MOUSTACHIOED WOMEN & RHINOPLASTIC GIRLS

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Moustachioed Women and Rhinoplastic Girls

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Using staged photography to explore the imposition of Islamic patriarchy and its impact of beauty standards on the female body in the Muslim world.

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Acknowledgements

For *"woman, life, freedom"* And for my beloved poet, who said:
"Put your weight on me, feel my solidity, let your dreams become reality."

Research Précis

Summary

This photography project creates photographic portraits of women to explore the pervasive influence of theocracy, patriarchy and visual culture on women's body image, their anxiety and obsession with ideal beauty. Scenography, lighting and composition methods are used to reflect the suppressed emotions of these women, creating moments of pressure to conform to social beauty standards. Guided by historical photographs and observed images of women in social media, I depict society's accepted standards of femininity and the subtle violence directed toward women's bodies in the Middle East.

Brief description

This photography project is my experimental and cultural exploration of religious dogma, gender inequality and censorship in contemporary Iran.

In this practice, I use social media as a source to inspire the creation of staged portraits of contemporary Iranian women. As a counterpoint, guided by Antoin Sevruguin[1]'s historical photographs, I recreate images of Iranian women from the 19th Century to confront the ideals of beauty as fleeting and fickle and reveal the impact of the male gaze on the face and female identity in the Middle East.

By considering the influence of Islamic fundamentalism[2] under the Iranian theocracy[3] on the beliefs and feelings of Iranian women, I seek to enter into a deeper understanding of the culture and behaviour of women in the Middle East. Emphasising the distinction between modern expectations and ancient traditions, I portray women's choice of fashion, appearance, and beauty to represent how the limitations and pressures of the male-oriented culture can affect the perception, self-esteem, self-image, and individual identity of women.

Drawing from theorists such as Michel Foucault and Rae Connell writings about the body, I investigate how women in Iran increasingly subject themselves to cosmetic surgery and the other forms of bodily manipulation as their bodies are heavily policed and scrutinised under the patriarchal system. By channelling visual culture[4] and observation in social media accounts, I examine how visual culture reproduces itself in Iranian women's daily lives and pushes them toward Western beauty ideals.

My research includes sources from a wide range of social media, popular culture, and history as well as my own experiences.

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[1] Antoin Sevruguin (1851–1933) was an Iranian photographer of Armenian-Georgian descent in Persia during the reign of the Qajar dynasty (1785–1925).

[2] Islamic fundamentalists claim that their goal is to return to the principles, roots and basis for knowing and understanding Islam and calling to it.

[3] Theocracy considers religious authority to dominate political authority; Therefore, it is a government in which people reach government officials based on their 'personal position in the religious hierarchy'.

[4] Visual culture is a way of studying a work that uses art history, humanities, sciences, and social sciences. It is intertwined with everything that one sees in his day-to-day life - advertising, landscape, buildings, photographs, movies, paintings, apparel - anything within our culture that communicates through visual means.

Objectives

1. Examine my experience of religious dogma within Iran and how gendered expectations impact female identity, self-esteem, and self-image.

2. To research the contradiction between modern and traditional religious expectations from my lived perspective as an Iranian woman.

3. To photographically explore women's choices within the context of contemporary Iranian society by referencing physical appearance, clothes, makeup, body issues and plastic surgery.

4. Creating staged photographic self-portraits to communicate a dual sense of identity and internal conflict after migration and living in a new country and culture.

5. Making and sewing Iranian costumes and clothes to evoke an historical period.

6. Incorporate symbolic objects and costumes into staged portraits to reference aspects of Islamic culture from a female perspective.

7. Photographing a range of women with different faces and makeup to explore the concept of beauty and its relativity with specific reference to Iranian society.

Rationale

My Masters project uses staged photography to considers the anxiety, shame and obsession of Iranian women with their bodies and their nuanced connection with the male gaze through staged photography. This practice draws upon sociological, feminist, critical masculinity and visual culture theories around identity, gender, and sexuality to depict and subvert the conventional of female objectification as a socio-cultural construct in the Islamic world and modern Middle East.

Through my research into cultural and historical references, this project speculates on Iranian women's psychological and social motivations for cosmetic surgery under the impact of the restrictions created by religious dogma, the male gaze and visual culture.

Based on the social learning theory[5], people learn how to behave from living with society members. This approach refers to the role of family and society in forming gender identity.[6]

Gender identity is one of the dimensions of individual identity that arises from social relations and is reproduced in interactions with masculine power. "*Men are empowered in gender relations, but in a specific way which produce their own limits*".[7] Thus, social structures and standards determine how a woman (or man) should be.

In the Middle East, masculinity is valuable, and gender stereotypes are traditionally taught to people from childhood; the power of masculinity has been institutionalised in society's culture from the smallest social unit to the most prominent social group.[8]

Men and women are unequal, and this inequality is justified from a religious point of view.[9] As a result, individual identity and social division of power and sexual behaviours are all controlled by masculine power.[10] Thus, the emergence of cultural and religious stereotypes encourages the emergence of masculine behaviour against women.[11] In Islamic rules, a woman is more than an independent social identity; she is the mother, sister, wife, and daughter of a man and male is naturally the leader and the owner of the ultimate power in the home, society, economy, politics and judicial system.[12] In this cultural structure, women gradually become submissive creatures in the patriarchal family structure. In these societies, men's desires are dominant, and they are the ones who have overpowered women's lives and property.

