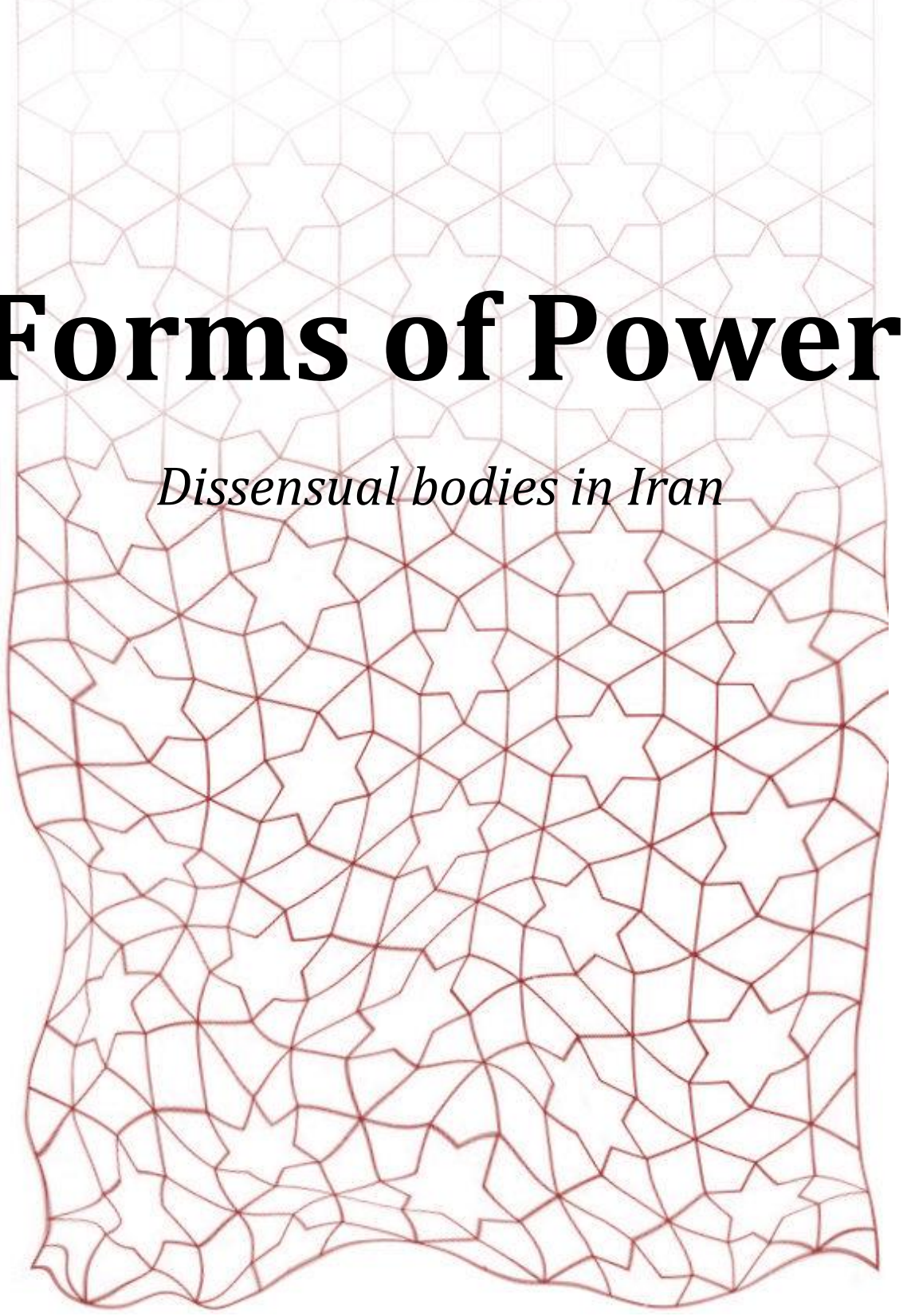
Forms of Power

Dissensual bodies in Iran



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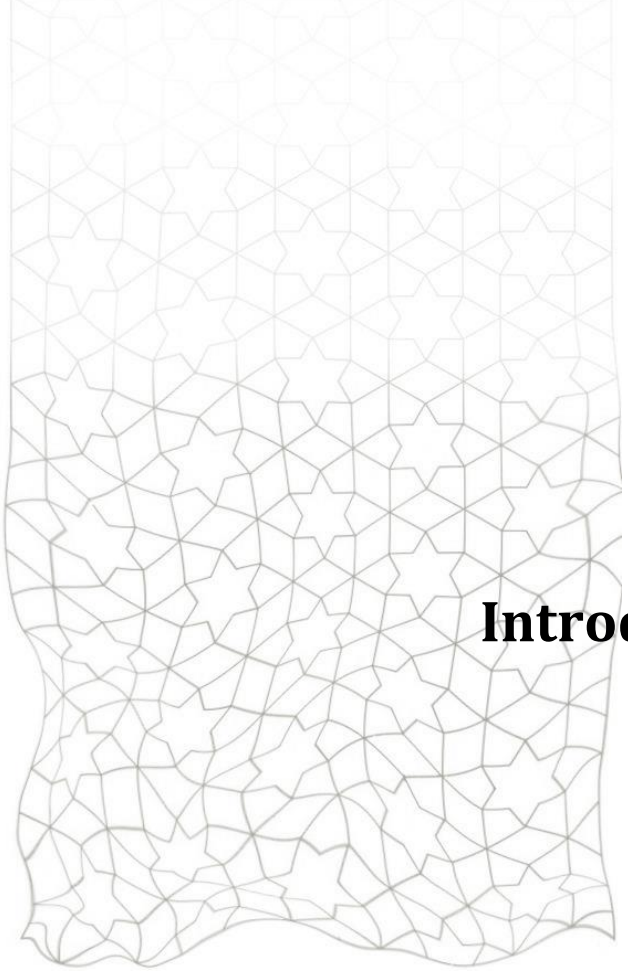

1.
Introduction

We have had too many bad kings in our history;

Perhaps that is why we have so many good poets.

- Hamid Dabashi

The first time I ever set foot on Iranian soil was marked by a confusing pretension of knowing the rules. The obligatory scarf on my head was new to me, but I pretended to be a local, while secretly looking at other women on the plane before arrival, to know where exactly it was not okay anymore to not have it on my head. I wondered what it would communicate to others, if I had put it on earlier, or later, or in a different manner. Imitating the women I could see in the fake light of the nocturnal plane, I tried a loose-fitting scarf first, like the ones I had seen in blogs about Tehrani youngsters. Yet as a newcomer, there was too much doubt and fear the fabric would slip off, so I pulled it more to the front. Yet, perhaps this was too conservative, and I didn't want to mock or insult anyone. Somewhere in between should do, and after installing the hejab I caught myself nervously checking every other minute if it was still in its proper place. The lady on the other side of the aisle nonchalantly cast the veil around her head (she *was* a local), and I tried to decide whether the look in her eyes was one of reluctance, sadness, or acceptance, or maybe a cocktail of all of them. I wondered at what point in the flight my body would become subject to the rules of the Iranian state, and how I should deal with them. When exactly would visible hair become condemnable? I was new to this wordless language, and it was impossible for me to know what its signifiers meant. Knowledge of the local 'code' grows on you as you live in it, many Iranians have told me afterwards, when I asked them how on earth you would know what would be acceptable for a work of art, and what would be restricted. Especially when political strictness changes with each new administration, creating era's associated with a president's name. Where to draw the line, and how to push the borders?

This master thesis will concern this thin line on which acceptable provocation takes place, the place of critical innovation and resilience. As anecdotally described above, one of the most visual and noticeable domains in which power is expressed in contemporary Iranian public life, is the human body. As in most contemporary societies, one's body is a place of expressing individuality, identity, but also a place on which power, both subtle and explicit, is exercised. As Shahram Khosravi described in his *Young and Defiant in Tehran*, individual bodies form a main locus for the expression of the government's power over its citizens. He shares his personal experience with the regime's force, how he and his friends were flogged for going to a party and showing 'un-Islamic' behavior, and states:"for many years to come red lines remained on my back to testify to how the new social order had been embodied."[1] This was not long after the Revolution of 1979, in which the exiled Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini seized the massive resentment against the Shah. This had been expressed in a movement consisting of liberal Islamists, Marxists, feminists and various other layers of the highly dissatisfied Iranian population, but Khomeini violently forced it into his personal Islamic revolution. The revolution was followed by a gradual but strict implementation of the Islamic or *Shariat* law, with noticeable effects on individual bodies - euphemistically put. From dress codes to physical punishments and executions, bodies are a major instrument in the exercise of power, for the Revolutionary regime. The severity of these physical punishments by the Islamic Republic differ per era and presidency, but the explicit physical effect of the state's authority on the bodies of civilians is constant. Moreover, punishments that would look medieval to Westerners did not only occur in the tumultuous years just after the revolution: in 2001, more than 200 youngsters were flogged in the public sphere for 'cultural crimes', such as playing music too loud, drinking, or going to parties.[2] But it is not only in the judicial penalties, that the physical expression of power can be seen. More visibly in day-to-day Iran are the restrictions concerning how both men

[1] Khosravi, p. 16
[2] Ibid., p. 17-18

and women need to be dressed in the public. A segregation between men and women, and between the domains of inside and outside, is partly safeguarded by the obligatory hejab. Khosravi explains:

> "Women had to cover their hair and skin in public, except for face and hands. In 1983, Parliament made "observance of the veil" compulsory in the Penal Law, on pain of 74 lashes. In 1996, the Penal Law was reformed and the punishment of *bad-hejabi*[3] was reduced to prison and a fine. *Bad-hejabi* is only vaguely defined by the law. 'Uncovered head, showing of hair, make-up, uncovered arms and legs, thin and see-through clothes and tights, tights clothes such as trousers without an overall over them, and clothes bearing foreign words, signs, or pictures' can be understood as *bad-hejabi.* But the term can also refer to the use of nail varnish, brightly colored overalls, or even modes of body movement or talking."[4]

Though not in an equal manner as women, men in the Islamic Republic also have to obey certain rules of clothing and modesty. The length of their hair, the covering of 'immodest body parts', and accessories deemed as decadent (bow ties, sunglasses, jewelry), are all under control of the Penal Law.[5]

In modern thought, Michel Foucault (1926-1984) has been one of the most influential authors in structuring the ways in which the human body forms a place of power.[6] His observations of body and state will help me in formulating how bodies are put to use as a place of power, for both the individual citizen and the state, in the works of art I will discuss in this thesis. Foucault will be my main source in analyzing the body politics present in the works, if and how a power balance is altered or undermined, and what the possible controversy exposes about the daily structure of power in Iranian society. The questions he raised will offer a framework of understanding how subjects are created and how bodies play a role in that process of subjectivation. In a relationship of power, one does not directly act upon the other, but acts upon the other's actions.[7] The one, thereby, governs the field of actions of the other, and this is a mutual process from two sides, according to Foucault.[8] Since the body is an important place of power interaction between the two sides of state and individual, it is interesting to look at the ways Iranians find in their daily lives, and in their art practices, to use this locus to 'talk back'. What kind of body does the Iranian state need, and which body does it attempt to create? And what exactly is political in how bodies are referred to in the works of art I will discuss?

Interfering with the normal body-power relation in a society, is one thing. However, the context of this research is one in which the form of expression is affected, just like the bodies themselves: bodies on canvas or in copper must obey the same strict Islamic rules as the bodies of flesh and blood. In Shiite Islam, it is not forbidden to depict humans and other living beings, as

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[3] Improper veiling (the word *bad* means the same in English and Persian)
[4] Khosravi, p. 44-45
[5] Ibid., p. 44-45
[6] Even though Foucault has emanated from the context of 20th century France, his thought has spread and influenced his generation and the ones after him, worldwide. Projecting only western ideas on other parts of the world, without taking the respective traditions and narratives into consideration, is unwise, but equally so it is unwise to pretend that Foucault has not been noticed by Iranian scholars and artists.
[7] Foucault (1982), p. 789
[8] Ibid., p. 790

it is in Sunni Islam.[9] Since art exhibitions belong in the public sphere, there is a control of everything that can be seen, and all art shows are checked, mostly before they are opened.[10] So how can an artist express critique, a different narrative or an experience of their own body, that is deemed to remain in the private sphere, if their art can be censored? One of the ways in which artists in contemporary Iran manage to make works of art concerning the human body, without being restricted, is by using different methods of non-figuration. It seems hard to combine this with a subject so tactile, physical, and full of form as the human body, but in this thesis I will show a few examples from the contemporary Iranian art sphere that do just that. Non-figuration in this context does not necessarily mean a visual absence of identifiable forms, referring to things in reality, but will rather be used to indicate general separation between form and content. It is a distinction between what we can see, and what realms of thought, association and imagination it opens behind our eyes. Besides 'formal non-figuration', the use of visual metaphor is another example of this: what is depicted or described is not what the work of art is 'really' about, but it refers to it in a subtle or more obvious manner. The series of paintings discussed in chapter 2, for instance, address a theme that is not literally depicted, but that nonetheless comes up in the mind of the spectator, without it ever becoming too explicit. Through this artistic tactic, a controversial topic is present without being presented in a literally visual way. In all four case studies, form takes on a different relation with the content and impact of the work, a process not too surprising in a context in which it is mainly form and explicit content that can be restricted by the authorities. It is hard to label something with such a level of ambiguity as 'a-moral', or going against the state ideology. When put like this, it seems a logical answer to the Iranian government, to make non-figurative works about controversial topics, referring to certain forms through other forms. But is it always that simple? How do artists manage to get across the content of a work to the spectators, but not to the authorities? I want to come to an understanding of how this method of invisible critique works, if it works, and if so, how exactly each of these artworks expresses dissent.

Important in understanding how a work of art can be subversive, provocative, or a threat to those who are in power, is to examine how it acts against the logic of the dominant power structure. In other words, provocation depends entirely on context and its norms. Each society has a structure of how things are done, and within that structure it is possible to find the borders and create ways to cross them. In Iran, the borders are both explicitly visible and hard to define - but you can be assured of strict penalties when you really cross the line. So within that context, another form of critique exists than in societies like the western European democracies (in which a lot of critique and even provocation is so usual, that it can almost be considered as part of the norm). It is this form of critiquing a vague yet strict whole of power structures, that interests me most in this inquiry. I do not pretend I know exactly where the borders are, as they shift over time and knowing them requires years of living in the system. Yet I do believe it is possible to say something about critical art that has found a way to be innocent in form, and thus allowed to be seen in the Iranian public sphere. In my own structure of thought, the French thinker Jacques Rancière (b. 1941) has been a defining factor in the way I see structures and deviations in societies, and how the balance between them operates. His concept of *dissensus*, rooted in the inseparability of aesthetics and politics and their continuous mutual influence (or effect), is key to understand how works of art can subvert a certain political structure. With the

[9] It is even possible to depict the Prophet Muhammad, even though all holy men usually are protected from sight by a veil in front of their face, in traditional Persian painting.
[10] Sharafjahan

term *aesthetics*, he points to the very basis of all that can be perceived in a certain societal structure, and the distribution of places and abilities that is implied within it. It is who is able to speak, to hear, to see, what is perceivable and what remains hidden. This distribution is an indication of the distribution of power, and therefore is undeniably linked to *politics*, which he most clearly defines with the help of Aristotle:

> "This is what Aristotle means when, [...] in Book III, he defines the citizen as 'he who partakes in the fact of ruling and the fact of being ruled.' Everything about politics is contained in this specific relationship, this 'part-taking' [avoir- part], which should be interrogated as to its meaning and as to its conditions of possibility."[11]

To be factual, Rancière calls the partition of the sensible, or the dominant structure, *la police*, whose very opposite is *politics*: a political action is that which acts upon that distribution, and is very closely linked to what he calls dissensus.[12] This key concept is the undermining of the distribution of the sensible, or the aesthetics of politics, by not following or accepting one's appointed place, showing what could not be shown. In this framework of thought, it is a matter of analyzing every act of politics as a unique expression within its context, as its context changes and thus the political or dissensual power of the act changes as well. I will therefore attempt to see each of the works in its own form and context, to be able to analyze if and how exactly the artwork operates as dissensus in the Iranian public sphere.

