



## Journal

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JOURNAL

FILM, MIND & BODY — 1 DAY AGO

## Newsha Tavakolian channels the effects of Premenstrual Syndrome in her latest short film

by MARINA WATSON PELÁEZ



 View Gallery  
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For The Sake of Calmness takes Newsha Tavakolian's experience of Premenstrual Syndrome as its starting point, developing into an abstract and experimental response to the syndrome that should resonate with every viewer

Newsha Tavakolian was twelve years old when she got her first period. It could not have come at a less convenient time. She had been selected as her school's lead-singer and was to perform at a celebration for Iran's Islamic Revolution. Tavakolian had been practising for four months, but, she felt so debilitated, and was in so much pain that she couldn't do it. "It was so disappointing," she recalls.

Memories like these were a starting point for the photographer's unnerving latest short film *For The Sake of Calmness* (19 minutes, 2020), which began as a photography project. It is currently on show at New York City's Thomas Erben gallery until 13 February, and the International Rotterdam Film Festival will also screen it from 02 February to 05 February. Reflecting on how Premenstrual syndrome (PMS) has affected Tavakolian, the film immerses us in a world of hypersensitivity, detachment, and melancholy.



© Newsha Tavakolian.



© Newsha Tavakolian.



PMS, which it is estimated affects over 90 per cent of women, is a combination of symptoms women experience before their period. The syndrome includes feeling sad or anxious, mood swings, bloating, acne, fatigue and insomnia. Tavakolian interviewed more than 100 women about their experiences of PMS over four years as part of the research for the film. She also began visiting a neurologist to understand what she was experiencing.

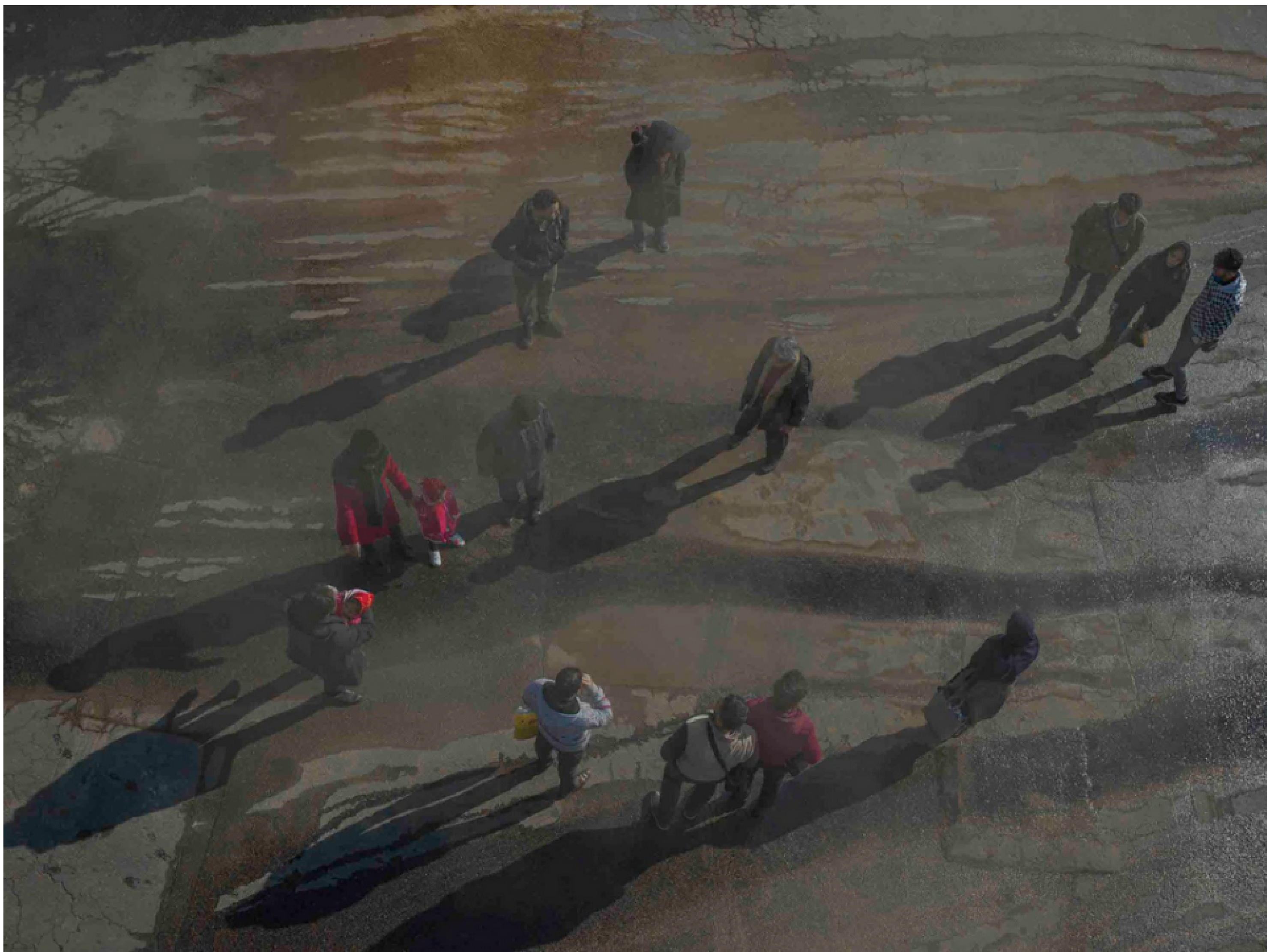
*For The Sake of Calmness* is a deeply personal project, set to Tavakolian's monologue. However, it is also coherent with her previous work, such as her series *Look*, which explores middle-class youth in Iran and the pressures and isolation they face. With *For The Sake of Calmness*, Tavakolian looks inwards, but, as she did with *Look*, also outwards, endeavouring to understand how PMS affects society more broadly. "I have a deep interest in people who are in limbo. I like to capture the in-between. When people are not yet at their destination, but, they are also not at home," she explains.

