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Shatanawi, M.

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The Disquieting Art of Khosrow Hassanzadeh

MIRJAM SHATANAWI

"This series is the result of two years of thought, research and travel. It is a reflection of a world where the word 'terrorist' is thrown about thoughtlessly. What is a terrorist? What are the origins of a terrorist and in an international context who defines 'terrorism'? The West, with its personal definition of terrorism, gives itself the right to take over a country, while in the Middle East the West is clearly accused of being a full-fledged terrorist. In exploring these questions, I portrayed the people in whom I have the most faith: my mother and sisters." With these words Khosrow Hassanzadeh introduces his most recent work *Terrorist* (2004). In the four-piece series Hassanzadeh portrays himself and his family members against a backdrop with images referring to their personal religious beliefs, accompanied by labels describing each portrayed "terrorist" with characteristics such as nationality, religious denomination, and personal history. The combinations of images and

Khosrow Hassanzadeh is one of Iran's leading contemporary artists. During his artistic career his work became increasingly concerned with Islam as a factor in the interplay between East and West. This article discusses his recent series of works *Terrorist* to analyse the artist's efforts to simultaneously criticize the accusing gaze of the West and reclaim the right of self-representation.

texts reveal that Hassanzadeh addresses contemporary Western perceptions in which Islam is heedlessly associated with terrorism. His "terrorists" are Muslim terrorists, and at the same time, ordinary believers who are under scrutiny because of their faith.

Discovering Islam

The emphasis on Islam in the *Terrorist* series reflects Hassanzadeh's development as an artist whose career became increasingly tied with the Euro-American art world and its concomitant perceptions of Iran as a Muslim country. After a short training at Tehran's Art Academy, Hassanzadeh made his first paintings in the mid-1980s. International recognition came only in 1999 when his *War* series, a gloomy diary of his memories as a volunteer soldier during the Iran-Iraq war, was exhibited at the Diorama Arts Centre in London. The exhibition proved to be a turning point in Hassanzadeh's career. His work, increasingly addressing an outside observer, represented by his Western audiences, ultimately changed orientation. He began to observe Iranian society with the eye of an outsider, "looking in at his own society with a strictly incriminating eye" and "looking out for signs of culture and identity."¹

It is at this point that Islam made its way into the paintings of Hassanzadeh. While his early works contained no references to Islam or Muslim society whatsoever, the newer series were loaded with them. Both *Chador* (2000), a response to Western perceptions of the veil as a symbol of the oppression of Muslim women, and *Ashura* (2000), a re-interpretation of the Shiite ceremony focusing on the female saints of Shiism, set out to challenge the dominant Western views of Muslim women. *Prostitutes* (2002), a tribute to sixteen prostitutes killed by a religious fanatic in Mashhad, increased Hassanzadeh's fame in the West as a representative of a presumed Iranian "counterculture." Meanwhile, Hassanzadeh's orientation was gradually changing from a direct commentary on Iranian society to including a reflection on Western obsessions with Islam.

Ethnic marketing

Hassanzadeh's shifts in focus are tightly interwoven with the changed positions artists from the Middle East occupy in the global art world. Since 9/11, exhibitions featuring artists from the "Middle East" or the "Islamic world" are booming in the West. Most of these exhibitions start from the debatable premise that contemporary art can serve as a means to inform audiences about the current state of affairs in the region.² Moreover, the Middle East is "hot" and museums and galleries, just like publishing houses and other commercial institutions, need the marketing appeal of ethnic labelling to boost visitor counts or art sales.³ All the same, the idea that an artist's national or religious background has an indelible effect on an artist's practice is highly controversial in the art world, and particularly in the Middle East. Many artists, including Khosrow Hassanzadeh, have been struggling against this notion for years. They argue that terms like "Islamic," "Middle East," or even "Iran" are loaded with religious and political subtexts and that the use of such terms in exhibition concepts draws away attention from the artistic value of their work. Ironically, it is precisely Hassanzadeh's raw commentary on Iranian society that prompted most curators to include his work in their exhibitions.



