

Viscous Violence: Sheida Soleimani's Oil-Slicked Nightmare

by Kate Kraczon. Published in the Houston Centre for Photography, spring 2020 issue.

Gulf of Oman. Nuclear deal. Sanctions. Coronavirus. The contemporary geopolitical entry points into Sheida Soleimani's practice are expansive. And urgent. Her relentless focus on the petroleum industry, and on the actors and materials that define *The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries* (OPEC) and other nebulous international networks, produces bodies of work that are similarly mercurial. Born to Iranian refugees, Soleimani's photographs collapse personal and global narratives, nearly dissolving them. She has spoken openly about her family's history and its effect on her work—specifically her parents' experiences as political prisoners in the 1980s—and yet I want to contextualize her practice locally. That she is a New England based artist, that I am writing this essay in Providence.

The New Bedford Whaling Museum was established in 1907 to chart the growth (and demise) of the whaling industry in the region, once the largest whaling port and processor of whale oil in the world and the wealthiest U.S. city per capita. Used primarily for lamps, whale oil, like crude, was divided according to type. Sperm oil, which burned cleaner, was preferred for lighting and industrial lubrication, though lamp oil and goods such as soap and margarine were produced from other species. As less expensive alcohol and, ultimately, petroleum-based illuminants entered the market in the late 19th century (and with the rise of wages in the United States) New Bedford's fleet of whaling ships diminished dramatically and the city rapidly industrialized.

The parallels between crude and whale oils are nearly tautological, the extraction of limited natural resources, the shift to alternate forms of energy when these resources show signs of exhaustion. What distinguishes the visual histories of contemporary petroleum production and the whaling industry of the previous century is the muted violence of the former, and the explicit, often celebratory violence of the latter. Whaling museums cannot avoid this violence. The tools used to hunt, kill, and carve the animals are installed alongside paintings, photographs, and works on paper that gruesomely depict the harvesting of whale oil for profit. Artists across centuries and continents illustrated these brutal encounters, the agonizing deaths of the whales, the deadly, debilitating work of the sailors. Capitalist exploitation of both these animals and the workers hired to kill them was shifted—gradually—towards an energy source external to the United States, and the violence was sanitized. As Soleimani is acutely aware, the bio-political warfare on Middle Eastern populations has gained little visibility in western media.

As I write this New England based essay, Kent Monkman's monumental history paintings *Welcoming the Newcomers* and *Resurgence of the People* (both 2019) hang in *The Great Hall* of the Metropolitan Museum, and Kehinde Wiley's *Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps* (2005) faces off with Jacques-Louis David's *Bonaparte Crossing the Alps* (1800–1) at the Brooklyn Museum. Both artists offer an alternative to the Euro-centric subjecthood that dominates major museums across the United States (and Canada, where Monkman is based). We are in a moment of historical reimagining, and these artists harness the aesthetic powers of oil painting to destabilize the medium and adjacent ideologies. To question it, play with it, exploit it. Soleimani gestures towards this genre and implodes it.

Though via the lens, Soleimani's work is less in conversation with the histories of Dada and Surrealist photography than with an outright refusal to narrativize the neo-colonialism that grips the Middle East, and particularly Iran. Though drawing on the visual maneuvers of the pre-war avant-garde, she turns to 17th century Dutch still life; the multi-figure history painting; the traditional portrait. Swapping decadent piles of fruits, spices, and silks for piles of petroleum products, Soleimani links her practice to these four-hundred-year-old records of colonial conquest. And, perversely, to the "haul" videos of the internet, the contemporary equivalent. Accrual of wealth, of "stuff," is signified as grotesque and explicitly violent in Soleimani's photographs. Their intentional illegibility is an act of defiance, denying the didactic strategies that many artists utilize. Her images are messy, confusing, chaotic. Splattered with oil (or bubblegum), these viscous, gooey materials provide cartographical channels between objects, actions, and political figures without explanation. They require a self-imposed form of research by the viewer, your own personal google session.

The web remains Soleimani's primary source of imagery, both easily accessed and through deeper, darker sources. For the 2016 series *To Oblivion*, Soleimani collaged photographs of women executed in Iran that she received directly from their families using proxy servers. For *Medium of Exchange* (2018), she produced photomontages of her research into the relationships among OPEC countries and the United States. Figures such as *Dick Cheney* and *Venezuela's Eulogio Del Pino* are printed as masks, worn by femme reading bodies, and often posed in sexual suggestive arrangements. Whereas Monkman and Wiley impart dignity on new historical players—Monkman's alter-ego *Miss Chief Share Eagle Testickle* or Wiley's rococo portraits of men he encounters on the streets of Harlem—Soleimani veers towards sexual humiliation, even abjection (Cindy Sherman's *Grotesque* series from the late 1980s is certainly an inspiration). The homosocial spaces of our plutocracies are rendered absurd, oil slicked sex parties with frat-house vibes.

To produce these psychosexual tableaux, Soleimani printed large-format images of government and corporate leaders to fashion masks for her models. Her sets are similarly collaged from printed photographs of internet-sourced aerial maps, oil fields, cities, and corporate logos. Images are cut and often ripped, the rough edges on view. Linear perspective, long heralded as a form of artistic progression, is skewed as space is flattened on set. That her production is understood as analog is crucial to the artist; Soleimani views this flattening as a form of violence. Humor is often injected into these photographs, but they are ultimately horrific. Bodies are ripped and slashed, dismembered arms and hands frame basketballs, dumbbells, and, yes, chewing gum made from varieties of crude. A sludge-filled nightmare of our contemporary historical moment that rivals the bloodiest, most heartbreaking image in New Bedford's museum.