

From Studio to Street: *The Intimate Gaze of Kaveh Golestan*

Kaveh Golestan (1950-2003) was an influential and prolific pioneer of documentary photography within Iran. Celebrated for his coverage of many major historical events, including conflict reportage in Northern Ireland, the Iranian Islamic Revolution, the Iran-Iraq and the Gulf Wars, his photographs were featured in publications such as *Time*, also the BBC and *Tehran e Mosavar*. Beyond photojournalism, Golestan produced a vast body of street photography. His approach here frequently borders on the ethnographic, perhaps nowhere more so than in his deep engagement with the inhabitants of Shahr-e No, the vibrant red light district of pre-revolutionary Iran. The resulting photo-series, simply entitled *Prostitute*, presents an especially nuanced and aesthetically accomplished example of Golestan's work as both documentarist and artist. This historically poignant example of his drive to social engagement is here presented alongside a second photo-series which constitutes a more private photographic exploration, of an imaginary world parcelled into surrealist Polaroid collages, grouped under the title *Az Div o Dad*. While both series are in their own ways politically subversive, or work to redress imbalances of power in society, the second series is more explicitly experimental. It forms a unique and unexpected component within a vast archive of work (including a quarter of a million negatives) that, overall, arguably constitutes the most significant visual document of the social, cultural and political history of Iran during the second half of the twentieth century. Yet until recently, these particular photo-series have remained obscure, especially to an international audience, buried by the troubled history of the revolutionary rupture and post-revolutionary Iran.

Given recent historical developments and the apparent *rapprochement* between Iran and the outside world, works such as these demand sensitive attention. Not only did both of these series emerge within a defined context of pre-revolutionary Iran, but also their re-emergence today sheds light on the particularly cosmopolitan intellectual milieu which constituted that era. Furthermore, each in their own way embodies the scars of subsequent cultural revolution, trauma and erasure. It is precisely because of those multiple and compounded layers that a revisiting of these works is so vital. Each series remains problematic in its own way in the face of contemporary conservative cultural impositions which colour and control every aspect of Iranian society. It is crucial to acknowledge that the new relative normalisation of diplomatic and business links following the 2015 'Iran nuclear deal' between Iran and Western nations will do little to aid a serious critical evaluation of these works, let alone their emergence within an international context.



As a curator and agent of the Kaveh Golestan Estate, itself owned by Golestan's widow Hengameh Golestan, the re-circulation, digitalisation and conservation of this archive has become a personal mission—a core facet of my own curatorial research platform, the *Archaeology of the Final Decade*. The latter amounts to a curatorial think tank which engages with accounts of culture which have been lost through material destruction, acts of erasure, and other political, economic or human contingencies. Revolving as it does around histories of nations condemned by social displacement, cultural annihilation or deliberate disappearance, the crux of this research is an archaeological methodology. However, archaeology here does not imply merely a vertical excavation into the origin of things. Integral to our understanding of the term is an equally extensive horizontal, genealogical investigation in the Foucauldian sense, relating laterally across interconnected realities. These range from the aesthetic and socio-political to the geographic, anthropological, ethnographic, linguistic and spiritual. By attending to the condition and discourses surrounding the emergence of the object, or archive, new research questions and discursive relationships are liberated. Retrieving and withdrawing the object from the hubbub, reintroducing it into the public domain and reincorporating it into cultural discourse arguably serves as an act of healthy historical reconciliation, redressing gaps in historical and art historical knowledge for a local, as well as, an international audience. Whilst the retracing and reclaiming of the object is a reconstructive process directed primarily towards an act of intra-cultural assimilation, we strive to enact and promote curatorial research, exhibition and re-circulation of the works in the global public domain. The prescribed resolution, the façade of closure enforced upon sites of cultural erasure, contestation or trauma is thus destabilised and deconstructed.

This displacement of the object, or archive, through time and space, and its consequent revitalisation in new local and international contexts activates latent knowledge embedded within the object itself, potentially liberating a rearticulation of multiple discourses. This leads to the generation of new narratives, new value production and new meanings symbolically and materially: these new *systems of statements* accumulate through sequential instantiations of this 'horizontal' archaeological method, in an open-ended and historically radical manner, which demands a break with accepted truths.