The film is a mood piece with no linear narrative. The characters stare at the camera or into thin air, without saying a word. Tavakolian isn't telling a story. Instead, she wants to provoke feelings. By combining her personal experience with that of the women she interviewed, she wants people to understand what it is like to have PMS and translate that experience abstractly.



Tavakolian decided she had to be experiencing the effects of PMS when shooting the film; this is the time at which she feels most creative and empathetic. "I've been thinking about and studying the topic for a few years, so, in the back of my mind, I was ready to shoot the project," she explains. The photographer teamed up with the Iranian cinematographer Peyman Shadmanfar, with who she discovered she shares a similar visual aesthetic and cast several professional performers.

The film also features Tavakolian's parents. In one scene, her mother appears sitting in the kitchen, staring into space, distraught. A clock ticks away in the distance. "I am a strict perfectionist," says Tavakolian in Farsi. "I want my subjects to be staring out at a point. Not like my father who has his eyes closed." The following scene captures her parents sitting together. Filming the scene under the effects of PMS, Tavakolian began wondering whether they were happy after being married for 46 years. Shortly after the shoot, her father died of a heart attack, and Tavakolian had to wait nine months to gather the strength to sit in the editing room and watch the footage back; seeing the images of her father had been too torturous.



© Newsha Tavakolian.



Silence is also significant to Tavakolian. “When you say too much, there is no space for people to have their own ideas, to add something,” she says. “Ambiguity is important to me.” At one point, we see an aerial shot of people walking in different directions. “The insanity of the left side is always present. The right side was nice, it was kind,” the voiceover says, before proceeding to talk about air pollution. The spectator is likely to be left feeling confused, without really understanding what is going on. And that seems to have been Tavakolian’s intention. “The whole project was about uncertainty, whether it’s reality or just an illusion,” Tavakolian says. She worked closely with the sound designer, Kamran Arashnia, to create an abstract atmosphere, resembling her experience of PMS. The sound, at times, can be uncomfortable.

Tavakolian’s approach to this project is different from that of her photojournalism work. But, she did get ideas from past assignments. One of the scenes in *For The Sake of Calmness* portrays a landscape of sunflowers, wrapped in plastic. “I saw this while on assignment for National Geographic in Iran’s salt lake Urmia,” she explains. “The farmers wrapped them inside plastic bags so that birds and other animals don’t come to the seeds and to protect them from the wind.” Tavakolian can’t pinpoint exactly why she incorporated this scene or how it ties into PMS. It was intuitive. “The whole point of my project is about abstracted feelings. If it is easy to explain and talk about, I wouldn’t do this project,” she says.

The project first went on show without an explanation or artist’s statement accompanying it, in part, because Tavakolian feared men would avoid going to it given PMS does not relate to them directly. However, she believes everyone should understand the syndrome. “If men had something similar, the whole world would gather to research it,” she said. “That’s why it took so long to start to understand it.”

*For the Sake of Calmness* is on show at Thomas Erben Gallery, New York, until 13 February 2021.

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