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Newsha Tavakolian: Blank Pages of an Iranian Photo Album

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In Blank Pages of an Iranian Photo Album, Newsha Tavakolian attempts to convey the shrouded personal stories of her own generation, the millennials who grew up in Tehran after the 1979 revolution. Recently announced as one of six new nominee members of Magnum Photos, we find out why she must be heard on her own terms.



Newsha Tavakolian, the 33-year-old Iranian photographer and one of the newest members of Magnum Photos, was barely a teenager when her father took her from Tehran to Berlin. It was a family holiday with friends, and she remembers a night dancing with her childhood friend before they saw the Berlin wall. “How could people live behind a wall and not be allowed to leave?” she asked Hamila, who couldn’t imagine either. So they continued to dance.

That family picture of the two of them, dancing their childish dance, acts as the requiem for *Blank Pages of an Iranian Photo Album*, the first photobook of Tavakolian’s

almost 20-year career. A self-taught photographer, she was born in the midst of the Iranian revolution and the country’s bloody war with Iraq. From a job as a 16-year-old working on a now-defunct woman’s magazine in Tehran, to photographing the 1999 student uprising in Iran, the 2003 war in Iraq, and then ensuing conflicts in Yemen, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Pakistan, she now has a collection of photographs, and an exhibition, that encapsulate this complex and expressive documentarian and artist.

The student uprising in 1999, when Tavakolian was still a teenager, was seminal. Tehran had not seen such violence on its streets since the Islamic revolution of two decades earlier, and merely the act of photographing such an event was life-threatening. The protests, small at first, began on the day of the forced closure of a moderate and progressive newspaper, *Salam*.

That night, a student dormitory was raided by riot police. A student was killed, and others were forced to jump from the balcony. The raid sparked six days of violent demonstrations and rioting throughout the country. Riot police, militia and vigilantes fought on the streets, and at least three more people were killed, as well as more than 200 injuries. After the protests were quashed, more than 70 students disappeared. The “whereabouts and condition” of some, Human Rights Watch claims, remain unknown.

While Western photographers largely tried to capture the warfare within safe distance of the city’s safe zones, Tavakolian “spent a week scaling trees and perching above with a zoom lens”, taking some of the defining images of one of the first genuine uprisings against the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei’s regime.

Writing in *Time*, the American-Iranian journalist (and Tavakolian’s friend) Azadeh Moaveni said: “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.”

She is not a known name outside of photography circles. Indeed, she hasn’t been that well known at all – until recently. The photobook and associated exhibitions in Paris and London, the result of her winning the Carmignac Foundation Photojournalism Award last year, helped bring her to the attention of Martin Parr, current president of Magnum Photos. On 30 June, after the agency’s annual general meeting in Paris, she was announced as one of six new entries to the Magnum family. Tavakolian was one of two women, alongside the US-born photographer Carolyn Drake, and the only photographer from anywhere in the Middle East.

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“We were impressed with her work, from the documentary project on the Hajj, to her more recent portraits,” Parr tells BJP. “The fact that she is an Iranian woman is another plus point, as we are keen to support diversity, and to find emerging talent outside of Europe and America.”

Tavakolian used that very personal image of her and her friend, she says, to acknowledge the importance of the family photo album in Iranian society. Such yellowed, time-beaten books – seen in the West as an anachronism in the age of the Facebook – remain a precious possession in Iran. “For most of these albums, the content is familiar,” she says. “An endless flow of snapshots of family gatherings with birthday cakes for newborn babies and children growing up in the new Islamic Republic, summer evenings in lush gardens, family gatherings on Shab-e Yalda, the winter solstice.

“The families may differ,” she says. “But the living rooms remain the same, with carpets and furniture dating from before the 1979 revolution. Whether we knew it or not, we were all middle class, sharing the same values, and dreaming of progress and better lives.”

Tavakolian is waiting for us in the garden of a grand hotel in Paris. The Carmignac Foundation, with whom she has had such a publicly complex relationship, have organised for a group of London journalists to get an early Eurostar to the French capital. She wears a long-sleeve, pin-stripe shirt and a long black shirt, a leather jacket over the top. Her hair, without veil, drops over her shoulders. Over duck breast and wine, she smilingly – nervously – fields questions from two women sat either side of her, both experienced arts journalists keen to learn of her life. She seems a little overwhelmed by it all; the Parisian opulence, the attention, the slight need to perform. Yet, before we eat, she comments to the table as a whole, how the men and women have been separated; men on one side, women on the other. Her husband, the Dutch-born *New York Times* correspondent Thomas Erdbrink cracks a joke, and she laughs.