However, since Rancière sees a unity between aesthetics and politics, in which both parts mutually influence each other, it will be interesting to see how it holds if put to use in a context of rupture between form and content. What happens when his idea of the interrelatedness of aesthetics and politics is applied to art with such a level of ambiguity and a vital level of invisibility? In other words, is it possible not to see the critical content of the work? Is there such a thing as 'non-dissensual dissensus'? Moreover, Rancière's ideas will be discussed in a different geographical and cultural context, present-day Iran, than that from which it emanated, France. Certainly, it is a possible pitfall to project 'western' ideas and theories on a context that is perhaps different in its philosophical history, thereby universalizing these ideas, but I think it is a greater pitfall to assume that western theory has left Iran untouched and unaltered. Contemporary artists harvest the fruits of many traditions and influences, and differentiating 'east' and 'west' as irreconcilable units does not seem effective at all in analyzing their work. This being said, to understand the context in which these works operate (in other words, to understand the Iranian distribution of the sensible), it is important have basic knowledge on its culture, recent history and artistic traditions. Unfortunately, it is hard to apply it elaborately and precisely to this subject in the scope of this research, but it remains interesting to look at the deeper cultural characteristics of the Persian context. For instance, the tradition of Persian poetry as a vessel of political critique, the rebellious character of the Shi'ite Islamic religion, and frequent characterizing of Iranian culture as one of the word, more than one of the image. I must add that unfortunately, scholarly research in the precise field of this inquiry hardly exists. Up to now, the combination of body politics, societal power relations, Iran, and non-figuration as an artistic strategy, appears to be a unique one. Therefore, it was necessary to combine at least as many disciplines (such as visual anthropology, political philosophy, art theory, social history) in inspiration, preparation, and creation of this thesis. And naturally, it must be noted that without

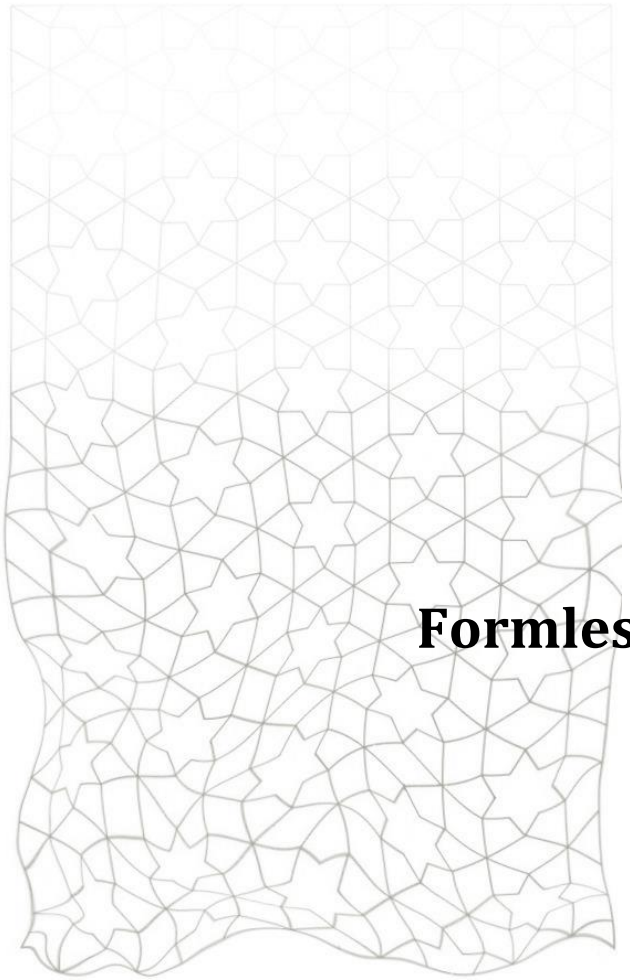
[11] Rancière (2001), thesis 1
[12] Ibid., thesis 7

speaking Persian, the sources are even harder to come by. Fortunately, I am not entirely the first or only one to see critical Iranian contemporary art in the light of non-figuration: both Iftikhar Dadi and Staci Gem Scheiwiller have analyzed works in terms of allegory. The latter even observed an "allegorical turn in recent Iranian art" and defined it as "a method for artists to "speak" about polemical issues in Iran in ways that allow more safety but equally poetic, multifaceted and far-reaching results."[13] She states that in this field of work, it "is not so much the possibility of revealing new or unintended meanings, but the very possibility of meaning being revealed that is at stake."[14]

In contrast to the scarce scholarly analyses of contemporary Iranian art, especially when it can be seen as politically controversial, the international art world has recently taken up a fascination for this art, and exhibitions of Iranian artists are becoming more and more common. Iranian art has been gaining popularity among a mostly western audience, often because of its politically critical stance and a rejection of the strict Islamic laws, thereby appealing to a western sense of identification. However, the most explicitly critical works are unlikely to be produced within Iran itself, and even though artists like Shirin Neshat have an Iranian background, most of these 'famous ones' have lived outside Iran for quite some time (and in Neshat's case, since she was 17 years old). Moreover, the binary opposition between 'the west' and Iran, made both in clerical Iran and in the international art world, does no justice to the delicacy and complexity of the works. If we want to liberate contemporary Iranian art from being caught between international misunderstanding and national censorship, it is necessary to do research on a small, direct scale, looking at how art works operate and how they can be analyzed within their political context. The attention this art receives across the globe asks for more research in its specificity, in order to move beyond a certain sense of exotism. In this thesis, the artists whose works I discuss, live and work in Iran, and exhibit their work in that context. This is important not only because of the challenge of exhibiting critical works under the risk of censorship, but also because they are having a contemporary, up to date experience of living in a fast changing society, and can thereby say more about its political reality.

This thesis will be a modest attempt to contribute to a better understanding of this art, by finding an answer to the following main question: "How do contemporary Iranian artists deploy non-figuration to make critical art about the body?" In order to do this, I will discuss four case studies, grouped in three chapters, that all address and use the human body in a dissensual way. In the first chapter, the works by Mona Aghababaee and Ghazaleh Hedayat will have a formally non-figurative character, while clearly speaking about the female body. The second chapter will deal with a series of paintings by Aeen Shahsavar and Maryam Abbas, in which they implicitly manage to allude to a private bedroom life, without actually depicting it. Lastly, the third chapter will deal with a series by Ali Ettehad, dating from tumultuous 2009, in which female skin and a thousand questions are laid bare in photographs that are provocative, but impossible to censor. In all of these chapters, I will ask myself the following questions: how are these works of art dissensual or critical, and is it possible not to see that? What kind of experience of the body is communicated through the works? And how do they act against a certain norm or power structure in Iranian society? On a deeper level, this thesis will form an illustration of the question if and how creative imagination can find and redefine freedom in all contexts, and the ambiguous position of art as a presumably free medium, in the war-like battle that is politics.

[13] Scheiwiller, p. 158
[14] Ibid.



2.
Formless, Female

Ghazaleh Hedayat & Mona Aghababaee

The first few days I spent in the new context of Iranian public life, were marked by a similar pretension of knowing the rules and fitting in, from when I left the plane. I covered my body, according to the law, by obscuring hips, buttocks, making the general silhouette less explicit, covering all skin except lower arms and the face, and veiling my hair. I remember being very aware of the parts that needed to be hidden, and was afraid that my veil would slip off, or that the wind would blow under one of my layers of visual protection. Even though the rules are milder for tourists and foreigners, the repercussions are still serious. If, as a woman, you violate the law by not wearing the veil or showing too much of your body, the consequences can be, in ultimate circumstances, being banned from the country. For Iranian citizens the punishment can range from a simple warning, to two months in prison or even lashing.[15] It made me think of all the passages I had read in advance, especially one from Marjane Satrapi, about the state's ways of making you worry about the small things, like clothing and hejabs, keeping you from worrying about the big social and political problems.[16] But all I could do, perhaps influenced by my research goals, was seeing these 'little' things as a symbol of suppression, a symptom of the bigger political problems and the state's forcing manners. As I had entered this state, the state had entered my personal space and the parameters within which I could dress myself. The chadors I saw on the street seemed grim at first, in this knowledge, but soon enough I discovered the skinny jeans and heartwarming smiles that sometimes hid under their cover. Sure enough, they were effective in hiding the body of a woman, making its forms disappear in a formless black cloak. In a way, abstraction is part of the daily experience of having a female body in Iran, if you see it as the practice of changing and hiding certain forms, making a silhouette resemble something else than the body inside. In a way, this is a form of self-censorship, through which the state makes itself felt in its citizens and their bodies on a daily basis. There is a word in Persian, *ria*, and it means as much as hypocritical pretension, or duplicity. From the age of seven, women are taught to behave and dress differently outside than they would do naturally inside, making this *ria* necessary to a certain extent, to be able to live in Iran.

Ignoring all difference between sincerity and behavior of *ria*, the value system in the ideology of the Islamic Republic relates veiling to modesty, and the veil is made to symbolize 'inner purity', as well as an 'ideological device in the war against cultural invasion'.[17] 'Proper veiling' is even put at an equal level as the sacrifices of the martyrs, the thousands of men and boys who died for the fatherland in the Iran-Iraq war, or for the Islamic Revolution. This is most explicit in governmental slogans such as "sister, your veil is more vital than the blood of the martyrs", slogans accompanied by a very clear visual language on numerous murals in the public sphere of the Iranian streets. It forms a symbol both for the traditional Iranian identity, unlike the decadent Westernization that threatens Iranian minds, and the Islamic ideological identity cherished by the Revolutionary regime. It is even so that its Penal Law is based on a equalization of sin and crime.[18] Form is therefore not just form, but indicates a system of value, religion, and identity. According to anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod, a strict Islamic reading of the concept of modesty, exemplified by the veil and modest dress, implies "hiding your natural needs and passions", and is it about "masking one's nature, about not exposing oneself to the other".[19]

[15] Rezaian
[16] Satrapi
[17] Khosravi, p. 45
[18] Ibid., p. 43
[19] Ibid., p. 45 (quoting Abu-Lughod)

Because of this daily struggle with form and its absence in the public realm, it is all the more interesting to see that non-figuration is used in art concerning the female body, while often critically reflecting on the restrictions that rule over it. As stated before in the introduction, the bodies of plaster and clay, or pencil on paper, must obey to the same rules of Islamic modesty that apply to the bodies of flesh and blood. Nudity is out of the question, that is, if you want to exhibit your work and thereby enter the public sphere. Certain things belong to the private sphere, and other things to the public sphere. Therefore, the ways in which artists in Iran can reflect on the body as a place of personality, politics or power, are limited. One of the strategies that can be discerned is that of different ways of non-figuration, that can be literal and formal, or a certain division between form and actual content. In this chapter, I want to discuss a subcategory of the human body and a sensible subject for Iranian politics, namely the female body. The two artists I will discuss here are young women from Iran, one born amidst the revolutionary turmoil of '79, and the other in the structure of the Islamic Republic itself. Both of them experiment with communicating the experience of their own bodies within the framework of rules and restrictions that is given in modern Iran, and both of them do so in non-figurative manners. I wonder if and how this can be a way in which visual art can critically reflect on the female body, without being censored by the authorities. Two case studies will serve as examples of this phenomenon: the single work *The Sound of my Hair* by Ghazaleh Hedayat (Tehran, 1979) and the sculpture series *Swallow Your Femininity* by Mona Aghababaee (Isfahan, 1982). In both of these case studies, (a part of) the female body is the subject, but not the form. I wonder if the non-figurative visual language of Hedayat and Aghababaee is referring to forms and body parts in reality, as a formal circumvention of censorship, or perhaps creates an expression of something else.

Ghazaleh Hedayat

"The Sound of my Hair" is a relatively small sculpture made by Ghazaleh Hedayat around 2010, that has been exhibited in various countries, including Iran, Switzerland, and the Netherlands.[20] The phase in the oeuvre of Hedayat in which this work was created, revolved around the theme of silence and was explored in different media, such as video, photography, and sculpture.[21] This particular work consists of four of her own hairs nailed unto the wall, small and thin enough to be invisible at first, so that the attention is drawn by the title next to the work.[22] The title in itself raises questions, as it alludes to a combination of vision and sound: the sound of one's hair. Does hair make sound? What would it sound like? Yet the ears hear nothing, as the hairs are, in her words, 'silenced by the nails in the wall', so it remains an imaginary, visual sound.[23] Hedayat manages by the simple combination of hair, nails, and title, to create a number of questions and possible readings. It could also be seen, of course, as hairs forming strings to be touched and played, in which case the nails would accommodate the sound, instead of muting it.

All of this would already be interesting in a less suppressed context, in which artists would, for instance, do research on the senses and their possible overlap - but this is Iran. Female hair is not allowed to be seen in public. Knowing this, another legion of interpretations and open endings enter the frame of reading. What does an obligatory veil do to the sound of one's hair? Is

[20] Nur Art, Framer Framed
[21] Delfina Foundation
[22] Mop Cap
[23] Ibid.

she actually alluding to a lack of freedom of expression? In her own words, Hedayat said she was fascinated by questions such as, "how can I hear the sound of my body? How can I expose it to be touched?" and that she wanted to "make it tactile and uttered."[24] This ambition is the perfect opposite of what Islamic modesty aims to achieve, if we follow the words of Abu-Lughod. To expose her own body to be touched, to utter it, to give it expression, by using her own hair and make it visible, goes against the moral fundament of sexual segregation in the law of the Islamic Republic. The interpretations of this work that I have come across on German and Swiss sites, mostly focus on the fact that it utters liberal critique about being a woman in a religiously restricted Iran.[25] It is a logical interpretation: an Iranian woman makes work with her own hair in a country where showing one's own hair is problematic, and thus goes against the governmental ideology. But I think *The Sound of My Hair* is more complicated, layered, and interesting than just that.

There is a layer of implicitness (and I would call this non-figuration if it weren't for sound to be involved) that operates in two senses at the same time: sound and vision, and if you interpret the installation of the hairs as strings, even touch is involved. If we see the hairs as strings, she finds a way of focusing on the tactility of her own body, the sound of her own body, without making this experience explicit or 'real'. She alludes to a possibility of creating sound and thus reflects on an existing silence, to touch but at the same time to the impossibility of touch. In her own words: "you can feel it, you can see it through your eyes, and you can hear it through your eyes. (...) It's not like a sound-project, it's only visual. But you have to feel the sound of it. Because hair doesn't have sound."[26] Therefore, one of the most present things in this work is not hair or sound, but the absence of any sensuous experience - and its very absence asks more attention than anything physically present.[27] The work poses a personal, intimate question in the public realm of Iran. Yet the interesting layer in it is the focus on sound, instead of vision: imagine the difference when it would have been called 'the sight of my hair'. Because of the title, a new relationship between invisibility and inaudibility is formed. In other words, there is a gap between what is written as descriptive title, and what is to be seen and heard in the actual work of art. Although the title speaks of a sound, there is none, and the hair has been stripped of its personal character ('my hair') by being nailed onto the wall horizontally, as well as of any sexuality the structure of the state might have feared in it. Even though the material is the artist's own hair, it has been removed from its context and has been changed of form, allowing it to become something else than 'just' female hair.

The role that the body has in her work, is one of intimate, personal wondering, in which parts of her body (the four hairs) become externalized, made into objects of their own. It is only because of the title that the spectator knows that these are human hairs, and those of the artist. Therefore, what the spectator sees is not an image of something he or she is not allowed to see, inciting to have dangerous morals or a decadent western lifestyle. But in a society where female hair is sexualized and forced to be hidden either under a veil or behind the closed doors of the private sphere, every single artist's hair is loaded with meaning. To some extent, Hedayat manages to de-sexualize these hairs by making them something with an existence outside of her

[24] Mop Cap
[25] Nur Art
[26] Ibid.
[27] L'absence n'est-elle pas, pour qui aime, la plus certaine, la plus efficace, la plus vivace, la plus indestructible, la plus fidèle des présences? - Marcel Proust, *Les Plaisirs et Les Jours*, 1896

body, disconnected from her body. In Foucault's reading of the relation between body and state, sexuality is a major way in which bodies are disciplined: "sex is the most speculative, most ideal, and most internal element in a deployment of sexuality organized by power in its grip on bodies and their materiality, their forces, energies, sensations, and pleasures."[28] The self-censorship discussed in the beginning of this chapter, can be seen as an expression of the disciplining power of the Iranian state over its citizens, and the internalized self-subjectivation that is a direct effect of it. With the term 'discipline', Foucault meant "a mechanism of power which regulates the behavior of individuals in the social body"[29]. According to him, it is key to see what would be the ideal body for the state: malleable, docile, productive, and subjected. But the body as it is present in Hedayat's work is resilient, despite the disciplining forces that attempt to subjectivize it for the state's sake. It is, as it were, objectivized in order to pose a question of a poetical nature, about the sound of hair. By making her hairs into objects of their own, and making them the carrier of a personal, but innocent question, Hedayat manages to undermine the dividing structures put on female hair in Iran. She desexualizes them, and thereby depoliticizes them. Perhaps it can even be said that ironically, they become *hers* again. By making these objects of division and discipline something external of her, yet referring to them as hers in the title of the work, the concept of the body becomes ungraspable.

