

Sheida Soleimani's HOTBED: A Carnavalesque Mix of the Ironic and Sinister

By Jane Ursula Harris. Published on the occasion of the exhibition *Sheida Soleimani: Hotbed*,
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Born to political refugees who fled Iran in the wake of the 1979 Revolution, Sheida Soleimani's experience growing up Iranian-American was paradoxically shaped by nostalgia and trauma alike. Like many of her generation, she found herself caught between two Irans: the one her parents once knew and loved before the revolution; and the one that nearly killed them. The racist ignorance of an American society that could not distinguish between the two, which she also endured as a result of her heritage, added to her conflicted sense of identity and belonging.

This double consciousness, not surprisingly, is foundational to her photo-based multimedia practice, which exposes injustice and hypocrisy with no regard for allegiance. Whether redressing human rights abuses enacted under Iran's repressive theocracy, or the racism and xenophobia she encountered at home, her acerbic, penetrating eye spares no one. And while her primary subject matter has been the ever volatile terrain of US-Iranian relations, and the military industrial complex that fuels it, the scope of her vision - with its desire to seduce viewers rather than shock them - refuses didactic, linear readings.

Following in the footsteps of her activist parents, Soleimani's bold and defiant willingness to speak her own truth has nonetheless put her at risk. What to a western audience may appear ironic or oblique, is provocative and egregious to an Islamic regime. Her exhibition, *To Oblivion*, 2017, for example, which confronted the ongoing disappearance/murder of Iranian female dissidents under Sharia law, led to death threats, and the eventual revoking of the artist's dual citizenship. Inspired by her own mother's stories of torture and imprisonment, the works in this show consisted primarily of collaged theatrical-styled backdrops, and soft bust-like sculptures, all imprinted with censored photos of the missing women. Soleimani's research into their stories required covert contact with Iranian human rights lawyers and family members gone underground, not to mention dangerous forays into the dark web where many of the photos were extracted.

Part tableaux, part still life, Soleimani's method of world-building enacts a deliberate spatial and conceptual ambiguity. The format of her constructed sets, with their dizzying conflation of 2-D and 3-D elements, is designed to force viewers to consider what is real, and what is illusion. It's a process the artist has been refining for years, one that underscores the dissembling nature of media itself, particularly in the age of Fake News. That these tableaux are typically represented through photographs that flatten their flimsy hand-built fictions only intensifies their mystifying conceit. Many viewers, in fact, assume the resulting images are made in Photoshop. Soleimani's relationship to photography, a medium she believes has historically been used to flatten and oppress bodies, and her description of the lens as "a dick that penetrates the world", further informs this conceit.

In Soleimani's current exhibition, *HOTBED*, 2020, which combines new and older works, the monumental scale of such photographs takes on the aura of advertising; traces of commercial and strobe lighting evoking an autocratic, Debordian sense of spectacle. Made before Biden won the 2020 presidential election, the works range from 2015-2020. Their subject matter, refracted through Soleimani's dark campy wit, casts a wide net, exploring the thin line between Trump's authoritarianism and that of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's; the devastating effects of US sanctions; Iran's response to the COVID-19 pandemic; the geopolitical and environmental consequences of the oil trade; the misogyny of anti-secularism; the military industrial complex, and the impact of social media/pop culture on uprisings.

As with all her work, Soleimani offers us a complex, subjective take on "truth" through a symbolic lexicon of images and materials, some obvious, some cryptic. Materials such as frosting, bubble gum, fish, lime powder, bar bells, slices of bread, toy missiles, and Kleenex are physically composed and integrated with photographic images of military maps, missile signals, gold bars, electrical outlets, wrestlers, and images of Pamela Anderson from her Baywatch days. It's a panoply of references that in prints like *Westoxification*, 2018, featuring a Busby Berkeley-esque extravaganza of swirling Andersons, humorously spoofs Iran's fear of the West. The Orientalist gaze with its penchant for sexual fantasies and images of a barbaric Middle East is also skewered as well.

The oldest work, *B-Team, Iran Deal*, 2015, features black-and-white images of Iranian wrestlers, symbolizing Iran's national sport, and the 2015 Iran Nuclear Deal wrestled together by the UN Security Council and the Islamic Republic of Iran. In a nod to Hannah Höch's iconic photomontage, *Cut with the Dada Kitchen Knife through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch in Germany* (1919), Soleimani has replaced the faces of world leaders - Angela Merkel, John Kerry, etc. - with wrestlers, framing their action with colored cut-outs of the latter's hair and beards. The distortions in scale (enhanced by the presence of 3-D props like towels and energy drinks) and the cascade of her hybrid figures echo Höch's Dadaist masterpiece.

Hotbed, 2020, from which the show takes its name, invokes another form of effacement. The photograph is based on the now infamous televised address by Iran's Deputy Health Minister, Iraj Harirchi, during which he assured Iranian folks he had COVID under control. In her inimitable way, Soleimani's satirization of the minister's ludicrous assertions, made as he wiped a sweaty brow, and the day before he tested positive himself, is a carnivalesque mix of the ironic and sinister.

Submerging all but the plaid-suited arm, hand, and shoulder of the Minister - all of which she outlines in lime powder - beneath fragmented aerial shots of cemetery plots, she creates a chaotic architecture of death. Harirchi's hand, which clasps a tissue to his missing face, is framed on one side by a roll of toilet paper that unravels beneath him, and a strand of white chain-link on the other.

On November 3rd, in another absurdist television address to the Iranian people, the Ayatollah proclaimed: "It's obvious that when a regime reaches this point, it will not live for much longer and will be destroyed". He was mocking the U.S. 2020 presidential election. Coming from one of the world's most corrupt dictators, it's a hilariously deranged statement, especially given Joe Biden's eventual defeat of Trump. And yet for a minute there, Trump's authoritarianism was giving the Ayatollah's a run for his money. Soleimani's diptych-esque wallpaper works, *1/8/2020* and *PS752*, with their finger-pointing showdown, are a hyperbolic embodiment of that, and a commentary on the ensuing blame game that exacerbated the decline of US-Iranian relations. The nearly identical cropped gray-suited forearms of each leader centered in these respective works are made virtually indistinguishable. So too, the hawk and dove perched atop each respective finger are turned into useless, empty signifiers, as interchangeable as Trump and Khamenei's swaggering threats.

Now that Trump has been ousted, one can dream that Khamenei could be too. In the meantime, Soleimani will continue to make art both seductive and tragic, and always with her trademark cunning humor. As media blackouts, food shortages, hyperinflation, and state-sanctioned torture continue to devastate Iranian lives, we can be sure that her deft send-ups of corruption and duplicity will point a finger at us, insisting we question what we choose to see and believe.