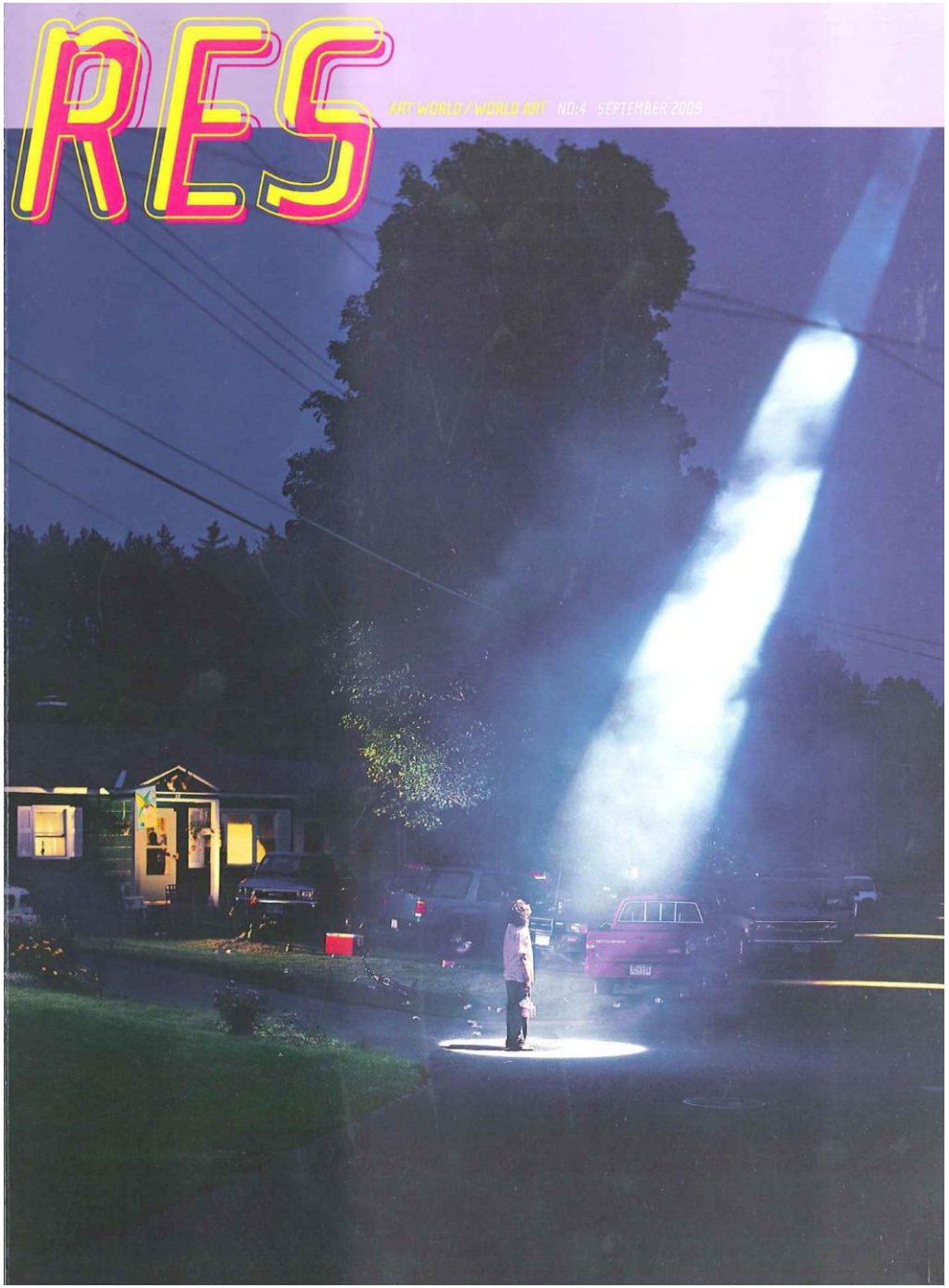
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:RTED MODERNITIES AND CONTESTED)ITIONS: CONTEMPORARY IRANIAN IAL CULTURE AND (IN)AUTHENTICITY

