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Behnam Sadighi's images show stark landscapes of a neighborhood in west Tehran. // (Courtesy of Hillyer Art Space/Behnam Sadighi)

The Iranian Artists Picturing Their Cities

MIMI KIRK OCT 16, 2017

Iran has experienced extraordinary political and economic transformation over the past four decades. From the 1979 Islamic Revolution to the democratic aspirations of the [2009 Green Movement](#) to the [2016 nuclear deal](#) with the U.S., the country has seen profound change, including in its cities.

“These developments have affected urban life, both for individuals and the collective,” says Gohar Dashti, a photographer who splits her time between Boston and Tehran. “These changes have also inspired artists.”

Dashti is the curator of an exhibition that provides a platform for this inspiration. Dubbed “Urban Mapping: Public Space Through the Lens of Contemporary Iranian Artists,” the show, hosted by the Washington, D.C., gallery Hillyer Art Space, features the photographs and videos of 10 artists whose work focuses on the urban.

Rana Javadi’s images of the revolution, for instance, show the commotion and dynamism of central Tehran during that period. In one photograph, a group of young women gather, arms raised in protest, on what is now known as Enghelab, or “Revolution,” Street. Pre-1979, it was named after Reza Shah, the shah of Iran from 1925 to 1941.



(Courtesy of Hillyer Art Space/Rana Javadi)

The more contemporary images by Behnam Sadighi and Mehdi Vosoughnia examine residential areas of Tehran. Sadighi’s shots of Ekbatan Town, a planned area west of central Tehran built in the 1970s, show an eerie, empty landscape. Despite the fact that the town is home to a population of more than 40,000 people, Sadighi says in his artist statement that he sought to show modern citizens’ tendency “to not tolerate others, to go away from people, and to be on your own.”



(Courtesy of Hillyer Art Space/Behnam Sadighi)

Vosoughnia's photographs of Pamenar, a Tehran neighborhood that dates back to the 18th century, have a much older, yet equally isolated, feel. Empty spaces abutting the backs of crumbly buildings hold a soccer field, parking lots, and a tree or two. In Vosoughnia's statement, he notes that in such spaces he felt a connection to Tehran's past as well as present.



(Courtesy of Hillyer Art Space/Mehdi Vosoughnia)

Dashti is clear that the exhibit isn't about providing a sneak peek into an exoticized, "axis of evil" culture, but is rather a reflection of Iranian artists' experiences. "The show does not give information about Iranian cities and people for tourists who have not seen Iran," she says. "It is an exhibition for understanding how Iranian artists look at their city."

Allison Nance, the director of Hillyer Art Space, adds that she hopes those who come to the exhibit will reflect not only on the artists' experiences, but also on their own relationship to urban space.

Artist Arash Fayezi's work, in particular, provides this opportunity. Fayezi's series of photographs, "Ramblings of a Flâneur," invokes Charles Baudelaire's concept, in which the flâneur is a stroller and observer of the city—a figure who is both part of and detached from their surroundings.

Fayezi's five images of Tehran show such cityscapes as a mosque under construction, a blurred image—perhaps on a billboard—of a young commander who was killed in the Iran-Iraq War, and a cluster of megaphones from which one can imagine political speeches loudly emanating.



چهار بلندگو در چهار جهت جغرافیایی
بتاریخ یکهزار و سیصد و نود

(Courtesy of Hillyer Art Space/Arash Fayez)

Fayez notes that while the images are manipulated to look like Polaroids, a number of them are in fact digital. “This play on originality and authenticity indicates the ambiguity of the flâneur about their city,” he says. “It reflects a state of mind in which they switch between an imaginary and actual metropolis.”

Fayez’s other piece, a video, shows the artist on a San Francisco street attempting to shave off his beard in order to look less Middle Eastern in his new American home. He shaves without water for 13 minutes, but fails to remove as much hair as he wants.



(Video screenshot courtesy of Hillyer Art Space/Arash Fayez)

Fayez says the different locations of the photographs and video demonstrate the city dweller’s simultaneous feeling of connection and disconnection. “It’s a schizophrenic state of mind in which they are a tourist in their hometown,” he says. “It’s about notions of strangeness and alienation that can happen to any citizen in any city.”

“Urban Mapping: Public Space Through the Lens of Contemporary Iranian Artists” runs through October 29.

About the Author



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