

OF TABLEAUX AND TIME

the concepts of time in Shadi Ghadirian's 1998 Qajar series

SITI MUNIRAH BINTE ABDUL RASHID

DP2002 HISTORY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY

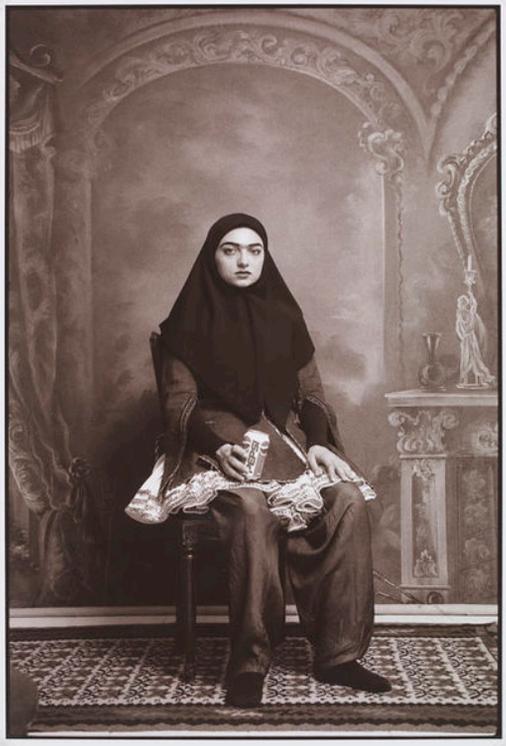
A smirk, a scowl, a sigh. The curious camera can capture even the most fleeting of feelings and facial expressions, freezing them in a timeless tableau that transcends the confined capabilities of the eye. Photography seems to stop the trajectory of time, pausing and prolonging the moment beyond itself. Yet, as much as the photographic process preserves time, it is also as involved in the production of conceptualizing and comprehending the nature of time itself.

In Shadi Ghadirian's 1998 *Qajar* series, the convention of a progressively linear concept of time is subverted through the manipulation of the medium to incorporate multiple trajectories of time simultaneously within the same frame.¹ As a result, the performance of time is captured to be in conflict with itself, highlighting the ways in which time is artificially arranged and revealing wider implications, especially about the inescapable binaries of 'East versus West' and 'tradition versus modernity' that is inherently implied in Ghadirian's work.²

In the style of studio portraits that were popular during the period of rule by the Qajar dynasty in present-day Iran, *Qajar* is a series of restagings of women dressed in approximations of Qajar fashion with their short yet full skirts over loose trousers and heavily unplucked eyebrows in stiff and stylized poses against a painted backdrop

¹ Melissa Heer, "Restaging Time: Photography, Performance and Anachronism in Shadi Ghadirian's *Qajar* Series," *Iranian Studies* 45, no.4 (2012): 537-48.

² *Ibid.*



Shadi Ghadirian, Qajar series (1998)

on carpeted floors.³ However, in every portrait, is an anachronistic prop that references the present within a scene made to look like the past.⁴ Although the subtle detail of a Pepsi can or a pair of sunglasses may merely mimic the aesthetic of a banal prop common in many of such studio portraits of that period, it is also an assertive gesture of difference.⁵

At a glance, the jarring incongruity between the prop and the overall portrait suggests a clash of cultures, of East versus West and tradition versus modernity.⁶ The Pepsi can, for instance, as a symbol of ‘modern’ American consumerism and capitalism is immediately contrasted with the ‘traditional’ Qajar style and setting in contemporary Iranian society.⁷ This, thus, suggests a tension between the public depiction of Iranian women in opposition to their private desires.⁸ However, this reduces *Qajar* to a simplified framework that ignores more nuanced complexities that go beyond binaries. Rather, it is perhaps more meaningful to pay attention to the ways in which the *Qajar* portraits perform time.

Firstly, time is performed with awareness of its artificiality. Arguably, the concept of time is constructed and even then, exists multiple methods of how to measure time.⁹ The constructedness is evident in not only in the possibility of the past and present converging throughout the *Qajar* portraits, but also in precisely the fact that the backdrop used to depict a more authentic appearance of the original *Qajar* photographs is, ironically, the most obviously artificial feature.¹⁰ As a result, the

³ Marta Weiss, *Light from the Middle East: New Photography*, Steidl (2012).

⁴ Heer, “Restaging Time.”

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Weiss, *Light from the Middle East*.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Heer, “Restaging Time.”

¹⁰ Ibid.

fabrication of temporal consistency in an attempt to create an illusion of credibility divulges its own farce.¹¹

Secondly, time is performed with awareness of multiplicity through the convergence of various times. Fabian asserts that Time acts as mechanism to define the Self against the Other where the West “required Time to accommodate the schemes of a one-way history: progress, development, modernity (and their negative mirror images: stagnation, underdevelopment, tradition).”¹² However, as Banerjee argues, multiple modernities simultaneously exist rather than a singular definition.¹³ As a result, to reduce the Qajar portraits to a simple binary of tradition versus modernity and thereby already demarcating the East as inherently backward as compared to the West due them being, as Chakrabarty theorizes, placed in a type of temporal relegation in the “waiting room of history,”¹⁴ is ignoring the historical processes that have occurred prior.

