

# DISTANT VOICES, STILL LIVES

A fascination with events before his birth – and those who documented them – led Amin Yousefi to revisit Iran’s past. Meet the recipient of the RPS Award for Achievement in the Art of Photography (under 30yrs)

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Above and opposite: from the series *Eyes Dazzle as they Search for the Truth*, 2022, by Amin Yousefi

AMIN YOUSEFI / IMAGE FROM 44 DAYS: IRAN AND THE REMAKING OF THE WORLD BY DAVID BURNETT



AMIN YOUSEFI / IMAGE FROM DAYS OF REVOLUTION BY MICHEL SETBOUN



**In downtown Tehran, thousands have descended on the streets in protest.** Somewhere in the crowd, a shutter clicks – and a moment is preserved forever on 35mm film.

It was the day after Christmas, 1978. When American photojournalist David Burnett arrived in Tehran he found himself, in his words, “in a place that was slowly falling apart”. Within hours he was on the street, in the middle of a gun battle. “I could tell this story would not soon go away,” he wrote afterwards.

Burnett’s instinct proved right – he was, in fact, in the midst of a revolution. The protests, which had been simmering for months, were fuelled by widespread discontent with Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi’s regime. Economic hardship,

endemic corruption and the Shah’s close ties to the US, along with his Westernisation policies, had alienated many Iranians. What began as scattered protests in 1978 soon snowballed into a powerful yet ideologically diverse movement uniting secular nationalists, leftists and Islamic revolutionaries – all demanding the end of the monarchy.

Burnett was among a handful of photographers documenting the turbulent months leading to the toppling of the Shah’s government in February 1979. Signalling both the end of the Pahlavi monarchy and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the Iranian Revolution, as it became known, was a major turning point not just for

Iran but for the geopolitical landscape of the entire region, with lasting consequences that continue to reverberate.

The images Burnett and others took during this period serve as an enduring visual record, capturing both the intensity of the crowds and the violent clashes with security forces. At first glance the subjects seem unaware of the photographer’s presence. On closer inspection, you see them – faces staring out from the sea of bodies, their gazes directed at the camera. These are details so subtle they could easily be overlooked if it wasn’t for another photographer – 40 years on – deliberately searching for faces in the crowd.

Amin Yousefi, recipient of the RPS Award for Achievement in the Art of Photography (under 30yrs), had an almost

accidental route into photography. Born 1996 in Abadan in Khuzestan province, Iran’s most oil-rich region, his hometown played a major role in the Iranian revolution, and was a key battleground during the Iran-Iraq war, which lasted from 1980 to 1988. Once hosting the world’s largest oil refinery, the city was heavily shelled during the war and thousands of people across Khuzestan province were displaced as a result.

It was the legacy of these events, all before he was born, that became the subject of Yousefi’s early work. Despite studying maths and physics at high school with plans to pursue engineering, his interest in photography was sparked after taking an art course and experimenting with his uncle’s film camera.



