

Sheida Soleimani

Visual Art as Political Activism

Born and raised in the USA, the young Persian-American artist Sheida Soleimani has never set foot in her parents' homeland, and her knowledge of this is based more than anything else on oral history, as well as on images and media coverage gleaned largely from the Internet. Her father was a highly engaged political activist, who, in the course of the revolution of 1979, was forced to flee the country via Turkey to ensure his own safety. Her mother was then arrested and tortured to force her to provide information about her husband's whereabouts. During the artist's childhood, her parents repeatedly told her explicitly brutal stories from these turbulent times—perhaps as a mixture of self-therapy and the preservation of history. The scope of human rights violations in the Islamic Republic Iran continues to be devastating, especially with regard to women, who have virtually no rights and are all too often the victims of inhumane acts of violence and cruel executions. From the enlightened democratic perspective of the West, Sheida Soleimani observes the incidents in her parents' homeland and feels a profound sense of responsibility to use her art to make the fates of these women more known among a wider public. It has thus become her political and social legacy to draw attention to the current situation in Iran so that the victims can be given a face and thus not fall into oblivion.

Sheida Soleimani scans the Internet for images and further information on countless victims of the atrocities carried out by the Iranian regime. Delara Darabi, Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani, Nedā Āghā-Soltān, Reyhaneh Jabbari, Khadijeh Shahla Jahed, Zahra Bahrami—the names of these women mean nothing to most people in the USA and Europe. Yet, in recent years, each of them has been sentenced to life imprisonment, publically executed or murdered in cold blood in broad daylight. After seven years imprisonment, Reyhaneh Jabbari, for example, was executed by hanging on the 25th of October 2014. Her crime? The fatal injuring of her rapist while attempting to defend herself and flee.

From a distance, Sheida Soleimani's images reveal a certain sense of beauty. The coloration and composition are deliberately highly sensual and even seductive. On the one hand, this proves to be a clever visual strategy, which the artist consciously employs to grab the viewer's attention. On the other hand, the "beauty" in her images can also be understood as a subtle reference to femininity, which all too often proved to be fatal for the victims. Upon closer inspection, the ostensible beauty is transformed into an image of cruelty. Blurriness and pixelization betray the digital sources of her motifs. What at first glance appears to be a photo-collage à la Photoshop is actually a realistic representation of a tableau created specifically for the image, in which large cloth dolls stand in a surrogates for the protagonists on a stage embellished with carefully selected, symbolically charged props.

Neda (2014), for example, presents the face of Nedā Āghā-Soltān, a 26-year-old student of philosophy, who was shot to death in 2009 during a protest rally against the re-election of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad—presumably by the Basidsch-e Mostaz'afin, a paramilitary militia of the Iranian regime. The incident was

caught on video by a passer-by and immediately uploaded onto the Internet. Stills from the video depict the face of the young woman in the moment of her death. In Soleimani's image, a small ladder symbolizes a public execution, while cubes of sugar are a reference to slaughtering (in Iran, animals are often given sugar cubes to pacify them before they are slaughtered). The withering hyacinth in the lower right corner serves as a *vanitas* motif (in the context of the Persian Nowruz festival, the hyacinth symbolizes the coming of spring).

In the tradition of politically motivated collage artists such as Hannah Höch and Raoul Hausmann in Berlin in the 1920s—or perhaps much more following the example of the accusatory photomontages of their artist colleague John Heartfield, who began warning against the threat of the Nazi regime at a very early stage—Sheida Soleimani's images and objects walk a thin line between art and activism. By no means “art for the sake of art”, these haunting works make use of aesthetic strategies in order to draw attention to the fates of countless women in Iran in the hopes of provoking change in the politics of her parents' homeland. With her art, Soleimani creates a kind of Memorial to the Unknown Victim and makes an important contribution against forgetting.