

"Light From the Middle East: New Photography" at the Victoria and Albert Museum: A Review

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'The break,' from the series 'Upekkha,' 2011 by Nermine Hammam. (Copyright V&A)

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by [Mariam Motamedi-Fraser](#)

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**Light from the Middle East: New Photography
Exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum,
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The photographer Abbas's images of the Iranian revolution have been described as "the memory of the event." [1] I certainly remember them. Or I remember the event. I remember anyway my parents deciding that we had seen enough of these images on the streets, so they folded up their newspapers and unplugged our television at home.

Abbas's images are the first ones you see upon entering the rather dark space of *Light from the Middle East*. There is the photograph of handprints, dipped in the blood of martyrs; the photograph of protestors, burning a portrait of the Shah; the photograph of chadori women, receiving military training. If you are my height, the first visible image is the photograph of the bodies of four executed generals laid out on the shelves of a morgue. These are the first images you see if you follow the exhibition in the direction of the English language, starting in the room on the left, as the exhibition intends you to do, and walking your way around the semi-circular space to exit on the right. If you travel in this direction, then the exhibition invites you to reflect on the work under three headings, in this order: Recording, Reframing, Resisting. There are other ways to "read" the exhibition of course. You could, for example, go from right to left, the direction of Farsi and Arabic. This would give you a very different sense of what is on view here, a point to which I will return.

There is a lot of interest in the contemporary Middle East art market right now. All the photographs in this exhibition belong either to the British Museum or to the Victoria and Albert Museum collections, or to their recently formed joint collection of contemporary Middle Eastern photography (funded by the Art Fund). Moreover, *Light from the Middle East* is one of at least eight shows in major international galleries and museums that, since 2004, have either featured or focused on Middle Eastern photography. This is timely. Given how much information about the region is mediated through photographic images—whether they are produced by governments, embedded reporters, the global press, or by citizen journalists—it seems important to be paying attention to photography today.

Odd then, and frustrating, that the lively and exigent work in *Light from the Middle East* should be constrained by a structure and sequence—recording, reframing, resisting—that reflects the very conception of photography that the exhibition seeks to interrogate. The artists in the show have more confidence than this. For most, the photographic project does not begin from the premise that there is a moment of "pure" recording that can subsequently be reframed or resisted. Instead, the works generate vigorous debate about process, perspective (position, scale), practice and belief. In an interview in the exhibition catalogue, for instance, the artists Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige do not ask whether the images of "our wars" (in Lebanon) record the truth or manipulate reality. They ask: "How could we believe in them? This question is still valid today. It deals not only with how much we still believe in images, but also how can we believe in this world and the images it produces." [2] Some of the most compelling pieces in this exhibition—like Hadjithomas and Joreige's *Wonder Beirut: The Story of a Pyromaniac Photographer (1997-2006)*, Walid Raad's *Notebook Volume 38: Already Been on a Lake of Fire (2003)*, and Nermine Hamman's *Upekkha (2011)* series—build entire worlds that we both believe *and* disbelieve, that are both fact *and* fiction, true *and* imagined. These pieces have already stepped quite some way away from recording, reframing, and resisting.

There are thirty artists on display here, and they come from a generously defined "Middle East" that stretches from North Africa to Central Asia. In keeping with geo-political circuits of visibility, artistic legitimacy and networks, however, note that a substantial proportion of these artists/photographers are also based outside the region, mostly in New York, London or Paris. In order to impose some coherence on this extensive range of material, each individual piece is obliged by the exhibition to demonstrate how—usually on account of a political prompt—it illustrates and/or disrupts an



"The break," from the series Upekkha, 2011 by Nermine Hammam. Archival inkjet print, 60 x 90 cm. (Copyright V&A. Art Fund Collection of Middle Eastern Photography at the V&A and the British Museum.)

established way of understanding or doing photography. The problem with this approach is that it diminishes both politics and photography. Insofar as these images are said to be about politics—where politics is a topic to be recorded, reframed, or resisted—the exhibition has the curious effect of reproducing dominant, recognisable representations of “the Middle East.” It is all “about” revolution, war, religion, gender, censorship. Insofar as these images are said to be about photography—where photography is a range of techniques for recording, reframing or resisting—the exhibition can offer only a limited account, within a conventional framework, of why these pieces are provocative. In its weaker moments, the organization of the exhibition tends to confuse and conflate political and photographic strategies. These problems manifest themselves differently across the exhibition, but two examples will suffice here.

