

MEANWHILE



SHIRANA SHAHBAZI



BARBICAN ART GALLERY, LONDON
SWISS INSTITUTE, NEW YORK

FOREWORD

At a time when there are many pictures and signs without words, and life is dominated more by pop icons than by lexical signs, the photographs of Shirana Shahbazi stand out for their artistic assertion that they are more than just mere images. They maintain a well regulated distance both from the subject chosen and the viewer. Whether dealing with a person or object, life becomes the copy, the catalogue of itself.

Light and its direction, colors or indeed their absence, are in the foreground. People and objects are classified as in a list in which life is systematically reconstructed. Shahbazi's still lifes avoid the feverish opulence of a Caravaggio, yet flirt with art history, and in their graphic colorfulness are reminiscent of my grandmother's patterned Resopal chopping boards.

In her book *Kunst als Beschreibung*, Svetlana Alpers unmasked 17th-century Dutch painting as a purely formal exercise, which is primarily about what presents itself to the actual eye. She demonstrated that this painting was a component in a unique visual culture, an art that above all emphasized the craft aspect and set out above all to depict the visible world, in line with the intense "enjoyment of seeing" of the Netherlanders of that time.

Shirana Shahbazi requires a similarly straightforward way of reading her own pictures. They have hardly any references beyond themselves. Any interpretation that diverts from their simple purpose of being pictorial is wide of the mark.

The exhibition at the Swiss Institute is the most comprehensive show of Shirana Shahbazi's work to have been staged in America. MEANWHILE is a three-dimensional installation on a black ground, which weaves photography and painting, still lifes and portraits, butterflies and skulls, into a virtually encyclopedic total picture. In spite of the diversity of what is on offer, it is a place of quiet observation which—as the title of the exhibition indicates—opens up its own space in time.

The Swiss Institute warmly thanks both Maja Hoffmann and Stanley Buchthal, the LUMA Foundation, and Fogal, Switzerland, for their generous support of MEANWHILE. Salon 94 has taken care of and sponsored the catalogue from the start with great enthusiasm—I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn and Fabienne Stephan for this. I would also like to thank Pro Helvetia, the Board of the Swiss Institute, in particular the two co-chairs Fabienne Abrecht and Dieter von Graffenried, and the whole SI team for their tremendous commitment. And first and foremost the artist herself, for the intense "enjoyment of seeing" the visible world, which her art provokes again and again.

Gianni Jetzer
Director
The Swiss Institute – Contemporary Art

INTRODUCTION

Shirana Shahbazi is an artist who challenges our expectations, in ways which are deceptively subtle. She plays with different genres within the tradition of art—still life, landscape, portraiture—and renders her imagery in diverse media—silkscreen, digital and analogue prints, painting, and breathtakingly fine, handcrafted silk carpets. She places dissimilar images together in order to calibrate the fine differences (whether formal or cultural) between them. Those differences are embedded in the work, but remain elusive: “The viewer is confronted with a picture that seems familiar in a way and yet at the same time is different. But then you couldn’t point out those differences,” she says. It is tempting to extrapolate from this the basis of a political manifesto: a call for an understanding of cultural difference, played out in subtly shifting shades, rather than abrupt contrasts. I am sure the artist would resist such a grandiose claim. But suffice it to say, she has an unerring ability to create imagery fixed in a state of underplayed tension between the known and the unknown: too familiar and it would tip into cliché, too exotic and it would descend into stereotype.

You might say that Shahbazi’s work is neither Eastern nor Western, but at the same time, both. Are the gorgeous fruits and flowers and birds in her recent works of still life, for example, a throwback to Iranian tradition? Perhaps to the *tazhib a tashir*, a variant of Persian miniature, imported from China to Iran at the time of Kadjar dynasty, when beautiful images of roses, tulips, irises, chrysanthemums,

doves, and nightingales flowed from the delicate brushes of Persian painters? Or maybe they belong more fully to the European canon, to the language of 17th-century “nature morte” artists, for whom the brief beauty of flowers and the plumage of dead birds were an ever present reminder of the shortness of life? If Shirana Shahbazi’s iconography is unlocatable, then so too is her aesthetic. Many artistic currents meet in her work: it cannot be reduced to a single source or simple influence. Her images glow, as if from the inside, with the luminosity of an historical miniature, while their vivid color is grafted onto the forthright compositions typical of a graphic artist or poster painter. That forthrightness is in turn rendered in precise detail with an observational register learnt from the modern photography tradition as exemplified by New Topographic photography, and latterly, the Düsseldorf School.

Shahbazi’s new work for the Barbican is the fifth in a series of specially created commissions conceived in relation to The Curve, a 90-meter long semi-circular gallery which wraps around the Centre’s concert hall. She has taken this unique opportunity to produce a major installation, which, for the first time in her practice, integrates wall painting based on her photographs with a variety of photographic prints from her existing repertoire as well as new images.