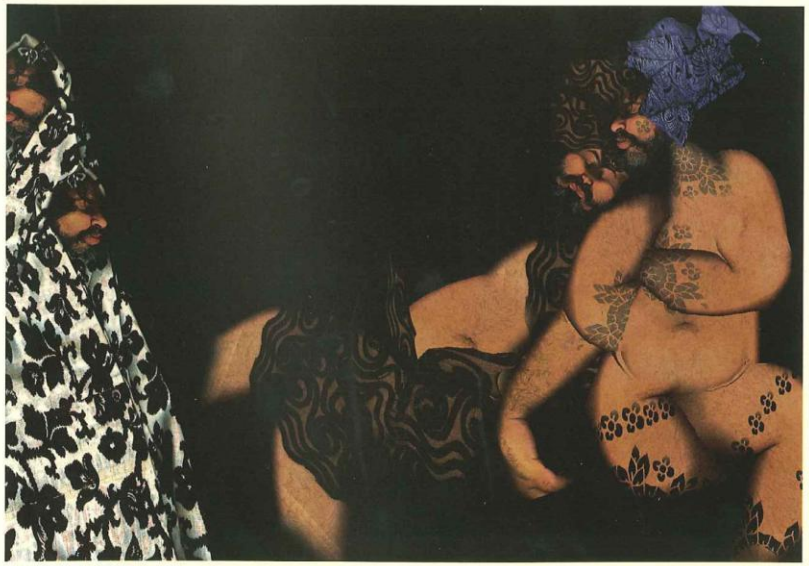
ANTHONY DOWNEY

IN 1978 the philosopher and social theorist Michel Foucault traveled twice to Iran. His journey there, and the articles he subsequently wrote for the Italian daily newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, were the source of much debate and were to later become known—following on from his unequivocal support for an Islamic revolution in Iran—as Foucault's "mistake". In the pre-revolutionary climate that he witnessed there, Foucault saw what he considered to be an alternative to Western industrial capitalism—the latter described by him at the time as the "the harshest, most savage, most selfish, most dishonest, oppressive society one could possibly imagine". (1) However, and despite the initial, albeit in some circles qualified, euphoria surrounding Ayatollah Khomeini's return to Iran, the repression of minority groups, political dissenters, women and non-Muslims that followed the revolution led to Foucault being regularly attacked in the French media. And it is easy to see why: his support for what he considered to be the emergence of a "political spirituality", nowhere more so than in a deeply secular country such as France, was never going to endear him to either the left or the right. When the political sphere in Iran was eventually eclipsed by clerical diktat (and news of mass arrests, torture and executions began filtering through), the writing on the wall was there for all to see: despite the revolutionary aspect of the events surrounding 1979 in Iran, the revolution, like all revolutions, had begun to devour its own children.

Whatever the rights or wrongs surrounding Foucault's support for Ayatollah Khomeini and the revolutionary zeal engendered by the revolution, his writings from that period—which marked his first and last foray into journalism—provide a stark and timely reminder of the difficulties to be had in diagnosing the political and socio-cultural landscape of Iran. And those difficulties revolve around the precise meaning of terms such as "tradition" and "modernity" and, just as importantly, how they relate to the thorny issue of (in)authenticity. In these terms we encounter an interpretive conundrum when it comes to interpreting Iranian culture insofar as the "traditional" cannot be simply equated with regional, parochial or, indeed, historical preoccupations; nor can the ideal of "modernity" be necessarily associated with progress, internationalism or cosmopolitanism. In short, these terms mean different things to different constituencies at different moments in time and this is all the more evident, I will suggest in what follows, when we look at how contemporary Iranian visual culture explores tradition and modernity in the context of (in)authenticity.

