



REFINERY29



Documenting The Search For Identity In Iran

by Tom Seymour

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“As a child, I never had a photo album, nor did I have many pictures of my childhood,” says Newsha Tavakolian, the 34-year-old Iranian photographer and one of the newest members of the Magnum Photo Agency. “So I always had this obsession with the childhood photos of other people.”

Tavakolian was raised in a country not known for its tolerance of journalists and reporters, or conceptual photographers, particularly when they happen to be women. A self-taught, entirely independent photographer, she has received precious little attention from the Western world, and not a lot in the way of support from her country of birth.

That hasn't stopped her. Last year, Tavakolian became the only female photographer from the Middle East to be part of Magnum, the world's most iconic photography collective. She has photographed, as close as anyone, the ongoing war in Iraq, sectarian conflicts in Yemen, Lebanon, Pakistan and, most recently, the living hell in Syria.

Tavakolian was born in the midst of the Iranian revolution. After struggling with dyslexia throughout her school life, a 16-year-old Newsha began working on a woman's magazine in Tehran, after having her first photo published on the front of her local newspaper, *Zan*. It was from this unlikely vantage point that Tavakolian witnessed the 1999 student uprising in Iran. The protests began after the forced closure of a progressive newspaper called *Salam*. As Tehran became engulfed by violent protests and rioting, with disparate militia marching the streets and Western journalists confined to their hotels, the still-teenage Tavakolian “spent a week scaling trees and perching above with a zoom lens.”

Her images were picked up by the Western media, and a year later, whilst still based in Iran, Tavakolian gained representation by Polaris Images, the New York-based photo agency. Writing in *Time* magazine, the American-Iranian journalist Azadeh Moaveni said of her friend: “She was disarmingly young in those days, girlish and funny in a way that made you forget she had already become one of the most intrepid and influential photojournalists in the country, and of her generation.”

In 2009, Newsha took to the streets to photograph the impact the Presidential elections might have on her country. Without going into details, the experience “ended in chaos,” she says, forcing her to stop her photojournalism work. Largely confined to her flat, a sprawling high-rise in the centre of Tehran, she began working, for the first time, on a more conceptual project, one that mixes social documentary with something more akin to art.

“For me, Iran is the country where I was born, I went to school here, started my career, and never left,” she says. “As a photographer, I have always struggled with how to perceive my society, with all its complexities and misunderstandings.”

A close engagement with this struggle resulted in her first major series, “Blank Pages of an Iranian Photo Album”, a stunningly intimate, complex and challenging collection of insights into the middle-class, millennial Iranians with whom she shares her life in Tehran.



In Tehran, without our digital, media-rich lives, family photo albums, with their yellowing pages and crinkling transparent plastic, remain precious family possessions.

“But when these people hit puberty, the number of photos in their family photo albums began to shrink,” Newsha says of the series. “Eventually, the pages of the second half of the albums are left blank. So I decided to make a new photo album for them, representing them as adults.”

Tavakolian’s images are often staged. She based her photography on the stories of her friends and neighbours, encouraging them to visualise how they regard their lives. In one, a young man stands defiantly in the centre of what looks like a drained, dilapidated swimming pool, the smooth walls holding him in. In another, a veiled woman tries to unpick her clothes from a thorn bush, a Western handbag in her hand, Tehran’s cityscape visible in the background. “The girl in the photo has chosen that spot because it shows how she is looking for her own place in the world. That is exactly what every one of us is doing,” Tavakolian says of the image.

In a third, her most iconic image, a woman in a black burka stares through the lens, tears streaming down her face. In another, a woman looks for the first time at her new nose, in what may be a backstreet cosmetic surgery salon.

Yet the series is also full of light; of men playing with their daughters; of children in long head-dresses cavorting about at street parties or on the school playground; of women sat on public transport with Chanel handbags and Marlborough lights, taking simple pleasures in slightly illicit things.

Such revealing images did not happen by accident, but by concerted attempts to engender trust. “I spent time with them,” Tavakolian says of her subjects. “I didn’t just meet them with my camera for a photo-shoot. I’d sit down with them, talking for hours, maybe only recording their voices so I could listen to what they had to say later. My name is Newsha, which means ‘good listener’.”

Tavakolian’s images are, in many ways, a critique of the West; a response to depictions of her society characterised by angry, bearded men, or a young, rebellious, almost sexualised youth, suspended in revolutionary fervour.

In Iran, 70% of people are under 35. The middle classes – the quieter, progressive millennials who just want to get on with their lives – are very rarely shown.

“Western media – of course not all of them – are still looking at us the way they looked at us 20, 30 years ago,” she says. “Serious media do not make this mistake. They know how multi-layered a society is. A lot of news media is constantly looking for more clicks. I think the audience is much more informed than that.”

Overwhelmingly, this work is personal. “I wanted to add the pictures that were never taken of the way that life is for them now, as adults. I followed people who, in a sense, define this generation,” she says. “This photo album is theirs; it is my vision of life in Iran now, unromantic and confined. Those who feature on the pages are interchangeable, placed randomly in the natural situation of what is or could be their daily lives.” They are, one gets the impression, mirrors as well. “I wanted to synchronise my vision with their thought and heart,” she says. “I think this harmony is the dream of all photographers.