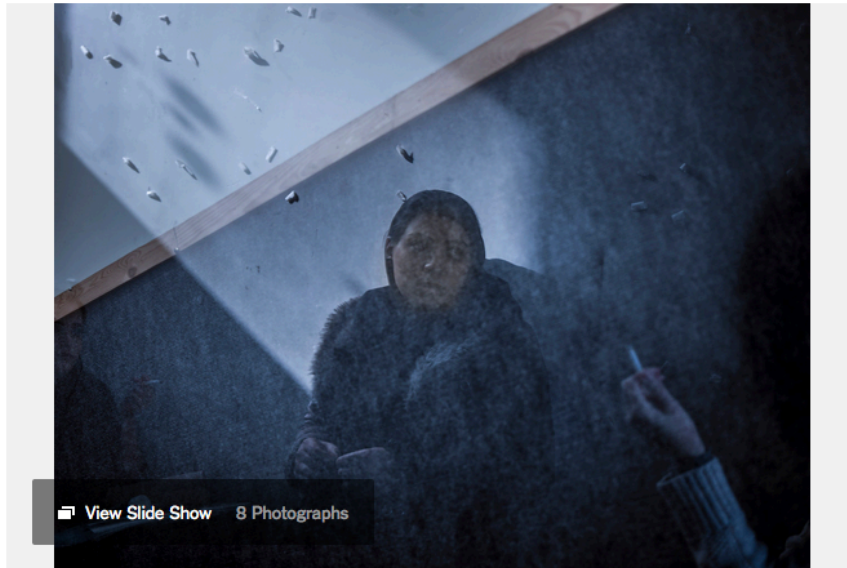


The New York Times



Keeping True to an Iranian Vision, Minus Big Money

By David Gonzalez Sep. 17, 2014

Update, 9/29/2014, Foundation Announces Changes

[Newsha Tavakolian](#) is painstaking about accurately portraying life in contemporary Iran, where she has documented the lives of young adults who were raised during the revolution and the Iran-Iraq war. Her work is subtle, nothing like the photo essays expected by Western news media outlets that are often fixated on the extremes of religious fanatics or dissolute sybarites.

“Everyone expects to see those images because it is a confirmation of what they already think,” said Ms. Tavakolian, 33, who freelances for The New York Times and is married to the paper’s Tehran bureau chief, Thomas Erdbrink. “But there is a big discussion in Iran right now among artists and photographers about this. Until when do we repeat the same subject only because it is sexy for outsiders?”

When she won a 50,000-euro [photojournalism prize](#) from a French foundation started by the investment banker Edouard Carmignac, she thought she had the money, time and freedom to explore the lives of this so-called Burnt Generation. She passed up assignments and embarked on this personal project, spending the first part of this year making scores of portraits, landscapes and documentary images about these young adults, which she eagerly looked forward to exhibiting and publishing in a book.

Not anymore.

She has instead walked away from the prestigious prize after what she considered repeated interference from Mr. Carmignac, whom she accused in a lengthy [Facebook post](#) and subsequent interview with Lens of distorting her vision by editing her images, demanding changes to her text and insisting on titling the project “The Lost Generation,” which she thought was not only a cliché, but could possibly provoke Iranian authorities. While she said the foundation had announced it had “adjourned” her prize because of fears for her safety in Iran, she said the only perils she faced were artistic ones from Mr. Carmignac, who she said seemed intent on controlling her take on her homeland and experiences.

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“I had to make a choice between my artistic freedom and my dignity, or the glory of something that is not real or not mine when it comes to what kind of book do I have,” Ms. Tavakolian said in a phone interview from Tehran. “This is a universal subject, not just about Iran. It is a subject all photographers are facing, but they do not talk about it. This is the only thing I have. It’s my vision, my artistic freedom.”

The foundation has not responded to a request for comment.

The head of the jury that selected Ms. Tavakolian said she delivered exactly what the jury expected. “She did deep work,” Anahita Ghabaian Etehadieh, the owner of the Silk Road Gallery in Tehran, said in an email. “Mr. Carmignac was probably expecting more of a work of photojournalism. Newsha’s work is a combination of staged and documentary series. He probably expected action and sensation. It’s true, you don’t find this in Newsha’s work.”