A sense of the complexities involved here can be seen in the fact that Iran has one of the oldest continuous civilizations in the world—with urban settlements dating from 7000 BC—and yet one of the youngest population demographics (with a quarter of the population aged 15 or younger). Despite its lengthy history, moreover, it nevertheless has a relatively nascent form of governance based upon a somewhat compromised version of liberal theocracy. In the West, the Islamic Revolution, despite the complex events leading up to it, is largely understood as a categorical Ground Zero in Iran's political, cultural and social development; a view that tends to see forms of atavistic traditionalism re-emerge in 1979 rather than, as Foucault saw it, an alterative form of modernity and the possibility of a new "political imagination". The often conflicting views of tradition and modernity, and what they mean, are not helped by the fact that Iran would appear to offer three competing but occasionally complimentary historical versions of itself: one based on an epic, traditional Persian past that lasted until the fall of Qajar dynasty in 1925 (and the subsequent change of name to Iran in 1935); the period 1935-1979, which covers the modernization policies of Reza Pahlavi and his son Mohammad Reza Pahlavi—both respectively being the last two Shahs of Iran; and, from 1979 onwards, the era of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the ascendancy of clerical rule.

To associate the period 1935-1979 solely with modernization, however, is debateable and it is at this juncture that we start to the see the ambivalence in terms such as tradition and modernity. (2) Many within Iran saw this period not so much as an era of enlightened modernism—the cornerstone of Western neo-liberalism—but as further evidence of an enforced westernization and the base co-option of Western ideals into the spheres of education, art, culture and public life in general. (3) To the extent that these debates appear to be largely political, they were attended by and in part predicated upon the cultural criticism of influential commentators such Jalal Al-i Ahmad whose phrase "westoxification" ("gharbzadegi") was regularly employed to describe a peculiarly Iranian form of cultural inauthenticity. (4) In terms of his overall outlook on Iranian cultural life and politics, Ahmad was largely critical of the manner in which western systems of government, thought and culture were infiltrating Iranian life.



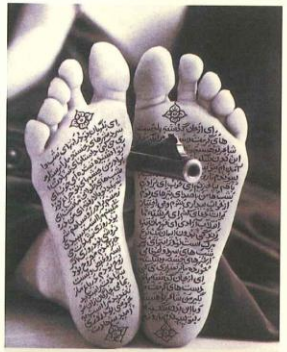
Ramin Haerizadeh, Men of Allah, 2008
C-print, 39.4 x 59.1 in / 100 x 150 cm
Courtesy Saatchi Gallery, London

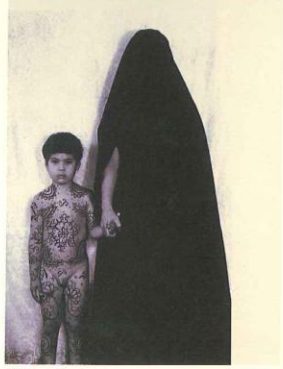
Farhad Moshiri, Woman under electric blanket, 2007
Embroidery glitter and oil on canvas mounted on mdf, 47.2 x 63 in / 120 x 160 cm
Private collection, London

Ahmad's use of the phrase "gharbzadegi", stemming from his 1962 volume *Occidentosis: A Plague from the West*, was later channelled to great effect through the rhetoric of Ayatollah Khomeini and thereafter became an integral component—alongside the ideal of national self-sufficiency that continues to this day—in the ideology underwriting the Islamic Revolution. In the rubric of "westoxification", tradition was presented as an ameliorative form of authenticity by Ahmad and the leaders of the Islamic Revolution. It was that most modern and revolutionary of forces inasmuch as it usurped Western-inspired forms of imitative behavior. The revolution was represented as not so much anti-modern in this context as it was a revolt against the vested interests of the West in Iran's oil fields and strategic location. It was, in Foucault's words, "the first great insurrection against global systems, the form of revolt that is the most modern and most insane". (5)

