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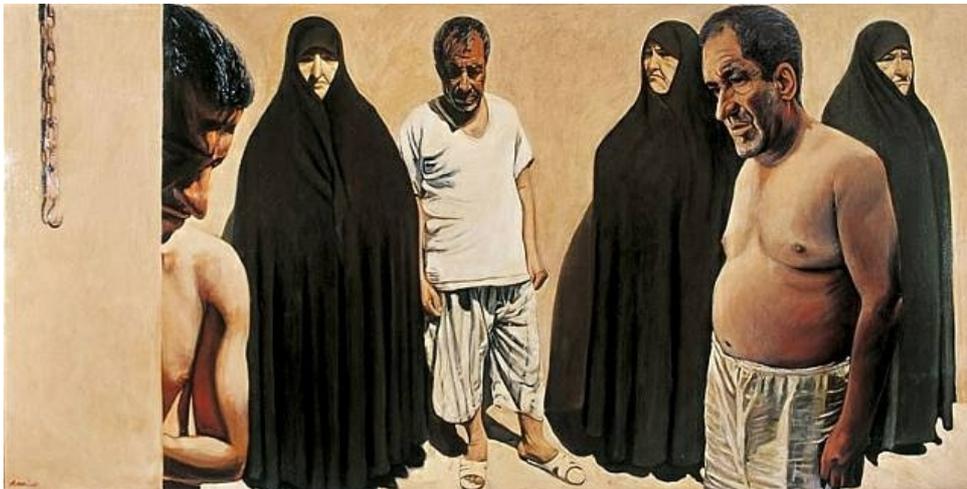
# Silk Road, Silk Underwear: Westernized Oppositions of 'Postmodern' Iranian Art

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"Untitled" by Ahmad Morshedloo

*Saatchi exhibition suggests pandering to international preconceptions, clichés all too common.*

**[ art ]** Right after the 2009 Iranian presidential elections, as the 53d Venice Biennale and 66th Venice Film Festival took place, Iran seemed to be on the minds of everyone in the Italian city, whether artists, spectators from around the world, or local residents.

Four Iranian artists were part of these major events: three represented Iran at the Biennale -- Hamid Reza Avishi, Iraj Eskandari, and Sedaghat Jabbari -- and exiled video artist Shirin Neshat's *Women Without Men* was shown at the film festival, winning her the Silver Lion for Best Direction.

The curator of the Iranian Pavilion at the Biennale was Mahmood Shaloei, conservative director of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art. Shaloei selected artists whose work is strongly connected with the heritage of Islamic culture. The sculptures of Avishi, who works with the Department of Islamic Science of Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, had never previously been presented abroad. Some of his works are on permanent display at Tehran University's Faculty of Fine Arts, as well as other institutions. Almost 100 of Eskandari's paintings have been purchased by the Organization of Islamic Propagation and various Iranian museums. Jabbari's paintings and calligraphy are well-known around the Muslim world.

Avishi's heavy, formal, symbolic bronze sculptures, the confrontation between good and evil in Eskandari's *Achaemenid* series, the mystical and austere calligraphy of Jabbari -- all refer to a single cultural vision. Far from individualistic, these artworks glorify a severe, patriarchal version of Islamic culture.

Ironically, the famous Palazzo Malipiero, which was transformed into the Iranian Pavilion for the Biennale, was Giacomo Casanova's Venetian residence. Along with the Marquis de Sade, the seductive Casanova was one of the most libertine authors of the 18th century. The contradiction between the Biennale's central theme -- utopia and the hope for a better world -- and the austere Iranian exhibition only deepened the irony. While the Iranian opposition, both domestic and in the diaspora, was

contesting the presidential election, this conservative display was offering a very different vision of the future.

By contrast, the Westernized Shirin Neshat, who lives and works in New York, envisioned Iranian women fighting for their emancipation. Oppressed by sexual, religious, and social pressures, the five lead characters in her film desperately look for freedom. The transformations they undergo -- through flight, rebellion, death -- ultimately bring them to a magic orchard, a mysterious place that is nothing but the inner garden of their transcendent souls.

As I write these lines, I am brought short by my oversimplified analysis. Neshat versus regime-approved male artists? Feminism versus patriarchy? West versus East? Democracy versus oppression?

How easy the world would be to navigate if things could always be divided between two poles. Even though Neshat is a great advocate for Iranian democracy, her artistic vision is linked to the Orientalist ideology of the West. Her quest for beauty and her sensual but empty images create a charismatic caricature of Iranian society that highlights Western clichés based on the principle of opposition: women in black veils versus men in white, a black feminine social space opposed to a white male one. Neshat offers us an archaic vision of the Islamic world in which everything places women and men in opposition.

This binary perception of the world that Neshat exemplifies is troubling. The postmodern perspective, founded on such Manichean oppositions, has become our new judgmental paradigm. Following Neshat's path, younger Iranian "feminist" artists are addressing the situation of women in their country. Unfortunately, their work does little more than confirm Western prejudices about the Iranian reality.



The Silk Road, the recent exhibition held at the the [Tri Postal](#), a huge (post-)industrial space in the northern French city of Lille, offered a striking example of this. Baghdad-born art collector

Charles Saatchi, whose unconventional taste has reshaped the art market over the past two decades, offered 60 major pieces from his personal collection housed at London's Saatchi Gallery to create the exhibition.