The problem, artistically, is that the easy and mostly made interpretation of these works are political, because of the strictness of its context's regime and the usage of female hair. As I have stressed in the introduction, this leads to a loss of complexity in the reading of contemporary Iranian art. It is harder to raise innocent questions, in a world where everything bodily is loaded with meaning and cultural associations. One might even argue that a restrictive state creates its own dissent in what most people deem normal. Regarded from the smaller context of her other work made around the same time, politics doesn't seem to be the major topic. Her work of this period revolves around sound and silence, but naturally, by using her hair, she has added a socio-critical layer, and she has probably done this very consciously.

The dissensus, if we look at this work from a Rancièrian angle, partly lies in the obvious fact that Hedayat does something that is she is not supposed to do: she shows her hair in the public sphere. But what is more interesting as a political, dissensual act, is the fact that she has found a permitted way to cross the line. In his *La Nuit des Prolétaires* (1981), Rancière describes 19th century labor movements in France, whose members managed to undermine the distribution of who is allowed to read, write, know, and who is supposed to work and sleep, without thereby breaking the law. The night was appointed to them for sleeping, but instead, they used it for reading and self-education. Even worse for the power structures around them, this time was spent dreaming of another system, of ending the capitalist society.[30] I see a parallel to this in Hedayat's work and the other case studies I will discuss in the coming chapters, in the sense that they have all found ways to open up realms of the imagination that weren't supposed to be opened, without openly disturbing the aesthetic framework *la police* has condemned them to. They find forms that are allowed in the distribution of the sensible, but in that visual language they wonder about topics, problems, and experiences that disturb that distribution. Hedayat's hair is no longer part of her body, and thus fails to be categorized as an object of sexuality, yet still refers to it. The title makes clear it is her hair, and she wonders about its sound, while she

[28] Foucault (1977), p. 155
[29] Michel Foucault Key Concepts Website
[30] Rancière (2007), p. 154-5

has nailed them to the wall, in a silencing act. Nothing of this is outspokenly critical of the regime, of its laws, or its censorship, but the dissensual content lies not far under the innocent surface. Rancière has also called this 'mute speech': words or thoughts that are created, unaware of who exactly they will reach[31] - and one might add in this context, how exactly they will reach someone. This is a key element in how politically critical or dissensual works of art can be exhibited (and thus seen, discussed, etc.) in the framework of the Islamic Republic: it can never be explicit. It has to be implicit, unclear, not outspoken, yet assumable by all ingredients that can be discerned. These works balance on the thin line between silent resilience and punishable or censorable action, a line that has unfortunately become second nature for the younger generation of Iranians. Yet independent of the reading of the work, in Rancière's vision, the creation of a work in which the aesthetics of politics are undermined or altered in its practice, is already an act of dissensus.

Mona Aghababaee

The second case study I would like to discuss is a series of sculptures, called *Swallow your Femininity*, by Mona Aghababaee. Born a few years after Hedayat, her visual language is very different, yet it was born out of the same bodily experience and the need to reflect on it. Aghababaee has a background in handicraft, which is looked down upon in the hierarchy of the different art disciplines, in the Iranian art world. Handicraft is seen as feminine and not a real art - yet unsurprisingly it has brought forth as interesting works as any other discipline. Aghababee's series is more explicitly about femininity and female bodies than Hedayat, if we follow the title itself. Aghababaee's works are formed in an even less referential way than Hedayat's, in the sense that they don't literally refer or contain a certain part of the body. Unlike with the hairs pinned to the wall, there is no reference to a specific body, let alone to the body of the artist herself. Nevertheless, in the first show in which these works were exhibited, when the title of the series was still 'untitled', a male visitor came up to her, telling her that he saw that they were vaginas and other female forms, and he asked her why she tried so much to hide them. This came as quite a surprise to Aghababaee, who had worked from a certain fascination with form, material and the female experience in Iran, rather than a clear idea about bodies and forms.[32] Logically, the process of interpretation was led into a certain direction tremendously after this series was called *Swallow your Femininity*. Instantly, the works must be seen in the light of femininity, and a certain physicality implied in the verb 'swallow'. At the same time, swallowing one's own femininity implies a certain hiding, a non-uttering of it, a bit like the state's requirements of the behavior of women in the public sphere. According to Aghababaee, the title is not just there to 'help the audience', but is part of the artwork.[33] When words demarcate a certain area of understanding, the interpretation of abstract forms is influenced by that demarcation. The forms become allusions to the feminine body, and it becomes possible to see in them body parts, peep-holes, and obscuring yet transparent layers. As Aghababaee herself states, the spectator has to participate, to walk around, and his gaze thereby gets swallowed, or swallows the works and its forms. As a matter of fact, in the process of making the sculptures, this was the feeling she got from them, as if they would swallow her. It is interesting to see that she chose to combine the 'feminine' technique of weaving, associated with the place of women in rural areas, with the masculine, strong, and flexible material of metal wires. The material manages to form layers that hide certain forms, yet which it is possible to see through, especially

[31] Rancière (2007), p. 156
[32] Aghababaee II
[33] Ibid.

if you walk around the works. She told me that she could not have made a realistic body out of plaster and clay, not out of lack of ability, but because she doesn't like it. "Maybe it is because of all the layers we have in our life, and all the things that we have to hide, in our characters, it doesn't even matter if you are a woman or a man, you know, you have to hide, you have to cover."[34] To her, with her artistic background in handicraft, this was the purest and most logical way of making an image of something that is to a large extent an abstract experience. It is about one's relation to form, to seeing and not seeing, to hiding and showing.

Even though the clairvoyant visitor saw the forms Aghababaee had woven as vaginas, I don't think her work is an abstraction of forms that cannot be depicted in the Iranian sphere, in the way that one image can be a metaphor for another. Rather, it is a more complicated reflection of an experience that is (in its peculiarity) generally unknown to the audience outside Iran, and especially the west.[35] Even though the word 'abstraction' has unfortunately been degenerated to a word that means too much and thus too little, I cannot think of another word in this context that describes the minimization of one's own form that is part of the daily lives of women in Iran, as well as the formal non-figuration in Aghababaee's works. In this part of the chapter, I will therefore use it in a form-related way that is both applicable to ways of dressing and hiding one's own physical forms, and to the visual language in her work. As I talked with Aghababaee about her works, it became clear to me that they were made primarily as a reflection of the process of self-abstraction in the daily life of an Iranian woman. This process expresses itself in the veiling, the renewed relation to one's body every time you switch between public and private, and the ways in which you cannot show your body, yet trying to find new ways of having an identity in the public realm, distinguishing you from others. When I, as a woman, walk out the door and onto the street, the nature of my freedom changes in the doorstep. From there on, I need to hide certain forms, and I thereby engage in a process of self-abstraction. This becomes visual in the character of Aghababaee's sculptures, with which you have to interact, and around which you have to move yourself, in order to be able to see through the first layer, to see the forms that allude to hidden and erotic parts of the female body. There are, in general, a lot of layers in her work, reflecting the complicated nature of the Iranian society and the experience of being one of its women. It seems a worthy reflection of the following characterization by Iranian-American author Hamid Dabashi of Iranian culture:

> "(...) Iran can be identified only as a set of mobile, circumambulatory, projectile, and always impermanent propositions. Anytime anyone tries to capture, corner, or nail it, it loses its identity. It is like a butterfly. It can only be seen in motion, fluttering its inconsistencies around- just before it has been caught, trapped, and pinned in a box."[36]

In my own experience of this country, opposites and their strict separation seem to form the fabric and structure of society: man and woman, inside and outside, government and people. Yet as often as these opposites are visible, they can be seen mingling, undermining their separation, losing their mutual borders. As Dabashi eloquently explained, you seem to find a contradiction or exception, every time you think you found out how the system works. Aghababaee's work

[34] Aghababaee II
[35] Save, perhaps, the audience with a background in Saudi Arabia or other oppressive states who intervene in the personal sphere of the body and its liberties.
[36] Dabashi (2008), p. 16-17

seems to be a certain way, have a certain form, from a certain viewpoint, but as soon as you move it changes and thereby lays hold of the right of contradicting itself.

But what happens when you, as a spectator, know that these works are reflecting on the abstract experience of having a female body in Iran? Is it in that sense critical, provocative, does it communicate a politically sensitive content? In general, Aghababaee herself is quite cynical about art as a way to have influence on many people, to make them think or change their views. It is mostly other artists who see your work, or people in the scene, who are interested in art and used to seeing it. For politics, she said, it is more effective to write, or to make a documentary - but art isn't the most effective way of performing a political critique. Yet would art be restricted by the authorities, if it wouldn't be deemed at least a bit influential?[37] The way that the body is put to work in her series has a lot to do with the difference between inside and outside. In Iranian society, this is one of the most poignant 'dividing practices', as Foucault would call it, that makes a division between the inside of a private sphere and the outside of the public life, and who belongs where. Traditionally, inside is the place of the household, the woman as mother and daughter, and the family, or related people (*mahram*). Outside is the place of men, the unrelated people of the other sex (*namahram*). To go into this public life, the veil safeguards the women as it serves as a 'mobile inside', covering from the public gaze that which belongs to the inside.[38] The veil is therefore also a safeguard to maintain the structural division that shapes Iranian society and, to a large extent, seeks to control the sexuality of its subjects. The forms that Aghababaee uses, do not only refer to the inside of female bodies, exposing intimate parts in a non-figurative manner, but they also play with the strict difference between inside and outside, since they allow the spectator to see through layers, yet never exposing all they are made of. As one walks around the sculptures, inside becomes outside, visible becomes invisible, and the point of division constantly shifts. What Foucault spoke of when he used the term 'dividing practices', is the process in which society divides a citizen either in himself, or from others, and thereby objectifies him. He gives as examples the division between sane and insane, criminals and good guys, and the sick and healthy.[39] A subject is no longer a unique human being, but is labeled and categorized, and ultimately put in a place in society for 'people like him' (the insane to the mental institution, the sick to the hospital, the criminals to prison). The forms that can be interpreted as personal parts, can thereby also be interpreted as personal spaces, in works that both speak of body and society. In an equal manner as Hedayat's work, Aghababaee's series manages to play around with the subjectivation of the individual body. Whereas Foucault describes self-subjectivation as the process in which the individual makes him/herself a subject in the structure of power, consciously or unconsciously, the artist's own body is the subject and is subjectified in the work of Hedayat and Aghababaee. Yet the way in which they do so, undermines the place these bodies and their intimate questions were supposed to have in the context of the public sphere. They even manage to re-appropriate their bodies to a certain extent, by de-sexualizing and depoliticizing them.

At first sight, the works of Aghababaee conform to the rules of depiction and modesty that apply to art within the Iranian sphere - nothing is visible that should remain hidden. Yet the experience at the basis of these works, and the experience that one can have by interacting with them, is one that is supposed to be banned from the public sphere. One is tempted to look

[37] I have to say, though, that often these restrictions com across mainly as a display of power.
[38] Khosravi, p. 45
[39] Foucault (1982), p. 777-778

through layers, think about body forms, femininity, and hiding. On the OneArt website, she states:

> "*Swallow your Femininity* is a body of work that comments on the daily experience of being a woman in Iran. Females in my homeland are faced with lots of challenges. Iranian society reinforces gender differences, constantly alerting women to the fact that they are not men and essentially reinforcing inequality. I am interested in the many ways that women respond to this restricted political and psychological environment. Through formal abstraction, most women gravitate towards extremes often either attempting to hide their gender or reveal their femininity in unusual ways."[40]

One of the things she hereby points to, is the fact that the rules and morals imposed by the state are not internalized and naturalized, but are instead met with resistance, resilience, and unexpected opposition. This pattern proves that even if strict rules are followed, resistance to the source or origin of those rules is possible, and this pattern repeats itself in the form of the works themselves. Since it is art, it can mean these different things at the same time, or as Paul Ricoeur said of the hermeneutics of poetry: "the poem means everything it can mean".[41]

An experience that is limited in form, such as the experience of a woman's body in the streets of Iran, has to find an expression that does right to the nature of the experience. As Aghababaee herself stressed, she does not lack the ability to make a figurative human form, but it is not interesting to her. Her experience is non-figurative, invisible, layered, and so are the works she has made for the series *Swallow your Femininity*. But it is nothing close to a mere illustration of experience. I think it is interesting to make a connection between this and Rancière's division between the three regimes of art, of which the last two are the representative and the aesthetic regime of art. In the representative regime of art, there is a close relation between the two Aristotelian concepts of *poiesis* and *mimesis*, whereby works of art are classified and judged in the light of methods of making, and mimesis, or likeness, is the core concept that orders the ways of working, looking, and judging.[42] In the aesthetic regime of art, however, art is categorized in a system of ways of *being*, instead of doing. In this regime, art is recognized as a way of being that allows opposites and contradictions to exist in the work of art: it is, as it were, liberated from any dependence on the outside world, and exists in itself.[43] To be clear, these regimes are far more complex than just a difference between figuration and non-figuration. It is about the system in which art is conceived and perceived as a whole, what is called art and by which concepts or categories it is structured.

In the context of the Iranian condition, there is indeed a difference that is somewhat similar to the difference described by Rancière, between the aesthetic and the representative regime of art. It is the difference in the aesthetic language used by the government, and by Iran's artistic scenes. Whereas in the state language, form means content, and the main goal of form is to educate, clarify, and illustrate the messages and moral standards of the Islamic Republic, this congruence finds its opposite in the poetic, implicit, non-figurative, and at times vague aesthetic language of the artists that I discuss in this thesis. It is as if the state and the artists communicate

[40] OneArt
[41] Ricoeur, p. 104
[42] Rancière (2007), p. 31
[43] Ibid., p. 31-34

in two different 'regimes', to speak with Rancière's term. This very ambiguity about what is meant with a work of art, points to a form of dissensus more or less central to all of the works discussed in this thesis. It is the changing of the relation between form and content that is implied in the aesthetics of the Iranian state, and the undermining of its one-on-one relationship. In other words, the tight connection between what is visible and what is desirable in society, is undermined by a disconnection between form and content. In a way, it becomes a vessel of communication for the dissent among the Iranian society, especially the younger generation, as if to say: what you want to see is still not what we really are. Whereas that which is allowed a visible existence is desired to be a reflection and an expression of inner morals, in the Islamic Republic's ideology.

When Aghababaee wanted to reflect on the experience of having a body that is female in Iran, she was given certain parameters of that experience, and certain parameters of form in which her reflection was allowed to take place. And within these parameters, she managed to make a series that is both non-figurative and 'formed' enough to be clear for at least one spectator, a series that is both a reflection of an 'abstract experience', thereby referring to the world outside art, and an aesthetic enterprise in its own right, with its own laws. It shows itself, and hides itself; gives an explanation in its title, but only a very poetical one, that can be understood in more than one way. It is this ambiguity that can hardly be followed, punished, or censored by the authorities.

Conclusion

Even though 'body' and 'non-figuration' seem to be each other's opposites, due to the physical and figurative character of the human body, with all its implications in social, moral, and political spheres, for Iranian women the two opposites come quite close to one another. Whereas veiling and covering is mandatory in Iranian public life, and accordingly, expressing one's own body experience or sharing its forms is made hard, the two artists I have discussed above managed to do exactly this in non-figurative visual languages. Both Hedayat's work and Aghababaee's series reflect on an experience of physicality and the abstraction of one's body, be it the sound, the sight or the forms of it. And both of them turn this into works of art in which a participative experience of the spectator is necessary. Hedayat's work dares the viewer to think in three senses about her own hair, one of the most controversial parts of the female body: how would it sound, what do I see and is that allowed, what happens if I touch it? And is hair still political when it is no longer part of a female body, and thus no longer sexual? With the sculptures of Aghababaee, the spectator is obliged to walk around, to see through, and to be unable to see through the layers of metal wire. Their forms are non-figurative, yet it is clear that, in knowledge of the series' title, they are also forms of femininity. Hereby they manage to communicate an experience that cannot be depicted, mainly because the forms of a woman would be restricted in the public sphere, but perhaps also because of the abstract nature of the experience itself. Non-figuration is, in these cases, an essential part of the work of art, as a reflection of Iranian society and the experience of being a woman in it. Having to change form each time one switches between inside and outside, private and public, and having to deal with the forms or obligatory formlessness of your body within these parameters from the age of seven, finds no interest in a simple human statue.