Implicit within these discussions we find a significant degree of crossover between political and cultural debates around concepts such as modernism in Iran. Whilst there is much to say on the matter of Iranian modernism and its conjoining of local and international influences, I will restrict my comments here to contemporary art and the ongoing negotiation of tradition and modernity in Iranian visual culture. (6) We can see this in the work of Farhad Moshiri who was born in Shiraz, studied at the California Institute of Arts, and now lives and works in Tehran. In works such as *Cherry Jar*, 2005, we are presented with a relatively traditional-looking representation of a jar that recalls both 13th century Iranian pottery and the pottery found in the 6,000-year-old site of Susa (the latter being one of the oldest known settlements in the world). Although this could be seen to be an exercise in verisimilitude, there is a subtle point being made here about how cultural legacies and traditions are used to promote contemporary global views on certain regions. Through an intricate process of painting and folding his canvasses, Moshiri's finished works take on the patina and *craquelure* of the pots he is representing, mimicking a form of inauthentic authenticity, so to speak. Often decorated with Farsi calligraphy, which is usually associated with verses from the Qur'an or Persian poetry, it nevertheless becomes clear that Moshiri's brand of calligraphy does not necessarily allude to either the Qur'an or to poetry but to modern-day Iranian words, popular street slang, the brand names of mass-produced commercial products, and lyrics from contemporary Iranian pop music. (7) The traditional cultural forms of the past and the enunciative practices of the present, or modernity, are combined here in a hybrid process that further questions any easy distinction between the two or, indeed, any bifurcated notion of an authentic or inauthentic Iranian visual culture.

The apparent divisions between tradition and modernity, and precisely what they mean in the context of "authentic" artistic





TOP
Shirin Neshat, Allegiance with Wakefulness, 1994
From the *Women of Allah* series
Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York

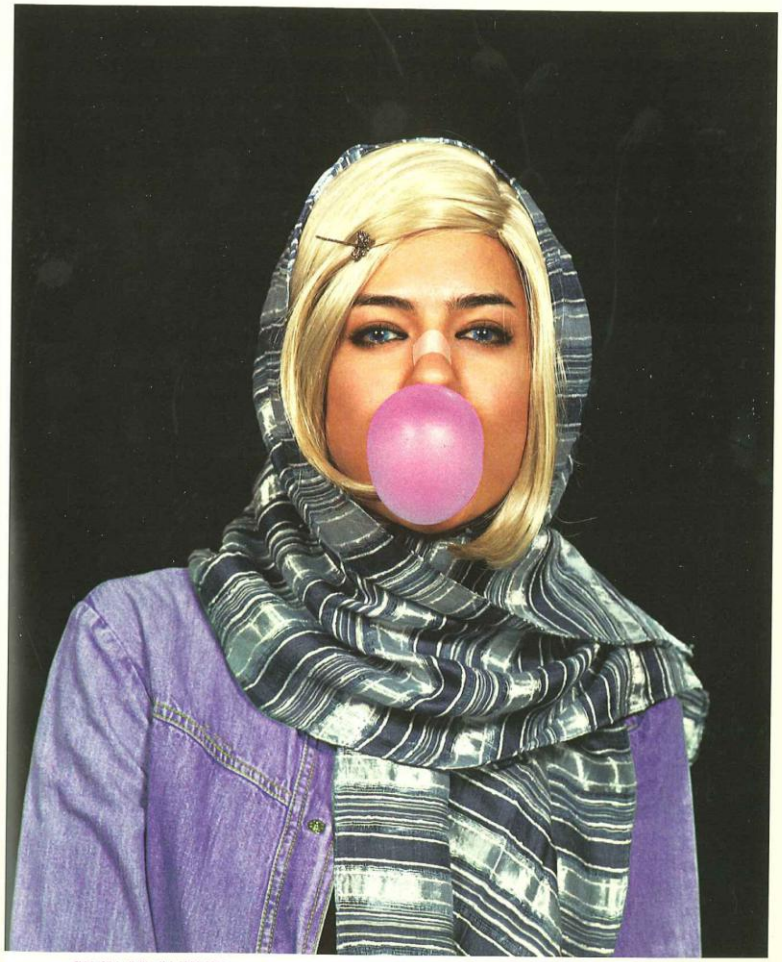
BOTTOM
Shirin Neshat, Untitled, 1996
From the *Women of Allah* series
Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York

