

## Iranian Impromptu

By Jack McNamara



*Faezeh*, 2008

A prostitute opens her eyes to a client with no face  
 A house cat tries to scratch through a thin glass door  
 A man in a grey suit pours petrol over his head  
 8000 photographs of neon crucifixes in Seoul  
 Horses graze to the sound of barking dogs  
 A white bathtub fills with black hair

For the first time in the UK, a collection of works by some of Iran's most important film and video artists of the last ten years will be screened together in one programme. The three-day event, put together by curator Vali Mahlouji as part of his Iran: New Voices season, takes place over a weekend at the Barbican this December. Its purpose is to explore how current film and video output reflects what it means to be Iranian today. The answer, as given by these ten artists, pushes and pulls in all kinds of directions; a testament to the complexity of their relationship to the country. Each piece can be seen as a distinct reaction to some facet of life in Iran, be it political or personal. The resulting weekend offers a survey of modern feeling and experience in a captivating part of the world.

Shirin Neshat, one of Iran's most internationally recognised artists, opens the season with five cinematic fragments adapted from Shahrnush Parsipur's novel *Women Without Men*. Initially conceived as a multi-channel installation, she now presents the works in vivid 35mm for cinema exhibition. Her narratives explore rape, prostitution and censorship in a world dominated by men. The five practically wordless films take place in a kind of fairytale landscape and present various scenarios of women seeking refuge from male aggression. In each case the heroines manage to escape immediate danger only to find themselves trapped in a wider arena of injustice. Neshat's international status has enabled her to produce this work on an epic canvas. On the other side of that scale is installation artist Ghazel, who tackles the same subject with far more modest tools. Her infamous *Me Series* is a collection of home-video vignettes that expose the absurdity of gender restrictions. Her body covered by a Chador, Ghazel presents herself sunbathing, waterskiing and mountain climbing, accompanied by laconic slogans such as *Better not Talk* and *Every Day is Valentine's Day*.



*Chelgiss III*

Provocative caricatures also appear courtesy of Shahram Entekhabi, who aims his barrel at male stereotypes. In the cartoon-like video Miguel Entekhabi fuses a Middle Eastern militant with a Cuban revolutionary in what must be the reactionary West's ultimate nightmare. Dressed in khakis with a cigar hanging from his mouth, Entekhabi's Miguel guffaws into the camera lens whilst casually playing with a hand grenade. This sense of defiance comes across with even more vitriol in Barbad Golshiri's caustic series of videos. In Jxalq an anonymous figure masturbates in an elaborate maze made of toilet paper and in Middle Eastern Impromptu a masked man rages at the camera that the bombs will bloom freedom on our wasteland as they did in Iraq. His works explore the interplay between ability and futility. The subjects are able to express their frustrations, but only by concealing themselves and avoiding consequence.

Expression and communication are also central concerns of Mandana Moghadam's actionist piece *The Well*. The film documents a failed attempt to build a well in both Sweden and Iran that, by means of an intercom, would have enabled people to communicate between the two countries. The well was successfully built in Sweden but its construction was stopped in Iran. Filmmaker Shahab Fotouhi pushes this notion of empty communication even further. His video *Repeat After Me* involves a group of Swiss locals singing the Iranian national anthem with no knowledge of what the words mean, while his shorter piece, *Direct Negotiations*, involves a household cat resolutely trying to scratch its way through a transparent glass door. The works convey both despair and derision at a historical lack of sympathy and understanding.



*Untitled 4*

Amidst all these bold reactions, what place is there for the more meditative work of Abbas Kiarostami and Avish Khebrehzadeh who close the programme? 'The Roads of Kiarostami' continues the efforts of his earlier film Five to bring the viewer into closer scrutiny of nature, this time through a montage of roads. Khebrehzadeh's gentle animations of two horses drinking (Distant Memory) and a solitary figure swimming, (A Swim) go even further into apolitical terrain. Both artists seem to aspire to remove their works from man and society as far as possible. Kiarostami has even spoken of a desire to be entirely eliminated from the work that he makes. Yet, while we watch hundreds of ducks walk past the screen in Five, we do not stop thinking about the filmmaker. Neither do we stop thinking about the world beyond the sea and the drinking horses. The success of these works is precisely in their ability to highlight what is absent from them. They are themselves reactions against the more direct, political reactions of the other artists on the programme. Instead the pieces attempt to salvage and promote a kind of purity that is seen to be disappearing both in the world and in the film and video that now reflects it.

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Vertigo Issue 21 | November 2008

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