

SHE WHO TELLS A STORY

WOMEN
PHOTOGRAPHERS
FROM IRAN
AND THE ARAB WORLD



About the Exhibition

She Who Tells a Story – Women Photographers From Iran and the Arab World brings together more than 85 photographs taken by 12 women photographers from Iran and the Arab world. Ranging in genre from documentary to portraiture, these evocative images challenge Western conceptions and provide insight into the contemporary social and political landscape of the Middle East, a part of the world where Canadian Forces have been engaged since the 1950s.

The photographers question tradition and challenge perceptions of Middle Eastern identity. In Arabic, the word “*rawiya*” (راويّة) means “she who tells a story.” The works of these 12 women tell a story by presenting a compelling narrative and offering insights into life in the Middle East today.

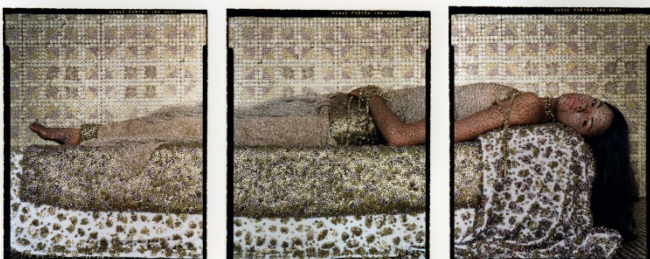
The exhibition is divided into three thematic areas: Deconstructing Orientalism, New Documentary and Constructing Identity.

Deconstructing Orientalism

Historically, Orientalism refers to a way of seeing the East — including Middle Eastern, North African and Eastern cultures (the “Orient”) — as culturally inferior to the Western world.

Shirin Neshat’s groundbreaking *Women of Allah* (1993–1997), a series of black and white conceptual narratives inspired by the female warriors of the Iranian Islamic Revolution, opens the exhibition. The series grew out of a visit Neshat made to Iran 17 years after she left her homeland to pursue studies in California. The work represents a critical turning point in photography, as Neshat was the first to examine the complexity of female identity in the Middle East from the point of view of a Muslim woman. Her work also appears in the section Constructing Identity.

Moroccan-born photographer **Lalla Essaydi’s** chromogenic (colour) prints on aluminum present a stunning triptych entitled *Bullets Revisited #3* from her powerful series by the same name. Her meticulous layering of materials and references in constructing *Bullet Revisited #3* is beautifully intricate and presents a complex portrayal of female identity.



Bullets Revisited #3, 2012
Lalla Essaydi (born in Morocco in 1956)
Triptych, chromogenic prints on aluminum
*Courtesy of Miller Yezerski Gallery Boston; Edwynn Houk
Gallery New York
*Reproduced with permission
*Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

New Documentary

In addition to addressing social and political issues, **She Who Tells a Story** presents a new kind of documentary, a more artistic and imaginative form that brings the real-life experiences of the creators to the forefront. Many of the photographers featured in the exhibition have direct experience of war and revolution, including the 1980–1988 Iran–Iraq War, the Iranian Revolution of 2009, and the many conflicts of the Egyptian Revolution or Arab Spring that began in 2011. These themes — of conflict, occupation, protest and revolt — all find a place in their images.



Untitled #2, from the series Today's Life and War, 2008
Gohar Dashti (born in Iran in 1980)
Pigment print
Museum purchase with funds donated by the Weintz Family Harbor Lights Foundation
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
*Reproduced with permission
*Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Born and educated in Iran, **Gohar Dashti** is the youngest photographer in the exhibition. Dashti was born in 1980 just after the Iranian Islamic Revolution and grew up in a town near the Iranian border with Iraq during the Iran–Iraq War. Dashti used the desolate landscape of the desert as a setting to stage her series of photographs *Today's Life and War* (2008). Her series of theatrical, staged photographs uniquely captures the pervasive feel of being surrounded by constant conflict. In the scenes, a young couple performs daily routines, like doing laundry and having dinner, amid the tension of a conflict zone. The landscape, as a contested space, is where the young couple's daily life exists — surrounded by tanks, missiles and the debris of war. The photographs show the resistance and courage of everyday life in conflict.

Alternatives to Dashti's staged documentaries can be found in the works of Egyptian photographer **Rana El Nemr** and Jordanian filmmaker and photographer **Tanya Habjouqa**. Both women work in urban settings. Habjouqa is one of the founding members of the first all-female photographers' collective to emerge from the Middle East — Rawiya. This collective of six photojournalists is dedicated to telling the personal stories of Middle Eastern women, rather than relying on outsiders. Habjouqa's series *Women of Gaza* (2009), records the experience of women in Gaza who, like all residents of the occupied territory, live with limited freedom. The series challenges perceptions of life in an impoverished city under siege with images that show residents as they seek out spaces of relative serenity to assemble and celebrate simple pleasures, such as having a picnic.

Rana El Nemr applied documentary techniques of street photography to the urban metro in Cairo in her series *The Metro* (2003). El Nemr inconspicuously photographed passengers in the car designated for women. The images show women deep in thought, lost in the act of moving from place to place.

