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AS A SELF-TAUGHT photographer, it seems that Newsha Tavakolian (b. 1981 in Tehran) has already lived many lives through her professional assignments. Covering riot and war situations in her native Iran and in neighbouring countries, she has, over the years, also developed an artistic career distinct from her work as a photojournalist. Her work is included in group photography shows in the West and she is beginning to make a name for herself as an artist who explores women's issues. During her last solo show in New York, she took the time to speak with the Asian Art Newspaper.

Asian Art Newspaper: Professionally, you started very early in the field of photography. You would assume that initially in Iran that the odds were against you: being so young, as a woman, and combined with the field you wanted to cover. However, you have succeeded in entering the world of professional photojournalism.

Newsha Tavakolian: When I was sixteen, I decided that I did not want to carry on studying. For me, studying at school in Iran was quite difficult because I could not sit in class, and I could not write well as

I was dyslexic. Back then, it was different from today where parents follow their children's lives very carefully. In Iran, dyslexia was not recognised and I always

ended up being behind at school. So, I reached the age of sixteen, I quit my studies, but I knew I wanted to do something with my life. I liked photography among other things and most of all, I wanted to become a singer. In my family, everybody sings (my aunt is a professional singer, and my grandfather and all my aunts have great voices). However, becoming a professional singer was not possible in Iran because, as a woman, I could only sing for women and I did not like that idea. One day, my father bought a camera from one of his friends who was living in the United States in addition to the one we already had at home, which was a professional camera. I was thinking about what to learn and what to do, and unconsciously, I started to do some research into photography. I took a course for a couple of months, and then, as I was sharing a taxi while holding my camera in my hands, the other passenger inquired whether I was a photographer. I answered yes, mentioning that I was interested in journalistic photography. He suggested one specific newspaper I could go to which was actually a woman's newspaper. Without knowing it, that passenger changed my life and my destiny. As I was really young without any experience, they would not let me go out and become a professional photographer right away. They were right – I did not have any journalistic pictures, I only had pictures of flowers, and so on. For about two months, I started picking up the phone at the newspaper while still taking pictures on a daily basis. At the newspaper, they saw that I was really enthusiastic about it. I was subsequently asked to join their photo desk and I began archiving and taking pictures at the same time.

AA: How did your family react to your projects?

NT: Fortunately, I have a very open-minded family. My parents' philosophy is that you put the pressure on your own shoulders, that it is your life and that you are responsible for it.

AA: What was your first assignment?

NT: Initially, I was not taken very seriously and I got to do all the smaller assignments. But I wanted more. As I started out, I was lucky because I was documenting the changes in Iran. It was the time when we had reformist presidents and all the newspapers I was working for were reformist newspapers. They wanted to change, they wanted to make our culture richer without constantly betting on our past culture. I was witnessing all the changes and hopes that young people had. Suddenly, the atmosphere in the country was different because young people had hope. The government opened the door of Iran a little bit and as up until then we had only had governmental newspapers, independent newspapers grew like mushrooms. Pictures were also very important at that time and I was lucky to start during that period.

AA: When you say you were 'documenting the changes', can you be more specific? What would that imply with regards to your work?

NT: Everyday, there would be something happening. For a couple of years, there were a lot of positive things like big meetings of university students with all kinds of discussions (conservative, left wing, etc.), woman playing football, which was not possible before, theatres, etc. I was taking pictures and I was everywhere.

When I was eighteen, suddenly the judiciary in Iran decided they wanted to shut down all these newspapers because they saw that things were about to change. Subsequently, there were big riots, and there were only a few newspapers that were still running and I was working for one of them. For one week, I covered all the students' riots and during that time, my pictures were on the front page. From then on, I was taken seriously. Although it 16 years since I have been working as a photographer, I still have to prove myself on a daily basis. Back then, we had very few woman photographers in Iran. However, while working, I never thought of my gender. I never thought that as a woman from Iran, I could not do certain things. It is a mentality I have, and such issues never crossed my mind.

AA: Retrospectively, would you say that you took a lot of risks for your assignments?

NT: Certainly, but when you are younger, you don't think about these things, and this is all the more true when you are on sight. In Iran, after I covered these big riots, the newspaper realized that I was really serious. I simply fell in love with photography. It is not only just about taking pictures: in a way, you show what you think. Some people write, some people paint, and I take pictures. Then, when I was twenty, I went to Iraq because every time I did something, I subsequently wanted to do more. I was not happy just working in Iran. So I covered the Iraq war and began travelling in Iran and in the Middle East for different projects. I guess I did my best works in Iran because it is my country, I have feelings for it, I am passionate and I care about it. In Iran is my story, too. Therefore, I decided to stay in Iran more and do long term projects. In 2009, when the free movements began, they did not let us work. Until 2009, I was doing serious photojournalism and documentary photography. Then, I started thinking about how to say what I want, how to capture the mood, how to talk about the issues that I feel are important without doing photojournalism. Looking at my work, it is documentary, but at the same time, I am trying to create a bridge between documentary photography and art. That is how I see my work now.