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[5] social learning theory emphasizes learning in a social context. This theory says that people learn from each other. This learning can be based on observation, imitation or modelling. Albert Bandura is one of the pioneers of this theory.

[6] Bandura 1977

[7] Connell 1982, 108

[8] Afary 2009

[9] Ritzer 1983

[10] Goffman 1997, 201

[11] Fiske 2013

[12] Bashiriyeh 1954

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Simone de Beauvoir states the socialisation of gender roles as a factor of man's authority over women. According to her, the personality of women could be formed very differently from the current unequal patterns, provided the girls were raised from the beginning with the exact expectations and rewards and the same strictness and freedoms their brothers are raised. Consequently, the acceptance of gender in society by institutionalising inequality and its continuation in future generations can become the basis of gender inequality.[13]

The feminist perspective sees the violence as caused by male dominance and gender inequality. In society there are different types of masculinity in each period. However, their cultural valuation differs, so some of them are presented positively or even as role models, and others are rejected.[14] Although the model of masculinity is different in various social contexts, there is always a type of masculinity in every culture that is used as a standard for measuring masculinity.[15]

Iranian society has experienced patriarchy for periods of its history. In Iran, the history of response to patriarchy and the traditional status of women goes back to the late 19th Century. The patriarchal culture of Iran's traditional society had a demeaning view of women and limited women's social and political activities.[16] Commitment to the traditions and customs of patriarchal societies and the constraint of women's activities to housework were among the elements of women's positioning in traditional Iranian society. Buying and selling women as slaves were prevalent in some areas of Iran during the Qajar era.[17] At the end of the 19th Century, the connection with Europe led to the spread of protest against the traditional position of women. With the establishment of European-style schools, girls gradually entered them. Women played a role in Iranian social movements, such as the tobacco boycott and constitutional movements.[18]

After the Islamic Revolution of 1979[19], the Islamic Republic of Iran increased patriarchy in all areas of governance and society by relying on Islamic ideology; and implemented strict religious and patriarchal laws, such as compulsory hijab, gender segregation, and moral policing. Therefore, the control and ownership of women's bodies became a social and cultural construct in a gradual process of brainwashing that began in schools.[20] The Islamic Republic has built a society without transparency and social stability. The systematic and brutal suppression of women starts within the family, goes into the policies and government programs, and continues in the street.[21]

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[13] De Beauvoir 1949

[14] Connell 1996, 209

[15] (George and Davis 1977, 224).

[16] Bashiriyeh 1954

[17] Najmabadi 2005

[18] Najmabadi 2005

[19] The Iranian Revolution, also known as the Islamic Revolution, was a series of events that culminated in the overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and the replacement of his government with an Islamic republic under the rule of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, a leader of one of the factions in the revolt. Various leftist and Islamist organizations supported the revolution.

[20] Peyvandi 2020

[21] Bashiriyeh 1954

The pressure of the patriarchal society under the strict Islamic rules does not leave room for the emergence of women's human identity and gradually created a new form of fashion for women to express their social identities under the restrictions of the mandatory hijab.[22] These restrictions have caused concern and a lack of self-confidence in Iranian women regarding their appearance. In addition, some women have reached a stage where they hate their bodies. To heal this hatred of the body, they perform cosmetic surgeries, including medical interventions and various pharmaceutical and cosmetic products.[23] "*In Islamic societies that dictate the use of the hijab – where only the face is exposed – facial components such as the shape of the nose, shape of eyebrows, colour of skin, become far more heavily scrutinised and this is why there is so much interest in plastic surgery in Muslim countries*".

De Beauvoir's theory in *The Second Sex* is very close to my observation, experience and understanding of life in Iran as a woman. She indications that in a patriarchal culture (with values and standards set by men), women are considered 'other' and 'object'. In this process, women become passive, and men control women and consider themselves the owners of women.[24] *"One of the major implications of patriarchy has been its control of feminine corporeality. The male gaze shapes women's bodies and their subjectivities through many practices and relations that span different religious, historical and socio-cultural contexts"*.[25]

Exploring the notion of masculinty drew my attention to hegemonic masculinity. Borrowing from Antonio Gramsci's use of the term hegemony [26], Connell defines this type of masculinity as follows: *"Hegemonic masculinity is a form of gender action that warrants questions about the legitimacy of patriarchy and the dominance of men".[27]* In describing the practice of hegemony, Connell refers to how the ruling group consolidates and protects its power. In this process, the presentation of ideals and the definition of morality play a fundamental role. The rulers try to convince the general public mainly through mass communication and the organisation of social institutions to make it appear natural and inevitable.[28]

Religious and traditional beliefs in much of the Middle East have created a toxic form of hegemonic masculinity in which women are objectified. Objectification is the creation of a cognitive and interactive relationship between the subject (men) and the object (women) based on gender and instinct, in which the female body is preferred as the most important indicator of her identity.[29] In this process, the male gaze points to the woman's body for visual enjoyment. As a result, female identity is reduced to the product of a man's instinctive, sexual, physical and sensual understanding of a woman and her body.[30]

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[22] Afari 1388

[23] Afari 1388

[24] De Beauvoir 1949

[25] Glapka 2018

[26] Antonio Gramsci is best known for his theory of cultural hegemony, which describes how the state and ruling capitalist class – the bourgeoisie – use cultural institutions to maintain power in capitalist societies.