This visual language of implicit presence, that deals with the body yet never in explicit forms, goes against the logic of public life that is imposed by the state. These works manage to communicate an experience to the spectator, in the public realm, that has an immanent layer of critique on an imposed relation to one's own body. It is hard to make an 'innocent' work about bodies, self-abstraction, and voyeurism, in the context of modern Iran, since none of these subjects are innocent themselves, and all of them have been politicized and moralized, especially since the Islamic Revolution. Yet without falling into the pitfall of becoming simplistic, or 'activist art' by prioritizing protest over aesthetics, they manage to re-appropriate the daily, formless, subjectivation of their bodies. Initially, covering and hiding was imposed on their bodies in the public sphere, but they manage to make this non-figuration into a language of their own, understandable for all who live within the same parameters of personal expression. They thereby prove that many ways are still open to talk about the possibilities of the body -even the sound of hair- within the restrictions given to them by the clerical government.

The forms that Aghababaee uses, hovering between visibility and invisibility, eroticism and abstraction, possibly change the way you see forms in daily life, especially in the context of their subject matter. The fact that Hedayat manages to exhibit her own hair in public, by describing around them, making them into something else, making the work about something else than the sensitive material of which it is made, is symptomatic for the reality of many Iranian artists: trying to turn restrictions into strategies. The ways in which both Hedayat and Aghababaee manage to distill their experience in a work of art, obey to the laws and restrictions of what form can be in the public space. However, getting across this experience of their bodies, and simultaneously, the crookedness of it, the *ria* and hypocrisy of the way they should be handled with is, to me, an act of dissensus and subversion.

If non-figuration is in essence about form, this chapter has been an example of it, as it was an exploration of female form and non-figurativeness. But what about non-figurativeness that is figurative at the same time? In the next chapter, I will focus on a series of paintings in which we can clearly discern and identify forms as depictions of pieces of reality. But what the series is actually about, is not made explicit anywhere, not even in the title or exhibition text. Sex in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

IMAGES

Ghazaleh Hedayat, *The Sound of My Hair*, ±2010, human hair and iron nails on wall

Image from delfina foundation

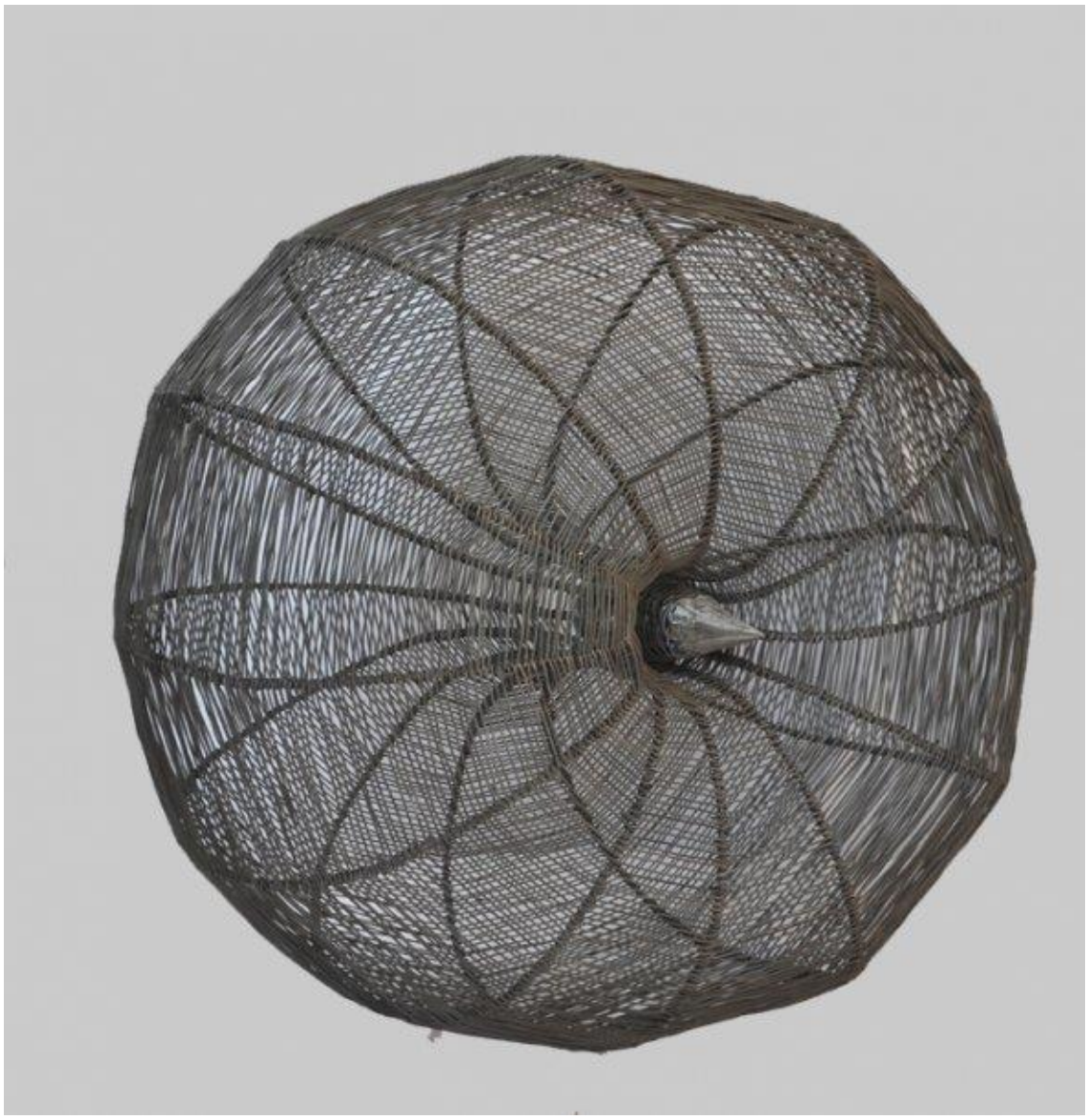
Mona Aghababaee, *Swallow your Femininity*, 2010-11, metal wire

All images from OneArt

"Imposed Gender"

Untitled

Untitled



“Self-Stimulation”

Untitled

3.
Iranian Insiders

Abbas Shahsavar & Maryam Ayeen

One of the last days I spent in Tehran, after a few weeks in Iran, I was convinced I somewhat knew what I could and could not do as a woman in the public realm. Covering hair and body, as soon as I switched from private space into public, became routine. Most eye contact with the other sex was either shortened to a meaningless minimum, or charged with enough carelessness to ward off intimidation or unwanted attention. Introductions to men were naturally accompanied with a hand on my heart, instead of shaking his. Yet on that one day near the end of my stay, I met a young man who once again changed my idea of borders and limits. We kept bumping into each other, four times in a row in different locations in Tehran, and since both of us were towering over the rest of the Iranians, it wasn't that hard to keep track of the other. At the fourth chance he got, he initially obeyed tradition and waited until my male companionship finally left my side in the Artist House, before he politely said hello in his broken fragments of English. But not long after, I found his hands looking for mine in the dark of a theatre room, after he had playfully asked for my phone number. I had grown accustomed to a polite distance, in a society where even married couples rarely hold hands on the street. I knew these things happen all the time in private, but in the midst of all these people? This young man did not care one bit, as he jokingly fooled around and made it very clear that he liked me. But holding hands in the dark was only the beginning of my surprised confusion, as we decided to meet once again. On my last day, a few hours before I returned to the Imam Khomeini International Airport, we drove around from gallery to gallery, until he parked his car in front of the house where I had stayed in protective family structures. And a few moments later, inside that household, I would be back in the other Iran, in which I wasn't allowed to go out 500 meters on the streets alone after nightfall, because 'there might be men'. However, as we kept sitting next to one another in his car, and tried to say goodbye, the public sphere of Tehran saw these two strangers kiss.

This chapter is shaped around the borders and assigned places of sexuality in the Islamic Republic. Hopefully, the personal anecdote above makes it easier to imagine the feeling of being there, of trying to find out the rules and the borders of behavior, which can be an exhausting process for outsiders. To see how art can deal with these borders in a possibly controversial or critical manner, I will discuss a series of paintings called *Misunderstanding in the Blue Room* (2014), by the married couple Abbas Shahsavar (Kermanshah, 1983) and Maryam Ayeen (Bojnord, 1985).[44] Thanks to the interactive 360 degrees panorama image that can be found on the website *360 cities,* the size of the paintings can be experienced in relation to the room of exhibition and the spectators standing in it.[45] In opposition to what can be found on the Azad gallery site, where they were exhibited, it becomes clear that these works are miniatures, whose details can only be experienced in close-up. In each of the works a scene of the painters' private life is depicted, located within the walls of their home. A central role is either for one of them, or both at the same time, and in one occasion, their cat. In most of the scenes, they are captured in household chores or the daily routine of changing clothes, and as expected in comfortable surroundings, they are dressed in pajamas, bathrobes, or simple dresses. One of the first striking things to be observed, with the knowledge of the past chapter fresh in mind, is the missing veil around Maryam's head. Strictly speaking, the veil is not obliged inside the domestic environment, and combined with the fact that the painters are married to each other, this might be the reason that this was allowed to be exhibited in Tehran.

[44] Shahsavar & Ayeen; Behance
[45] Website 360 cities

Analyzing all visual material that can be found online, a total of ten paintings on the site of the gallery and a few more on the artists' site, a number of constants can be discerned. In none of the paintings, Maryam or Abbas look at the spectator: instead, they seem to be preoccupied with their tasks and thoughts, as they look away, down, or have their bodies turned away from the perspective of the painter altogether. In only one painting there is a clear interaction between the two, yet it is protected from the gaze of the viewer, who only sees the back of Abbas, as he is supported by Maryam, and changes a light bulb. Most scenes depict only one of them, in which the pensive subject seems to have become part of the interior, spreading an atmosphere of routine, playfulness, and hidden thoughts. Abbas holds a bra, sitting in his bathrobe, Maryam lies on the floor with a bottle held in her hand and a cat next to her, Abbas looks at the underwear lying on the floor whilst he has his hands in his pants, Abbas sleeps on the floor with a pillow between his legs, Maryam holds up a dress in front of her body, Abbas follows Maryam into another room, upper body undressed. They radiate a sort of solipsism, either individually or with their attention fully immersed in the other. The paintings don't have a distinctive style from one another, even though they are made by two painters, which can only be noted by the difference in signatures, popping up sporadically in a corner. All of them were painted in a certain hard realism, with clear and outspoken colors, though the borders between color planes are a bit fuzzy at times. They display a scenery of bare interiors, with hardly any decoration, and mostly cold colors. A visual characteristic of this series that can be observed as in line with traditional Persian painting, for instance in book illuminations, is the tendency to flatten the planes of the composition, and excluding decorative patterns from perspective, for instance of the rug Maryam lies on. One of the most distinctive, almost weird elements in each and every one of the paintings, is the presence of a power plug or light switch, even in the most unpractical of places. In some of the works these are accompanied by holes in the wall, which is more elaborately worked out in their similar series *Sick*, of which I do not know if they were ever on public display.[46]

What the founder of the Azad Art Gallery, Rozita Sharafjahan, found so obvious that she would hardly spend any words on it in our short conversation, was that these works are suggestive, and loaded with sexuality. This character can hardly be pinned down to one specific visual element, and strictly spoken within the framework of the Iranian Shariat law, the depictions are innocent, despite perhaps a missing veil. However, in combination, the poses of Maryam and Abbas, the underwear scattered on the floor, the wine bottle held in Maryam's hand, the erection and hands in Abbas' pants, the hole in the wall, and the suggestion of nudity behind a held-up dress, or the action about to take place in a room we cannot enter, radiate a sexual energy. Interestingly, the paintings that can only be found in the online archive of the artists, are a lot more explicit in this sexuality, for instance by portraying Abbas with an erection under the cover of his pants. The question now becomes, how exactly is this sexual layer created, and how do these works 'work' in their specific context? How should we look at them, in order to understand their layers of reference and controversy? What exactly is happening in this series, and what should happen in our minds?

Inside, outside

A first layer of understanding is created in the knowledge of the fundamental structuring element of differentiating inside from outside, shortly touched upon in the previous chapter.

[46] Shahsavar & Ayeen

Whenever a woman leaves the safety of the home, she has to dress up for the masculine outside world, by creating a 'mobile *andaruni*', a mobile inside, through veiling. This difference between inside and outside, private and public, is one of the most defining and structural differences in Iran, that forms an order of places, who belongs in them, and how they are expected to behave. As Afsaneh Najmabadi explains in her modern history of Persian gender and sexuality, the private sphere is essentially the place of the feminine, whereas the public is the place of the masculine.[47] It has to be noted that the black-and-white gender opposition between man and woman is more of a modernist, European concept than a traditional Persian one, in which many in-between forms had a role in social life, especially before this European, 'colonial modernism' forced its way into Iran.[48] However, for the analysis of this series, the difference between inside and outside is a key element, and these spaces have been widely characterized with the opposition woman-man, known-unknown, familiar-unrelated. Traditionally, the feminine has to be protected from the masculine: the family sphere must be covered from unwanted, *namahram* gazes and interaction.[49] As David Bailey and Gilane Tawadros explain in *Veil*:

> "Since women are taken to be a constitutive part of the male core self, they must be protected from the vision of unrelated males by following a set of rules of modesty which apply to architecture, dress, behavior, voice, eye contact and relationships. Walls, words and veils mark, mask, separate and confine both women and men. Instances abound in Iranian culture: high walls separate and conceal private space from public space; the inner rooms of a house protect/hide the family; the veil hides women, formal language suppresses unbridled public expression of private feelings; modesty suppresses and conceals women, decorum and status hides men (...)."[50]

This segregation between inside and outside, referred to as *andaruni* and *biruni* in Persian, is a fundamental part of the structuring of Iran's society, entangled with the difference between man and woman, expressing itself in veiling, codes of modesty, and expected behavior patterns.[51] In the first chapter, it has become clear how both man and woman have to cover certain parts of their body, as soon as they leave the private, and enter the public sphere. In many ways, there is a lot more freedom within the four walls of the private space, generally condemning Iranians to a life with two faces. In my own experience, it struck me how literal and explicit the separation of men and women is, in the daily life of public Iranian space. The city buses are separated in front and back, one for the women and family, one for the men. Some restaurants do not allow single men or a group of men in, because they are designed to serve families (a woman alone is no problem). All security checks in airports are completely segregated, mosques and holy shrines can be either entered as a woman or as a man, and if you want a tour guide in one of the latter two, you can be sure it is one of your own sex. The psychology behind these segregations lies in the understanding of the self, according to Al-Ani, Bailey, and Tawadros:

> "In many non-western societies with strong hierarchical and collective relationships, including Iran, the self is not fully individuated or unified as it is purported to be in the west, but it is thought to be familial and communal, defining itself foremost as part of a

[47] Najmabadi, p. 207-9
[48] Dabashi (2008), p. 45-6; Najmabadi, p. 2-7
[49] Al-Ani, Bailey, Tawadros, p. 139
[50] Ibid., p. 139
[51] IranDocumentary1

> close-knit group. However, even in these societies, the self is not entirely communal or cohesive. Indeed, there exists a contradiction between outer shell or public self and an inner core or private self, both of which are integral to the overall sense of the self. Psychologically, the core is supposed to be private, stable, intimate and reliable, while the exterior is construed to be unstable and unreliable, the domain of surfaces, corruption and worldly influences. The self's duality necessitates a boundary zone, which like a veil or a screen can protect the core from contamination from the outside and, acting similar to 'screen memory', can protect the core to leaking to the outside."[52]

This psychology of the self knows its physical counterpart in the structuring of individual bodies, as in the separation between inside and outside, and man and woman, described above. In my own experience, my making it into a law, the structure of binary oppositions and their separation attains a certain normality, by which individuals are subjected and their place and behavior in society is safeguarded. In the words of Foucault, this would be called discipline and normalization, though he uses these terms in describing an early industrializing state, and a nineteenth-century context.[53] Leaving the question out whether or not the Iranian contemporary context is comparable to that society, it suffices to observe that the vision of the traditional, Islamic, modest body, is far from accepted as 'normal' by the younger generation. And since the body is the locus central to this thesis, where this fight becomes the most tangible, visible and personal, it can also form a way of 'talking back'. So how do the painted bodies of Ayeen and Shahsavar actually operate? Does the way the body is put to work in these paintings, go against a form or norm of subjectivation, or a dividing practice meant to control subjects?