Ahmad Mater's *Magnetism I and II* (2012) appear in the section entitled “recording” because, according to the exhibition catalogue, the works record a sculptural installation—iron filings spiralling around a central, black, magnetic cube. They also however (again, according to the catalogue) exploit the limitations of the camera's recording capacity because, at first glance, they (the iron filings, magnetic cube) do not look like what they are but rather appear to be aerial photographs of pilgrims circling the Ka'ba. In this way, the work “playfully calls into question the reliability of the photographic image.”[3] True, but *Magnetism* only does this insofar as the notion of “reliability” is anchored to a particular conception of photographic recording, in which the camera represents, without interference, something that once passed before its lens (something that has/had a physical reality). Consider alternatively the artist's own account of his work, in which he suggests that his photography “records experiments and experiences.”[4] With this simple claim, Mater opens up recording to an entirely different referent—for him, what passes before the lens is “experiences.” And he offers a reliable representation of it: *Magnetism* faithfully portrays the pull, the force, “the feeling of being at the centre of the Islamic world.”[5] The “recording, reframing, resisting” triad also creates its own exclusions. The catalogue is noticeably silent, for example, on Mater's use of the photogravure printing process, presumably because it is not perceived to interfere with the recording of the iron filings and magnetic cube which takes place, roughly speaking, in a single moment and at a specific location. This, in the context of the exhibition, would seem to be the only way the technique could secure any relevance. The space and time of experience however, which is Mater's alternative referent for recording, is far more expansive. Experience roams around history and folds in different people and places. It is under the sign of experience therefore, and not of physical reality, that photogravure, the technique that 'Abd al-Ghaffar deployed in the first printed photographs of Mecca during the 1880s, acquires its real significance. [6]

The main problem with the organization of the exhibition is this: if we already know in advance what politics and photography are, then how is it possible to find something new, and something newly challenging, in these images? A second example—the images from Amirali Ghasemi's series *Party* (2005), which are included in the section “resisting” — illustrates this point, which is arguably broader than the exhibition itself.

Ghasemi's *Party* portrays people at parties in Tehran with their flesh and faces whited-out in order to protect their identities from the media and the Iranian authorities. As Ghasemi himself notes, these images are inevitably understood to be about “censorship, women's rights, the hijab, and Islam.”[7] In *Light from the Middle East*, Ghasemi is described as “[rebellious] against photography ... while depicting acts of social rebelliousness.”[8] It is “very tricky” however, Ghasemi says, “to glorify young people's desire for having a good time as a rebellious act against the authorities.”[9] And even trickier to imply, as the catalogue does, that Ghasemi's work is an act of rebellion because his whiting-out reminds us “of how easily photographs can be manipulated” and “is suggestive of the unobvious techniques employed by the Iranian censors of imported magazines.”[10] It is tricky because, whether these photographs are or are not *about* censorship, they are themselves censored. The assumption that these images engage with censorship at the levels of both content and technique gives rise to an uneasy tension: for even if the *topic* of the photographs, censorship, is political—and it is worth noting that the artist himself is deeply ambivalent about this interpretation[11]—should a pre-emptive act of censorship, in effect, of self-censorship, necessarily be considered an act of resistance?