Golestan's *Prostitute* series (1975-77) constitutes the last extant photographic document of the Citadel of Shahr-e No—the notoriously squalid and vibrant red light district of Tehran—before it was burnt down (with an undisclosed number of residents trapped inside) during the Iranian Revolution in 1979. After scorching, the remnants of the quarters were destroyed and the entire neighbourhood was bulldozed flat and out of sight by official decree. The formation of the district dated back to the 1920s and it was a thriving red light quarter by the 1940s. The area came to be called the Citadel after the erection of a wall in 1953 that enshrined it as an inner city ghetto. The exclusion of the neighbourhood from the open city landscape was an initiative of the post-1953 CIA-aided coup d'état that deposed the government of Mohammad Mosaddegh and installed General Zahedi as prime minister. The Citadel of Shahr-e No became also known as the Zahedi Citadel.





The walled ghetto was accessed through a gate and was structured internally around two main avenues, broadly dividing living and business quarters, with a grid-like plethora of smaller crossroads. One of the avenues consisted mainly of houses where the women lived and raised their children, some of whom were born into and lived their entire lives inside the neighbourhood. The other avenue was mainly a business quarter where they received clients through *madames* and pimps cutting pathetic deals and trading in addictive substances that usually spiralled them further into debt.¹ The area housed a tapestry of populist culture, rich with drinking taverns, cabarets and other socialising hangouts catering mainly for urban groups of lower economic means. It aroused the curiosity of artists and writers, including foreign film and theatre directors, such as Bernardo Bertolucci² and Peter Brook.³ By the mid-1960s it had its own health clinic, police station and a small but very active social services department.⁴

In the few years just prior to the Iranian Islamic Revolution, Golestan completed a very personal mission—he had no official permit—of penetrating the Citadel of Shahr-e No with his camera, and subsequently publicly exposing its interior, in three consecutive photo-essays in the Iranian daily *Ayandegan* in 1977. Golestan spent a year and half between 1975 and 1977 carefully composing the sixty-one portraits, edited from a substantially larger pool of negatives. The process involved several years of extensive study and research, long visits to the district and the befriending of residents. His meticulous observation and empathetic sensitivity to the individual subjectivities of the women of the Citadel has produced one of the most remarkable bodies of portraits. Golestan used his photographs with the intention and understanding that photography is a civic refuge at the disposal of those robbed of citizenship. Here, this condition was exemplified by the segregation of the persons from the mainstream of society, not just by their abject poverty or illegal profession, but physically and geographically by enclosure within the confines of a walled ghetto. Permeating the walls, Golestan's transgressive lens operated against a tripartite set of conventions, always focused on the human condition. Firstly, it sought to expose the forbidden physical space, kept out of sight behind the walls. Secondly, it sought to explore the functions attributed to that space of exclusion and thirdly to draw attention to the outcasts who navigated or negotiated through that space. Golestan consciously identified with the excluded and assumed an active role as intercessor in the dispute that he articulated. His lens played the conduit for the marginalised to interact with the mainstream, to overcome public denial about the truth of their experiences. He constructed a relational dialectic between the image of the impoverished, forgotten, forbidden from sight and mainstream metropolitan citizenry. This *anti-dream* was presented against the *arcadian lights of the capitalist city in advancement*.⁵ In his calls for action, Golestan positioned himself not only as the harbinger of the truth of the oppressed but also a radical activist, dialectically opposed to the idleness of the chattering metropolitan intellectual. Golestan intended to summon us to action, to move, radicalise and politicise his audience. Indeed, when he showed them at Tehran University in 1978, his exhibition was shut down prematurely after fourteen days and the works remained unseen to date.

