

Native women artists who have, as ahtone shared, “created the potential for a future where their cultures live, survive, and thrive ... their work makes it possible for our children to see themselves in the future, to be proud of their history, and to continue to make our world” (42). •

**Karen Kramer** is the curator of Native American and Oceanic Art and Culture at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, MA, where she has developed major exhibitions on Native American art, including the recent, critically acclaimed *T.C. Cannon: At the Edge of America*. She directs the museum’s innovative Native American Fellowship Program.

## Notes

1. For example, see Lucy Lippard’s *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women’s Art* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1976) and *Get the Message? A Decade of Art for Social Change* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1984), and Nancy Marie Mithlo, “‘A Real Feminine Journey’: Locating Indigenous Feminisms in the Arts,” *Meridians* 9, no 2 (2009): 1–30.

## What if Not Exotic? Critical Perspectives in Contemporary Iranian Art

Edited by Mahsa Farhadikia  
Building Bridges Art Exchange,  
Los Angeles, 2019

Reviewed by Donna Stein

In Iran, “exotic” has been a code word for the traditional Orientalist point of view about life in the Middle East. Because of political tensions between the US and Iran, curiosity in the West about the geographic East and its political affairs has become exoticized and eroticized, and women’s issues historically and in modern times are simple ways to explain the message.<sup>1</sup> *What if not Exotic? Critical Perspectives in Contemporary Iranian Art*, the recent exhibition at the Los Angeles non-profit Building Bridges Art Exchange, offered new insights into the consideration of Middle Eastern art and specifically contemporary Iranian art. The title immediately addresses the curatorial approach by asking the question, “What if not Exotic?”

The well-written, carefully documented, and thoughtful exhibition catalogue, edited by Mahsa Farhadikia, the show’s curator alongside Aria Eghbal, with a contributory scholarly essay by Ali Golestaneh, introduces an alternative to current international market perspectives that favor Iranian modern artists. These include well-known artists Parviz Tanavoli, Hossein Zenderoudi, and Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian (1922–2019), who, beginning in the 1950s, incorporated the new culture of a developing country through calligraphy and other traditional and indigenous motifs. More



Fig. 1. Shaya Shahrestani, *Figure 6* (2019), pencil on cardboard, 12" x 16 1/2".

recently, post-modern artists whose careers developed after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, for instance Shirin Neshat (b. 1956), Shadi Ghadirian (b. 1974), and Siamak Filizadeh, emphasize socio-political issues in juxtaposition with Orientalist clichés from the Qajar Dynasty (1789–1925) first propagated by nineteenth-century European and American artists, and have also received worldwide attention. Contrary to what most Western viewers expect, the curators for this exhibit wanted to show artworks of high technical quality by Iranian artists who do not explicitly work in the political arena. Nevertheless, it is impossible for individual artists to escape their day-to-

day reality, which encompasses limited access to materials, and an underlying narrative of censorship in which everyone is insecure about what they do and say even in their own home.

The exhibition and accompanying catalogue never intended to give a complete view of Iranian art but present instead an in-depth exploration of contemporary Iranian art and artworks that reflect the lived experience of a new generation of artists who are middle class and have primarily exhibited in local art markets. Both catalogue essayists, Farhadikia and Golestaneh, note that Iran’s class-oriented society does not support marginalized middle-class

artists, and, because of the sanctions on Iran, the economic restrictions on those in the lower classes place limitations on their personal and professional involvement in the arts. Of the twenty-three artists included, more than half (fourteen) are women. Of these, only Foroozan Shirghani (b. 1980) had exhibited in Los Angeles previously, and several do not live in Iran, including Shirghani, Ghazale Baniahmad (b. 1983; Canada), and Nazanin Noroozi (b. 1985; New York). The foreword by Farhadikia and Eghbal states that the included artists “have not resorted to predictable and predetermined subject matter or visual elements to question their current political situation” (8). What struck me immediately was how every artist relied on photography, which has had a great flowering in Iran since the early 1980s, as a basis for their work in all media, including painting, video, photography, mixed media, printmaking, and sculptural installation.