[27] Connell, 2005, 75

[28] Connell, 1987 107

[29] Shahabi 2013

[30] Shahabi 2013

I spent my teenage years with a lack of self-confidence and fear of people judging my body, and even now, these things still affect me. Like many Iranian women, I was regularly verbally harassed by men who wanted to comment and judge every aspect of my body and tell me to get plastic surgery to be b eautiful. But what is the definition of beauty that is sought? How does the male gaze shape the female body?

This project recreates historical portraits of urban women in 19th Century Iran that are placed in counterpoint to portraits of contemporary Iranian urban women to reveal the significant contrast between the ideals of beauty and the historical male control of women's bodies. The critical aspect of this project is to convey the distortion and manipulation of women's bodies – how women are shaped, privileged or rendered invisible due to the impact of the male gaze.

The artist who sparked this project in me is Antoin Sevruguin[31] and his historical photographs of Persian women in the 19th Century. The subjects of Sevruguin's photographs include a wide range of Iranian women, such as urban women, harem women, middle-class and under-privileged women.[32] There are commonalities between Sevruguin's work and my practice, as seen in my interest in painting[33] and my passion for storytelling through staged photography, lighting, and composition. Sevruguin's photographs have a painterly quality, the lighting of his works is thoughtful, and his portrait images are fully staged. The semiotic and sociological examination of his works, from fashion, veil and make-up, to props and elements in the set-up, along with his photographic approach, allowed me to consider the lives of Iranian women in the 19th Century in regard to patriarchal issues, and the impact of modernism and traditions.

Visual culture is not only a part of everyday life, but also colonises all aspects of it (Morozoff 1999).

In this project, I employ visual culture as a tactic to study Middle Eastern women. I observe Iranian women's beauty and fashion by focusing on social media, especially Instagram, to depict the standards of female beauty dictated in visual culture. In parallel, I would like to cite and underline the prominent male role in controlling women's body image in the Muslim and patriarchal Middle East.

This project is thematically bonded with the works of artists Shadi Ghadirian[34] and Tala Madani[35], two female artists from post-revolution Iran.

In Ghadirian's photographs, women are central. Her work examines tradition and modernity, the past and the present. She portrays women who have gained self-confidence, are aware of their abilities and have a continuous presence in society while being in the cycle of repeating the responsibility of traditional housework.

Alternatively, in Madani's figurative paintings, we see clownish, bald, and disfigured men who are unashamed of their appearance who are still acting as if their male sexuality deserves praise and appreciation. However, men are not the only motifs of her works because babies and mothers are also

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[31] Antoin Sevruguin (1256-1352 AH / 1840-1933 AD) was an Iranian photographer of Armenian descent who took various photos of people, landscapes, monuments, and historical events in Iran during the Qajar period.

[32] Sheikh 2019

[33] Back in Iran, at the age of 15, I started oil painting and sketching. My dream was to be a painter one day. In 1998, when I started my bachelor's in photography, I became fascinated with the possibilities of cameras and light.

[34] Shadi Ghadirian is an Iranian contemporary photographer.

[35] Tala Madani is an Iranian-born American artist, best known for her contemporary paintings, drawings, and animations.

found in the corners of Madani's paintings. Babies with dirty bodies and nameless mothers seem to have lost their identities. Therefore, the human body is a hanger for Madani to show her concerns. Through a distinctive painting technique, Madani enables repeated symbols and images with complexity, curiosity and fantasy.

The critical points of resonance between this project and the works of the Ghadirian and Madani are exploring the male-centred culture and how hegemonic masculinity defines femininity.

My body of work highlights the female body as an object in patriarchal Middle Eastern societies that have reduced what it means to be a woman to mere physical and sexual attributes.

Fig. 01

Tala Madani.
Dazzlemen.
2008.
Painting, Oil on linen.

Fig. 02

Shadi Ghadirian.
Qajar.
1998.
Photography.

Research Questions

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- What is the concept of beauty and fashion in Islamic societies under the laws of compulsory hijab?

- How can staged photography, costumes and cultural references explore restrictive aspects of female identity in Islamic culture?

- How can photography be used to question female identity in Islamic culture?

Methodology

STUDIO ONE
For the Honour

In July 2020, when I entered the Master of Fine Arts, only a few weeks had passed since the tragic news of the *honour killing[36]* of Romina Ashrafi[37], in Iran. she was only 14 years old when her father allegedly beheaded her in a horrific crime[38]. However, Romina's murder inspired me to explore the sociology and psychological roots of violence and crime against women in a more fundamental research-based way.

Fig. 03

Ramak Bamzar.
My concept map from studio 1.
2020.

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[36] Honour crimes or honour killings are violence and often murders of women of a family by male relatives. These women are punished for 'disgracing the honour of their family.

[37] The death of Romina Ashrafi, who was reportedly beheaded by her father, has put a spotlight on the practice of honour killings in Iran. Romina was only 14 years old when she was reportedly beheaded by her father in a horrific case of a so-called 'honour killing' that has shocked Iran.