The project was originally conceived as a triptych—*Prostitute, Worker, Asylum*. It included parallel exposés of low-income labourers and mentally handicapped children who had been abandoned to the care of an asylum. The triptych symbolised a 'dysfunctional' archetypal family unit—Man, Woman, Child. Focusing on those robbed of citizenship, his engagement with the marginalised and socially excluded was in line with a distinct prevalent trajectory that had artistically manifested itself, especially in films by, amongst others, Ahmad Faroughi, Ebrahim Golestan, Forough Farrokhzad and Kamran Shirdel.⁶ Arguably, ambivalent and contradictory state sensitivities and harsh censorship measures played a role in transposing "the spirit of unmasking, of rebellion against authority"⁷ into a far more limited sphere of calling for democratic civic practice. To a lesser or greater degree these works investigated

the radical implications of the discourse of natural rights as defined by the plights of women, the poor, labourers, abandoned children, the mentally ill and inmates. They designed opportunities for the invisible to be seen and heard, although arguably such focused designs contrapuntally perpetuate marginalisation.⁸ Importantly, Golestan focused attention on the sitters' subjectivities by emphasising that we must look at the photographs formally as portraits:

I consider this an exhibition of portrait photography. This is the context within which I framed the work. Naturally, in order to portray the reality, I have ensured that some of the sitters are portrayed within their [individual] setting. This was possible in the context of the Prostitute and Worker series but not when I photographed the children. There, I literally had only ten minutes.⁹

The scene, the situation of dispossessed citizenship, is supplanted by the centrality of the person. Golestan consciously attempts to avoid turning the prostitute into a sign whilst creating the Shahr-e No series. He sensitively negotiates the photographic contract to de-anonymise. As a result, these images are mostly consciously constructed intimate portrayals of individual subjectivities. Young and not so apparently young women gaze directly at the spectator, quietly enduring their various predicaments. The gaze of the photographed subjects is varied: frank, sharp, probing, passive, exhausted, furious, introverted, defensive, warning, aggressive, hate-filled, pleading, unbalanced, sceptical, cynical, indifferent, anticipating or demanding.

To avoid fetishism, Golestan's own photographic gaze must sublimate sexual drives and mitigate patriarchal marks of masculine ownership. Nevertheless, here—in this spatial opening for people within society to see each other—notions of beauty, femininity, desire, erotic sensibility and the politics of sexuality are often openly projected through the technologies of the gaze. Despite the power relations implicated in his relationship to these women as male photographer armed with a camera and lens, he ardently works through and counteracts the potentially problematic dis-balances. Golestan's meticulous observation, his humane gaze and his empathetic sensitivity attend to the individual lives and subjectivities of the women, their own particular and private sensibilities. The dynamic field of power relations through which the photographic situation *creates* the Shahr-e No series misses not an intimate detail of costume, a jewel if there is one, not a gesture, or a crack in the wall, a fold in the cloth. Whether ravishing beauties or distressingly abused individuals, these historically compounded portraits of trauma constitute one of the strongest topographies of femaleness produced photographically in Iran.

In 1976, two years before he was to begin documenting the overthrowing of the monarchy, the celebrated Iranian documentary photographer Kaveh Golestan produced a hitherto underexposed, intensely personal and profoundly experimental series of photographic collages. This unique body of work, *Az Div o Dad*, references in its title an oft-cited verse of the classical Persian poet Rumi¹⁰, in which the poet yearns for the humane—nowhere to be found—in the face of the hypocritical, demonic (*div*) and the bestly (*dad*). As such, and despite the surrealistic collage aesthetic, perhaps this mysterious archive of Polaroids can be comfortably placed alongside the socially engaged *modus operandi* of Golestan's broader oeuvre, primarily consisting of black and white, ostensibly straight documentary photography. Certainly, the work has overtones of political subversion and engagement. Yet, exploring the photographs, one is struck by the fearless ambiguity of the images, which splice official royal, military and political portraits and architectural backgrounds with snake tails, vulture and bat heads, unidentifiable and often grotesque animal fragments, anonymous body parts and graphic female nudes. These monstrous constructions and grotesquely theatrical *mis-en-scene* happenings present evidence of a period of aesthetic and creative freedom far surpassing that found in the artist's other works.

