



Transcontinental Rails

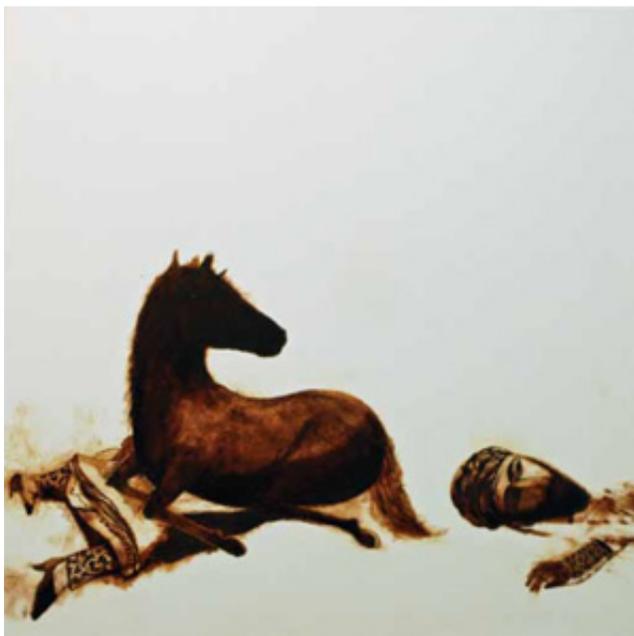
*John Haber
in New York City*

Tarjama/Translation, Iran Inside Out, and Eve Sussman

How much has changed in Iran in only the last months—between its rigged election, Obama's election, the Internet, and time? I have no idea, but I *can* say how much has changed here in America. As some striking but confusing shows about the Middle East come to New York, that says something about America, too.

Several shows at once have presented Iranian art, including some of the same artists. And they see it with sympathetic eyes. They include at least two summer gallery surveys that I was unable to review, "*Tarjama/Translation*" at the Queens Museum of Art, and "*Iran Inside Out*" at the Chelsea Art Museum. Several other artists, too, are looking at east and west from both inside and out.

Three shows take transcontinental travel as their very subject. *Gulnara Kasmalieva and Muratbek Djuamliiev* follow trucking along *A New Silk Road*. "*A Despot in Flora's Garden*" finds the incursion of capitalism from Asia to the Americas. *Eve Sussman* goes looking for the Cold War, Russian landscapes, and the Soviet space program. One could call them all "western art inside out."



The Mideast in translation

Just a year ago, my government looked to the Middle East and saw only an Axis of Evil. *Art against torture* in Iraq made the *cover of the*

Daily News. Now antiwar art is yesterday's news. And now the Middle East is having its say.

It draws on its own traditions, but also western culture, and they can look equally desirable—or equally funny. It uses western media, from art-school portraiture to video. It has a problem with torture and war, but it trusts that you will, too. If Americans obsess over gender and think of Iran as repressive when it comes to sexuality, so do Iranians.

"Tarjama/Translation" is by no means the largest show of Islamic voices, but aprawls. One should see it as a foretaste of more to come. It touches on Iran, Iraq, and elsewhere. Its artists may come from the Middle East, Europe, or even America. It pays only rare and ambivalent tribute to the interaction between east and west. Political conflict appears only allusively, as in Mitra Tabrizian's cryptic terrorist plotting on video.

Its twenty-seven artists meander around the old Words Fair architecture. I never did find the contribution by **Emily Jacir**. It has long labels that one cannot easily match with the art. It also has far too much video. Has that become the lazy artist's medium—or the lazy curator's?

Some artists appear because they come from the Middle East. Others, like **Michael Rakowitz**, merely take it as their subject. Little is chilling, while Poursan Jinchi's tiny red marks from the Koran on a tall white scroll is lovely for its own sake. Some is truly funny, such as Wael Shawky's recitation about the glories of Islamic martyrs. He paces supermarket aisles, framed by six-packs and ice cream. Gulsun Karamustafa's *The City and the Secret Panther Fashion* mixes Orientalism, soap opera, and high camp.

The largest show, however, also insists most on parallels between east and west. It takes thirty-five artists from Iran, plus twenty-one more from "the Diaspora." The art looks both inward and outward, too. Sara Rahbar covers an American flag with a map of Iran and, in Farsi, "Look what love has done to us one more time." Arash Hanaei subtitles a painting of Abu Ghraib *How to Engage in Dialogue*. Mostly, though, "Iran Inside Out" is about a changing Iran—in what the curators call a "process of deconstruction and reinvention."

