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May 2, 2013 Written by [Allegra Kirkland](#)

Alone Together: Newsha Tavakolian at Thomas Erben Gallery

"We are all so much together, but we are all dying of loneliness."

This oft-referenced quote, by German theologian Albert Schweitzer, captures a universal truth about the human condition, but its poignancy is particularly acute for city dwellers. After all, feeling lonesome while contemplating the vastness of the ocean or looking at the night sky is one thing; feeling isolated while surrounded by a crush of people on a packed subway platform or navigating a crowded sidewalk is quite another. The presence of all of those unfamiliar bodies—millions of unconnected souls coexisting in such close contact—only intensifies one's psychic isolation.



Newsha Tavakolian, "Look," 2012. Inkjet print, 41 x 55 in., courtesy the artist/Thomas Erben Gallery

Look, the most recent series by Iranian photographer [Newsha Tavakolian](#), personalizes this pervasive urban phenomenon. Currently on view at the [Thomas Erben Gallery](#), the exhibit features large format portraits of Tavakolian's neighbors in the Tehran apartment building where she has lived for the past ten years. Though the residents have spent significant time in close proximity—riding the same elevator, sharing the same view out their wide picture windows—they remain strangers. In its relentless documentation of individual solitude, Look serves as a contemporary, Iran-specific take on a classic modernist subject: the isolation and alienation of urban life.

"I wanted to bring to life the story of a nation of middle-class youths who are constantly battling with themselves, their isolated conformed society, their lack of hope for the future and each of their individual stories," Tavakolian notes in the exhibition's press release.

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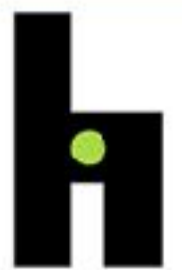
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Newsha Tavakolian, "Look," Installation view, courtesy Thomas Erben Gallery

Tavakolian's project is driven by her desire to illustrate the difficulties of daily life in modern Iran. In response to President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's ongoing nuclear program, the US and the UN have imposed harsh new rounds of economic sanctions over the past three years, many of which specifically target the nation's highly profitable petroleum industry. As a result, Iran has been plagued by high rates of unemployment and hyperinflation, and soaring prices have limited supplies of basic foodstuffs and medications. Despite unprecedented access to technology—several of Tavakolian's subjects are shown with smartphones—Iran is increasingly cut off from the rest of the world.

"Look mirrors both universal urban anxieties and a sense of depression specific to Iran because of the sanctions and mismanagement which are killing the future and opportunity of youth in Iran," Tavakolian said in a recent interview with *Roads & Kingdoms*. "It's not about protests, but about feelings."

We see a young woman in profile, sitting at a dressing table as mascara tracks run down her cheeks. A heavysset, bald-headed man with red-rimmed eyes slumps on a couch next to a pack of Marlboros. All the subjects share the same detached, mournful expression. Though surrounded by the detritus of the everyday—wallets, photographs, water glasses—the subjects do not engage with these objects, appearing instead to be lost in a dream state. One of the most arresting images features a young girl seated before a colorful birthday cake, staring blankly into the camera as the candles flicker. Tavakolian seems to suggest that, in modern Iran, there is no cause for celebration.

The straightforward, documentary style of the portraits is influenced by Tavakolian's work as a photojournalist. She spent years covering wars and natural disasters throughout the Middle East for publications such as *Time*, *Le Figaro* and *National Geographic*. It was not until 2009, when post-election riots and mass arrests created a particularly dangerous environment for Iranian journalists, that Tavakolian turned toward art photography. By documenting the cultural conditions in contemporary Iran, she could continue to engage with social issues without putting her life at risk.

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Newsha Tavakolian, "Look," 2012. Inkjet print, 41 x 55 in., courtesy the artist/Thomas Erben Gallery

In this series the line between photojournalistic documentation and art photography is blurred. These are real individuals who have suffered significant consequences as a result of Iran's falling economy. Yet the photographs are staged, the grief manufactured. Though the figures appear to be brooding alone in their apartments, they are actually performing loneliness for the camera. Rather than serve as overt political statements, the photographs offer demonstrations of the malaise and anxiety of middle-class Iranians—documentary evidence of a broken system.

"Why nobody seems happy in the pictures?" a visitor to the Tavakolian exhibition asked in heavily accented English.

"Well," replied the gallery assistant, "they all have very different circumstances."

Tavakolian would argue otherwise.

Newsha Tavakolian, *Look*, April 11-May 11, Thomas Erben Gallery, New York City

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