Shirana Shahbazi, Farsh-01-2004
Hand-knotted wool and silk carpet,
27.6 x 19.7 in / 70 x 50 cm
Courtesy Gallery Bob van Orsouw, Zurich

production, is also explored in Ramin Haerizadeh's series *Men of Allah*, 2008. Haerizadeh's images, upon first viewing at least, appear to allude to the tradition of Persian tapestry until we realize that they are photographs that have been digitally manipulated to resemble precisely such complex patterning. This ambivalence continues in his references to Taaziye theater, an historic genre that was popularized in the Qajar dynasty. In Taaziye theatre all roles, including female, were played by male actors and the masquerade and the fluidity associated with this theatrical genre is present in the manner in which the artist assumes all of the roles in his photographs, including male and female, victim and victimizer, and villain and hero. With a little further theoretical nudging it would be relatively easy here to position Haerizadeh's work, which draws upon traditional elements, in the modern context of identity politics, masquerade and notions of performative masculinity—all conceptual mainstays of so-called post-modern theory. Conversely, but also referencing the context of tradition, modernity and the (in)authenticity of identity, Shirin Aliabadi's work focuses on the sociopolitical specificity of femininity in Iran today. Aliabadi's *Miss Hybrid*, 2006, examines the issue of hybridity and represents a series of physical transformations—hair color, facial piercings, nose reshaping surgery, and the use of different colored contact lenses to alter eye coloring—in her subject that is not only popular amongst Iranian women but also registers the signifiers of a cultural rebellion played out against tradition worldwide. These works not only explore cultural norms of beauty but also the meanings of modernity and tradition and how they relate to the role of women in Iran and the influence of Western ideals—or apparent "westoxification"—upon the youth of Iran today.

Contrary to popular Western perceptions, Iranian women are not required to wear full chador, although many do. Others choose to maintain the government's requirement for modesty in public spaces by wearing a combination of headscarf and long-sleeved overcoat (known as the *manteau* or "Persian coat"). The chador has, however, been a thematic mainstay in the work of Shirin Neshat, who used it throughout her series *Women of Allah* (1993–97). It also appears in Katayoun Karami's 2005 *Stamp (me and my mother)*, a complex work that examines the history of the chador but also familial links to notions of tradition and modernity. Karami's photograph of her mother, taken in pre-revolutionary days, conforms with apparently Western "modern" styles of dress, whereas Karami's self-portrait is more in keeping with post-revolutionary "traditional" styles of dress. Although her self-portrait was taken thirty years after the photograph of her mother, it is Karami who (to Western eyes) seems strangely dated. Again, the precise meaning of tradition and modernity is determined by who is deploying the terms and in what context.

In suggesting that we analyze contemporary Iranian visual culture around the contested contours of modernity, tradition and authenticity, we need to examine what exactly is being produced not only within Iranian visual culture today but as part of its influential diaspora. Bearing in mind the sheer diversity of output from artists living within Iran and beyond its borders, we should also inquire into the authenticity of the phrase "Iranian visual culture" as a veritable or indeed verifiable phenomenon. What we find in a significant amount of these artists is the sense that, far from maintaining any originary sense of authenticity, their practices are the result of multiple cultural crossovers and inter-relationships, nowhere more so than in a globalized world order and in a country, such as Iran, which has an extended diasporic community. These issues become clearer if we look at the work of an artist such as Shirana Shahbazi, who was born in Tehran in 1974 and now lives and works in Zurich.