Nor did she think it was proper for Mr. Carmignac to put himself into the editorial process. The photographer chosen by the jury must be able to deliver the work he/she wants to show,” she said. “I think we all agree with these points. From my point of view, Mr. Carmignac shouldn’t play any role in editing the project.”

Ms. Tavakolian wanted to explore the lives of nine young adults, like a former soldier, a teacher, a mother, a would-be émigré. She had referred to them as members of the Burnt Generation, which was, if anything, a working title but not necessarily a final one. They were people whose lives had yet to take form in ways they had once hoped.

“It was a difficult subject because it is not very visually attractive,” she said. “But it is about the issues of contemporary youth. It’s hard to make good images. It’s challenging. But as a photographer I like to challenge myself and also see how creative I can be.”

As she pursued her project, Ms. Tavakolian noticed a pattern when she paged through her subjects’ family picture albums: After a flurry of snapshots from childhood, most pages went blank soon after her subjects reached their teenage years. Those were times that coincided with the revolution and, later, the Iran-Iraq war.

That revelation gave her a new organizing concept for her project: She saw it as filling in those white spaces. She called it “Blank Pages of an Iranian Photo Album.” Enthused, she traveled to Paris in the early summer to meet with Mr. Carmignac and the foundation.

It did not go well.

She said that he was angry and started walking around the room asking “What is this? This is not what we want,” she recalled. “I said: ‘Mr. Carmignac, I live in Iran, not you. This is my vision about the country I live in.’”

She said he chose a selection of pictures during that meeting, even though she had envisioned something bigger. She returned to Iran and continued to work on the project, doing captions, text and video. Soon, she heard from the publisher that Mr. Carmignac now wanted to title the project “The Lost Generation.” Ms. Tavakolian was upset and sent him an email outlining why.

“As an artist, I always like to leave some imagination for the viewer,” she said. “With a title like that, you know what you are going to get.” She said he replied suggesting a compromise was possible.

She eventually returned to Paris, where she met with the foundation. But that meeting resulted in Mr. Carmignac’s doing an edit of some 40 pictures, with very few of the subtle portraits that she said were central to her concept.

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“The rest of the images were all over the place,” she said.

She said he kept insisting on using “The Lost Generation” as a title. She resisted, and by way of explaining the consequences of using something she thought was sensational, she told them how Iranian authorities had recently arrested a fellow photographer whose work had offended their sensibilities.

“I wanted them to know that with that title they can put me in danger also,” she said. “But my point is as an artist, I should have the final say.”

Although that example she cited would later be used by the foundation to assert she was buckling under government pressure, she said nothing of the sort had happened.

“I am not a delicate flower,” Ms. Tavakolian said. “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? I have covered a lot of events here, but always with me being responsible for my decisions.”

She finally heard from the foundation that it was going to “adjourn” her project — the exhibits and books — because of the danger she faced in Iran. On top of that, she also learned that Mr. Carmignac had insisted that she remove passages from her text that related to her own experiences growing up in Iran.

Soon afterward, she took to Facebook to declare she was returning the prize.

“These last three months were like the most difficult time of my life,” she said.

“I lost half of my hair. It was a serious matter for me because my work is my life. For Mr. Carmignac it is something small to play with. But for me, it is my life.”

Update: *Newsha Tavakolian announced this week that she has agreed to keep the prize and continue with the book and exhibition projects after the Carmignac Foundation announced major changes to the award. A statement released by the foundation, after a meeting between the jurors and Edouard Carmignac, said the jury president will serve as curator of Ms. Tavakolian’s work for the coming year, and will be joined by another juror to curate the book and exhibit.*

The statement said the foundation wanted to ensure her safety and “allow the public to grasp the realities of life in Iran in all its complexity.”

Ms. Tavakolian, in a statement posted on her Facebook page, welcomed the developments, which prompted her to keep the prize.

“This weekend the Carmignac Foundation had a huge turnaround, promising that from now on there will be no more interference in my project and that two key jury members will be in charge of curating my work,” she wrote. “I have decided to accept these new conditions, as for me this was about one thing only, to be able as a photographer to choose the title, edits and texts of my work.”