Iran inside America

Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath divide "Iran Inside Out" show by theme—war and politics, gender and sexuality, culture as commodity, reinventing traditional art forms, and street culture within Tehran. In practice, all these themes overlap. You would have been looking for them all anyway. Politics is like that, and so is the influence of the past or of western media.

Mahmoud Bakhshi Moakher makes photographs of native flowers into blank postcards awaiting communication. Shahram Karimi gives the main hall a ceiling tapestry, but with portraits of Iranians dead and exiled. Pouran Jinchi again simulates traditional tiling, but in glue on canvas. Ala Ebtekar uses Persian manuscript pages as the backdrop to her drawing of a mythical horsewoman. Even here, though, the artists see a distance between themselves and what they love. Besides, the horsewoman comes with a few small bombs dropping here and there.

The majority see contemporary conflict through decorative traditions. Ramin Haerizadeh uses them to dress—or undress—a contemporary theater group, while Shiva Ahmadi uses them to gild oil barrels. Samira Abbassy evokes *Eternal War*, all in sepia tones. With others, the idea can get repetitive, and sometimes plain sympathy works best. Alireza Ghandchi evokes torture in black-and-white photos of wire-bound faces. Newsha Tavakolian photographs an older woman half hiding behind her own image, but one remembers her as daring to look out.

The art gets most literal minded when it comes to everyday images of Tehran, and its sexually and politically charged themes are most cramped at their most literal minded. Pooneh Maghazehe makes a sculpture of acrylic-soaked tampons, while Nicky Nodjoumi calls the strip search of a woman's genitals *The Golden Triangle*. Even then, though, artists are trying to keep their sense of humor. Abbas Kowsari photographs a woman's SWAT team, all in black veils and downtown traffic. Siamak Filizadeh plays the great white hunter astride a lion, with a preposterous bushy mustache, and he gives a bodybuilder one, too—but with the ink overlay of an old manuscript. He may not challenge anyone's assumptions, but one has to laugh anyway.

The collision between eastern and western traditions can make painting doubly academic. I could live without, say, Nazanin Pouyandeh's *GI Jane*, with borrowings from Henri Rousseau, or Farhad Moshiri's agonized woman watching TV in bed beneath a decorative blanket. Video gives that same collision time to unfold in surprising ways. Karimi and Shoja Azari shift rapidly among an old canvas, a political rally, and a call to prayer. Farideh Lashai morphs between *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* and a contemporary restaging. **Edouard Manet** once shocked Paris, too.

The one celebrity artist gets a whole room, and her video gives the collisions their most startling image. **Shirin Neshat** returns to the devices that first brought her wide attention. As with *Rapture* in 1999, men and women face off in black and white across two projections, this time on facing walls. *Turbulent*, from 1998, similarly builds on associations with masses and lone figures, sound and ominous silence. A man and woman take turns intoning classical poetry—in his case at a

microphone as in a mosque, backed by rows of seated men, in her case alone and almost drowned out by a voice-over of further chanting. Silence alternates between vulnerability and a threat, and the woman's chant descends into a wail.

Traffic in art

Gulnara Kasmalieva and Muratbek Djuamlijev compress at least three cultures, dozens of lives, thousands of miles of Kyrgyzstan, and billions of dollars in legal and illegal traffic into just nine minutes. Is even that enough? They follow the fate of scrap metal and cheap electronics across *A New Silk Road*. The ancient route also overlaps present-day oil pipelines, which never appear, but the video is all about a forgetting of context.

Like their title, the artists insist that Central Asia is in danger of losing everything about its heritage but imperialism and exploitation. The video's rhythms underscore global trade's impersonal pace. Sometimes the same close shot appears on all five monitors, arranged in a tight arc. Sometimes parallel or staggered action conveys forced repetition. Workers rapidly bundle material in strapping tape. Broken-down Soviet rigs and Chinese eighteen-wheelers clamber along endless highways flanked by equally barren terrain.

Halfway through, townspeople mingle at a truck stop. A singer and an accordionist crank out a folk melody, no doubt celebrating something just as depressing. Then the pace resumes, as one big rig on each screen hurtles toward the viewer, and all but the center screen go black. The lone remaining truck continues past and away, trailed by a man on horseback. On facing gallery walls, color stills mounted on metal mimic the bland monumentality of socialist realism. The actors themselves seem oblivious to irony.