First of all, it is striking to see the obvious depiction of a private sphere, the personal space of a married couple, in the public space of a gallery. What bodies are allowed to do in each of these spheres (and who is allowed to see it) is so different that its overlap is very rare. Secondly, even though the inside is displayed on the outside, what the bodies actually do in the scenes, is not the spicy action whose depiction might cause controversy, but it is constantly alluding to the invisible existence of that action. If it is so clear to Sharafjahan that the works radiate or allude to a certain sexuality, what kind of sexuality is that? Can we define it as fulfillment, longing, ecstasy, or perhaps frustration? Compared to the strict and heavily loaded separation of man and woman, the atmosphere of these paintings is surprisingly shameless, and even playful. They seem to know exactly where the border lies of what they cannot depict, but also how to make it clear enough to what they are actually referring.

Poetry

In other words, Ayeen and Shahsavar made sure it would be hard to pin down the exact controversial elements of expression, by giving the literal body a relatively innocent role to play. But in a culture formed so deeply by poetry and metaphor, the way of reading might be easily turned toward what is *not* literally depicted. In this case, it is key to understand how it should be read, and a possible clarifying factor is poetry. Poetry is deeply entrenched with Persian culture, past and present, to a level that is hard to imagine for outsiders. Families take selfies with, and put babies on the tomb of Hafez as a sort of blessing, as he is considered the greatest poet of

[52] Al-Ani, Bailey, Tawadros, p. 139
[53] Foucault, (1980) p. 61

Persian history, his book present in every household, together with the Qur'an.[54] Abbas Kiarostami, the country's most famous and popular filmmaker, put the role of poetry as following:

> "In Iran, in conversation, the use of poetry is not limited to intellectuals, or poets, or even poetry lovers. We have simple people, illiterate people who, during the day, recite a couple of verses in order to relate to one another and express their viewpoints. Poetry in Iran pours down on us, like falling rain, and everyone takes part in it. Your grandmother, when she wanted to complain about the world-- she complained with poetry. Or if she wanted to express her love for your grandfather, she expressed it with poetry, even faulty poetry. (...) Because above all, poetry is the language of the Persian culture. Whether the poetry of Rumi or common poetry."[55]

In this rich tradition of Iranian poetry, it has often been used as a vessel for critical or controversial content, as poems have the liberty to mean many things at the same time. The woman who is close to being a stereotype of the Iranian artist in the western world, Shirin Neshat, highlights not only the importance of this in Iranian culture, but especially the way it offers to address things one cannot really speak about:

> "Poetry and calligraphy are innate in Iranian culture. I like poetry because it has the potential to be metaphorical, and for us Iranians, metaphorical language is essential. It has been used for many years and today it is used by artists and visual artists, because it provides the opportunity to "say what is forbidden to say" without being censored, and it allows you to make statements between lines in a country where we are forbidden from speaking out, especially women. (...) I like to count on Iranian poetry, because I know that it's understood by my people."[56]

Ergo, poetry has been an important way of communicating critical content across the ages, without raising too much suspicion of the authorities, and it appears to still have this function for some contemporary artists. Moreover, the authors of *Veil* add the very medium used by Ayeen and Shahsavar, to a list of examples from the Iranian culture in which there is a boundary between inside and outside. Miniature painting, as a traditional form of Persian painting, usually conveyed their message 'in layers', rather than presenting it clearly and explicitly.[57] This artistic choice could be a clue as to how the viewer should read their works. So what happens if you look for metaphorical, symbolical, and poetical elements in these paintings? Underwear, clothes lying around, and the suggestion of nudity behind a dress or outside the frame, all imply a certain intimacy. As well it could be that these household scenes are the moments just before or after the bedroom action, also alluded to by the open doors and the couple passing through. Even the poses of Maryam and Abbas, especially the one in which she holds him up to change a light bulb, with his crotch remarkably close to her face, can be easily read as metaphors for sexual activity - in this case, a blow job. The erection of Abbas on the bench is hardly poetical. And what to think of all these recurrent light switches and sockets, in the most unpractical places? I cannot think of another reason why there would be a light switch or socket in each of the paintings, other than a

[54] Darke
[55] Zanganeh, p. 86
[56] Marse
[57] Al-Ani, Bailey, Tawadros, p. 139

form of symbolism. It could be that electricity forms a metaphor for sexuality, or in a more simplistic reading, a power plug can be plugged in and plugged out, just like the reproductive organs. All sockets in the paintings online, however, are empty. Then there is that wine bottle in the hands of a lying down Maryam, and especially the way she holds it. One reading is that of a phallic symbol, but again there is more to a wine bottle in the history of Iranian poetry than one might suspect. As Nasrollah Pourjavady explains in his chapter on metaphors on love and wine in Sufi mystic poetry from Iran, wine is a widely used metaphor in describing both worldly love as divine love. The cultivation of wine, the pouring, the seeing, smelling, drinking, and its intoxicating effect, all refer to states in which lovers can be.[58] Although an interesting detail in relation to this painting of Maryam is, that for the Sufi poets, the real effect of wine starts with drinking it - whereas Maryam doesn't drink, and the bottle is empty in her hands.[59]

These mixed signs, and symbols going both ways, lead me to think that these paintings are not just about something so sexual they cannot depict, therefore hidden in bottles and underwear. If it were about the visualization of a private sex life, made by both man and woman, why would there be as many references to the absence of sex, as to sex itself? The empty sockets, the empty bottle, the gazes turned away from the viewer's eye, and the radiance of solipsism and slight boredom lead me to another interpretation. These works are not about sex, but about borders - the borders of expression of sexuality, the borders of privacy and the public. I think the subject of sex is not what this art is really about, even though it is the most obvious source of controversy, but merely the way and the medium to express something else. Ayeen and Shahsavar don't depict sexuality as such, they have rather found a way to visualize the borders connected to sexuality themselves. Their series is about how bodies have to act, in private and public, and they express that very boundary. Every part of the human experience and its behavior that is considered as sexual by the ruling ideology, is thereby condemned to the relative invisibility of the private sphere. Through law and the arrangement of the public space, human bodies are categorized as man or woman, and each of these designations implies a kind of behavior, as well as the separation between sexes itself implies a kind of behavior towards the other sex. In the words of Foucault: "discipline proceeds from the distribution of individuals in space".[60] In its own place, the individual body is controlled and conditioned, as the expectations of the state of the bodies of the people, influences the individual's own expectations of his or her body.

Rancière

If these works are actually about borders, what can be said about their dissensual force, in the light of Rancière's thought? How do they operate, and if anything at all, what do they undermine, or offer as an alternative? To answer these questions, it is necessary to look at the logic of the work, versus the logic of the context in which it operates. First of all, an important element in understanding why this work is interesting as possible dissensus, is visibility. Naturally, it is unusual to visualize the inside, and exhibit it in the outside: this is a confusion of two separate realms, even though what is depicted, is made in knowledge of what is allowed in the outside world. Then there are the somewhat confusing allusions to sexuality, crossing that border of

[58] It has to be noted that in mystic Sufism, these lovers are lovers of God- but the difference between profane lovers and divine lovers is not that big, in their perspective and poetry.
[59] Seyed-Gohrab, p. 132-5
[60] Foucault (1977), p. 141-144

'what happens where' in society once more. However, the most interesting layer of visibility is that of the border itself. The spectator is offered an image that is allowed, and not going directly or explicitly against the logic and ideology of the state. But the subtext, the obvious invisible, that to which the symbols and the atmosphere allude, might go against this logic and ideology. In this very aesthetic contradiction, this Aesopian image language, lies a visualization of the aesthetic border that structures a great part of society. In the work, both inside and outside are present, especially in the fact that Abbas and Maryam are not doing what you actually can do inside, because it will be visible outside. This very combination is a visualization of what bodies are supposed to do inside and outside, which undermines the segregating structure at the basis of that behavior. If invisibility and natural acceptance safeguards a structure of power, the spectator seeing this work is now forced to think about the borders of what he or she is allowed to do and where, and the power at the basis of that border is thereby possibly undermined. Rancière names this as the fundamental difference between politics and police. The distribution of the sensible, or police, does not allow a void, and claims to be a whole, claims to be all there is. Politics, or the manifestation of dissensus, shows what *la police* structured as invisible.[61] Just like in the first chapter, it is an undermining of the logic of what is visible and represented: where the state logic only sees a unity in image and content, in the arts (be it poetry or the visual arts) there is a rupture between them. In Rancièrian terms, this changes what is visible and invisible, and thereby changes the relation with the perceivable world around us. In his own words:

> "[politics] begins when they make the invisible visible, and make what was deemed to be the mere noise of suffering bodies heard as a discourse concerning the 'common' of the community. Politics creates a new form, as it were, of dissensual 'commonsense'."[62]

But returning to the experience of Iran, as it was in February 2016, it becomes apparent that everyone there, especially the younger generation, knows this border all too well. Does it have to be revealed, and does that actually undermine any 'natural' order? I don't think so. Reading Rancière once more, I suspect that his idea of consensus, as the opposite of dissensus, is not applicable to Iran:

> "consensus, as a mode of government, says: it is perfectly fine for people to have different interests, values and aspirations, nevertheless there is one unique reality to which everything must be related, a reality that is experienceable as a sense datum and which has only one possible signification."[63]

Other than the gap between binary oppositions such as man and woman, or inside and outside, there is also a gap between visual imagery and how it is understood and interpreted by a majority of the Iranians. Not only does this apply to the artistic expressions that are the subject of this thesis, but even the government murals, spreading their ideology of Islamic piety, veneration of martyrs and the evilness of the western world, are met with widespread

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[61] Rancière (2001), thesis 7 :
"It is this exclusion of what 'there is not' that is the police-principle at the heart of statist practices. The essence of politics, then, is to disturb this arrangement by supplementing it with a part of the no-part identified with the community as a whole. Political litigiousness/struggle is that which brings politics into being by separating it from the police that is, in turn, always attempting its disappearance either by crudely denying it, or by subsuming that logic to its own. Politics is first and foremost an intervention upon the visible and the sayable."
[62] Rancière (2015), p. 139
[63] Ibid., p. 144

skepticism. There is a difference in how many Iranians, young and old, see themselves and their place in the world, compared to how they are viewed and visualized by the aesthetics of the state. Quoting Rancière again:

> "Dissensus is a conflict between a sensory presentation and a way of making sense of it, or between several sensory regimes and/or 'bodies'. This is the way in which dissensus can be said to reside at the heart of politics, since at bottom the latter itself consists in an activity that redraws the frame within which common objects are determined. Politics breaks with the sensory self-evidence of the 'natural' order that destines specific individuals and groups to occupy positions of rule or of being ruled, assigning them to private or public lives, pinning them down to a certain time and space, to specific 'bodies', that is to specific ways of being, seeing and saying. This 'natural' logic, a distribution of the invisible and visible, of speech and noise, pins bodies to 'their' places and allocates the private and the public to distinct 'parts' - this is the order of the police.[64]

This being said, the paintings by Ayeen and Shahsavar are hardly a rupture with the minds and self-image of many of its spectators, and probably they are hardly provoked by it. These works are about the border of depiction, the boundaries of expression in the Iranian public realm. But if it is a document of anything, it is that of the deeply dissensual character of contemporary life in the Islamic Republic.

Conclusion

The non-figuration in this chapter has gotten a different and less formal character than that of the first chapter. Whereas Hedayat and Aghababaee literally used formal abstraction in their works, Ayeen and Shahsavar do use the human form in a realistic and recognizable manner. However, the way in which they use the depiction of their own bodies, makes that which is not depicted an equally important part of the work. In this manner, non-figuration or the absence of literal depiction, is an important element in the understanding of the work. In the context of contemporary Iran, sexuality is a complicated and endlessly interesting theme, structured in the state's ideology by separating man from woman, and inside from outside. In each of these spaces, and under each of these labels, there are different rules that order and discipline the behavior of individual bodies. And even though there are enough ways, contextual and poetical, to see the sexual layer in this series of paintings, in this chapter I have argued that they are in fact not depictions of sexuality, but of borders. The spaces that are so clearly separated in Iran, that of inside and outside, are confused in these miniatures that depict scenes from a private household, with all intimacy and references to sexual life, and yet are designed to fit the public sphere of an exhibition. As a depiction of the border, it feels as a typical expression of today's Iranian youth, poking fun at the more serious generation above them, and the ridiculous image of their lives, made by the state. There is a certain carelessness in these works, knowing exactly when they would cross the line, joyfully and resiliently rope-dancing their way over it.

In expressing the line between two places whose difference structures a part of society, these works manage to make visible a normally invisible part of the distribution of the sensible, and

[64] Rancière (2015), p. 139

this can be seen as a Rancièrian dissensus. But in the light of this resilient generation, to which the artists themselves and a large part of their audience belong, the borders of this partition are very well-known, and the fact that there is a difference between the state's truth and their lives, is obvious. Showing this border, or even crossing it, would hardly be provocative to them. In a context that cannot be described with Rancière's *consensus*, it would make more sense to see these works as an expression of the deep-rooted dissensus in daily Iranian life.

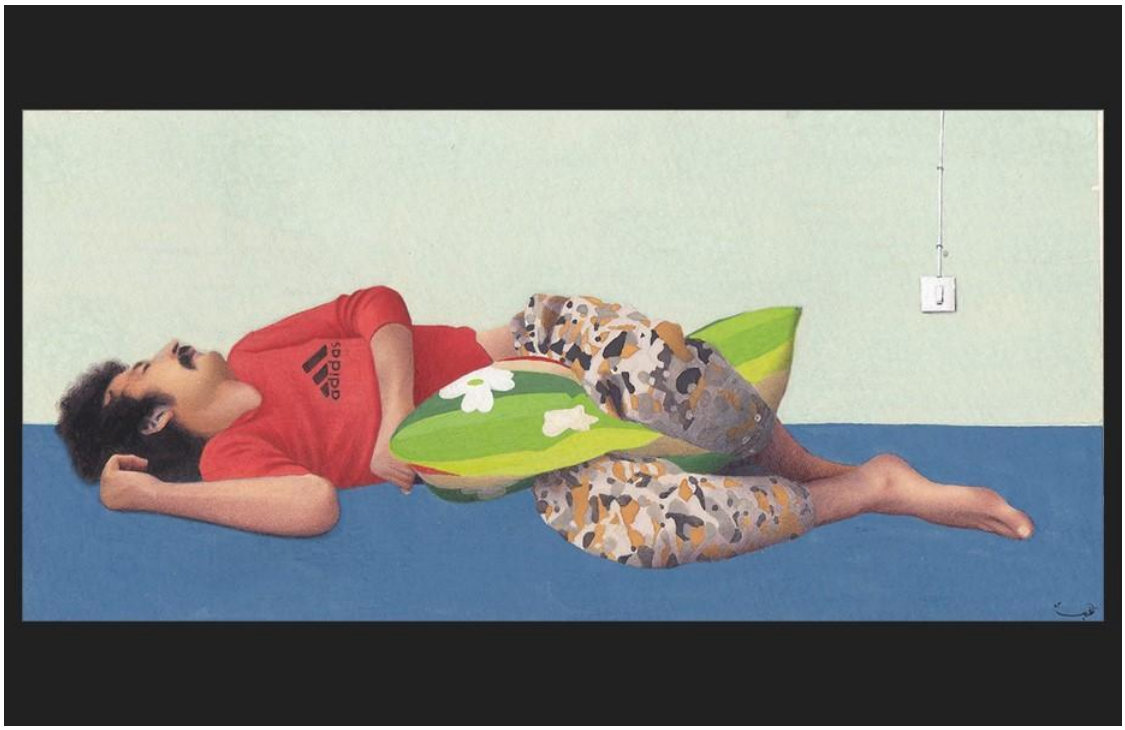
Again, these works form a visualization of the thought, that this generation is not represented in the image of the state, that there are meanings beyond all images, and that these things cannot be stopped, made explicit, or be prosecuted. The imagination is free, and the visual combat is all but over. In the next chapter, I will discuss a series of photographic works by Ali Ettehad that can be characterized as downright artistic activism, pushing back hard when the state pushed so many young Iranians down, just before the tumultuous green summer of 2009.

IMAGES

Ayeen Shahsavar & Maryam Abbas,
***Misunderstanding in the Blue Room*, 2014, gouache on paper**

Sources:
Azad art gallery website
& website of the artists.

