

ARTFORUM

“Iran Inside Out”

CHELSEA ART MUSEUM

556 West 22nd Street

June 26–September 5

“Iran Inside Out” sets out to challenge conventional perceptions of Iran and Iranian art. It succeeds not by explaining and apologizing for Western politics and prejudices but by showcasing 210 glimpses into contemporary Iranian culture. Curated by Till Fellrath and Sam Bardaouil, this timely and important exhibition is equal measures rebellious, expressive, aesthetic, and historical. It situates the traumatic experience and aftermath of the 1979 Revolution and reinforces the powerful voices of public protest in Iran following its recent contested elections.

The exhibition is organized around the binary of homeland versus diaspora. As seen in other places, Iran’s diaspora artists often engage cultural and historical references and nostalgia more explicitly than those working in the country. But unusually in the Iranian case and likely because here *diasporic* often means “exiled,” the strategy resonates powerfully, rendering geographic and cultural markers self-reflexive rather than tokenistic. For example, Roya Akhavan’s large triptych *Under the Bruised Sky*, 2009, replicates patterns from traditional Persian painting into poetic, dizzying mazes that transmute and abstract their legibility. And Mitra Tabrizian’s photograph *Surveillance*, 1989–90, eerily elides black-and-white images of Iranian clergy meeting Western leaders in three periods of modern history.

The meeting of different moments, referents, and cultures is complicated further by the impression that Western (especially American) perceptions of Iran bear heavily on the identity of art made in the country. This is seen clearly in the representation of American soldiers in Behrang Samadzadegan’s painting, as well as in Shirin Aliabai and Farhad Moshiri’s line of cleaning products emblazoned WE ARE ALL AMERICANS. Though the distinction of “inside” and “out” seems to mark a real wedge, that, too, is transcended by masterful works, including Shirin Neshat’s sublime film installation *Turbulent*, 1998.

This exhibition offers its audience a rich paradox, dissolving any monolithic views of contemporary Iranian art but instilling a strong sense of the specificity inherent to the artists’—and art’s—identity.

— Beth Citron



Farhad Moshiri and Shirin Aliabadi, *We Are All Americans*, 2006, color photograph, 29 1/2 x 39".