[38] Unfortunately, women's lives in Iran and the Middle East are intertwined with violence, inequality and oppression.

For the Honour photographs was formed spontaneously through my practice– a surreal image that depicts the brutality of an honour killing using staged elements and symbols. Abstract conceptual re-creation in photography usually ends up in surreal photography or digital art[39]; therefore, the originality of my practices in these works is linked with Photoshop manipulation. My attention in these self-portraits is on the female body from the perspective of gender identity to portray men's ignorance, control, and dominance over the female body.

Fig. 04

Ramak Bamzar.
For The Honour.
2020.
Photography and Digital Art.
100cm x 70 cm.

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[39] Digital art is a general term for various artworks and practices that use digital technology as an essential part of the creation and/or presentation process. Since the 1970s, different names have been used for it, including computer art and multimedia art; And digital art itself is included under the more general term of new media art.

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While googling about Romina on the web, an image of her death announcement catches my attention, the name of Romina's father (the killer) is seen as a mourner in the obituary. A father who is both a murderer and a mourner for his daughter creates a great paradox in me. [40] A culture andtradition that denies and normalizes women's right to choose so that they do not even realize the depth of suffering and violence against women that I would like to depict.

I start photographing a live female model. After examining several images, the idea of adding symbolic elements and objects reaches my mind while playing around with the lighting and subject matter. In the following practice, I place a bowl (containing artificial blood) in the model's hand; the blood bowl may refer to my dreams and imagination of Romina's death. My brain is full of red and bloody images. At this stage, I followed the rest of the work in Photoshop and added and edited the female figure's image elements.[41]

Fig. 05

Ramak Bamzar.
For The Honou, Trio.
Studio practice.
2020.
Photography and Digital Art.
100cm x 40 cm.

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[40] According to the Islamic Penal Code in the Islamic Republic of Iran, the punishment for suicide is revenge, but some murders with honour reasons have a reduced penalty in the laws of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Islamic Penal Code exempts fathers and paternal ancestors from retribution. In only one case, the killing of a woman by her husband does not have retribution, which is the premise of Article 630 of the Islamic Penal Code. This article stipulates: *"If a man observes his wife committing adultery with a stranger and has knowledge of the woman's adultery, he can kill them at the same time."*

[41] A white tablecloth on a woman's body is a metaphor for mourning ceremonies in Iran and the contradictions of traditional society.

In this trio of self-portraits, I wrap women's heads and hair in sheets of Quranic verses[42] and deliberately, in the haphazard method, wipe the bare body parts of women.[43] Using the background and covering the lower body with black cloth, not much of the women's body (except for parts of the hand) remains in the images.

This method refers to the sense of captivity, suffocation and muteness of these figures - which sometimes makes us doubt their identity. Are these figures' natural bodies or plastic mannequins?

Fig. 06

Ramak Bamzar.
For The Honou, Trio.
2020.
Photography and Digital
Art.
50 cm x 70 cm.

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[42] ˹As for˺ those of your women who commit illegal intercourse—call four witnesses from among yourselves. If they testify, confine the offenders to their homes until they die, or Allah ordains a ˹different˺ way for them. Surah An-Nisaa, Verses 4:19 to 4;22.

[43] I also use the pixel effect (in Adobe Photoshop) on an image to evaluate the possibilities and practicalities.

STUDIO TWO
Besides Myself

"The meeting with oneself is, at first, the meeting with one's own shadow. The shadow is a tight passage, a narrow door, whose painful constriction no one is spared who goes down to the deep well. But one must learn to know oneself to know who one is."[44]

In Studio two, my practice is greatly affected by Melbourne's covid-19 quarantine[45], which led me to focus on self-portraits. This body of work explores the paradoxes and wounds within me to assess the 'self' as an identity formed in a historical, cultural and linguistic context. I found it challenging to trust my uncertain 'self' and delve into my pains, vulnerability, and concerns which, alongside research and practice, guided me all through.

"Knowing historical identity is only possible by referring to the historical past and what is called tradition"[46]

Observation of Claude Cahun's self-portraits[47] definite me to reflect on the concept of identity and the 'other self'. Cahun's self-portraits are a mechanism for creating a 'reflection' of the 'self' and revealing identity as an ambiguous and strange mask.[48]

Fig. 04 and Fig. 07

Claude Cahun.
Que me veux tu? (What do you want from me?)
1929.
Gelatin silver print.

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[44] Jung 1990, 317

[45] Beside myself is taken in my backyard in Melbourne, using natural light, props and a mannequin. Backyards in Melbourne have a distinctive feature: wooden barriers, the symbol I wanted to create my internal feelings and thoughts: Glooming and loneliness – perseverance and battle.

[46] Najmabadi 2005

[47] Cahun 1894 - 1954

[48] Cahun in her double portraits used photomontage to produce her duality significantly.

In this photograph, I create a 'split self' using a digital darkroom (Adobe Photoshop) and merge two portraits of myself into one image.

I simultaneously bring two physical personas of myself into one image to express inner conditions to express uncertainty, and the psyche and endeavour to convey that identity is an amalgamation of experiences, memories, culture, beliefs and history to which we belong.