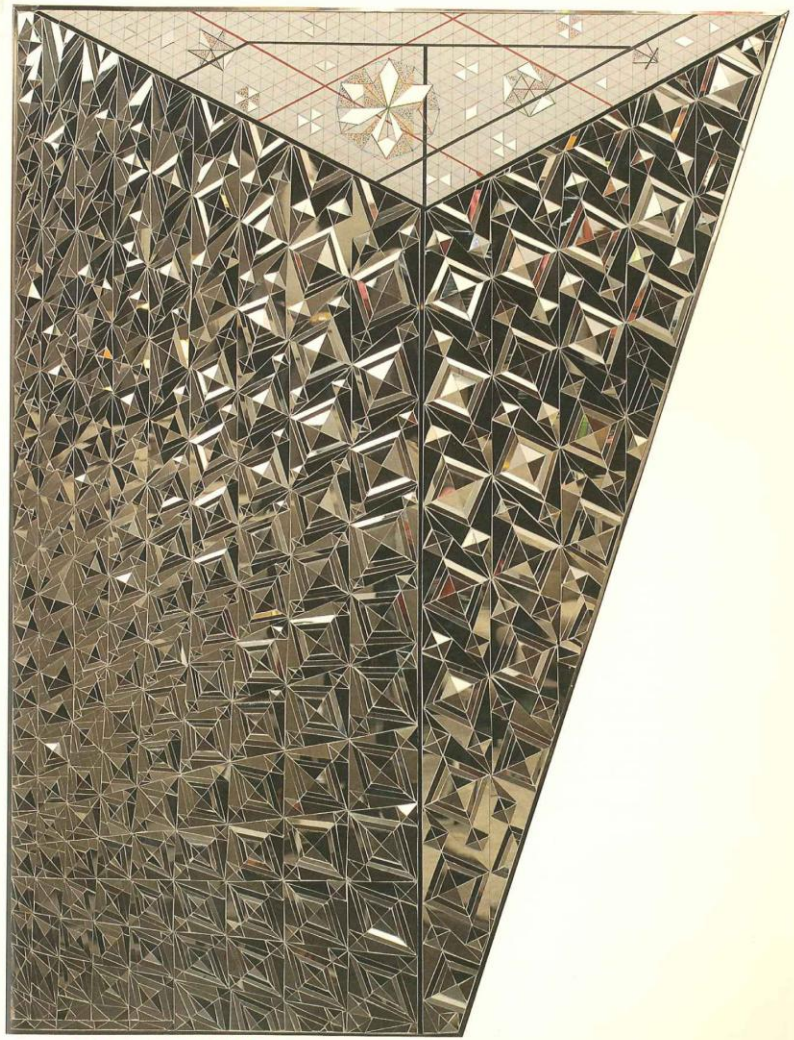


Shirin Aliabadi, Miss Hybrid #3, 2006
Inkjet print on plexiglass, 59.1 x 48 in / 150 x 122 cm
Courtesy the artist, Galerie Kashya Hildebrand, Zurich and The Third Line, Doha – Dubai

In works such as *Farsh-01-2004*, 2004, Shahbazi worked from photographs taken in cities as diverse as Harare and Shanghai and, as part of her show in the 2003 Venice Biennial, had the images painted by Iranian billboard painters in a style that would be readily recognizable to Iranians in cities such as Tehran or Shiraz. Assuming, in this monolithic form of representation, both a Madonna-like presence and references to the semiotics of advertising, these original images are also used as the basis for Iranian master carpet weavers to render small carpets that resemble prayer mats. (8) Shahbazi's practice refracts images found in her contemporary environment through a number of traditions and their interest as images lies in the aesthetic exploration of the very notion (and practical impossibility) of authenticity itself in the broader context of a globalized and diasporic community that takes its inspirations from both Western and Persian art traditions.

Nicky Nodjoumi, Early Morning after the Party, 2007
Oil on canvas, 72 x 50 in / 183 x 127 cm
Private collection, London