(All untitled)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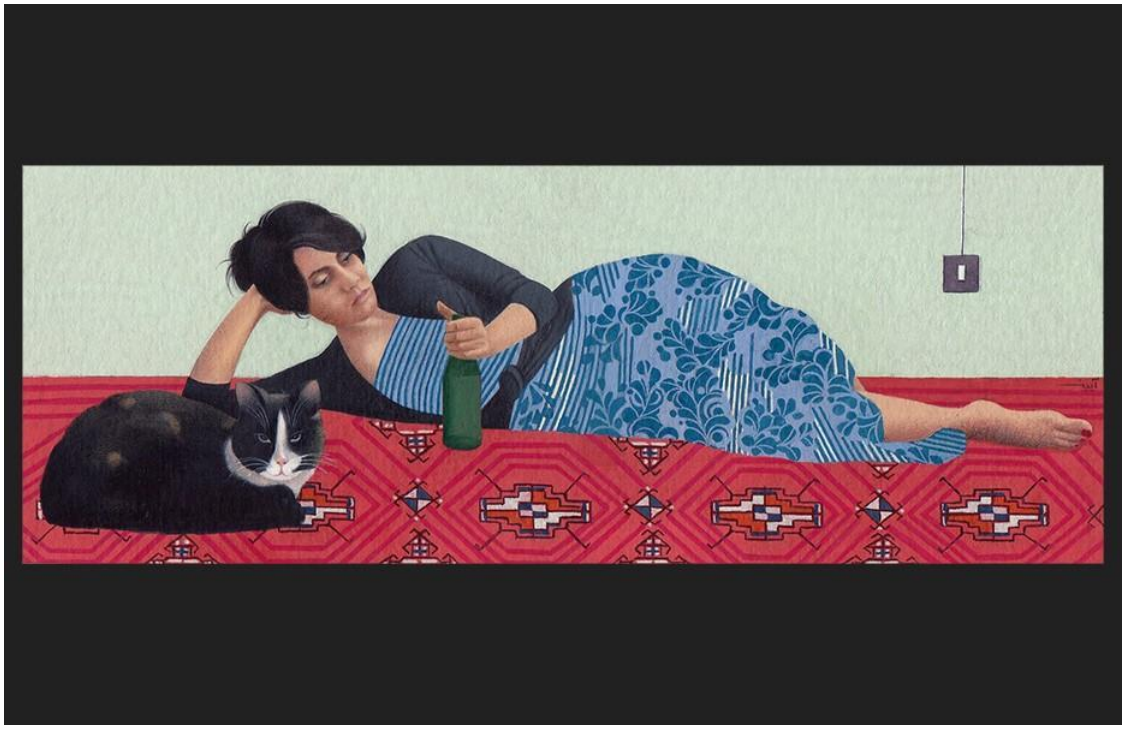
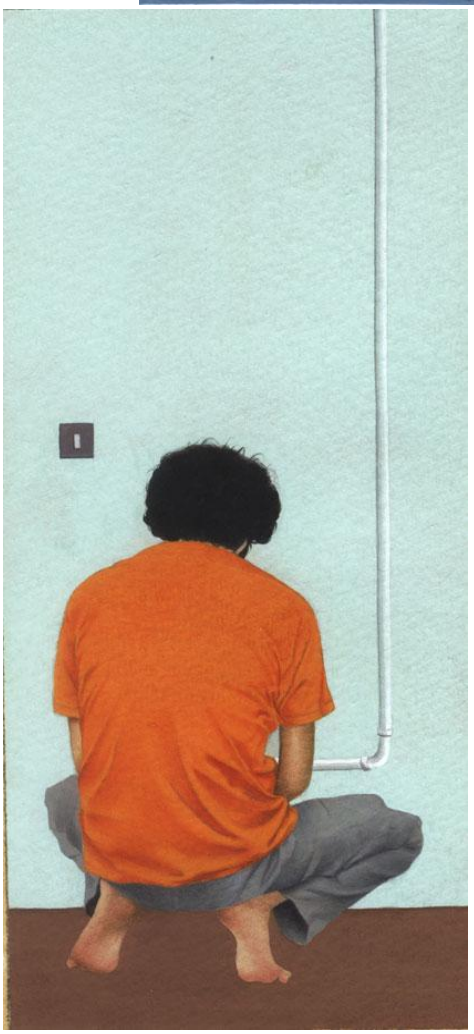
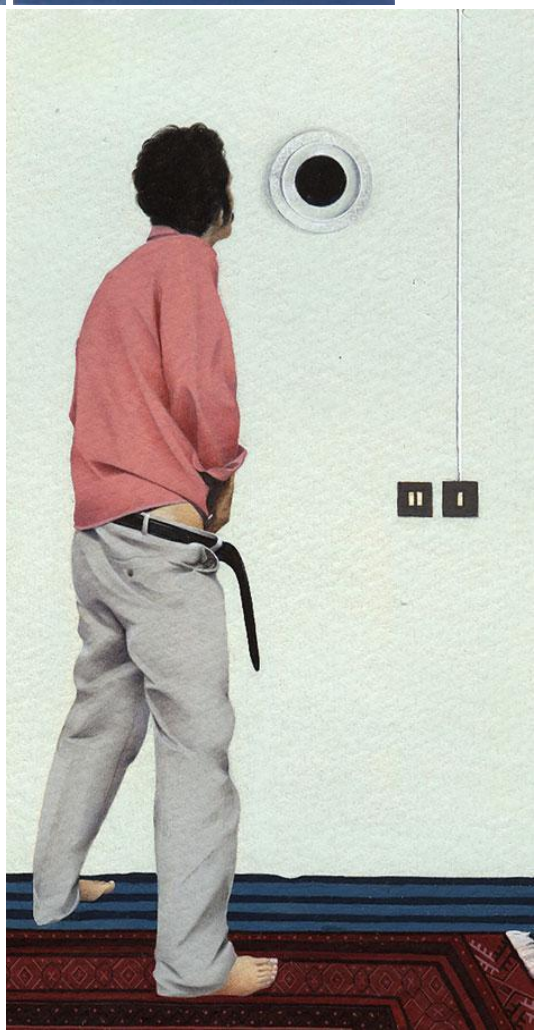
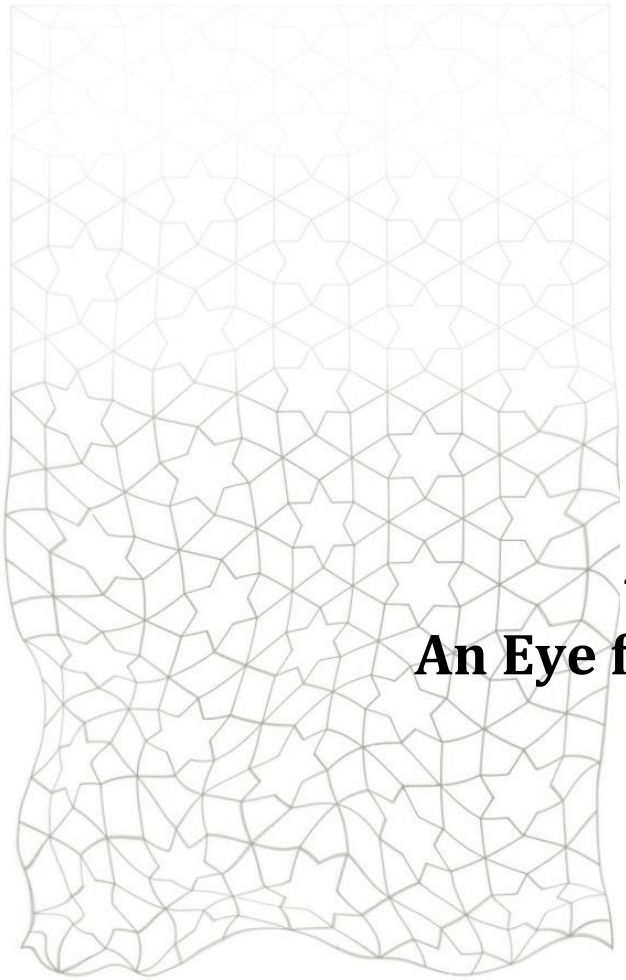



CALVIN







4.
An Eye for an Eye

Ali Ettehad

If there is any long-lasting memory of my first stay in Iran, that has influenced my research more than its equally memorable hospitality and stunning beauty, it is the concern of Iranians that foreigners misunderstand and misrepresent their country. Often I would get into a conversation about certain cultural aspects or experiences that I had, in which the Iranian part of the dialogue was determined to not let me leave with any 'wrong' ideas, even if the next determined Iranian would gainsay everything the first would argue. At times it felt as if my conversation partners were fighting with themselves, trying to move within the minefield of inner conflicts in which tradition, respect, international interests, politics, shame, love, and pride all play their part. If any people, it is the Iranians who are burdened with a fascination for the own identity, while many contradictions make up its fabric.

This final chapter's case study is a photographic series called *Only for Use Inside the IRI* (2009), in which numerous layers of identity and contemporary life come to the fore, in what perhaps can be seen as the least obscured visual language of all case studies. It is made by Ali Ettehad (Sari, 1983), whose interests mainly revolves around identity questions in the Middle East, related to his ongoing research in Persian history and mysticism.[65] The works have a rather straight and explicit style, compared to the rest of his oeuvre. Initially, when I expressed my interest for *Only for Use Inside the IRI*, he was a bit reluctant towards the work, as he explained that it really had to be understood in its socio-political context, and that he uses a more poetical approach in his current work.[66] Yet I think that in the context of this thesis, it is one of the most interesting series, to see how non-figuration be explicit and implicit at the same time, and how it can deal with the politics of body in more than one way.

Visual analysis

Ettehad's *Only For Use Inside the IRI*, in which IRI stands for the Islamic Republic of Iran, consists of photographs of a woman's skin, taken so closely to the skin, and so brightly lit, that the forms that are visible, could easily be understood as other parts of the body. They seem to be sexual, but on a closer look, they are in fact innocent, non-sexual parts of her body, such as her back, armpit, or mouth. There is a high contrast in dark and light, and the photographs are really taken from a close angle, showing all pores, skin structure, hairs, and imperfections. No retouching has been performed afterwards, the skin is visible as it is in reality. Only one picture is blurred, the one with the lips, and it is suggestively turned around 90 degrees, making it resemble a woman's genitals. This being the exception to the general style, it gives the whole quite a 'cool' or cold atmosphere, as if these parts of skin, in all their vulnerability, are just put up for show, in their golden framework. There is a layer of black between photo and framework, and the framework itself is either golden or silver, and quite sizable. They remind me of kitsch, or the classical European frameworks for academic paintings. Then there is the barcode, present on each of the works, each of them different, just like the unique frameworks.

For the first time in all of the case studies spoken of in this thesis, an actual, individual body is represented directly - that is to say, visible in the way it is visible to our eyes, mediated only by photographic technique. And the parts of her body are recognizable enough as such, to be called 'figurative'. Yet again, in this series, form plays a game of multiple layers of meaning and reference. And even though the forms that he has chosen to show are pushing the boundaries,

[65] Ali Ettehad Website
[66] Ettehad I

they are still 'innocent', and manage to refer to the parts of her body you really aren't allowed to see. The effect of zooming in on these body parts, is that the woman to whom the skin belongs, remains anonymous. All we know about her is that her skin is white and her hair is black. Removed from their context, the fragments of skin seem to lose their place in a whole, but still keep their sense of mystery, as the viewer is offered a peek into what is normally reserved for *mahram* and husband, and herself. The effect of zooming in onto the body is that the body parts we are allowed to see, have become predominantly forms, instead of tools of representation. Form is thus both used to refer to something beyond the picture, playing a game of mimicry, as abstracted into planes of light and shadow. The effect of this is that the viewer does not see the body parts as such, but initially just as composition, and afterwards as what the forms remind us of, the non-exposable parts of the female body. In this layer it is not about the things we can discern after a good look (back, armpit, elbow), but about what we cannot see, and perhaps that cannot even be depicted. The full content or subject-matter cannot be understood by just knowing what is depicted, but what is referred to therewith has to be taken into account. The frameworks make up a large part of the surface, drawing attention to what is in the center, and at the same time hiding the rest of the body. It gives an impression of a peephole, as if the spectator is a voyeur into a world that is normally hidden. Yet in combination with the barcodes it suggests a possibility of buying and owning what is inside the framework, an advertisement of the sample of skin.

So just like the paintings of the last chapter, the works of Ali refer to something outside the visibly presented image. But he does it in a way more radical and confronting way than Ayeen and Shahsavar, firstly by using the medium of very clear photography, making what you see as explicit as it can be, and secondly by depicting real nudity. Through their form, the works do not just refer to a blurry and implicit bedroom life of a married couple, but they form direct documents of a woman's skin, exposing it to the public. But why is this non-figuration used, how does it work in relation to the subject matter? It zooms in to such extent that the context of a whole body is obscured, and thus the identity of the woman who owns it, as well. The non-figuration creates a new way of looking at someone's body, so it opens up other ways of reading it, seeing it. The question is raised what actually creates nudity: naked skin or context? At the same time, by zooming in on fragments of skin, and playing with light and shadow, Ettehad can refer to other parts of the body by making these forms mimic the more intimate parts of the female body. What we can see is in itself 'on the border', as they are a direct question about the nature of nudity, a term that, according to Ettehad, can only exist in a cultural context.[67] In a personal interview with Ettehad, he stressed that this concept is different in Middle Eastern societies, than in the Western world. Probably it has become clear in the previous chapters, that a way of dressing that would be considered normal in the West, would be considered 'nude' in Iran and countries alike.

Body

The manner in which the body is put to use in Ettehad's works has multiple, intertwined layers. The first and most obvious layer is that of sexuality and nudity, as shortly addressed above. In a short text on this series that is published on Ettehad's website, the American author Arthur C.

[67] Ettehad II

Danto expresses his admiration for the artist, and for the depicted woman, as the work exposes something normally unexposed:

> "When you show me a photograph of a woman's skin – or in Islam – a woman's hair – you have seen something that is one of the most powerful things in the world. It is not like the skin of a pear, or an apple. In allowing you to see it, she has performed an act of exceptional bravery in certain parts of the world."[68]

As discussed in the other two chapters, the female body is considered as something that has to be covered in the public space in Iran, and as Danto mentions, female skin is sensitive in other parts of the world as well. However, putting the emphasis on Islam, when speaking about this sensitivity, bears the danger of undermining the diversity present in that one religion. Naturally, the state of Iran claims to be an Islamic Republic, forcing their interpretation of the religion onto the Penal Law and its enforcement, but in the discussion around veiling, nudity, and modesty in the Middle East, multiple issues other than Islam, come to the surface. If we want to understand the discussion about veiling and nudity in its context, cultural traditions that are present in a certain place, are an equally important factor, as religion. Researcher and human rights activist Pınar İlkkaracan stated in her article on female sexuality in the Middle East and Maghreb, and the Egyptian feminist Nawal El Saadawi agrees with her, that the treatment of women in these areas are not a result or embodiment of the Qur'anic vision of women and sexuality, but rather "a combination of political, economic, and social inequalities through the ages."[69] İlkkaracan claims that Islam is merely used as an instrument in legitimizing the violation of basic human and sexual rights, and that it is impossible to essentialize 'the Islamic vision' of female sexuality and gender equality. In her words:

> "Islam has absorbed not only the practices and traditions of the two other monotheistic religions - Judaism and Christianity - from the region of its birth, but also other pre-Islamic practices and traditions from the geographic location in which it strove to survive and gain power as a cultural and political system."[70]

Put like this, nudity is more of a cultural question than a religious one. As Khiabany and Sreberny argue in their work on blogs in contemporary Iranian culture, gender equality and Islam are not opposed to each other. Patriarchy and gender equality are, but patriarchy is not unique for Islam.[71] When zooming in further on gender in Iran, Najmabadi is helpful in explaining the relation between female sexuality, and the dichotomy between tradition and modernity. According to her, modernity has been associated by numerous Iranian modernists with unveiling and undressing, as local traditions and the veil became signs of backwardness, in their eyes.[72] One of the most extreme examples of this difference in the last century, was the decision by Reza Shah to forcefully prohibit the veil in public life in 1935-6, as it stood in the way of national progress. In a mirror event to present-day Iranian moral police, the law enforcement started to remove Iranian women's veils in the streets, at times violently.[73] In Khosravi's words:

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[68] Ali Ettehad Website
[69] İlkkaracan p. 754, El Saadawi p. 206
[70] İlkkaracan p. 758
[71] Khiabany & Sreberny p. 92-3
[72] Najmabadi p. 133
[73] Khosravi p. 9

> "The conceptual dichotomy between *sonat* and *tajadud* [tradition and modernity] is heavily gendered. In Iran and other Islamic countries, the most characteristic distinction is the way it is reflected in the duality of veiling/unveiling and thus explicitly imprinted on women's bodies and voices."[74]

This dichotomy between tradition and modernity is helpful in understanding some layers of identity in relation to nudity, but dichotomies in this field of culture are necessarily abstractions, and unfortunately, rarely satisfying in describing a complex reality. As Hamid Dabashi argues in his elaborate *Iran: a People Interrupted*, these dichotomies are built on essentialism, and a colonial method of producing knowledge about a subjected area of the world. Since European modernity came hand in hand with the oppression of European colonialism, even the concept itself is contaminated with a simplistic view of the historical and geopolitical place of Iran in the world.[75] In the usage of these terms, there is an inherent claim of some sort of cultural authenticity in 'tradition', undermining the diversity of this actual tradition, to which 'modernity' is no more an opposite than a natural ingredient.[76] This series of works by Ettehad, as well as his wider oeuvre, are operating in this field of cultural identities and contradictions, questioning its origins and futures, and they surely are more interesting than the simplified opposition between tradition and modernity. However, it is part of the subject-matter, as the political context of contemporary Iran makes use of this conceptual dichotomy in order to distance itself from the decadent Western 'Other'. As İlkkaracan observes:

> "The religious and nationalist fundamentalists make utmost use of this perceived threat against "Muslim" identity by constructing a "Muslim" or "national" female identity as a last sphere of control against the "enemy": the West. Thus, pressure on women to become bearers of constructed group identities and the control of women's sexuality are currently at the heart of many fundamentalist agendas."[77]

Foucault

So far, it is mainly the element of nudity, and the exposure of what is not allowed to be seen in public, that creates the controversial potential of these works. The latter can be considered a recurrent theme in most of my case studies, and operates in the field of what Foucault has termed 'dividing practices'. In these practices, the subject is 'either divided inside himself or divided from others'.[78] These divisions are made on the basis of oppositions that structure society by putting people into groups, and judging what is normal in which place of that society. Whereas he proceeds to exemplify these practices with the binary oppositions of mad-sane, sick-healthy, and criminal-good guy, I think in the context of this series (and again, this may go for all of the case studies in this thesis), the most striking dividing practices are the differences between inside and outside, and between man and woman. Naturally, these come to the fore in the works by showing a woman's skin, photographed by a male artist, in public, yet obscuring its owner and making her anonymous. However, going further than just showing skin, and thereby going against the rules of body behavior matching the labels of man and woman, and inside and outside, is the inquiry into the nature of nudity in Iranian society. By making skin something that

[74] Khosravi, p. 9
[75] Dabashi, p. 46, 252
[76] Ibid., p. 28
[77] İlkkaracan p. 766
[78] Foucault, (1982) p. 777

is almost foreign to the body as a whole, the series interrogates the normality of culture, laws that are taken to be natural by some, and reveals its man-made character.[79] As good art does, it liberates the imagination from the shackles of what is normal, but there are more layers to this work, that are perhaps even more interesting, in the field of economics.