Later that afternoon, we are driven to Le Chapelle des Beaux Arts, a beautiful, vast architectural complex opposite the Louvre in the heart of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, run by France’s Ministry of Culture and Communication.

In a Church-like gallery, the walls of which are covered in Renaissance-era art, Tavakolian has hung her series; videos and stills and text combine to tell the stories and imbue the feelings of her so-called burnt generation. She accepts pictures, signs books, and patiently fields questions in French and English from wandering passersby.

But do not underestimate her steeliness. *Blank Pages of an Iranian Photo Album* is politically charged; a defiant message to those that define her country, from both the outside and in. It’s a rebuke to the framings and perceptions, the ignorance and impressionism, that seek to depict Iran as a lair of extremists. It’s a statement of artistic integrity, and an affirmation of a full and rich life, in a country still defined in so many ways by its theocratic intolerance, its relentless oppression of women, its fervent control over individualism.

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

Tavakolian shows us men smiling with their daughters on their birthday, or laughing together in vibrant street scenes; of children smiling at street parties, or playing together, in long head-dresses, at school; of women, covered, with Chanel handbags and Marlborough lights, applying make-up, appraising their new nose, dancing together in exercise classes or riding a bike along the beach at sunrise. It shows Tehran for what it is: a rich, complex and colourful capital city.

And yet, at the same time, it’s an active challenge to the authoritarianism that undeniably pervades the life of Iran’s people. Much of Tavakolian’s work focuses on her contemporaries, the progressive millennials born in the Iranian revolution and now caught in limbo, between the traditions of their country and the globalism of our age. In this sense, the family album is a metaphor for her generation. For those family photo albums were never completed. The pictures of dancing children were not backed up by images of adulthood. They remained half-full, “at the moment our parents stopped taking our pictures”.

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“Reality took over,” Tavakolian says of those blank pages. “Enclosing our ambitions and aspirations into a straightjacket, tied firmly by both ideology and our own apathy. As we stopped adding pictures to our albums, we became subject to the perceptions of outsiders and those who focus only on the extremes of our society – the angry protestors or the mysterious women with their veils.”

For many beyond photography world, Tavakolian will emerge, fully formed, with another major exhibition at London’s Saatchi gallery. But these ideas have been gestating for years. Her first major conceptual series, *Look*, came after she was confined to her home, after covering the presidential elections in 2009 – a chaotic experience, she recalls.

Tavakolian began photographing the men and women that lived in the same up-market tower block as she, many of them a similar age, young professionals with big plans and busy lives: a former soldier, a teacher, a mother, a would-be émigré. She photographed them in their homes, in still, suspended moments, lost in thought. It showcased her remarkable ability to capture small movements, expressions and gestures that speak in a way words cannot. “I wanted to bring to life the story of a nation of middle-class youths who are everyday battling with themselves,” she says, “their isolated, conformed society, their lack of hope for the future.”

She had lived in the building, and known many of these faces, for more than 10 years, and lived the idea she was trying to communicate. This wasn’t an exercise in challenging perceptions and affirming realities. It was storytelling from the most native of tongues. “The masses of today are my generation,” she says. “In Iran, over 70 percent of the population is under 35. But the lives of the middle-class grown-ups, a generation that tries to be invisible, go unnoticed.”

Which goes some way to explaining Tavakolian’s reaction when Édouard Carmignac tried to impose his own ideas on to her work. After winning the award, founded by the Parisian investment banker and head of Carmignac Gestion, Tavakolian was given a €50,000 grant to further facilitate work on the project. The award was announced twice in two full-page advertisements in the *Financial Times*. After their heavily publicised fight, her work was eventually exhibited for the first time at a reception at Rencontres d’Arles.

Tavakolian had used the term “the burnt generation” to describe the men and women featured in her photography. It had become something of a working title before she settled on *Blank Pages of an Iranian Photo Album*. But when she travelled to Paris early that summer to show the work for the first time, Édouard Carmignac wasn’t happy. According to her account given to *The Times*, he angrily paced his office – two Andy Warhol pictures, one of Mao Zedong, another of Lenin, looking down upon them – as she showed him the work. “What is this? This is not what we want,” he said.