Fig. 08

Ramak Bamzar.
Beside Myself.
2020.
Photography.
pigment ink-jet print.
100cm x 70 cm.

Fig. 09

Susan Sontag considers photography the only inherently surreal art. In her opinion, manipulated photos are not necessarily just surreal photos. Sometimes, the photos taken by street photographers are more surreal. "*Mainstream photographic activity has shown that surrealist manipulation or dramatization of reality is unnecessary, if not superfluous.*" [49]

Sontag's comments about photography as the only inherently surreal art led to questions and investigations in my practice. Darkroom has replaced Photoshop in modern digital photography, says Kirkland. Yes, that is true. However, the subtlety is that when the image undergoes significant changes in Photoshop, it may no longer accurately represent location and time, creating a surreal that can question the photograph's authenticity.

I attempted to approach the subject through photography while keeping Photoshop manipulation to a minimum. In a pair of *Family Photos*, I explore and challenge digital photography's possibilities with minimal manipulation and reconstruction of elements.
In these works, I include mannequins (as official absent family members) in self-portraits to explore my connections, homesickness and loneliness during Melbourne's quarantine. — A narrative to convey human relationships and emotional needs that begins in the family, the first place we enter through birth, marriage and adoption. Our economic, cultural, religious, behavioural and related conditions are formed mainly from childhood. That is also included in the family patterns.[50]

Fig. 10

Ramak Bamzar.
 Familly Photo, I.
2020.
Photography.
pigment ink-jet print.
60cm x 80 cm.

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[49] Sontag 1977

[50] Orbuch 1989

Fig. 11.

Ramak Bamzar.
 Familly Photo, II.
2020.
Photography.
pigment ink-jet print.
60cm x 80 cm.

During this time, introspection and thematic research gave me deep insight into my creative process. Anger from the experience of segregation and gender discrimination and anxiety from the experience of being forced into ideological frameworks is my immediate motivation to explore the family, cultural and social influences on women in the Islamic Middle East.

Lollipops and Flies were created based on these advertisements of the Hijab campaigns. This photograph is a parity of a billboard advertisement; the lollipop is an accurate metaphor for the woman in this advertising image. Being dirty just because one is not veiled, and clean and perfect because one is veiled![51]

In objectification, a woman is reduced to her gender, and her body, the most important indicator of gender, takes precedence over her entire being and becomes the subject of male society's recognition and interaction. In objectification of the subject with an instrumental look, he points to the woman's body and femininity, interacts with it as a sexual object and objectifies it, and enjoys this act of acquisition consciously or unconsciously. The result is that objectifying women is the product of man's instinctive, sexual, physical and sensual understanding of women and their bodies.

Fig. 11.

Ramak Bamzar.
Lollipops and Flies.
2020, 2021.
Photography.
pigment ink-jet print.
100cm x 80 cm.

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[51] In Iran, after the Islamic revolution in 1979, the regime's propaganda was created to defend and promote the compulsory hijab, which identifies unveiled women as impure, deviant, and Westernised. In this ideological view, the female body is considered as the sexual stimulus of the male. Therefore, a woman's body, hair, voice or motion of women is meaningful and stimulating.

Fig. 12.

Hijab advertising poster in Iran.

Fig. 13.

Ramak Bamzar.
Lollipops and Flies, Details of the work.
2020, 2021.
Photography.
pigment ink-jet print.
100cm x 80 cm.

Since two, unlike arrangements, are used in the execution of this project, I will speak about *Moustachioed Women* and *The Rhinoplastic Girls* in two individual parts.

STUDIO THREE
Moustachioed Women

In 'Sociology of Gender', Stephanie Garrett considers 'gender' to be the individual and psychological characteristics determined by society and related to being male or female and the so-called 'masculinity' and 'femininity'.[52]

The following photographs are the first in *Moustachioed Women and Rhinoplastic Girls* series. From the view of gender identity, and deal with the definitions of ideal beauty and female fashion in Iranian popular culture to reveal the aspects of silent violence against women's bodies in patriarchal and religious culture.

The opening of this project started with the book *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards* by Afsaneh Najmabadi. Exploring the roots and historical and religious influences on Iranian women's gender identity gave me valuable ideas and inspiration and turned out to start the pictorial evaluation of Antoin Sevruguin's 19th-century portraits of harem women. Digging through his works evokes different thoughts and emotions in me.
In Sevruguin's photographs, women mostly sit or stand in private places, next to other components (or with other women) in the setting. They are not distinct from the other objects in the image; they do not smile, their facial expression does not convey a specific feeling, and their eyes stare at an unknown point. Inside, I feel compassion and sympathy for these women; they are part of the staged objects in the scene, and their identity is the same as other objects: still, silent and submissive.

Fig. 14.

Antoin Sevruguin.
Harem women.
Late 19th Century.
Iran.

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[52] Garrett 2010

"In the opinion of 19ᵗʰ Century European women, the moustache is a mark of "looking like men." In the nineteenth century, however, the most important visual marker of manhood was not a moustache but a full beard. The moustache, more accurately the soft down, or the imitation thin line of mascara that women applied over their upper lips, signified 'khatt', the much-celebrated sign of a young man's beauty."⁵³

These four photographs (including a self-portrait) draw our attention to women's lifestyle⁵⁴ in a specific historical time. Perceiving these women with moustaches, hairy bodies, and single eyebrows gives us a sense of denial and mockery.⁵⁵ It is as if we are looking at a completely alien world because we live in an age where beauty standards are entirely different.