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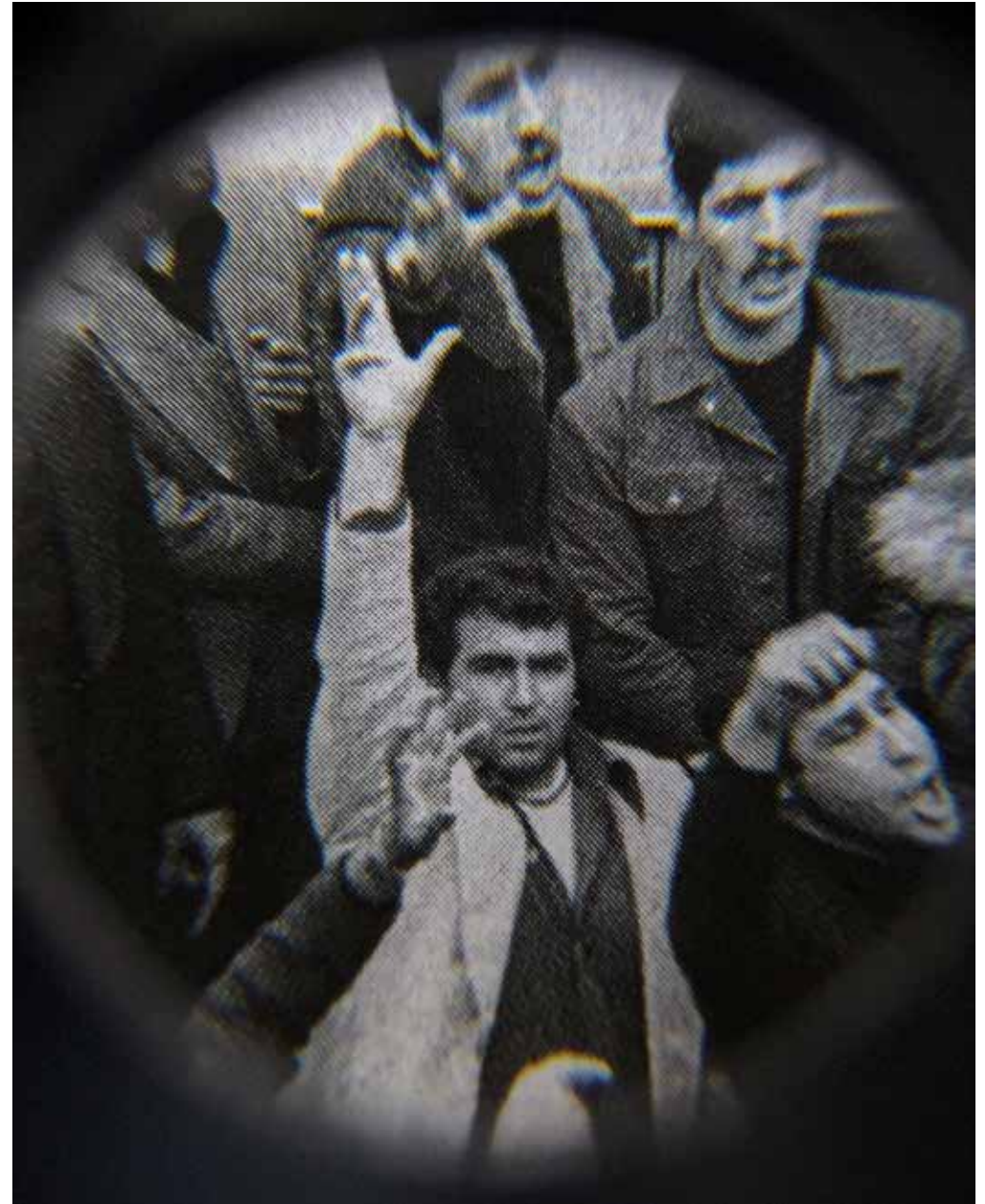
For Yousefi, the freedom in creativity offered a welcome escape from the rigid, rule-based world of science and led him to study photography at the University of Isfahan, in central Iran. His first major project – *Life, Death and Other Similar Things* (2019) – is, in many ways, a classic documentary series. There are portraits alongside quiet, understated street scenes providing an intimate view of Khuzestan, its landscapes and its people. Here is “a region blessed and cursed by its wealth of oil and natural gas,” he writes in his artist statement, “pillaged in an eight-year war with neighboring Iraq and crushed under the weight of the sanctions and an ineffective management.”

His approach to the medium changed, however, during his degree, when he was introduced to photography theory and began reading the likes of Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag and Liz Wells.

“In our BA programme, we had a student-led session each week on philosophy and photography,” Yousefi says. “Everyone was reading something and then sharing it ... I think it was around then that I started looking at photography differently.”

The real shift came during the COVID pandemic. At the time, Yousefi was working at Ag Image Archives, a collection of Iranian photobooks and photography archives run by Ag Galerie – the gallery that now represents him. He had also been assisting a curator, Homayoun Sirizi, who was working with images of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. His practice encompasses installations, performances and video projects that intricately weave together humour and keen observations of everyday life, reflecting upon Iran’s dynamic social and political landscape. Both these experiences opened Yousefi’s eyes to the broader possibilities of photography.

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“I became interested in the potential that the archive has: that you can work on it as a kind of study or examine it, or [that it can] become a part of your practice,” he says.

In 2022, Yousefi moved to the UK to study for a Masters (MA) in documentary photography at the University of Westminster, London. Arriving in the city, he felt like a tourist and when the tutor assigned a project, he struggled to find something meaningful.

“I couldn’t find those issues that documentary photographers usually find,” he says. “So, I was looking back and thought it would be good to work on archival material.”

Yousefi’s project, *Eyes Dazzle As They Search for the Truth*, 2022, originated while he was working with Ag Image Archives. He had come across a small 10x15cm photo. In it, a group – “students, young people” – had gathered in the street.

“I was really curious to see what was happening inside the photograph,” he explains. “It was just a single print with no context, so I was using a loupe magnifier to see the faces and also the details of some signs the students were holding.”

As the original photographer had captured the group from behind, there were not many faces in the frame. On closer inspection, though, Yousefi noticed some students had turned around and were looking directly at the photographer.

“It was really interesting for me,” he recalls. “It was like, all of these people are gathering here, and there are a few of them curious and staring at the photographer. Then I found out that this was not a protest, it was just a gathering of students from different schools ... But it was stuck in my mind, and I thought, ‘What if I examine this issue with more important, larger events?’”