“Artistic images don't bring weapons in the struggle,” Jacques Rancière has written. Instead, “they help frame new configurations of the visible and the thinkable, which also means a new landscape of the possible.”[12] A more productive way to think about the political intervention commanded by the use of photography in this exhibition might be to consider how the images create what Rancière calls “dissensus” around consensual “ways of seeing.” For Rancière, a dissensus challenges what has already been decided in advance; it is a “dispute on what is given, on the name that can be given of it and the sense that can be made of it.”[13] Importantly, a dissensus does this not by denouncing a given reality or by reduplicating it (only “better”) but by building “other ‘realities’ or other forms of ‘commonsense,’ which means other settings of time and space, other communities of words and things, of perceptions and meanings.”[14] It means building other worlds, as Hadjithomas and Joreige might put it. This, Rancière says, is where “[a]rt and politics begin.”[15] Exploring how the works in *Light from the Middle East* create dissensus would prevent any single piece from being reduced to being “about politics” and, at the same time, would open up photography to a more intensely charged notion of the political. Consider, in this regard, one of the images in Newsha Tavakolian's *Mothers of Martyrs* (2006) series, which appears in the section “recording.” The image shows a mother, sitting on a chair, holding a portrait of her martyred son in front of a black banner on which is written the word *Moharram*. According to the logic of the exhibition, the poignancy of this image must be explained either in terms of “the

photographic" (the catalogue discusses Tavakolian's ability to show, in a photograph, how a photograph can capture the likeness of an absent person) or in terms of "the political and cultural" (here it refers to her allusions to Shi'i martyrdom). But the power of Tavakolian's work arguably lies in how it brings these elements (and more) together, without collapsing them into each other. Tavakolian's image creates new connections, in Rancière's terms, between word forms and visual forms, between different spaces and times, a here and an elsewhere, a now and a then: between the portrait of the boy and the word on the banner, between the martyrs of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) and the Shi'i martyrs of 680-683, between the individual martyr in the hands of his mother and the "myth of martyrdom" that Abbas decries in his book *Allah O Akbar*.^[16]

Why do Abbas's images start the exhibition? They do so for two troubling reasons: because photojournalism is framed as the originary technique in a narrative of photography that begins with a particular conception of recording; and because the Iranian revolution is framed as the originary event in a narrative of the contemporary Middle East that is too often unwilling to tear its eyes away from political Islam. But what if you reversed the direction, and read the exhibition from the right to the left? Beginning from "resistance" allows you to immediately recognize that the force of the work in *Light from the Middle East* derives not solely from its engagement with politics (understood as a topic) or with photography (understood as a set of techniques) but from its challenge to organized, historical, given ways of looking at the world, of making sense of it, of "common senses." The sequence "recording, reframing, resisting" is one such common sense, as are the oppositions that sustain it: real/illusion, reliable/unreliable, censorship/rebellion, past/present. Reversing the direction transforms Abbas's *IranDiary* from the definitive starting point of the exhibition (the point from which to measure how far politics and photography have travelled) into the exhibition's conclusion. This concluding position is not so much a final summary as it is a final question, a question, in keeping with dissensus, as to what fresh senses can be made of *IranDiary*, as it joins the other worlds and novel connections created by the work in the exhibition.

[1] Shiva Balaghi, "Writing with Light: Abbas's Photographs of the Iranian Revolution of 1979," in *Picturing Iran: Art, Society and Revolution*, eds. Shiva Balaghi and Lynn Gumpert (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002): 103-126.

[2] Hadjithomas and Joreige, quoted in Marta Weiss, *Light from the Middle East: New Photography*. Göttingen, Germany: Steidl/Victoria and Albert Museum, 2012, 148.

[3] Weiss, 15.

[4] Mater in Weiss, 149.

[5] Ibid, 154.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Quoted in Rose Issa, *Iranian Photography Now*. Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2008, 60.

[8] Weiss, 27.

[9] Ghasemi quoted in Weiss, 148.

[10] Ibid, 27.

[11] Issa, 60.

[12] Jacques, Rancière. 'What makes images unacceptable?', *ZHdk*

http://culturalgenderstudies.zhdk.ch/veranstaltungen/documents/jacquesranciere/FORUM_JRanciere.pdf (2007).

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Abbas, *Allah O Akbar*. London: Phaidon, 1994, 10.

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