The video, commissioned by Lisa Dorin for the Art Institute of Chicago, comes alive only briefly—and only at its most brutal. It needs those opening closeups and the snap of strapping tape. It needs the closing thrust in the viewer's face. Without it, the irony and detachment can actually come at the expense of the Kyrgyzstani.

Regardless, traveling takes a commitment of time—and a commitment to time. On vacation, one looks for an escape from work in a spot of paradise. One also pulls out the guidebooks in search of a deeper and classier history. With "A Despot in Flora's Garden," those impulses collide. The serpent in the garden has crossed continents, bearing capitalism and colonialism. The group show's four artists are hot in pursuit, in the hope that a good map and a slide projector can tame it.

Armando Andrade Tudela documents the hand-painted designs on Pan-

American truck routes. The Peruvian truckers owe something to personal impulse, commercial logos, modernist graphic design, and tribal traditions. Rosa Barba shoots the Mojave Desert with bare hints of human litter and its history as a military test site. Michael Stevenson remembers a brief commercial art exhibition in Tehran in 1978, of gold-plated bricks, through a chart comparing gold and oil prices. Hans Schabus maps the history of stones, which served as the ballast for slave ships—and which he claims to have carried back to their place of origin. Each work looks static, even when it moves, and each would work better as an artist's book, but Schabus does most to breach history with his intervention and his fiction of recovery.

The space race

If any artist is in transit, Eve Sussman sure is. For starters, she and her collaborators took the train across most of Russia. One can see what *they* saw out the window—in small photographs, frame by frame like gallery-size contact prints. At her gallery, as at the spring **art fairs** not long before, one can run a magnifying glass across to isolate each frame. One has to imagine them as separate moments. One also imagines editing them into a movie.

She herself is in search of one. She began with **Kazimir Malevich**, for whom "White on White" (her show's title) carried the sensation of flight. This pointed her to the Soviet launch site for Yuri Gagarin, the first human in space. It also got her and her Rufus Corporation (well, Claudia de Serpa Soares and Jeff Wood) into trouble. The authorities saw less a modernist dream than Americans with an eye for Cold War secrets.

Sussman has recaptured the past before—while giving painting a history. Her ***89 Seconds at Alcázar*** imagined moments in time freezing into *Las Meninas*, by **Diego Velázquez**. Call the latter a court portrait, a paradox of mirrors and vision, or a reflection of the artist at work. Call it along with **Michel Foucault** a postmodern parable of society, authority, vision, knowledge, and art. Here it became an act of memory and the imagination. Even earlier, when she threaded a **playground scene** through two projectors on scaffolding, she was looking at real time from multiple perspectives.

She tried something like it again on a large scale, in an epic film based on *Rape of the Sabine Women*. Naturally, she staged it in New York with a local cast. A museum should call Winkelman immediately and demand it, so that I can see it. For her new project, she has got no further than the stills and a recreation of the cosmonaut's office. It looks authentic enough, but also waiting coldly for a purpose. One cannot even step on its floor. I get the feeling that she, too, has invested a lot

in where she is going but is not quite sure where.

All these shows are works in progress. East and west are in transit, and so are the artists. Even those who have never left Iran, central Asia, or for that matter New York look at them from both inside and outside. In each show, the subject is political, but the work of art less so. That ambiguity toward the political undermines much of the art, but it has an interest, too. Each thrives on heightening tensions and then defusing them by a heightened sympathy.

No doubt everyday life goes on, with and without western influence. Surely artists there, too, are making family portraits, abstractions, and comic books. Friends in Tehran are working on a long-term artistic diary, combining writing and images of decorative art. Naturally they, too, are scared and disappointed by the June 2009 election. "Iran Inside Out" is a wonderful portrait of a country that I shall probably never see, but as selective as any other portrait. One might take its themes simply as a reminder to look for worlds in collision.



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"Iran Inside Out" ran at the *Chelsea Art Museum* through September 5, 2009, "Tarjama/Translation" at the *Queens Museum of Art* through September 27, Gulnara Kasmalieva and Muratbek Djuamliiev at *Winkleman* through January 10, "A Despot in Flora's Garden" at *Simon Preston* through July 26, and Eve Sussman at *Winkleman* through June 20.