Farhadikia’s essay, “A Critical Review of Neo-Orientalism in Contemporary Iranian Art,” is a theoretical discussion based on post-structuralism, critical theory, and linguistics. She presents a careful reading of the ideas of historians Maziar Eslami and Ali Behdad and Juliet Williams, and concurrently summarizes the critical trends in Iranian studies among her colleagues with relevant quotes by domestic critics and international defenders. To substantiate her thesis and underscore her point about Neo-Orientalist artists, for example, she cites Iranian-American art historian Abbas Daneshvari, a Professor of Art History at California State University in Los Angeles: “The Qajars ... are both the gateway to Iran’s modernism and also a sign of Iran as a failed modern state. These two qualities are today the defining force of the conflicts that emerge regarding Iran’s identity and life ....” (21).<sup>2</sup>

Ali Golestaneh’s essay, “The Art of [a] New Generation of Iranian Artists: The City, Memory, and Escaping Inwards,” begins with a short history of Iranian art from the mid-1950s through the Iran-Iraq War of 1980–88, setting the stage for his analysis of style and thematic content in the current exhibition. Stylistically, the

work of the artists in the New Generation, “whose work is not in tune with the standards of national and international art markets” (31), reveals their economic limitations. Small in scale, their modest presentation often exhibits a sketch-like quality, which encourages repeated variations and constant experimentation in form and expression (31). The artists communicate a passive, reportorial account in their compositions, employing frontal perspective to create opportunities for dialogue between the artwork and viewer. There is minimal use of strange, imaginary, or unexpected elements. Color underscores and enhances subject matter (31).

The exhibition focuses on four main themes that are examined further in Golestaneh’s essay and in the catalogue’s excellent reproductions: Public Spheres, Private Interiors, the Body (from Defiance to Deformation), and Memory (from Personal to Collective). Quotidian life and urban experience are subjects rarely found in mainstream Iranian artworks. Private space as sanctuary represents individual habits and realities. Family gatherings depict nostalgic relationships, suggesting the home as a comforting space, both a refuge and escape from the pressures of a consumer society (35). The digital photographs of Ramyar Manouchehrzadeh and Ali Nadjian’s *Kathmandu* series (2016), for example, emphasize the coldness of the interior spaces, whose lack of context supports the idea of the alienation of human beings (36).

Representations of the human body in art are determined by restrictive laws and are under constant regulation and control within a social-political context (41). They serve as substitutes for the individual woman, a worker, or a middle-class artist. Since the Iran-Iraq War, the human figure has been a dominant theme in marginalized and unofficial Iranian art. This general motif allows the New Generation artists to use a work of art as a setting for the expression of pain, torture and oppression (36). Shaya Shahrestani’s (b. 1972) *Figures* series (2019; Fig. 1) drawn in charcoal pencil on cardboard suggests distress, conflict, and resistance, while the quivering lines, stains, ink blots and shading in Laleh Memar Ardestani’s (b.

1972) untitled monoprints on an ancient map of Anatolia (2018), bring to mind bruises and pain.

Memory and referencing the past constitute familiar and safe territory for artists. Using family photographs and personal artifacts as source material, they weave together social and collective memory. Afshin Chizari’s untitled intaglio prints, from the *Family Landscapes* series (2014), masterfully employ aquatint and drypoint to transform the anonymous group photographs from realistic events to abstract ideas. Nazanin Noroozi overlays her cyanotype photographs with abstract embroidery, employing a similar obfuscation of history by drawing on top of a stop-motion video in her studies for *Elite 1984* (2018). Master embroiderer Samane Motallebi (b. 1986) uses her stitchery over delicately colored digital prints on fabric that further historicize the imagery from the past.

Apart from the informative and worthwhile essays, the catalogue’s forty-two reproductions suggest the wide-ranging styles and interests of these artists, most of whom are largely unknown outside Iran. Their work provides a provocative entry into contemporary Iranian thought and experience. •

**Donna Stein** is former Deputy Director of The Wende Museum of the Cold War in Los Angeles, CA. Her book *The Empress and I*, about her years (1974–77) as art advisor to the Shahbanou of Iran on Western acquisitions currently held by the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, will be published later this year.

## Notes

1. Mahsa Farhadikia, interview with author, Dec. 6, 2019.
2. Abbas Daneshvari, “Seismic Shifts Across Political Zones in Contemporary Iranian Art: The Poetics of Knowledge, Knowing and Identity,” in *Performing the Iranian State: Visual Culture and Representation of Iranian Identity*, ed. Staci Gem Scheiwiller (London: Anthem Press, 2013), 111.