dilapidated and will not be going anywhere; from here, one discerns the strange barren landscape; and, finally, one recognizes the army tanks, leading to the startling realization that the environment in which the couple finds itself is a battlefield. Why is a couple that seems to have just gotten married calmly posing for a picture by sitting in an old car, in the middle of a battlefield? The discordance between what makes “sense,” the couple posing for a portrait, with what doesn’t make “sense,” the car and the battlefield, allows for the power of the inner psychic conflict of the scene to reveal itself.

Because the photos do not appear to be “real” – resembling neither documents from the war, nor personal snapshots – the authenticity of the photographs breaks down. These are not intimate photographs of everyday life, as is the case with the work of Nan Goldin; instead, they borrow the conventions of this type of photographic style in order to create a level of intimacy. The fact that Dashti does not hide the artifice of the staged performance of her photos produces a tension in the viewing experience. In the photo of the couple on the bed, the man and the woman find themselves not on a conventional bed, but on a simple cot, resembling a military cot from an army barrack. The woman does not sleep but stares with a persistent glare toward the viewer while the man, barefoot, sits on the bed and smokes a cigarette. What makes this activity strange is that this activity, getting ready to go to bed, takes place outside in a desert environment where five soldiers wearing gas masks and carrying machine guns run towards the couple. Again, the staged and performative elements speak of the psychic trauma the couple is experiencing. Dashti represents not an impending arrest of the couple by the Iranian army, but, rather, the weight of the couple’s shared stress and history. The images of the soldiers with gas masks, signifiers of the Iran-Iraq war, persist to haunt both the man and the woman in the moments before sleep and in our contemporary time. The staging of this inner psychic space challenges the viewer to contend with the various layers, moving from one to the other and back again, and refusing the viewer a final interpretive resting place.

Where the authenticity of these photographs collapses is where the visualization of the traumatic experience becomes a witness in the fragments of non-sense. Using the theatrics of performance, Dashti uses this artificiality to express the conflict between what one feels and experiences and

what one is told (by the authorities, by the media, and by the previous generation) that one feels and experiences in the face of trauma and war. Every new generation must define their own traumatic discourse in light of the analysis of the previous revolutions and wars. Dashti uses the artifice to express her discontent with the forms available to her to search for an authentic voice to express her own trauma, a trauma that is unique to her generation.

While the landscape of the battlefield creates a performative and layered viewing experience, Dashti's use of color, composition and props helps to create an interpretative screen, showing the visual embodiment of loss. Despite the overwhelming use of muted colors that seem to relay a sense of bleakness, she subtly includes pink or red highlights in objects or pieces of clothing that marks almost every photo with a glimmer of hope. For instance, in the wedding photo, the car is adorned with pink bows, or, in the photo with the tank and the couple having dinner, the woman's scarf is decorated with a smattering of pink. This use of color, combined with the fact that this couple perseveres and continues with their daily lives in the face of their trauma, imbues the works with a tentative sense of hope and promise. In photography, the use of full color roots a scene in a particular contemporary moment. The diffused light from an overcast sky and the muted and somber brown-green-gray colors that dominate Dashti's images cause the viewer to question the time period from which these photographs were taken, as though, on the surface, they could come from any number of historical moments. This causes a collision between the past and the present, holding history and the here-and-now in a continuous dialogue. By allowing a layer of timelessness, Dashti suggests that the psychic effects of war are universal in that they impact the social consciousness of the people and of the country for generations to come.

At the same time, Dashti uses specific markers and props to connect these images with the Iran-Iraq war. This war has been compared to World War One in the sense that the tactics used were similar. They both used large-scale trench warfare, machine-gun posts, barbed wire across trenches, and Iraq used chemical weapons (Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* 171). This information helps to visualize the war with respect to the methods used. Dashti's images mimic these tactics and demonstrate her intention to replicate a specific war. In the photo of the couple hanging laundry, laying the pieces of fabric on the clothes' line takes on a symbolic dimension as the clothes' line is barbed wire, which was used in the Iran-Iraq war. What is being

depicted goes beyond the simple activity of stringing laundry to dry. The white of the square cloths could symbolize innocence. As the symbolic visualizations of the memory of the couple's youth, the innocence taken away by the realities of war, the hanging of these white cloths acts as a memorial for lost innocence, an externalization of the psychological trauma.

This temporal tension between past events and present effects is also depicted in the photo of the couple facing each other as they eat a meal at the table; the army tank sits closely behind them, as though it is a third person at the table. The tank, a symbol of the past war, dwarfs the couple, as the tank's gun is positioned ominously between them. The woman speaks on a cell phone, an obvious marker of the present. Dashti pushes the temporal boundaries of photography to show that while we know these two moments cannot exist at the same time – the war being long over – she externalizes the psychological trauma by juxtaposing these two times. The phone and the style of clothes situate this couple in a contemporary moment. Not only does the conflation of time create a dialogue between the past and the present, but also the varied clothing signifies the progression of time and the persistence of the trauma.

Dashti's distinct voice emerges in another significant way – in her construction of gender relations. Searching the faces of the man and woman for emotional signs, for a way to interpret their relation to their situation, we find a barrier. Dashti's couple remains expressionless; their blank faces offer nothing but neutrality to their condition. In the ritualistic photo where the couple sits on a blanket with a mirror, a fishbowl, the Koran, and apples, the couple's expression is impossible to determine. Surrounded by helmets of soldiers, the couple seems to be creating a memorial with the scattered helmets acting as tombstones. However, the countenance of the couple neither confirms nor denies this ceremony. The seemingly emotional detachment or silence is the language of an unfinished mourning. At the same time, this representation of silence confronts the stereotype of the silenced and oppressed Muslim woman. With silent expressions for both the man and woman, Dashti refuses this gendered stereotype. The gender relations between the couple seem to contradict the prevailing assumption that Muslim men and women are constantly segregated from one another and that women are oppressed by men. Instead, Dashti implies that psychic trauma resulting from war is a systemic oppression of both men and women alike and that their response to this trauma can be similar *and* different. She

offers a measure of detachment that pushes toward the symbolic realm. The shared gaze of the couple, performing the ritual together on the blanket, suggests that they are co-participants of this mourning. Furthermore, in the photo where the woman is using the laptop computer and the man stares directly at the viewer, Dashti purposefully constructs a connection between him and the viewer. Throughout the series, Dashti allows both the man and the woman, separately and together, to reach beyond the frame to the audience. By giving them both a voice, Dashti enacts a brave intervention into the debate about culturally gendered difference. Depicted together, the couple shows a symbolic representation of the psychic trauma where neither gender seems more or less affected.

Dashti creates a distinct storytelling lens for social trauma that is in direct contrast with the short spectacular focus of a media that creates perpetrators and victims. She creates another story that in turn helps to complicate various stereotypes and creates new realities. To confront the past, as Dashti does, she invites the viewer to make connections between the intimacy and intensity of her lived experience, to become a witness of the constructed images that create a tension alluding to the psychic costs of war. Dashti's particular body of work offers a unique voice from her contemporary experience and depicts how, in the context of Iranian artists, political and historical events create specific cultural memories that have specific generational significances while referencing a more general communal trauma that spans generations. For the post-war generation, the sense of mourning reflects the unrecoverable lost innocence and youth and addresses the high social price of war. In fact, what we are presented with is an articulate, reflective and profound statement that allows us to feel a sense of mourning *and* a sense of hope.

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