In the visual language of *Only for Use Inside the IRI*, as shortly touched upon before, an important role is played by the framework and the barcode on the picture of woman's skin. As well, the style of photography seems to have an objective to display the skin as clear and honest as possible, yet obscuring its place and function in the whole of her body. Combined with the barcode and the framing, this creates the feeling of an advertisement, of a showcase displaying her body parts, with the barcode giving you the possibility of buying and owning. Already in the first meeting and interview with Ettehad, the remark was made that 'capital owns the body'.[80] According to Ettehad, the frameworks serve to present the skin as a valuable object, as in a museum, and at the same time to refer to the visual presentation inherent to consumerism.[81] The process of making people into consumers, has a strange similarity to the process of voting, after all the candidates have displayed themselves from their best side.[82] It must be noted that these works were made in the months just before the restless elections of 2009, in which Mahmoud Ahmadinejad claimed the victory and his second term as president of the Islamic Republic, resulting in the rise and demise of the Green Movement.

A third reference to consumerism is that of marriage in the Middle East, visually present by a sense of luxury in the frameworks, and the promise of being able to buy and subsequently own what you see.[83] Ettehad sold these works in sets of four, as a playful comment on capitalist tactics of selling more, but also as a reference to the idea of marriage: access to body parts is safeguarded when the whole package is purchased.[84] In Middle Eastern societies as Iran, and according to Qur'anic principles, as in the other monotheistic religions, sexuality is mediated and structured by the contract of marriage.[85] As the author Shereen el Feki puts it, marriage is also crucial in 'getting on with life', being able to start a family, a meaningful relationship, to move out of your parents' house; and in this step, capital plays a crucial role.[86] In Shia Islam, there is even a possibility of a short-term marriage, called *mut'a*, through which it is possible to consume a marriage with a temporary character.[87] Capital plays a role not only in organization and being able to safeguard a family's existence, but also by means of dowry, a literal transaction from the groom (and his family) to the bride. Once married, the man has shifted from *namahram* to *mahram*, from outsider to insider, and thereby the rights of both man and woman in relation to their bodies have changed. Being able to see and have access to a body that has been 'protected' from foreign eyes by means of a contract, has certain similarities to the process of buying a product over which the customer then has the right of usage. Without downgrading the value of these wedlock traditions, there is definitely a level of economics that is discernible in the contract of marriage. Ettehad thus manages to refer to invisible or non-exposable parts of the female body, in a manner that simultaneously criticizes one of the economic pillars of society

[79] pun not intended
[80] Ettehad I
[81] Ettehad II
[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Najmabadi p. 18
[86] Forbidden Talk LevantTV: 3:30-13:00 min.
[87] İlkkaracan, p. 767

that directly affects bodies, and women's bodies in particular. It subtly speaks of ownership, trade, advertisement, and consumerism, all in relation to the body and the way that sexuality is structured and controlled by cultural norms.

Another interesting observation one can make is that access to the body and the parameters within which it can move, dress, and be sexual, are decided by the abstract powers of the meta-structure of state and culture, whereas on an individual level, this body has to be exclusive for the eyes and access of only a few. There is a structure of control both in objectifying someone as an object to be sold, thereby reducing that individual to the level of a thing, and making someone into a consumer, predictable in their behavior. Interestingly enough, this capital objectivation of the individual can be linked to another abstract dichotomy, often used by the clerical powers in Iran, namely that between western capitalism and Irano-Islamic purity.[88] Ettehad implies that this so-called Western system of capitalism, is in fact very alive, even in a state that wishes to oppose itself from occidental decadence. It seems as if this opposition between the corrupt, capitalist west and the sober, Islamic middle east is undermined, when these works arouse a discussion about the possession and economical ownership of the female body, in social contracts like marriages.

In his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault stresses the link between the controlling of bodies and the framing of sexuality within the structure of family.[89] For him, sexuality is understood best as a social construct that can be put to use in relations of power, instead of a 'thing' in itself.[90] But Foucault does make a distinction between the deployment of sexuality, dealing with the sensations of the body, and the deployment of alliance, with which he means all business that safeguards the linking of partners and the laws reigning over them.[91] Both of these deployments are linked to economy in their own ways:

> "(...) if the deployment of alliance is firmly tied to the economy due to the role it can play in the transmission or circulation of wealth, the deployment of sexuality is linked to the economy through numerous and subtle relays, the main one of which, however, is the body – the body that produces and consumes."[92]

Both these Foucauldian concepts of alliance and sexuality come to the fore in Ettehad's series, through the use of nudity and the many references to capital, not in the least in relation to marriage, which is one of the most crystallized forms of alliance. The body is therefore mainly investigated in its relation to economic powers, that have an effect on the body as it defines the parameters within which it can act and how it is put to use within society. Working with all these layers of power and their links to capital and economics working on individual bodies within the Iranian society, Ettehad seems to address the lack of agency over one's own body within these structures. When ownership over bodies is mediated through capital and cultural institutions such as marriage, is having a body enough to decide over it?

[88] Khosravi, p. 9
[89] Foucault, (1990), p. 106-114.
[90] Ibid., p. 6-13
[91] Ibid., p. 106
[92] Ibid., p. 106-7.

Rancière

At first sight, the main dissensual quality of these photographs is the fact that they expose something that is supposed to be invisible in the public realm, namely nude female skin. It undermines the distribution of what may be seen in which place of society, and the fact that it is a male artist exposing female skin, might attribute to its controversial character. Another layer of Ettehad's work in which Rancière would see dissensus, is the way in which visual language operates against the dominant logic of unity between form and content, and the depiction of something designated to be unseen in public. These characteristics are logically intertwined, and can, to some extent, be discerned in all four case studies. The first is inherent to the separation between form and meaning, but the latter is more explicit in these works than in any other works discussed in this thesis, since Ettehad directly photographed nude female skin. Even though there is a difference between the congruence of state imagery and the implicit, almost Aesopian language of Iranian cultural expressions, the form Ettehad has chosen for his inquiry in cultural and economical identity, is explicit enough to bring shock to many. This form, as elaborated on earlier, has to be understood in the direct context in which this series came to being. The year 2009 is now notorious for the massive uprisings after Ahmadinejad's discussed re-election, but it was before the rise of this Green Movement that Ettehad had made his photographic works. No uprising starts from nothing: Ahmadinejad's first presidential era had taken its toll on the cultural scene and personal freedoms of Iranians. According to Ettehad, the moral police was very strict in implementing and controlling the compulsory hejab, and in general, liberties were tampered with.[93] The strong visual language, coming close to activism, were it not for its meticulous and subtle subject matter, to which I shall return in the following part, is a direct response to the restrictions coming from above.[94] The specificity for its direct context also comes to the fore in its title, *Only For Use Inside the IRI*, suggesting not only a consumerist approach to art, but also the untranslatability of the work for audiences beyond the borders of Iran. In the first personal interview, Ettehad compared this response to a fist pushing people down, and the only possible thing to do is to push back equally strong. And yet again, this bears resemblance to other epochs of Iran's history:

> "It is a dangerous thought for me as an artist, but perhaps it is true: maybe it is the fate of art and artists, that there was never a time in Iran's history in which interesting poetry sprung from easy political times. The highlights of cultural and poetical expression always came into being under pressure."[95]

But beyond these dissensual characteristics, that have more to do with the chosen visual language, there is a deeper lying dissensus present in the cultural topic that is discussed in the work. As I have shortly discussed in the previous chapter, the concepts of dissensus and consensus within the thought of Rancière start from the notion of a stable society, in which there is one main reality, one dominant structure to which dissent and consent relate.[96] But in Iran there are so many identities, contradictions, sources of knowledge, and to some extent, realities, that it is hard to analyze artworks from this context in terms of dissensus. As I have shortly discussed in the analysis of *Misunderstanding In the Blue Room*, a substantial part of the Iranian population does not have to be seduced to dissensus, and does not see themselves the way that the state portrays and reads them. There is not one 'natural order' to which everything, consent

[93] Ettehad II
[94] Ettehad I
[95] Ibid.
[96] Rancière (2015), p. 144

and dissent, relates itself. When, in a society, dissent with the stately norms is so prevailing, I think it is possible to define the Iranian society as a whole, as in a constant mode of dissensus. This is an experimental hypothesis, but based on my own observations and experiences, I think it is a more useful tool in understanding the current political and societal state of Iran than the idea of a state of consensus, in the manner described by Rancière.[97]

Furthermore, I have the impression that the younger generation, born just before the revolution or after, is very preoccupied with identity, with the questions as to who they are, and which factors are decisive in creating it. If identity is a key element of where individuals see themselves within the framework of society, it can also be central in the exercise of power, and if we follow writers like Dabashi and Khosravi, it is a field in which veiled critique is widely expressed in Iran. Dabashi even compares 'those young yuppie voters with their stylish hairdos, chic scarves, and sexy sunglasses' with the early Shiites, who turned against a religious authority with their 'innocent semiotics of resistance'.[98] Identity is tangled up with the distribution of the sensible, in the sense that it defines the place each individual assigns to himself, perpetuating or disrupting the whole. The art that is mastered by so many Iranians nowadays, is how this a dissensus of a given identity can be disguised in a non-dissensual manner, just enough to not be prosecuted, punished, or censored. Ironically, hinted at by Ettehad himself when he spoke of creativity springing from restriction, this is a recurring element in Iran's long cultural history. The early Shi'ites used to go around cloaked, attempting to spread their view on the Islamic faith through Aesopian riddles and questions, symptomatic of their inherent character of protest movement.[99] The untranslatability coming to the fore in the title of the work, can be seen not only in understanding of the form and the visual allusions to marriage and nudity within a cultural context, but also in the importance of having a discussion about the origins of identity. If we link this work to the popularity of Iranian art in the international art world, the title is a clear message: it is culturally specific, and neither the context, nor its dissensual value, can be exported. Ettehad's work dives deeper than just a daily resistance, even though the form he has chosen, reflects back immediately on the pressures of that time. He refers to the origins of cultural norms, and questions the definition of the body as nude. Which structures decide on where the border lies? And how are these definitions in service of an economical structure? Moreover, he manages to go past any simplistic dichotomies, such as tradition versus modernity, or Islamic versus Westernized, expressing the thought that this identity question is a more complicated one, and more importantly, that it is deeply related to power. This is a deeper layer of undermining a system or power structure than form, one that might get people thinking about who benefits from their identification with a group of people or ideology - and this in itself, is a question more universal, in these confused times, than Ettehad's title had foreseen.

Both these layers of *Only For Use Inside the IRI*, the clear subversive form and the subjacent subject-matter questioning the roots of cultural identification, are interesting in the light of Rancière's ideas on emancipation. In his thought, emancipation is the verification of the basic principle of equality between all 'speaking beings', and thus often the opposition of *la police*.[100]

> "It is always enacted in the name of a category denied either the principle or the consequences of that equality: workers, women, people of color, or others. But the

[97] Rancière (2015), p. 144
[98] Dabashi (2008), p. 234
[99] Brown, p. 86-7
[100] Rancière, (1992), p. 60

> enactment of equality is not, for all that, the enactment of the self, of the attributes or properties of the community in question. The name of an injured community that invokes its rights is always the name of the anonym, the name of anyone."[101]

Interestingly enough, anonymity is a direct part of the presentation of skin in this work, used for multiple reasons, such as addressing the objectivation of bodies within a context of capital. At the same time, anonymity can be a way of universalizing or generalizing an individual struggle, by detaching it from an identifiable subject. In other words, this skin might be any Iranian girl's skin. Coming back to the Rancièrian concept of emancipation, this time in the currently immaturely explored field of identity:

> "In sum, the logic of political subjectivization, of emancipation, is a heterology, a logic of the other, for three main reasons. First, it is never the simple assertion of an identity; it is always, at the same time, the denial of an identity given by an other, given by the ruling order of policy. Policy is about "right" names, names that pin people down to their place and work. Politics is about "wrong" names-misnomers that articulate a gap and connect with a wrong. Second, it is a demonstration, and a demonstration always supposes an other, even if that other refuses evidence or argument. It is the staging of a common place that is not a place for a dialogue or a search for a consensus in Habermasian fashion. There is no consensus, no undamaged communication, no settlement of a wrong. But there is a polemical commonplace for the handling of a wrong and the demonstration of equality. Third, the logic of subjectivization always entails an impossible identification."[102]

Ettehad refuses to accept the economical and cultural role of the body, assigned to the Iranians by the 'order of policy', as a natural given. He thereby also refuses to identify with the 'right names' given to this obligatory form in which bodies have to operate and appear within Iranian society, implying a union between appearance and morality. But all are equal in having skin, and by reducing what we can see within the golden frameworks, reflects on this fundament of being a human being. At the same time, this can be seen as an impossible identification: we are all destined to be framed by cultural specificities. He thus creates room for dialogue, not offering any alternatives or answers, but merely exposing sensibilities to be seen, for the audience to contemplate on.

Conclusion

The many layers of critical questioning present in this work, combined with a straightforward form of non-figuration, make this series of work into perhaps the most controversial of all the case studies discussed in this thesis. At first sight, it is mainly the depiction of nudity that is striking, yet in a confusing manner, as Ettehad manages to refer to sexual body parts with pieces of innocent skin. In Foucauldian terms, this can be seen as an undermining of the dividing practices between man and woman, and inside and outside. But one layer further removed from that surface, the frameworks and barcodes, together with the presentation of that skin, refer to multiple ways that capital enters and controls the body. Ettehad subtly shows us the links between advertisements, marriage, consumerism, ownership of the body, and to some extent,

[101] Rancière, (1992), p. 59-60,
[102] Ibid., p. 62

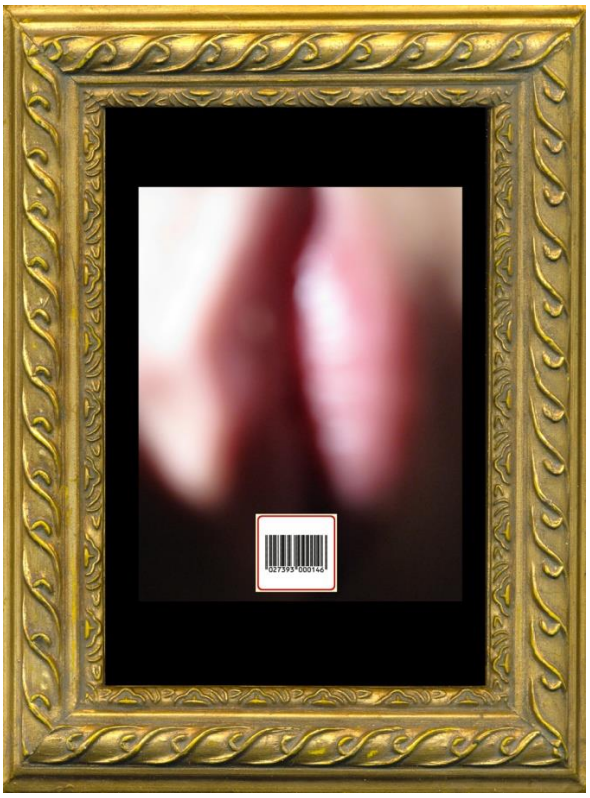
even the process of an election. It becomes clear that the body, even though it might be stripped naked to the very bare skin that we all have in common, cannot be seen apart from the structures of capital and control that surround it.