Iraqi-born artist **Jananne Al-Ani** captured sites in the Middle Eastern landscape using aerial photography. Al-Ani worked with the low light of the setting sun and shot from above, which makes archaeological features on the ground visible, such as earthworks or ditches. Her work in the exhibition is a production still from her 2011 video *Shadow Sites II*.

Rula Halawani, a Palestinian who currently resides in East Jerusalem, addresses the experience of destruction and displacement in *Negative Incursions* (2002), a series of photographs of the 2002 Israeli invasion of the West Bank. Rather than produce traditional photojournalistic representations, Halawani enlarged and printed her images in their negative form to obscure the specifics of time and place. Her subversive use of photography presents a landscape that is at first disorienting and unknown, and that only upon closer inspection can be understood.

Photographer **Nermine Hammam**'s series *Cairo Year One* (2011–2012) addresses the 18-day uprising in Egypt in 2011 that came to be known as the Egyptian Revolution or the Arab Spring. The work consists of 12 photographs arranged in two parts: *Upekkha* (a reference to the Buddhist concept of equanimity) and *Unfolding* (a reference to folding Japanese screens). In *Upekkha*, Hammam juxtaposed images of soldiers in Tahrir Square with serene landscape scenes from her personal postcard collection. In contrast, she created *Unfolding* after the uprising, when it became very difficult for her to photograph.

Iranian artist **Shadi Ghadirian** takes inspiration from Western studio portraiture of the late 19th century under the Qajar dynasty. In her series *Qajar* (1988), Ghadirian used painted backdrops and traditional clothing of the time period and then placed modern objects — like a bicycle, a Pepsi can and an avant-garde newspaper from Tehran — in the photograph to explore the tension between tradition and modernity.

Constructing Identity

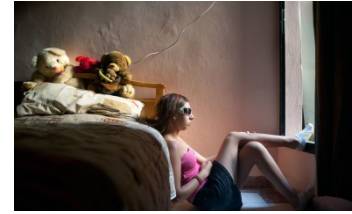
A second series of works from Shadi Ghadirian, *Nil, Nil* (2008), portrays a collision of war and domestic life. Her series of colour photographs shows everyday life and war simultaneously by juxtaposing objects that are typically feminine with objects that symbolize war.



Don't Forget This Is Not You (for Sahar Loffi), from the series *Listen*, 2010
Newsha Tavakolian (born in Iran in 1981)
Pigment print
*Courtesy of the artist and East Wing Contemporary Gallery
*Reproduced with permission
*Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Iranian-born **Newsha Tavakolian** uses photography and film to explore the social and political restrictions placed on women in her home country. Tavakolian currently lives in Tehran and after experiencing difficulty photographing in public in 2009, she turned to documentary photography to address social issues. The exhibition presents her series entitled *Listen* (2010). In it, she photographed professional female musicians who, as women, are forbidden to perform in public or record music in Iran.

This public/private dichotomy also interests Lebanese-born photographer **Rania Matar** in her series *A Girl and Her Room* (2009, 2010). After photographing women and girls in refugee camps, Matar began to think more about how girls' identities are shaped, especially during adolescence. Her largest series to date, *A Girl and Her Room* offers very personal portraits of adolescents from the Middle East in their bedrooms.



Stephanie, Beirut, Lebanon, 2010, from the series A Girl and Her Room
Rania Matar (born in Lebanon in 1964)
Pigment print
*Courtesy of the artist and Carroll and Sons, Boston
© Rania Matar.
*Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

The power of the hijab to stir emotions and to be either demonized or romanticized is a portrayal that Yemeni artist **Boushra Almutawakel** wanted to examine in her work. Her series *Mother, Daughter, Doll* (2010) uses the veil to challenge social trends and the rise of religious extremism. As an Arab Muslim woman herself, Almutawakel does not want to fuel the notion that women who wear the hijab are weak or oppressed, but rather that the hijab itself has many connotations that go well beyond self-expression.

The exhibition concludes with two recent series of works by **Shirin Neshat**. The series of photographs from *Book of Kings* (2012) was inspired by the wave of uprising in Iran in 2009 that came to be known as the Green Movement. The work references *Shahnameh* — also known as the *Book of Kings* — an ancient epic tragedy by an 11th century Persian poet. As *Shahnameh* casts the Islamic conquest of Persia as a tragedy, so Neshat's *Book of Kings* commemorates the countless masses of unknown citizens who sacrificed themselves courageously in the streets to demand their civil liberties after a heavily contested presidential election.

The series *Our House is On Fire* (2013) was created after the recent revolution in Egypt. For this portrait work, Neshat recruited her subjects from the streets of Cairo following the failure of the Arab Spring. Neshat used conceptualism, repetition, the gaze and scale to produce poignant portraits of loss, pain and defeat.

She Who Tells a Story will be presented at the Canadian War Museum from December 6, 2017 to March 4, 2018. This exhibition was organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.