AA: You said earlier that you wanted to bridge the world of photojournalism and art. Where would you put the border? It seems quite difficult to narrow it down. Sometimes, you have exquisite pictures in the news that will never find their way into a gallery.

NW: That is the thing. I would never show my photojournalistic work in a gallery because a gallery is a different story. Also, the audience going to a gallery wants something deeper: the content has to be more complex than photojournalism where you are there and just capture the news, in a moment, and that is it. In Iran, we have many amazing artists, but they do not really care about the society in which they live. They are in their own environment. I get all my inspiration from people around me – from society – certain things I see make me angry and then I want to do something about it.

AA: In a way, all the series you completed so far are mostly autobiographical.

NT: Yes. When I take pictures, I have to feel for the subject, otherwise nothing positive will come out of it.

AA: Your latest series *Look*, shown in New York last spring, is solely depicting neighbours of yours?

NT: Yes.

AA: When you study their faces, all of them have something on their mind. Initially, were they receptive to your project, letting you in their personal universe?

NT: It took a while. Before completing this project, I was doing a story with exactly the same setting in another building, but in downtown Tehran. After working there for four or five months, I looked at the photos and I did not feel any emotions at all. In the pictures, I emphasise emotions and I want to trigger something that makes you wonder. In downtown Tehran, the people I photographed did not know me, I did not know them, and we had no connection. Then, one day, I was looking out of the window of my apartment thinking: this is it! Unconsciously, I had the view, but I did not realise it right away. I immediately changed the project, placing the setting in my own house, taking pictures of my friends.

AA: Did you talk to your neighbours, or did you want the pictures to be spontaneous?

NT: All of the pictures were shot in my own bedroom because I did not want to go to their home and have to stage things. As it was my own studio, I had two or three lights and every time, I changed the setting. My work is about limitations. All images were taken at eight o'clock in the evening as if I were imagining what all my neighbours were doing at that precise time in their own homes. As I have been living in that building for 11 years, I knew them, seeing them in the elevator, downstairs, and occasionally, they would come to my house. The most important thing was that they trusted me. They knew that I would never misuse them or make them look stupid. The pictures are very private, and no one wants to show or share the sad feelings they are experiencing. If you see them in the company of other people, they laugh and they are not like this. I spent a lot of time with them, and I know about their private situation, and that is why I picked them. In a way, I acted like a psychologist, and they were really open to me. These 10 pictures took me almost seven months. I spent so much time with them, making sure they get a little bit more relaxed. Upon their first picture, they looked very nervous and it took a while to get them to loosen up.

AA: How did you create your *Singers* series?

NT: The Singers were different. I did not know many women singers, and I needed six women. So I started researching, asking around. Many of them did not want to be part of my project, thinking that maybe it was dangerous. The six women I ended up finding were very enthusiastic about the project. I took pictures of them while they were singing, but they did not know exactly what I was going to do. When I do projects like these, I spend a lot of time with the people involved in order to get inspired. I talked to them. These works all come from my background: I act like a journalist. With the singers, I spent a lot of time with them individually, to get to know them as individuals, to get to know their wishes, their lifestyle. None of these singers have an album. I created an album for them with a dream CD cover. I made 8,000 CD covers, but when you opened them, there were no CDs because they have no songs. Everything is imaginary: the song titles, the cover, the entire CD. They only get to perform at private parties and that is why they all keep a job on the side because they cannot make a living through their singing. In Iran, you do not have any female voices on the radio or on television. Consequently, it was a great opportunity for them and they were singing with a lot of passion.

AA: Have all your series been shown in Iran?

NT: Yes, all of them. I make it a point to always first exhibit my work in Iran and then abroad. For me, it is extremely important to show my work in Iran because in the West, people look at our work in a different way than Iranians. For me, I get all my feedback from these people at home. My work is about emotions and they know their emotions, their state of mind. When I had the last exhibition in Tehran, it was one of the busiest exhibitions, and everybody found something relating to their own lives in these pictures. As I was taking the pictures, my only goal was to take good pictures, and show them in Iran. I wanted to show Iranians how the mood is. Among Iranians, nobody shows it to one another, but behind closed doors, it is a different situation.

AA: It seems to be a difficult balance between over-dramatising and presenting something in a manner that Iranians would consider too harmless.