She responded with: “Mr Carmignac, I live in Iran, not you. This is my vision about the country I live in.”

After she returned to Iran, she heard from the publisher that he wanted to title the project *The Lost Generation*. Tavakolian fought her corner and a compromise was promised. When she next travelled to meet with the foundation in Paris, Édouard took it upon himself to do an edit of some 40 pictures, prioritising the more dramatic shots over her carefully orchestrated, semi-staged portraits.

Tavakolian’s reaction was remarkable. She published an essay on her Facebook page before giving interviews to the *New York Times* and *British Journal of Photography*. She was to give Carmignac’s money back, refuse the award and cut ties with the foundation.

“My acceptance of the terms of the award from the Carmignac Gestion Foundation was based on the understanding that I would have full artistic freedom as a photographer to create a work that is faithful to my vision as an established photojournalist and art photographer,” she wrote. “Unfortunately, however, from the moment I delivered the work, Mr Carmignac insisted on personally editing my photographs as well as altering the accompanying texts to the photographs. Mr Carmignac’s interference in the project culminated in choosing an entirely unacceptable title for my work that would undermine my project irredeemably.”

The proposed title, she said, “Changed the nature of my project from a subtle attempt to bring across the realities of life of my generation in Iran to a coarse and horrible clichéd view about Iran”.

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In response, Édouard, via his foundation, released a statement accusing Tavakolian, in the language of care and concern, of allowing her work to be dictated by the Iranian government. It said: “The Carmignac Foundation was recently faced with an unprecedented situation, whereby the safety of the fifth winner of the Carmignac Gestion Photojournalism Award, Newsha Tavakolian, was threatened. Ms Tavakolian notified the foundation of specific and significant risks posed to her own safety, and that of her family, and expressed her intention to tone down and shift the focus of her proposed *Burnt Generation* project that had been selected by the jury.

“Under these circumstances, the foundation made the difficult decision to postpone the project rather than accept such a change, which it felt would have distorted the award’s mission without necessarily guaranteeing the safety of its winner.

“Once the award was announced, the government has put the laureate and her family under severe pressure. In order to protect Newsha Tavakolian and her family, the Carmignac Foundation has decided to adjourn the exhibition, initially planned for November in Paris and thereafter in Italy, Germany and the UK.”

Despite their continued support of Tavakolian, it was a badly advised move. She responded: “As far as I can see, this statement is a natural continuation of the persistent attitude I have encountered at the Carmignac Foundation, namely to err on the side of controversy. All presumptions in this statement are absolutely false, and laughable. I am not in any way under threat, at least no more than other journalists who are in Iran.”

“I am not a delicate flower,” Tavakolian told the *New York Times*. “I just want to take responsibility for my own work. Defend myself? I can. But if someone else paints me into a corner, how can I defend myself?”

The Carmignac Foundation, to give them their due, realised they were playing a losing game. Allegedly heated discussions took place between the foundation’s jury and Édouard Carmignac, resulting in a new set of prize rules. The jury president, it was decided, would in future serve as the curator of the winning photographer’s exhibition. Carmignac’s power was superseded to his jury.

Tavakolian’s exhibition and book was to be entrusted to Sam Stourd , the new director of Rencontres d’Arles, and the Iranian gallerist and jury president Anahita Ghabaian Ettehadieh. She accepted the decision, saying: “The foundation has taken a major step forward. All that I’ve asked is for my artistic freedom to be respected. I believe the planned changes will be beneficial both to me and to future winners of the prize.”

Her statement was made: this photography series matters, she was saying, for hers is an invisible generation. Not lost, but unspoken, unrepresented. “When I started in photojournalism as a 16-year-old high school dropout, I made it my goal to explain Iran,” she says. “To convince outsiders that the country and my generation are now how they are often perceived to be. Now, what matters to me is that this work communicates the feelings some have here in Iran. These images will not change anything, nor will they help anybody. What I hope is that they visualise a generation marginalised by those speaking their name.”

Carmignac Photojournalism Award: A Retrospective, organised by the Fondation Carmignac, runs from 18 November to 13 December at the Saatchi Gallery, London.