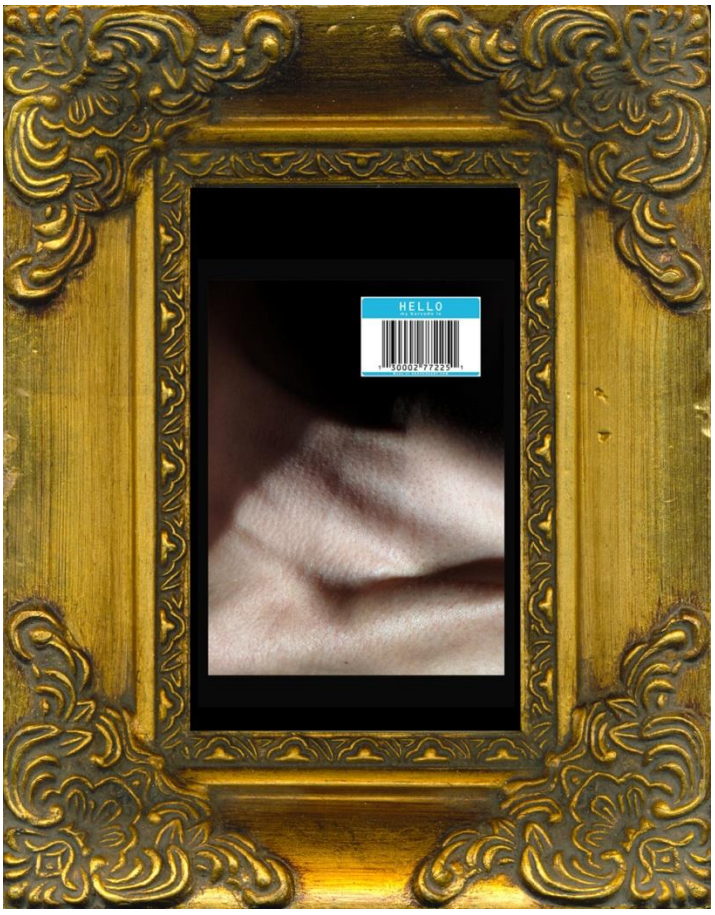
Moving even one layer deeper into the dissensual character of the series, from the controversial form and the subversive force of distinguishing between form and content that all case studies have in common, I arrive at the cultural question that lays within. His works isolate the body, detach it from its context, whilst the context is mimicked and maybe even ridiculed in the barcodes and the frameworks, through which you can contemplate the context that we accept as normal. Through presenting anonymous skin in a kitschy framework, he questions the ownership of individual bodies in contemporary Iranian society, an issue in which economic capital, cultural identities and a spectrum of visions on them, misunderstood as a dichotomy between modernity and tradition, play a part. This question is not posed on the level of state, but rather on the level of culture. It can be read as a cultural critique, or an investigation in cultural identity, broader than the mere framework of the Iranian government. The form is rooted in and tailored for the context of severe cultural censorship and a moral police whose strictness rules the streets. But its inherent logic as an artwork is not that of protest, nor posing an alternative identity. Central is the question of what heritage is and means in contemporary society, what and who defines cultural identities, and how they affect individual bodies. Ettehad moves away from a natural identification with cultural factors that reign the body, changing the Rancièrian 'right names' for an open-ended 'wrong' name.

It is hard to escape dichotomies and abstractions when describing and analyzing works within this context, and the only ones really managing to escape them are the works themselves, as they leave questions open. In situations like that created under Ahmadinejad's presidency, the imagination of many is asked upon. However, even when it seems the only field in which freedom and criticism is possible, the imagination is endless, and like the many heads of the Hydra of Lerna fought by Herakles, it grows when it is constrained.

IMAGES

All from artist's website.

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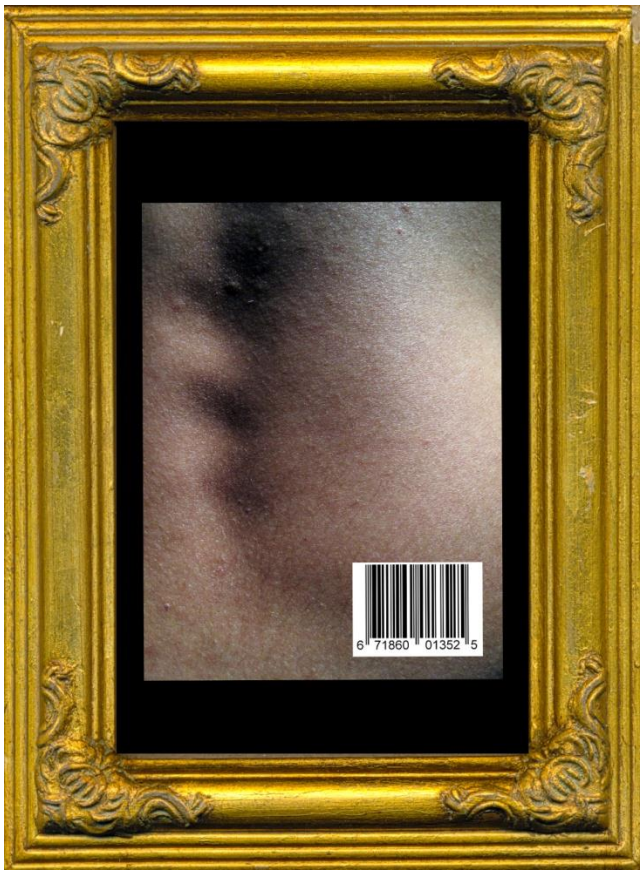
6 71860 01352 5


123456

5.
Conclusion

“The delimitation of the visible and the invisible, the audible and the inaudible, the thinkable and the unthinkable, the possible and the impossible.”

– Jacques Rancière

If I would have had the fate to be born Iranian, I would be quite tired of foreign attention for the daily resilience, and the struggle with authoritarian rules and incredible laws. There is so much more to the country, culture, and people, and there are so many artists that don't operate in the field of politics at all. Reality, without a doubt, is much more complicated than what I have been able to capture in the scope of this thesis. But it has been a learning experience for me, in which the only comfort zone remaining, was the one of political contemporary art. This thesis came to being as a response to a growing international interest in contemporary Iranian art, and the often shallow interpretations accompanying it, and if not anything else, the process of writing it has made me more and more aware of my own position in the world and its dominant centers of knowledge production. In this experience I had the chance to discover one of the most complicated, contradictory, and beyond beautiful countries on this Earth, and gained a thousand more questions.

This research has revolved around the main question how and why contemporary Iranian artists use non-figuration in their work, in order to discuss the body in a critical manner. My initial thought was that by making form more abstract, it is possible to avoid the restrictions on that image, while still referring to something outside that which can be seen. Having to work within the restraints of censorship can have the effect of forcing you to be more creative as an artist, communicating the subject-matter in a hidden manner, in an implicit image language, undermining the system of blunt visual prohibition. This is definitely an important artistic and practical factor in what Fitzpatrick named 'the allegorical turn' in contemporary Iranian art.[103] Yet during the course of this research, it became more and more clear to me that non-figuration can serve all kinds of purposes, specific for each work of art and its context. The fundamental characteristic of all of the case studies discussed in this thesis, connecting them as a red thread, is the separation between form and content, between the central subject of the work and the bare visual information offered to the spectator. However, each of the works or series in this inquiry has its own contextual, topic-related reasons for this visual language.

In four hairs nailed to the wall, called *The Sound of My Hair,* Ghazaleh Hedayat found a way to make her body tactile, alluding to three of our senses, namely touch, hearing, and seeing. Yet she managed to depoliticize and desexualize her hair by making it stand apart from her body, only referring to her body by their materiality, not in the slightest by form. In her case, it was rather the context that made hair political, than the actual core of an artistic question uttered in the work, in which matters of silence and tactility were more important than being subversive. Non-figuration has a different, and essential role in the sculpture series *Swallow your Femininity* by Mona Aghababaee, not because her formally abstract forms of iron wire are symbols of certain body parts, but more importantly because the experience from which this series sprung, is an abstract one. She responds to the daily life of Iranian women, and the duplicity in veiling, changing the forms in which you carry yourself for the eyes of the outside world, making the experience of having (and relating to) a female body an abstract one in itself. As she stated herself, she could not have expressed this with a figurative, realistic depiction of a human body. The works of both of these artists are formally non-figurative, and with both, titles play an important role in communicating the subject-matter. This stands in formal contrast to the visually more figurative series of paintings by Abbas Shahsavar and Maryam Ayeen, *Misunderstanding in the Blue Room*, in which the painters themselves are depicted within the

[103] Scheiwiller, p. 158

confines of their home. However, there is something central to the works, that is only alluded to in what the spectator can see, and not made explicitly visual anywhere. In the manner that they portray each other, they manage to refer to an invisible bedroom life, radiating an atmosphere of sexuality, without ever making this too explicit. Within their style of painting, there is a symbolic layer of joyful hints at the sexual life of a married couple. They depict what is happening inside, in a form that is acceptable outside, thereby undermining the binary opposition between these two fields in Iranian society. Finally, in Ali Ettehad's photographic series *Only for Use Inside the IRI*, naked female skin is reduced to forms through a high contrast of dark and light, that seem to become sexual parts of the body, but in fact are not. They are de-individualized, yet take a clear stance in their form by directly photographing a woman's skin, and placing these fragments in big frameworks and barcode stickers. More than the works by Aghababaee, Shahsavar, and Ayeen, and more directly than Hedayat's, it is not only the subject-matter that has a body-political value, but the form itself that acts upon socio-political controversies, by showing something that should not be seen in public, but is only just acceptable in this form. All of the works discussed in this thesis have very different reasons to use non-figurativeness, once you move beyond the obvious context of restrictions in art. And it has by no means become a form of self-censorship for these artists; rather, a non-punishable form taken back by them and endowed with different, personal meaning, through which reflection on the individual body within the framework of the Iranian society, is possible. It was this artistic strategy that Fitzpatrick, mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, described: it is not about revealing "new or unintended meanings, but the very possibility of meaning being revealed that is at stake".[104]

Body

Even though the subject-matters of all these works differ from one another, there are some main observations that can be made as to how the body is put to use in them. Foucault has been central in understanding how these allusions to the individual body function in a political context, and how their possibly subversive character can be understood. One of the main common grounds of the discussed works is the undermining of binary oppositions and the segregations between them, that structure Iranian contemporary society. These are what Foucault had called dividing practices, and the ones that come to the fore most clearly in this context, are the difference between public and private, and man and woman. In a society where the law commands that nudity and intimacy belong in the private sphere, and that differentiates the domains of inside and outside in terms of gender, publicly expressing thoughts and sensations that concern the body, especially when it is a woman's body, is already crossing some of these lines. The body seems to serve as a vessel for critique on bigger structures that affect the body in everyday life, something in line with Foucault's idea of the body as a place on and through which power directly operates. Another observation, akin to this expression of power on the body, is the fact that in more than one case study, the body is an individual one, the work is reflecting on a personal experience of the body, or the artist reflects on the structures of power surrounding our naked skins. As if to take back the agency over our vessels in this world, and thereby to go against the structures of control, ownership, knowledge, and power, that put themselves in control of our bodies. Ironically, it is a political act to depoliticize one's body, like Hedayat did in her wondering about the sound of hair, and Aghababaee as she reflected on the experience she has of her own body within the framework of Iranian society. More directly, as

[104] Scheiwiller, p. 158

Ettehad critically reflects on the structures deciding over ownership and nudity, as if to ask the spectator, what and who's skin is this?

Art

But when looking at the functioning of the works of art, the politics of aesthetics, in Rancièrian terms, a number of different observations can be made. A core element of this thesis has been dissensus, as it is the key to understand how art can be subversive within the theories of Rancière. First of all, what can be seen as dissensus in the discussed case studies, is the fact that all of them make something 'visible' or sensible in the public realm, that had been assigned to the private domain. This presence of sensitive topics undermines *la police*, or distribution of the sensible, that determines who is supposed to see and hear and say what, and to whom, and who is destined to be silent. The artists featured in this thesis have found ways to activate parts of the human imagination that weren't supposed to be active, yet they do so without openly subverting the aesthetic framework to which they are condemned by the dominant logic of the state. In innocent forms, they manage to communicate and wonder about subjects that are not supposed to be publicly discussed, thereby undermining the partition of the sensible. In this rupture between form and content, which is the fundament of the artistic strategy central to this thesis, is another layer in which I discern dissensus. In the aesthetics of the Islamic Republic, widely present the public realm, form and content is a synchronous unity, through which morals and ideal citizenship are communicated to the Iranian people. Implicit aesthetics are undermining that logic of unity between medium and message, whilst at the same time making it hard for the authorities to put their finger on what should be forbidden in these works.

A question central to this thesis, present in the background of all case studies, was: 'is there such a thing as non-dissensual dissensus?' And I think the answer to this question is negative. Dissensus is always recognizable as such, as well for the hard-line elements in Iranian society. Their problem, however, is the well-developed intuition of the artists that refuse to comply to denigrating laws, who know exactly where the borders are, and more importantly, know how to cross them without really crossing them. If laws and restrictions are made explicit, resistance finds its way into implicitness, or as Dabashi put it: innocent semiotics of resistance.[105] If censorship focuses on famous names, dissensus will be presented in a cloak of anonymity, that does not obscure its dissensual character, but erases the traces that could be bases of prosecution. This brings me to one of the more experimental conclusions of this thesis, namely that of Iran as a fundamentally dissensual society. For Rancière, dissensus relates itself to a standard state of consensus, one version of reality, to which all different opinions and struggles can relate. However, in Iran, there is not one dominant norm, not one narrative or truth that binds all society in reference. The state aesthetics and narratives are often met with skepticism among the Iranian population, and in this absence of a central narrative, all kinds of stories and ideas about identities can flourish. Art is a reflection of this dissensus, playing with subjects that interest the spectators, yet cannot be prosecuted by the authorities.

This being stated, the initial ambition to 'test' Rancière and Foucault in a context quite different than the French society from which their thought emanated, has been proven too much for the scope of this research. I am sure it can be done, but more time and expertise would be necessary in fulfilling this task, growing beyond the knowledge I have been able to create within thesis. In

[105] Dabashi (2008), p. 234

general, as most pursuits of knowledge bear as consequence, more questions have been raised in my mind than answers, and there is still a lot to do research on. It would, for instance, be interesting to relate this tactic of implicit critique to the art history of Iran, or even the Persian tradition of critical poetry, and the rebellious origins of Shi'ism. Furthermore, one would have to dive deeper into the cultural and religious characteristics of the traditions in this region of the world, to fully understand all references and symbolic allusions present in contemporary Iran's art production. If anything has become clear to me in the course of this research, it is that these works cannot be understood properly without a profound knowledge of their cultural context, and cannot be understood at all, with just the knowledge of Iran as a repressive state in which life as an artist is hard.

Above all, after writing this master thesis, I stand in awe of the resilience of imagination, and the comfort and freedom -even if merely in a relative form- that can be offered by art. An expression of art is preceded and followed by the imagination, that can never really be put to sleep by external authorities, no matter how strict their censoring policies. On the contrary, it seems, as the free creative mind is always ahead of the hulking laws, afraid of images that do not even have to be depicted to still exist in the minds of spectators. Naturally, this was noted by Dabashi, who describes it as a natural ingredient of the impressive history of Iran:

> "Iranian political history is a Trojan horse. Inside its belly is a hidden force never noted either for what it is or for its catalytic effect on that political history. The hidden force is the power of imagination, the force of a defiant intellect."[106]

[106] Dabashi (2008), p. 125

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