NT: Yes. That is why I wanted the setting to be very minimal with just a few items on the table. Have fewer things, but say more. I believe in this. Right now, people are depressed in my country, and there is no way I can fake it and include happy people in it. Deep inside, my neighbours are all like that: there is a heavy sadness in all Iranians. The sanctions are hurting everybody, and the government cannot manage the country. Everybody is worried. People have lots of problems and on top of that, there are many things that you cannot do. When foreigners come to Iran, they are always surprised about how well people are dressed, about the high level of education, how they have regular houses. In a way, it is totally modern, but nevertheless they are very aware of where they are standing, and how the situation is. Now, through the Internet, young people see the world, and within one click they are back in their reality. Every day, there are talks about war. It is heavy. The project is about that: it is all out of their hand. As a photographer, I always think I should not be so emotional about what I witness around me. I should keep a little distance to see the reality and where things are standing in order to come to the right conclusion. Basically, when you see my pictures, it is the story of my life, too.

AA: Since you want to show your work in Iran before it is shown abroad, do you self-censor your work?

NT: All the time, and you have to. I grew up that way. On one hand, you must show that you are not repeating yourself, but at the same time, you have to remain true to your style. These things are constantly on my mind. There are certain projects that I would like to do, but I realise that it is not possible. I do not want to put anyone in danger, I just want to show my work. The project I wanted to do was about love. In Iran, we are very emotional people. Because of the difficulties that my country is going through, they do not think about love anymore. Nobody trusts anybody. The idea of this project came about because I was interviewing people about love, and the girls said they were not in love because they didn't trust men. When I asked why they did not trust men, they answered that they just wanted to use you and leave. As I was asking men whether they were in love, they just

laughed, saying the girls just wanted to use their money. I would like to document the young generation and the changes. In the future, when you look back at my work, you will recognize the atmosphere, the inside. However, completing this project became complicated for me.

AAN: You are preparing a project in China?

NT: Yes, it is going to be a big project. It focuses on Iran, China, and Cuba and their respective leaders, Khomeini for Iran, Mao for China and Castro for Cuba. All three brought their ideology to society affecting the lives of millions of young people without them having any power to change it. I want to take portraits of young people in each of these countries showing the effect of politics in people's lives. I want to focus on young middle-class people as most of the time in my work, I do not want to dramatise things with poor people. I am always interested in middle-class youth because, theoretically, they have the power to change things. I already went to China for a research trip for a month, to get an idea of the mood, etc. In my artwork, I do not want to work with what sells well. I want to do what I want. That is why I keep my photojournalist work in order to make money. I want to stay free. I am very happy to be able to do both. I am trying to talk about Iran in an international language. That is how I like to work.

AAN: In your catalogue, you wrote 'confusing others has become like a second nature for me'. Can you elaborate?

NT: Inside Iran, I was not really a normal girl. I grew up in a society where the education for girls is extremely important. All the families want their daughters to be educated. I broke many rules, and I started travelling alone by bus in Iran when I was between the age of seventeen and eighteen. In Iran, people were always surprised to see me by myself, and that my parents would let me. I was a very free spirited girl. When I started coming out of Iran, people were also confused. They have certain expectations, but I never really fit in there. I am always confusing everybody.

AAN: You are frequently referring to 'a confused generation'. In what sense?

NT: The Iranian society is changing at high speed, faster than one can imagine. Young people act and think differently from their parents. They are so ahead of the government, but sometimes they are also confused: who is right? You always need to be careful what you say to whom, and a society like that makes you confused. Because of the internet, because of their education, they want a different lifestyle. It is not just the government, but also the culture. We have a lot of cultural problems.

AAN: Are there any specific influences that have had an impact on your work?

NT: I love painting and I am always looking at old paintings. I like Dutch paintings, especially the skies and colours. Also the artist Munch and I enjoy German Expressionism, because I tend to think that our situations are quite similar. In a mutation you try to do something. Their work is fantastic and effective. In addition, films are important, because I like narration in my work, I like to tell stories. However, photography remains my medium of choice as you can 'freeze' one second of something. I think it is very powerful.

AAN: You mentioned the efficiency of German Expressionism. Are you hoping your work will achieve something in Iran?

NT: I do not want to change the world and I do not want to change Iran through my work. I always think I could do better and I am always doubting myself. My goal is to become happy about my work. Of course, I would like to be effective, but I am not trying to achieve this. Especially in Iran, I am very quiet. Politicians should be politicians, artists should be artists, and teachers should be teachers. If people would do what they are good at, we would not have the problems we are presently having in Iran. I just do my work. I see a very bright future in Iran, although I think it is necessary for us to go through this transitional phase right now. We are now going through a transition other countries went through 100 years ago.

BY OLIVIA SAND