Fig. 15.

Ramak Bamzar.
Leila.
2021, 2022.
Photography.
pigment ink-jet print.
100cm x 70 cm.

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⁵³ Najmabadi 2005, 235

⁵⁴ According to Max Weber, lifestyle is a particular way of life that social groups use to distinguish themselves from others and to gain dignity and social identity. According to him, class tastes in leisure, body, clothing, speech, and other characteristics determine identity according to the male and female gender, social class and other personal and social attributes.

⁵⁵ During the era of Naser al-Din Shah, the moustache became a famous sign of beauty for women. Just like if a woman did not have a little moustache, they would paint for themselves while doing makeup. This custom was surprising to European tourists. In her studies on the gender structures of the Qajar society, Najmabadi analyzes that the moustache, or the shade of soft hair above the lips, is a sign of maturity and beauty for both young men and women.

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Fig. 16.

Ramak Bamzar.
Parmida.
2021, 2022.
Photography.
pigment ink-jet print.
100cm x 70 cm.

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Fig. 17.

Ramak Bamzar.
Ramak.
2021, 2022.
Photography.
pigment ink-jet print.
100cm x 70 cm.

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"To the contemporary eye, Qajar women's moustaches made them look like men and made them ugly. Yet, in its own time, the moustache was a cherished sign of women's beauty."[58]

[58] Najmabadi 2005, 235

Fig. 18.

Ramak Bamzar.
Katayoon.
2021, 2022.
Photography.
pigment ink-jet print.
100cm x 70 cm.

In the photographs of (Ramak) and (Leila), the figures have full bodies, and their makeup and apparels are rejected in our modern visual culture, a deliberate choice in which I like to disrupt the visual recollection (which is used to seeing women with thin and elongated bodies) and I ask the question, what is the disposition of beauty?

Fig. 19.

Ramak Bamzar.
Ramak.
Details of work.

Fig. 20.

Ramak Bamzar.
Leila.
Details of work.

The women who, while wearing hijab, some portions of their body are fully or partially naked (in such a way that the eye is drawn to it), which refers to the male gaze and their control over women's bodies and their personal choices. [59]

The figures (while sitting or lying on the ground) and the objects of the scene are in expressive interaction. The figures are in tight frames; no immense space is visible around the main subject, hinting at evoking an oppressive sense of confinement and control.

The woman's outward gaze at the viewer refers to the condemnation of eye contact, a sign of women's modesty in traditional Islamic culture. Puffy short velvet skirts[60] and silk dresses, jewellery and other objects seem to be a reward for keeping silent and not protesting, which refers to the objectification of women in the Muslim culture, which considers women as family property due to patriarchy.

[59] In Iran in the 19th Century (Qajar period) women did not play a significant role in choosing their clothes, and the influence of the king's taste and will was the main factor in changing the style of court women's clothing and fashion. Some historians believe that the uniformity of Qajar women's headdresses and bodysuits before modernity (compared to today) was the product of traditional and religious factors ruling that era. Only a few women had broken the boundaries and stepped beyond. Most women also had the same fate; as a result, they were passive and unwilling in the clothing field. Also, following religion among Qajar women was a deterrent against the complete change in women's clothing style.

[60] The souvenir of Naser al-Din Shah's first trip after watching the ballet dance in the city theatre was a tailor to design the clothes of the harem women; It can be concluded that the first acquaintance of Iranian women with the European trend was through clothes. After the dress, music came into focus as the first musicians in the society were the princes of the ladies.

Execution

Preparation and production

the implementation of this project required a lot of preparation. I did most of the crafting, sewing and completing during the summer holidays. Based on Sevruguin's historical photographs and research on women's fashion in the 19th Century, I designed the garments, which I repurposed and altered using materials, clothing and jewellery I discovered in thrift stores in Melbourne. I was looking to recreate historically authentic costumes to reveal the identity and realism of 19th Century Iranian fashion[61], so choosing the colour, arrangement, and sewing became my priority.
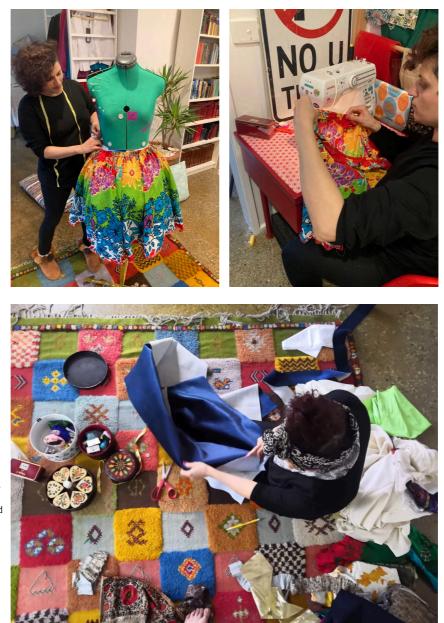

Fig. 21, 22 and 23.

Preparation and production.

