

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

An Iranian-American Artist Revisits Images from the 1979 Revolution

by An Xiao

October 21, 2014



Taraneh Hemami's Theory of Survival Souvenir Shop reimagines iconic images from the revolution as affordable memorabilia (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

SAN FRANCISCO — Follow a major social movement today, and unless you can afford to travel onsite, you're likely to experience it through photos, hashtags, and video uploads. But a movement's record has always had global resonance, distributed through a mix of broadcast and pre-internet forms of citizen media like pamphlets, posters, and zines.

The archives of the Iranian Student Association (ISA) of Northern California capture imagery from the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the response material from Iranian-Americans in the Bay Area at the time. These archives form the

S O U T H E R N E X P O S U R E

backdrop of artist Taraneh Hemami's Theory of Survival: Fabrications. Fabrications is an ongoing show and series of events set up around the concept of a bazaar and night market. She invited 12 local artists to participate and set up their work in Southern Exposure's gallery space, and each weekend, they've held a series of community events.

As Hemami noted in an interview with Hyperallergic, the concept is influenced by the ISA's methods of community gathering, where large numbers of activists, artists, and journalists gather to research and discuss creative opportunities for exchange and advocacy. The events have been centered around readings, music, performance, and conversation, with the gallery at Southern Exposure divided into booths, each artist's work appearing in discrete segments like stalls in a public market.

"It is very important to us," noted Hemami of the many everyday objects like t-shirts, coasters and rubber stamps, "to disseminate and distribute the objects and souvenirs as widely as possible ... [and] to give their ownership an ordinary flavor — less exotic and precious and more common and everyday."

Fabrics and clothing, so common to bazaars and markets, plays a key role in Fabrications. Haleh Niazmand's 2DIE4 series fashions the "dissident iconography of Iran" into high fashion items, playing with how activist imagery is repurposed in capitalist societies, while Taravat Talepasand takes a more casual approach with the Islamic Youth series, consisting of t-shirts, tank-tops, and sweatshirts with pictures of young Muslim women wearing sunglasses and smoking cigarettes.

The songs of Ferguson and Hong Kong are today boosted worldwide thanks to YouTube, but soundscapes have been a critical part of every revolution, especially as a broadcast strategy in the 20th century. Morehshin Allahyari's #AsYouScrollDown makes aural — in vinyl format — the top Tweets from the country's recent Green Movement; Ala Ebtekar's Mixtapes series combines music and news records from the 1979 revolution. Ebtekar's choice of format makes the audio virtually inaccessible to modern audiences, Allahyari's choice of medium makes it as hip as social media itself.

Hemami's own contribution to the show turns the ISA's archives into a souvenir shop, with gift wrap, coasters, and tote bags, reimagining iconic images from the 1979 Iranian Revolution as handcrafted memorabilia available for purchase. The image of the raised fist and a young woman flashing a "V" with her fingers while holding up a rifle reminded me of how iconic these gestures were during the social movements in the 70s and 80s, from the Black Power Movement in the United States to the People Power Movement in the Philippines. Visitors could stamp these icons onto free cards distributed at the show, and I ended up purchasing a small coaster of the woman making the "V" sign.

Hemami told me that the participating artists are a mix of several generations of immigrants to the US. While Fabrications is intended for all audiences and is quite accessible to those unfamiliar with the country's recent history, the show is also a way for Hemami to start a conversation across generations of Iranians, many of whom are reluctant to speak about their memories of the period.

"It is difficult to engage [Iranian activists and revolutionaries from the time] in a direct conversation of the complicated layers of that very personal history. Intergenerational conversations have become a strategy for us to use to engage them in a roundabout way," Hemami said.

In this way, the bazaar format helped create new spaces for conversation, including a thoughtful event held October 5 called "Connecting History to the Present." Organized by Hemami with Deirdre Visser from the California Institute of Integral Studies, the event invited people of diverse backgrounds to convene for food and conversation in small groups around their personal histories, before sharing with the larger group.

As Visser explained to Hyperallergic, the format was designed as much to disrupt conventional hierarchies implied by a panel format as to engage attendees with the broader themes of the show. But it also elicited a verbal engagement that brought together perspectives of first, second, and third generation immigrants from places like Korea, Guatemala, Sri Lanka, and others.



During the “Connecting History to the Present,” attendees gathered for group conversations—just one of many events held during the month

Poet and cognitive scientist Pireeni Sundaralingam led participants in an exercise borrowing from the research of clinical psychologist Thomas Cottle. Drawing circles representing past, present, and future, participants revealed how their histories intersected with their current lives and imagined futures. Each participant had wildly different representations, from intersecting circles like Venn diagrams, nested ones like Russian matryoshka dolls, and circles that didn’t intersect at all.

Sundaralingam told Hyperallergic that, “Given that our event sought to engage us in discussion around the nature and function of history, I felt that it was important to acknowledge that we possess such disparate models of the world, even when it comes to thinking about abstract time, independent of specific historical events. I wanted to make the invisible, visible, to see what assumptions we each carry regarding the unfolding of Time and History.”

Situated in the Mission District, a part of San Francisco with a deep connection to social movements and culture, the show inevitably brings up questions about how imagery, archives, and movements intersect in a hyper-documented present. Sanaz Mazinani’s Conference of the Birds addresses this most directly, with an array of flags, each of which blends images from the Occupy Movement and the Arab Spring. Both of these events were famous for their innovative uses of social media in very different contexts to document and disseminate images to the broader public.

On my way out from the event, I passed by — and documented — a piece of street art on cement that said “415 to 510” and “Guess I’ll move to Oakland!” Referencing recent struggles with gentrification in the neighborhood (and the respective area codes of San Francisco and Oakland). The stencil was just one of many street works created in the Mission (and presumably by a former Mission resident), a neighborhood famous for its gorgeous murals.

S O U T H E R N E X P O S U R E

Decades later, archives of these works may present a new way to engage with and remember this particular moment in San Francisco history.

The success of Fabrications lies in making the archives feel alive, rich, and relevant today, while playing with the idea that any archive can present a definitive view of history. Whether on Instagram and YouTube today or in pamphlets and posters in 1979, images, sound, and iconography play a major role in every social movement, but they are but one perspective on incredibly complex and multilayered events. They can inspire participants, and they can be bought and sold out of their original contexts. Hemami and the artists participating in this show embrace this reality, asking questions and provoking conversation more than providing definitive answers.

“Having a space of gathering has been at the center of this project,” Hemami said during the October 5 event. “The dialogue begins there. The artists have helped turned the gallery space into a place of gathering for the two months that we have occupied it.”

Theory of Survival: Fabrications continues through October 25 at Southern Exposure (3030 20th Street, San Francisco). It closes with a final Saturday Bazaar at 6 pm.