KHOSROW HASSANZADEH, COURTESY OF KIT TROPENMUSEUM AMSTERDAM



KHOSROW HASSANZADEH, COURTESY OF KIT TROPENMUSEUM AMSTERDAM

"Terrorist" # 1

Reclaiming independence

Set against this background, the *Terrorist* series can be analysed as a critique on the ways the international art world approaches artists from the Middle East, as Sohrab Mahdavi has done in his review of the series. He argues that by portraying himself and his mother and sisters as terrorists Hassanzadeh wants to take possession of the accusing gaze of the "other," i.e. the West. Thereby, the work seems to criticize the common practice of the art world to demand that artists in the Middle East scrutinize their identities and reformulate them according to Western needs. Although *Terrorist* aims to reclaim the right to self-representation and independence, "It fails on both registers: 'self-representation' here is an appropriation of Western values and the work can only become 'independent' if the artist's intended viewer is Western."⁴ Nevertheless, this "radical failure" only reinforces the artist's message, making it unique in the non-Western art scene. Artists like Khosrow Hassanzadeh are in a catch 22 situation. They have to rely on the Euro-American art market to function as artists in a gradually globalising art scene. Yet they feel uncomfortable with its crude marketing policies that emphasize their "otherness" and keep them in assigned roles of "Muslim" or "Middle Easterner." Hassanzadeh describes himself as an "Occidentalizer," someone who moves back and forth between the mutual imagery that East and West produce. The question is if in the current hypersensitive political climate artists will be able to take up such sovereign positions.

A retrospective of Khosrow Hassanzadeh is on view at the Tropenmuseum Amsterdam from 22 September 2006 through 7 January 2007.

Notes

1. Sohrab Mahdavi, "Terrorist," in *Tehran Studio Works: The Art of Khosrow Hassanzadeh*, ed. Mirjam Shatanawi (London: Saqi Books, 2006), 124.
2. As reflected in the titles of recent exhibitions that featured works by Hassanzadeh: *Inside Iran* (Amsterdam, 2006), *iran.com* (Freiburg, 2006), *West by East* (Barcelona, 2005) and *Musulmanes, Musulmans* (Paris, 2004).
3. Tirdad Zolghadr, ed., *Ethnic Marketing* (Zürich: JRP Ringier, 2006).
4. Mahdavi, "Terrorist," in *Tehran Studio Works*, 124.

Mirjam Shatanawi is Curator of Middle East and North Africa at the Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam.
Email: m.shatanawi@kit.nl

ISIM EVENTS

13 – 15 October 2006

Conference

Youth and the Global South: Religion, Politics, and the Making of Youth in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East

Venue: Dakar, Senegal

Organizers: African Studies Centre (ASC), Council for the Development of Social Science in Africa (CODESRIA), International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) & ISIM

19 October 2006

Onderhandelen met islamistische bewegingen?

Ramadan Festival Debate

Venue: University of Amsterdam

Panelists among others: Jan Schoonenboom, Tariq Shadid;

Chair: Radi Suudi

26 October 2006

ISIM in Utrecht

Sharia in Europe—Scope and Limits

Lecture by Mathias Rohe

Venue: Utrecht University

10 November 2006

Reflections on Muslim Intellectual History: Farewell Conference of

Professor Abdulkader Tayob

Venue: Radboud University Nijmegen

Speakers: Mona Abaza, Nasr Abu Zayd, Asef Bayat, Martin van Bruinessen, Abdou

Filali-Ansary, Muhammad Khalid Masud, Roel Meijer, Abdulkader Tayob

30 November 2006

ISIM in Utrecht

The Alevis in Flux: Reformulation and

Institutionalization

Lecture by David Shankland

Venue: Utrecht University

21 March 2007 – 25 March 2007

"Muslim Women" in Europe:

Bodily Performances, Multiple

Belongings, and the Public Sphere

Panel at 8th Mediterranean Research

Meeting

Venue: Florence & Montecatini Terme, Italy

Convenors: Ruba Salih (University of

Bologna) & Annelies Moors (ISIM)

Sponsors: EUI & ISIM

ISIM Ph.D. and Staff Seminars

Venue: Leiden University

17 October 2006:

Uncoordinated Networks:

Muslim Educational Institutions and

the Will for Reform in India

Lecture by Rémy Delage

31 October 2006:

Sacred Places and Sacrificial Paradigms:

Idd el-Hajj Discourses in Tanzania

Lecture by Gerard van de Bruinhorst

14 November 2006:

"Love Marriages" Revisited: The Shaista

Almani Case

Lecture by Tanya Sheikh

28 November 2006:

Islamic Law and Society in Morocco,

circa 1870–2006: The Genesis of

a Modern Legal System

Lecture by Léon Buskens

12 December 2006:

The Bosnian Ulama and the Negotiation

of Islamic Revivalism in Multi-Ethnic

Bosnia

Lecture by Önder Cetin

6 February 2007:

Lecture by Joe Stork

20 February 2007:

I Love Moroccan Music, Because I Am

Moroccan: Dutch-Moroccan Youth

and Their Musical Exploration of Identity

Lecture by Miriam Gazzah

6 March 2007:

Gender and Family Law Revisited

Lecture by Annelies Moors

20 March 2007:

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Muftis and Telephone Fatwas in Paris

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