These ideas coincided almost exactly with his move to the UK for his MA. So, it was unsurprising that Yousefi circled back to the archive and the Iranian Revolution, which he considers the most significant event in the Middle East in the past century. In London, Yousefi began collecting photo books from the revolution by various photographers.

Among these were David Burnett’s *44 Days: Iran and the Remaking of the World*, Michel Setboun’s *Days of Revolution* and Kaveh Kazemi’s *Revolutionaries: The First Decade*. Using the loupe magnifier he began studying the images, one by one, like a detective hunting for clues. As before with the images of the students, faces began to

emerge into view. Staring back across a 40-year divide, it was those looking directly at the camera that intrigued him.

“How could the sound of a 35mm camera shutter attract the attention of a protestor in a crowd?” Yousefi wondered. Now he is convinced – these people were looking for a reason.

“The photographer is [rarely] in the centre of the event,” Yousefi explains. “They’re usually in the corner, on top of a building, or at a distance, using a telephoto or wide-angle lens. There are so many people, and while it’s not impossible, it’s very difficult to look at the photographer [without] participating in the act of revolution.”

He adds that because of the distance and the situation, the protester was unlikely to know when the photographer would release the shutter. That meant they would have had to have effectively frozen themselves for a moment in the middle of the crowd, to make sure the photographer captured them.

For Yousefi, this speaks to a broader truth about the power of images. While working on the project he had been reading Ariella Azoulay’s *The Civil Contract of Photography*, which shifted his thinking about the role of the spectator.

“The person inside the photograph plays just as important a role as the photographer,” Yousefi says, paraphrasing Azoulay. “But in most cases the photographer is seen as the

single hero of the image. We rarely prize the person inside the photograph, but for me that relationship – the fact the image exists because the person is there – gives them agency, making them active participants in shaping the photograph.”

To make the images, Yousefi rephotographed the originals through the loupe using his mobile phone. “I find that using a loupe adds another layer to the photograph,” he explains. “For me, the image I was creating was a process of layers. The person inside the original photograph, looking at the photographer through her eyes, through the lens of the photographer in 1979, then through the lens of the loupe, and finally through the lens of my phone.”



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By isolating these singular moments, *Eyes Dazzle* challenges traditional representations of revolution – which are often framed as mass movements – and instead invites us to engage with the personal motivations of each participant. Looking into the eyes of the revolutionaries it is unclear for a moment who is the spectator and who is the observer.

Inevitably, this introduces another layer: the viewer’s own readings of the image. The project also complicates the role of the camera in shaping our understanding of history, suggesting that images are not fixed – they evolve, multiply and carry meanings beyond the photographer’s original intent. As writer David Company says in an article on Yousefi’s work for *Foam* magazine: “Photographs contain multitudes beyond intention, beyond what the photographer might have knowingly desired to include ... any and every photograph will hold more than we bargained for.”

Rephotography can be a contentious area, especially within the documentary context. When asked how he navigates the ethical complexities of rephotographing others’ work and how he perceives his relationship to the original images and their creators, Yousefi says: “The first thing is that I completely give the credit of the photograph to the photographers that I’m using the photograph [of].”

He also makes clear he does not regard his work as appropriation, but rather, adding another layer to the original images.

“For me, it is showing the potentiality that the photograph has, in this case, the specific images of the revolution, which I think go beyond the document of revolution. There are hidden potentials that can come up. That’s why I really focus on the photographic side of these images, rather than the historical and political side.”

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Indeed, there is another aspect of rephotographing that Company underscores in his essay, one which captures the careful, methodical process of Yousefi’s practice, a stark contrast to the often-fleeting attention we give images today.

“Against the notion of appropriation and theft, there is an equal and opposite notion of homage,” writes Company. “Of paying close attention. Of respect. Of communion. Rephotographing also makes us look slower and closer, accepting what cannot be known but must be thought, nonetheless. It keeps the door open.”

In 2024 Yousefi had the opportunity to meet Michel Setboun, the French photographer regarded as one of the most important documentarians of the 1979 Iranian Revolution – and one of the photographers whose work he used as a basis for his *Eyes Dazzle* project.

“Sometimes you think [because I used these images] maybe the photographer is not comfortable with that, but his reaction was amazing,” says Yousefi. “He said that although he’d taken the original photographs, he believes the images truly belong to Iranians, as they represent our history – and that he was happy that my images have become a raw material for my project to add another layer to the concept of the photography and also the revolution.”

Yet despite the photos being of the revolution, Yousefi rejects the idea of his work as a political message or commentary on recent events in Iran. “It is very important for me to not respond to those events immediately in the artistic practice, because they are so fresh,” he says. “For me, it takes years, I think, to process those things.”

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