Its title alludes to the 3,000-year-old, 5,000-mile-long network of trade roads that crossed the Asian continent and extended to the Mediterranean. Comprising 29 artists of nine nationalities (Chinese, Indian, Pakistani, Iranian, Iraqi, Syrian, Lebanese, Palestinian, and Algerian), the

exhibition included paintings, sculpture, photography, and installation art. Its division into three sections -- China, India, and the Middle East -- contributed to a sense that the latter is now effectively seen as a country of its own.

Most of the artists, whether Chinese, Indian, Arab, or Iranian, had created works whose social and political aspects corresponded exactly with Western expectations. Instead of revealing the profound complexity of their diverse situations, instead of fighting against Western prejudices and clichés, many of the artists opportunistically glorified Orientalism, a Western ideological notion that has virtually nothing to do with reality.

In Saatchi's vision of the world, Iran and the Arab nations make up a single country in which Islamic fundamentalism, war, and terror prevail. The immense paintings of Ahmed Al Soudani evoke the conflict in Iraq; the huge sculpture installations of Algeria's Kader Attia represent hundreds of feminine forms in prayer on the floor; the Palestinian Wafa Hourani criticizes the Israeli occupation; and three Iranian artists, Shadi Ghadirian, Shirin Fakhim, and Ahmad Morshedloo, evoke women's conditions in their country.

Ghadirian and Fakhim criticize women's status in an Islamic state via the principle of opposition: West versus East, modernity versus tradition, freedom versus restriction, and so forth. In Ghadirian's *Like Everyday* series of photographic portraits of women, the face of each is hidden behind a veil and replaced by a domestic object such as an iron, cheese grater, plastic glove, or colander. By conceiving veiled women as simultaneously traditional and, in contemporary terms, "desperate housewives," she condemns both the male gaze and the reactionary system within which these women are constrained. Ghadirian has an interesting sense of humor and I appreciate her vision. However, she fails to insightfully represent the Iranian context.

To deny that some Iranian men conceive of women in purely traditional terms would be absurd. But not all veiled women are desperate housewives. Most women in Iran are educated *and* religious: tradition and individualism tend to cohabitate and are not inevitably contradictory. If women find it necessary to wear the veil, they also feel the need to pursue social accomplishment. After 30 years of Islamic restrictions in Iran, Muslim women have learned how to distinguish their faith from the regime's obligations. They believe in God and also learn how to become independent by educating themselves in Western

values. But Ghadirian denies this reality and creates an Orientalist vision that reflects only the gaze of Westerners and their distantly formed preconceptions and fancies concerning veiled women.



Fakhim's primitive *Prostitutes* are sculptures of the feminine form involving a variety of materials. Her provocative works oppose items of Western fashion -- high-heeled, colored boots and sexy underwear -- with the Islamic veil. They denounce the sex trade as well as the hypocrisy of Iranian society. It seems Fakhim knows well how terrible women's situation is in Iran: domestic abuse, poverty, and social repression are leading more and more women to prostitute themselves. No one would deny the contradiction between the government's oppressive moralism and the growing sex industry in the country. But again, the fruitful examination and expression of this grim irony demands far more than the simple opposition of a public veil and intimate underwear.

Fakhim uses Western sexual paraphernalia to evoke prostitution in the Iranian context. But these objects do not symbolize prostitution even in the West. If some provocative storefront sex workers and streetwalkers wear such items (as with the touristic icons one encounters in Amsterdam's red light district or on Paris's Rue Saint-Denis), many prostitutes are educated women, poor students or full-time workers, who do their work discreetly, secretly.

If Fakhim's grotesque *Prostitutes* concern the poor, veiled "ladies of the night," what about those extremely elegant "ladies of the day" visible all over northern Tehran? What about those blond, trendy women, all sporting gold Rolex watches (whether real or fake), Louis Vuitton bags, and Gucci sunglasses, who are nothing but courtesans, high-class prostitutes to rich, old, married man? I see them in Shemiran's supermarkets, coffee shops, and malls, and their luxe appearance prompts respect even though people know perfectly well what they really are. Money in Iran, whether it

comes from corruption or prostitution, inspires respect, and no contradiction is to be found in this blind belief. These Westernized ladies who deliberately choose prostitution as a means to financial "independence" are simply ignored in Fakhim's work. Here again, one runs up against Western clichés about Middle Eastern women. If the veil routinely symbolizes tradition in the Orientalist worldview, other preconceived narratives would have us believe that veiled women are nothing but hot, sexual creatures hiding behind pieces of tissue.

Alongside these tired and tiresome clichés, one could see the strange, meditative paintings of Ahmad Morshedloo, in which depictions of old, fatigued veiled women inspired a beautiful sense of humanity. Though their dark veils seemed to be thick, dirty, and heavy, they were not imprisoned by them. No argument was to be found in their eyes, no plea. These profound and humble figures resembled silent Madonnas, full of dignity. And here I found what I missed poignantly in the rest of the exhibition: the universal dignity of the human being. Beyond Ghadirian's traditional women, beyond Fakhim's desperate, sexual women, beyond those cheap and ignorant visions of the feminine, there exists another feminine reality, both tragic and eternal, which has nothing to do with manmade boundaries, opposition, or contradiction, and can be found only in genuine artistic reflection.

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