Notably, the arrival of photography in the nineteenth century is intertwined with colonial enterprises and Western Orientalist representations of the East, yet also representations by the Orient themselves.¹⁵ Ali Behdad observes that the first photographic apparatuses in Iran were given to the Qajar monarch by the two colonial powers at the time, England and Russia.¹⁶ However, due to this historical antecedents of Orientalism, the images of Ghadirian’s as well as others cannot be divorced from the cultural politics at play.¹⁷ Middle Eastern artists have to continually “navigate a representational maze in which their work is often cornered against the wall as an

¹¹ Heer, “Restaging Time.”

¹² Johannes Fabian as quoted in Ibid.

¹³ Prathama Banerjee as quoted in Ibid.

¹⁴ Dipesh Chakarabarty as quoted in Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ali Behdad as quoted in Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

emblem of an essentially different locality and culture, or as derivative of pre-existing Western types.”¹⁸ Even the mere etymology of the Middle East generates the region as being conflated as a whole with no difference for diversity and always in relation to another rather than an independent entity.¹⁹

Hassan Hajjaj, for example, is often relegated to be the ‘Andy Warhol of Marrakech’²⁰ yet his eclectic work is decidedly and proudly inspired by the people and places of Morocco.²¹ In his 2014 *‘Kesh Angels* series that pay homage to the female biker culture in Morocco, Hajjaj undercuts precisely the female tropes of Orientalist representations: not of languid women exoticised in fantasy harems with their bodies exposed and gazes averted, but of strong women confronting the camera with confidence in their veils, *djellabas* (Moroccan robes) and *babouches* (Moroccan slippers) on a Marrakech street.²² He frames the portraits of *‘Kesh Angels* in repeated patterns of familiar everyday objects with touch of humour, evoking the vibrant colours and mosaics of the Moroccan landscape.²³ Just like Ghadirian with Qajar studio portraits, Hajjaj reframes existing styles, in his case the cinematic photography of martial arts movies shot from below with a wide angle lens, to new ends.²⁴

In conclusion, by analyzing the performance of time in conflict with itself in Ghadirian’s 1998 *Qajar* series, the concept of time is shifted from a common and

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Osamah F. Khalil, “The Crossroads of the World: US and British Foreign Policy Doctrines and the Construct of the Middle East, 1902-2007,” *Diplomatic History* 38, no. 2 (2014): 299-344.

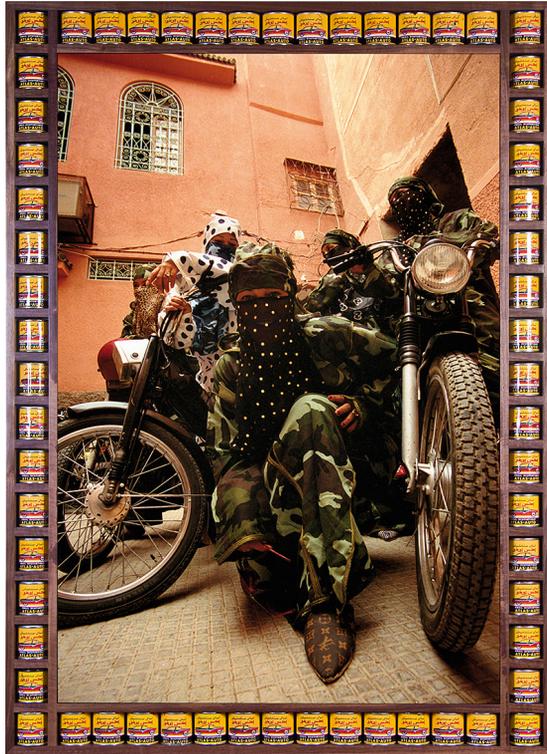
²⁰ Jade Jackson and Ashleigh Kane, “Meet Hassan Hajjaj, the ‘Andy Warhol of Marrakech,” *DAZED*, 2017, Retrieved from <http://www.dazeddigital.com/photography/article/34521/1/meet-hassan-hajjaj-the-andy-warhol-of-marrakech> on 21 November 2018.

²¹ Weiss, *Light from the Middle East*.

²² Ibid.

²³ Nadia Sayej, “The Motorcycle Gang Girls of Morocco,” *VICE*, 2014, Retrieved from https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/4w7xdq/motorcycle-gang-girls-of-morocco on 21 November 2018.

²⁴ Dale Berning Sawa, “Hassan Hajjaj’s best photograph: Kesh Angels, girl biker gang of Morocco,” *The Guardian*, 2018, Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/may/23/hassan-hajjajs-best-photograph-kesh-angels-girl-biker-gang-of-morocco> on 21 November 2018.



Hassan Hajjaj, 'Kesh Angels series (2014)

conventional understanding of progressively linear to one that is both artificial, multiple and adopted to justify colonialist and Orientalist tendencies in representations. No longer a mere record of reality, a photograph enjoys a position of not just an image, but a meaning-making object subject to the desires of photographers themselves. As a result, photography becomes a medium not just to preserve time, but also to produce and problematize the very nature of it.

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