Largely a result of the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the Iranian diaspora is a significant factor when we consider notions of tradition, modernity and cultural authenticity in artists as diverse as Siah Armajani, Monir Farmanfarmaian, Shirin Neshat, Shirazeh Houshiary, Mitra Tabrizian, Farkhondeh Shahroudi, Y.Z. Kami, Reza Aramesh and Nicky Nodjoumi. In doing so, we reach a crucial stage within which to understand what is happening in contemporary Iranian art: it is a globalized practice with sites of production and reception that stretch from Teheran to Toronto, Shiraz to Sydney, Qazvin to Queens, and Esfahan to the East End of London. Globalization and the spread of an Iranian diaspora tends to hyphenate forms of self-identification and cultural authenticity — precisely the contested ideals that still underwrite a significant part of political rhetoric in Iran today. (9) For artists such as Shirin Neshat and Shirazeh Houshiary, both of whom live and work outside of Iran and have international followings and practices, the context of Islamic art and visual culture is still crucial to their work. Similarly, in the work of Y.Z. Kami, who left Iran in 1984, the legacy of Iranian culture and society plays a significant and enduring role in his art. Kami, who has had shows at the Museum of Modern Art in 1997 and 2006, draws inspiration from, amongst other things, Persian poetry, Sufism, and Old Master paintings. To note as much is to highlight the extent to which his aesthetic practice—and, indeed, those of the other artists mentioned here—is indelibly imbricated within international debates concerning the politics of representation and contemporary visual practices worldwide. Artists working within Iran today, likewise, have a similar relationship to both the globalized contexts of international culture and the relatively localized concerns of their country. The location of culture, to gloss Homi Bhabha, is a third space where East and West not only meet in a hybrid inter-mixing of culture, history, tradition, modernity and the politics of representation, but a site from where the very notion of authenticity needs to be re-read through the refractive lens of the present.



Monir Farmanfarmaian, Mirror and Gatch, 2008
Mirror mosaics, chalk and ink drawing on wood, 49.6 x 59.1 in / 126 x 150 cm
Private collection, London

The fact that Iran should present itself as something of a conundrum, even to the acute mind of Michel Foucault, exposes the fact of an ongoing struggle there between the forces of modernity and tradition and the rubric of (in)authenticity through which they are both read. Referring to himself as a "mere novice" reporter to an Iranian journalist in 1978, Foucault suggested that "(w)e have to be there at the birth of idea... the bursting outward of their force; not in books expressing them, but in events manifesting this force, in struggle carried on around ideas, for or against them". (10) We turn here not so much to the past as we do to the present and the events that have been unfolding since the Iranian elections of 12 June, 2009. Iran is still providing something of a litmus test for Western neo-liberalism—just as it did in Foucault's day—and the apparent forces of traditionalism (figured in the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khameini and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad) and the more moderate, modernizing forces of Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mir-Hossein Mousavi were, at the time of writing, entering into what could possibly be an end-game for current forms of governance in Iran. This agonistic relationship between modernity and tradition in political terms is both reciprocal and tectonic in its cultural force: they rub up against one another and create new fault-lines and formations in ideals such as authenticity, political community and nationhood. And Iranian visual culture, in its national and diasporic contexts, would appear to be providing the arena in which such notions are being played out on the level of aesthetics. In suggesting as much, I am not promoting a paradigm that positions contemporary Iranian visual culture solely as a riposte to historical and political debates; on the contrary, it is the formal aesthetics of the works discussed here—rather than any overt politics—that renders them responsive to the socio-political, economic, religious, ethical and philosophical milieu in which they are produced, disseminated and interpreted. Tradition and modernity, and their inverted uses in the context of Iran, can be opposed or they can intersect. And the point of that intersection between the two, alongside the negotiation of their import, can be seen in contemporary Iranian visual culture and its ongoing engagement with the contested notion of (in)authenticity.

NOTES

(1) Cited in Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 75. To date, Afary and Anderson's volume offers the most comprehensive account of Foucault's time in, and writings on, Iran, including the full publication in English of his articles for *Corriere della Sera*.