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The instantaneous nature of the Polaroid as medium certainly facilitated and perhaps even encouraged the radically experimental nature of these images. The innovative working method developed by Golestan involved the temporary insertion, alteration and removal of various fragmentary cutouts over these found photographs, under the Polaroid lens. Specifically, Golestan used the first available Polaroid camera which allowed for manual control of exposure length, the SX-70. This approach to superimposition allowed for the creation of a private, virtual theatrical space below the lens, the images alternatively flooded with shifting levels of brightness and shadow. Golestan further embellishes the images by applying a range of hues through the use of different filters, an experimental—even playful—approach to photography that is antithetical to the pre-conceived aims of the photojournalist. Furthermore, the long and incremental exposure of components inserted and superimposed enabled an aesthetics of metamorphosis more literal and perhaps more potent than one relying solely on juxtaposition. Peering into these minute Polaroid squares we might discover the ghostly partial transformation and eerie slippage of a regal bust into that of a bat, or a vulture. The macabre and even visceral horror of these particular images evokes a sense of the Bataillian *informe*, the uncanny dissolution of boundaries within photographs.

The images in some cases appear to transition sequentially, akin to a series of film stills; for example, the sequential montage whereby the young Qajar monarch Ahmad Shah gains a pair of butterfly wings, before his face morphs into an eagle's head before flickering back between human and bat—alongside a variety of tonal and colour gradations. The construction and exploration of this mysterious, other wordly and ambiguous aesthetic, through this iterative series of rearranged elements, is anchored into (in a productive rather than reductive sense) an Iranian context by fragments of the real, identifiable in the appropriated nineteenth and twentieth century Qajar-era photographs. The small size and frequently dark, rather obscure images that draw in the viewer are suggestive of the secretive (or rather, private or individual), of the exposure of Golestan's interior world. This aspect of the images' materiality also gives a sense of physical compression—both of images-within-images, as well as the flickering of figure-ground reversals—which produce a material potency alongside the attraction and repulsion we feel towards the strange mystical human-animal hybrids displayed. The consciously composed and recomposed series of iterations of colour and hue, of light and dark, heighten the sense of a shifting, intangible representation, which abides by the logic of dreams, the compression of time and memory in dream-like fiction.

Beyond the uncanniness of the photographic double we have here a multiplication of photographic layers, which compels the viewer to read into and through the varied figurative, social and symbolic references nestled within. As such, metaphors of social violence are melded with a bodily vulnerability, a radical hybridity. European surrealists frequently expressed a profound anxiety with regards the mechanisation and technologisation of everyday life. In Golestan's series, the mechanical or technological appears as part of an ambiguous metaphor of social violence, whereby the cheeks of an open mouth cast in a deep red-orange hue are punctured with what appears to be a large, machinistic screw. Golestan was aware of other photographers who presented social violence through the rupturing or deformation of the body, such as the Polaroid works of the Greek photographer Lucas Samaras, whom he admired. However, Golestan's approach remains distinctly and persistently disengaged from the performative use of the body as medium or as site of spectacle. The body is distinctly not self-referential and its presence remains primarily anonymous, the figure remains generic outside the iconographic political figureheads in the found Qajar photographs. In one image, a bright, colour-saturated curvaceous female nude appears outstretched before a crowd of Qajar dignitaries,



their authority subdued and rendered somewhat banal by comparison and in the arresting presence of her eroticism. As the eye wanders North, the image is recast from the male perspective, whereby the absurdly monstrous female 'prey' lying before them adds a touch of humour to an otherwise bizarre and startling (though beautiful) image. In another, the same female body is axially rotated and appears to slide out of the mouth of an unidentifiable, monstrous amphibian, adjacent to another flesh-devouring monster, apparently guarded by a regal figure whose head has morphed into that of an eagle, against a backdrop of ancient ruins of the Citadel of Bam, all tinged with a warm, fleshy hue. Here, the humour often accompanying surrealistic renderings of the absurd is somewhat present—the monstrous and macabre flavour of these compositions provides a potent mode of deconstructing the iconographic images appropriated.