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[61] The souvenir of Naser al-Din Shah's first trip after watching the Russian ballet dance was a tailor who designed harem women's clothes based on Russian ballerinas' apparel, which considers the first acquaintance of Iranian women with the European trend through clothes.

lighting

My lighting method is rooted in my inherent appeal in the Baroque school paintings. One of the distinctive characteristics of the baroque style is the type of bright shadows and its lighting. The background in these works is dark, and the subjects and figures come to the viewer from this darkness. I like to create a dramatic effect using this type of lighting. A bright shadow leads to effective contrast in work and moves the viewer's eye through the scene, guiding the viewer's eye with the light to the places I like it to move.

This project employs studio flash lighting as a side light (at a 45-degree angle) to add glamour to the portrait by directing the light towards the subject's faces. Also, the gradient light indicates the details of the skin from light to dark, which I discovered to be an excellent technique for showing the details of the face and makeup in the portraits.

Fig. 24 and 25.

STUDIO FOUR
Rhinoplastic Girls

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Sarina - The day she became a woman

In The *Second Sex*[62], de Beauvoir asks why a woman considers 'other,' why she is the 'second' sex, inferior, and less valuable than men.[63] Her famouse statement is the kry of this photograph: *"We are not born women, we become women"*.

Fig. 26. Obligation Ceremony (Jashn-e Taklif) in Iran late 70th.

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[62] De Beauvoir 1949

[63] De Beauvoir states that in order to understand the inferiority of women, we have to examine the circumstances and positions, so de Beauvoir distinguishes sex from gender and considers gender as a facet of identity that is acquired gradually.

I consider this work an opening for Rhinoplastic Girls. Sarina - the most personal piece in the collection - was created with de Beauvoir's approach that refers to the circumstances and position of women from childhood under strict religious and theocracy regimes.

The image is a recreation of my experience at the age of nine from the *Obligation Ceremony*, known as Jashn-e Taklif[64]. A ceremony that formally celebrates girls' womanhood at the age of nine in Islamic countries. [65]

Fig. *27 and 28.* Obligation Ceremony (Jashn-e Taklif) in Iran.

In this shot, using pink material and textiles, a playful, nurturing and nostalgic colour, I depict childhood, in which a girl wearing a white spiritual veil while holding a barbie doll. My metaphorical considerations refer to my childhood in Iran, where I grew up under the theocracy of the Islamic Republic and was influenced by the ideologies of my religious dogma.

This naive child knew nothing when you were constantly in school. TV and the street were talking about death, doomsday, woman, hijab, sin and the agony of hell.

 "I remember that day very well when, with other nine-year-old girls at school, the teachers gave each of us a long headscarf and a prayer mat, and the principal told us that from today we must cover our hair and bodies in private and in public from strangers' men. From that day on, the hijab became mandatory because I was no longer a child but a woman. I had to protect my body from the male gaze and take responsibility for their desire."

Rhinoplastic Girls Introduction: In this part of the project, I recreate the portraits of contemporary urban women in Iran, I recreate the portraits of contemporary urban women in Iran, which are placed in

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[64] Obligation ceremony in the modern Middle East and Iran has taken a new form, using pink and barbie-like colours and glamorous celebrations to make violence and oppression against women appear valid and prominent. The ceremony usually begins with a religious song, and in the next stage, presenting gifts such as a veil, prayer rug, Quran and religious books provide part of the necessary measures to start their new life path.

[65] According to Islamic laws, girls reach the age of puberty at the end of their 9th year, and they can follow God's orders and must meet the duties of Islam, which is to wear hijab and cover their bodies from strangers' men.

distinction to the historical photographs of urban women in 19th Century Iran, to reveal the significant contrast between the ideals of beauty and historical male control over women's bodies.

"The identity of women in contemporary Iran is influenced by factors such as historical, social and cultural background, new intellectual paradigms, modernity, and global and multidimensional systems, which has caused women's identity to change from a simple structure centred on being Iranian to a complex and combined structure with elements become modern-Islamic, Iranian."[66]

Fig. 26.

Ramak Bamzar.
Sarina - The day she became a woman
2021, 2022.
Photography.
pigment ink-jet print.
50 cm x 70 cm.

[66] Aramaki, Sarostani and Qadri 2007, 136

Rhinoplastic Girls

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"The change in aesthetic sensibilities, especially for women, is often attributed to mimicry: Iranian women attempting to look like European women about whom Iranian men fantasised and wrote endlessly, with lighter features, thinner bodies, and hairless faces."[67]

In this body of work, "staged" is a symbol of "society", and "women" is a metaphor for "actors" who play different roles in a play by representing their gender and femininity through fashion, clothing and makeup.[68]

At the core of this project, the theories of sociology, psychology and gender, in addition to observing images of Iranian women on social networks, reflecting the suppressed feelings of these women, creating moments of pressure to confront social beauty standards and hidden layer and eyes It is the measure of gender identity that reveals the lifestyle of women in the religious, traditional and patriarchal structure of the Middle East. The implementation method in this re-creation is through staged photography and employing scenography, symbols, colour and studio lighting.[69]

[67] Najmabadi 2005, 235

[68] Goffman 1973

[69] Goffman 1979

Fig. 27.