(2) Foucault was quick to seize upon the anomalies in the use of the term modernity, noting the extent to which modernization as a political project and as a means for social and cultural change was effectively a spent force in 1970s Iran. Both Shahs had tried and failed, albeit for different reasons (not all of them within their control), to introduce a western version of neo-liberal democracy and industrialization that was to ultimately founder on its own hubris. The message derived from the success of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, in the West at least, was that Iran was somehow unready for modernity. Nevertheless, as Foucault was to observe, the Shah's version of modernity, promoted at different times by British, American and Russian interests in the region, simply had no place in Iran. He went on to paradoxically argue that it was in fact the Shah (the ostensible modernizer) who was obsolete in Iran: "His is the antiquated dream of opening up his country by means of secularization and industrialization. His project of modernization, his despotic weapons, his system of corruption are what is archaic today". See Didier Eribon, *Michel Foucault* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 284

(3) In cultural terms, it is notable that the collection housed at Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, designed by the Iranian architect Kamran Diba (who, in turn, employed elements from traditional Persian architecture), was largely assembled under the aegis of Shah Pahlavi in the late 1970s and was essentially a collection of Western rather than Persian or Middle Eastern art. Since the 1979 revolution, and despite the fact that it is widely considered to be the most important collection of modernist and contemporary art outside of the Europe and the U.S., it has been rarely on view to the public.

(4) Jalal Al-i Ahmad was a prominent Iranian thinker, novelist, teacher and cultural critic. He studied Persian literature and popularized the term "gharbzadegi" which has various meanings in English, including westernstruck, westoxification, or occidentosis. His writings were particularly critical of artists and other individuals who imitated Western ideals. He wrote: "One can but rarely find Iranian painters and architects who do not imitate Westerners but whose work is distinguished by artistic authenticity and originality, who add something to the sum of artistic endeavor in the world. Things have reached the point that we bring critics and judges from Europe to judge our painter's work". See See Jalal Al-i Ahmad, *Occidentosis: A Plague from the West*, translated by Robert Campell (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1984), p. 116. Although the book was never published *in toto* in the author's lifetime, Ahmad published parts of it in the journal *Kitab-i Mah* in 1962 and as a separate volume in September/October 1962. The volume we have today, and from which I quote, is a revised edition published posthumously in Tehran in 1978.

(5) See Eribon, *Michel Foucault*, p. 287

(6) It is arguable, for example, that an artist such as Charles Hossein Zenderoudi (b. 1937) reinvigorated the traditional aesthetics associated with Persian calligraphy by abandoning its rule system and seeings its practice through the lens of modernist practices. In Zenderoudi work, familiar religious and traditional objects become recurrent motifs but are rendered in a modernist idiom. Likewise Parviz Tanavoli's (b. 1937) work has similarly drawn upon both the literary and visual craftsmanship of his native Iran in the development of an international aesthetic idiom. A noted researcher, teacher, collector and author, Tanavoli travels widely and gives regular talks on his work, again drawing upon the inter- and cross-cultural influences that question any easy designation of his work as either traditionalist or localized. The movement to which they were both aligned is referred to as *Saqqakhaneh* which is probably best described as a neo-traditionalist movement where the predominant ethos concerned the reconciliation of a traditionalist and modernist aesthetic.

(7) In this process we could reference Moshiri's work to one of his modernist predecessors, Charles Hossein Zenderoudi. See note above.

(8) The subject of carpet weaving, in its political, economic and social dimensions, is one of the mainstays of Ahmad's argument in *Occidentosis: A Plague from the West*. He writes, "We who prove so meticulous in our local crafts of carpet weaving, tile making, fabric printing, and miniature painting are apathetic when it comes to machines. This apathy toward machines, technology, and the new sciences is the outcome of our confidence in the permanence of our oil resources and in the uninterrupted flow of the machines we buy with our oil money and credits". See Ahmad, op. cit., p. 81

(9) It is important to also note here the pitfalls to be had in the term "diaspora". To suggest, for example, that Iranian artists who are part of the diaspora address international (modern) issues whilst artists living within Iran address local (traditional) issues, as some commentators are prone to do, merely re-inscribes the old colonial binary tropes—cosmopolitan/parochial and so forth—and this should be resisted at all costs.

(10) Cited in Eribon, *Michel Foucault*, p. 282

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Shirazeh Houshiary, Untitled, 2004
Mixed media on paper, 19.7 x 19.7 in / 50 x 50 cm
Private collection, London