Instead, they are anchored within a personal artistic lexicon of tropes, of stock archetypes used repeatedly throughout the Polaroid series: the royal portrait, the vulture, the bat, the screw, the snake, the female body. As such, a fantastically diverse array of images is tied together by an element of repetition. Another core motif of these collages is the human-animal hybrid, which perhaps more than any of Golestan's other tropes yokes the context to vaster expanses of human time and history, given anthropomorphism's inter-cultural and temporal ubiquity. Whilst the hybridising of regal portraits through the superimposition of a vulture over a royal face certainly alludes towards subversive acts of defacement, we are never left with a simple void, instead we are presented with an array of anthropomorphic figures which resist overtly specific or contextual exegesis. Displacement onto the found Qajar images of figureheads and political men is a unifying thread. This makes a subversive gesture towards certain loci of power—regal or military—safely displaced onto the historical. Interestingly, and coincidentally, their year of creation is the same year in which Andy

Warhol recorded on Polaroid the Iranian royals of the time—Mohammad Reza Shah, the empress Farah Diba and the Shah’s sister, Princess Ashraf—and later immortalised them as silkscreen prints in his pantheon of glorified celebrities. By comparison, Golestan’s sensibility is clearly deeply personal, subversive, imaginary and it actively refuses to engage with the already iconographic, the celebrated. In Golestan’s case he obsessively conjures the demonic, the beastly. A parallel is more meaningfully found in the private sensibilities of the Iranian creative genius Bahman Mohassess, whose independent and individual artistic investigations in paint and bronze embodied a peculiarly dark Iranian existentialism, cynical and deeply suspicious of the human being, bent on portraying—lamenting—the condition of man. Golestan had close contact with Mohassess. The latter was a frequent guest and a close friend of Golestan’s father, the celebrated filmmaker, writer and translator Ebrahim Golestan. The young Golestan found in Mohassess an astute intellectualism, a sharp wit and an inspiring sensibility, a language close to his own. The animal-human hybrid creatures frequently occupy the latter’s work. The minotaur for example, that ancient mythological hybrid who dwelt at the heart of Pan’s labyrinth, and was significantly appropriated as an icon by the European surrealists, links Mohassess’ approach to perhaps a more universalist interest in the archaic, the timeless slippage between human and non-human categories.

Golestan’s use of the Polaroid captures his own elaborate feats of the imagination and as a series they embody a most powerful and relentless period of artistic, aesthetic experimentation. Produced within a single year, this artistic project seems to have possessed Golestan, as he himself repossessed found images and thrust them into a multi-faceted macabre maze of political and personal associations.

Notes

¹ Sattareh Farman Farmaian, founder and director of the School of Social Work, in interview with Kaveh Golestan, 1976

² The film director Kamran Shirdel recalls taking a stroll with fellow film director Bernardo Bertolucci in the neighbourhood of the Citadel, in reminiscing upon his time spent filming there. Interview with author, 2014

³ Arby Ovanessian, stage and screen director, tells of an account of Peter Brook’s visit to the theatre inside the Citadel. Interview with the author, 2011

⁴ See Mahmoud Zand Moghaddam and Nasser Zeraati, *Shahr-e No*, Bokartus, Gothenburg/Kitab-i Arzan, Stockholm, 2012, for an account of the Citadel with many references to its services, shops and activities

⁵ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcade Project*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2002

⁶ See Kamran Shirdel’s *Qaleh (The Women’s Quarter)*, a seminal documentary film about the Citadel dating from 1967. *Qaleh* was commissioned by the newly founded NGO The Women’s Organisation in 1967 and subsequently censored and banned by the Ministry of Culture. After the Islamic Revolution, Shirdel rescued what was intact of his original rushes, most of which had already been destroyed. He completed his documentary by animating a number of Golestan’s stills into the film. Shirdel later documented the torching of the Citadel

⁷ Morris Dickstein, cited in Susie Linfield, *The Cruel Radiance. Photography and Political Violence*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010, p. 234

⁸ Gary Gutting, ‘Crime and Punishment’, *Foucault: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, chapter 8; in reference to Groupe Informations sur les Prisons founded by Michel Foucault and Daniel Defer in the early 1970s

⁹ Kaveh Golestan, quoted by Kaveh Parham in *Kayhan* newspaper, 10 May, 1978

¹⁰ The original verse is “*Ke az div o dad maloulam o ensan-am arezoust*”, which translates loosely as “Weary of the demonic and beastly, I yearn for the human.”