Ramak Bamzar.
Ramak.
2021, 2022.
Photography.
pigment ink-jet print.
50 cm x 70 cm.

Staged Photography/Scenography

Benefiting from staged photography, where I have control over all the elements and objects of the scene, allows me to emphasise the inherent and metaphoric meaning of the show, the stage and the actors (women). The implementation method in this re-creation is through staged photography and employing symbols, composition, colour and studio lighting.
Creating a scenography piece - since the selection of objects, the arrangement of the scene, and the intention are all the artist's commitment - is an attentive and thoughtful procedure because, with each choice, I make a statement that reflects concepts and underlines my subject matter. This is the most demanding aspect of this project that I consider a conscious creation process.

I employ a table, a female figure and stage objects to contain these works. The women's figures (the collection of historical women sitting or lying on the floor) are standing or sitting behind a table, indicating the transition from tradition to modernity. The curved form of the round table allows me to create creative and distinct compositions by adjusting the camera angles (up and down) and composition aspect ratio (proportion of objects in the scene).[70]

Fig. 28.

Ramak Bamzar.
Leila.
2021, 2022.
Photography.
pigment ink-jet print.
50 cm x 70 cm.

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[70] The photography of this project was done in my home studio in Melbourne. I had been using natural light for lighting for years, but when I started this project, I bought a set of operated studio lights, which improved the quality of my photography and the control and intentionality of my lighting.

Fig. 29.

Ramak Bamzar.
The vigil – crying for a man I never met.
2021, 2022.
Photography.
pigment ink-jet print.
50 cm x 70 cm.

Symbols

The symbols in these works not only express my self-conscious abstract fantasies but also informs me about the depth of my animal nature: an imitation of the totality of my human being and its narrator. Encoding (marking) my thoughts through verbal or symbolic symbols is a way to record, refer back to them and make my concepts and meanings understandable for myself and others. Although there is no necessary link between the symbol and that thing, it is an excellent help to reflect my abstract and unconscious idea.[71]

Fig. 30.

Ramak Bamzar.
Chop it down.
2021, 2022.
Photography.
pigment ink-jet print.
50 cm x 70 cm.

[71] Tayeb 2000

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Fig. 31.

Ramak Bamzar.
Katayoon.
2021, 2022.
Photography.
pigment ink-jet print.
50 cm x 70 cm.

Colours

In the historical images, by employing subdue lights and ancient colours, I refer to classic painting tableau[72], while in the depiction of contemporary women, I metaphor the concept of fashion and modernity through vivid colours and rays.[73]

The preference for the dominant colours of apiece photograph is formed organically during studio practice. However, the element of colour - evenly distributed between the scene objects and prominent figures - recalls the consequences of my colour perception on my psyche and reflects my emotional response. The various colour spaces in each photograph represent the modern visual world (our visual world is full of advertisements and bright and seductive colours to attract the audience's attention). Still, the effect of colours on the psyche allows me to enter these women's spaces and create independent characters based on the psychic ability of colours.

Fig. 32.

Ramak Bamzar.
Niloofar.
2021, 2022.
Photography.
pigment ink-jet print.
50 cm x 70 cm.

[72] Tableau is used to describe a painting or photograph in which characters are arranged for picturesque or dramatic effect and appear absorbed and utterly unaware of the existence of the viewer.

[73] I used a black background in the early stages, but during the image evaluation, I realised that I needed to add more colour.

Lighting

Due to the staging nature of the photographs, I use a 45-degree exposure source that creates more shadow on one side of the image (behind the subject), a light contrast that allows me to create a dramatic scene. And the stealth environment is the method I used in photographs 28, 29,30 and 31.

The Models

My choices for creating contemporary women are based on the model's appearance to fictional and real characters. To find suitable candidates for photography, I quickly asked the Iranian community of Melbourne for help through social media. For about 20 years, I have received a positive response from Iranian women who wanted to cooperate with me on this project. Each model was required to read and sign a photo release form that allowed the final images to be displayed and sold.

Evaluation

My main goal in working on this project has been to explore my experiences - historically, socially, psychoanalytically and emotionally - of the society in which I grew up as a woman and research patriarchy in the modern Middle East. Where does it come from, and how does religion fuel the spread of violence and gender inequality against women?

My initial research interest began with a focus on gender inequality and women as men's private property, immersing me in the process of creating photographs based on the practice of honour. From there, I addressed the issue of gender inequality in more specific forms (such as the objectification of women, the male gaze, and the influence of ideology, religion, and tradition in the Islamic world).

I discovered and illustrated my stories, concerns, and anxieties by exploring symbols and metaphors. Ultimately, researching different aspects revealed new elements of the subject to me, leading to the creation of *Moustachioed Women and Rhinoplastic Girls*.

Conclusion

My journey of discovery and learning at RMIT has ended, but this is just the beginning of a more extensive travel to implement the ideas I discovered and developed through study and research. I remember very well that Jen Nelson told me in the interview that my performance would change a lot during the two years of study; I was hesitant that day but ready to learn. Today, after two years, I understand Jen's advice and how my practice (during the academic path) opened new horizons and guided me in a privileged and treasured direction. Re-creation is a big part of my identity that I can't prevent (and I don't want to), but with the experience of these two years of study, I can revise and expand it much more.

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