The Curve challenges artists to create ingenious responses to its distinctive interior architecture: these artists in turn push the Barbican team to make their ideas real. This sequence of new commissions, Curve Art, is as much about creation as presentation: our aim is to support the artistic process as well as the

artistic result. We are beholden to the generosity of the funders and partners who share this vision and the Barbican's desire to give artists the opportunity to realize new projects on an ambitious scale. Barbican Art Gallery is indebted to the Stanley Thomas Johnson Foundation, and to Marianne Burki, Head of Visual Arts, and Pierre Schaer at Pro Helvetia, Arts Council of Switzerland, who are ever energetic in their support of Swiss artists abroad. We are also very grateful to Shirana Shahbazi's representatives, Birgid Uccia and Bob van Orsouw at Galerie Bob van Orsouw, Zurich, and Jeanne Greenberg at Salon 94, New York. Projects on this scale are always the result of the skills of a team: I would like to acknowledge the essential contributions of the two painters, Siroos Shaghghi and Alireza Eidpour as well as of Nuri Koerfer and Fereshteh Hamidi-Moghaddam. The Barbican Art Gallery was pleased to collaborate with Lionel Bovier at JRP|Ringier in Zurich and Gianni Jetzer at the Swiss Institute in New York on this book, which has been beautifully designed by Manuel Krebs and Dimitri Bruni of NORM. For the Barbican, Lydia Yee, Curator, and Ariella Yedgar, Assistant Curator, have guided the project to its conclusion with consummate skill and understanding.

And finally I would like to thank Shirana Shahbazi for accepting this invitation, for consistently challenging our expectations, and for showing us the shade rather than the contrast.

Kate Bush
Head of Art Galleries
Barbican Centre



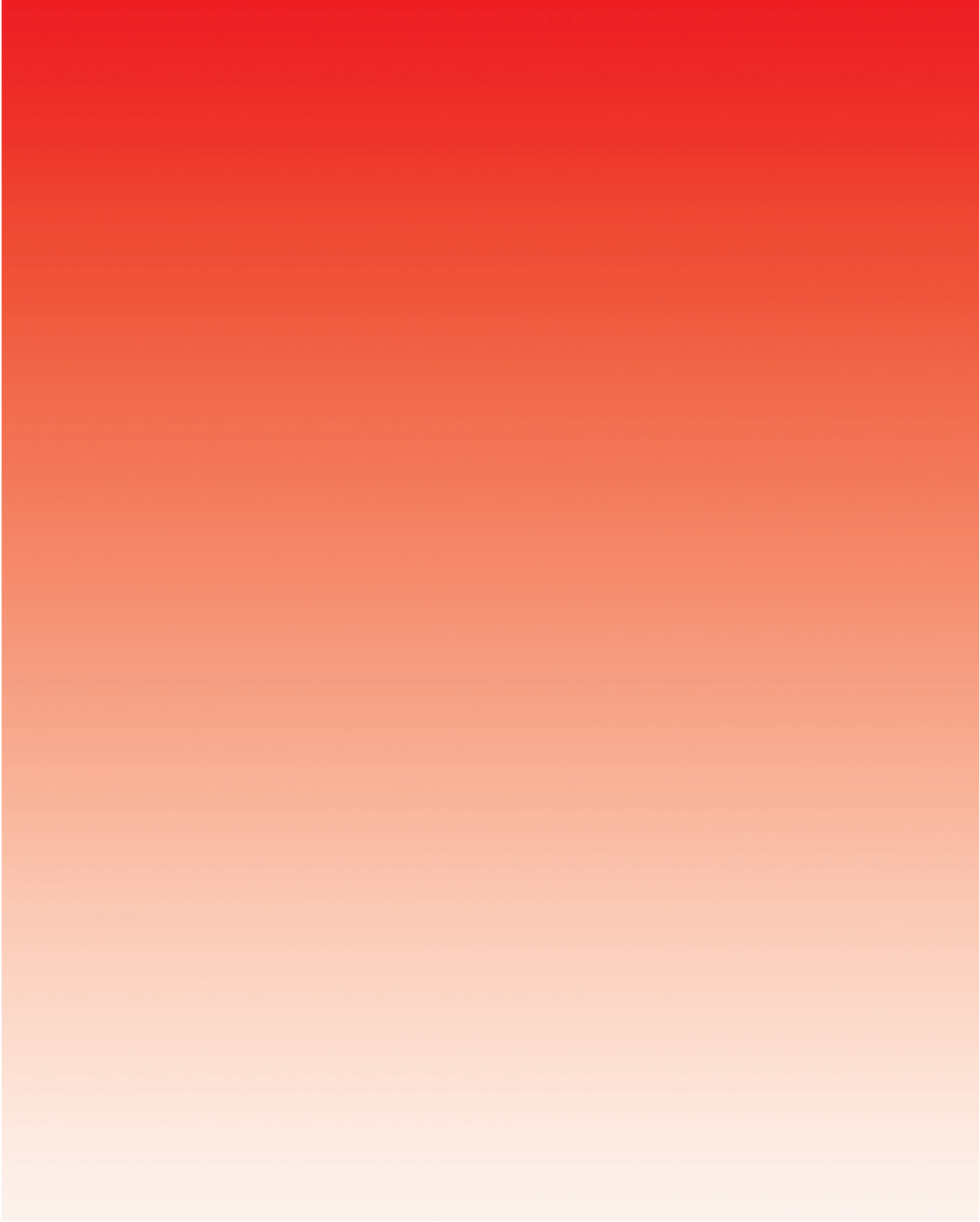








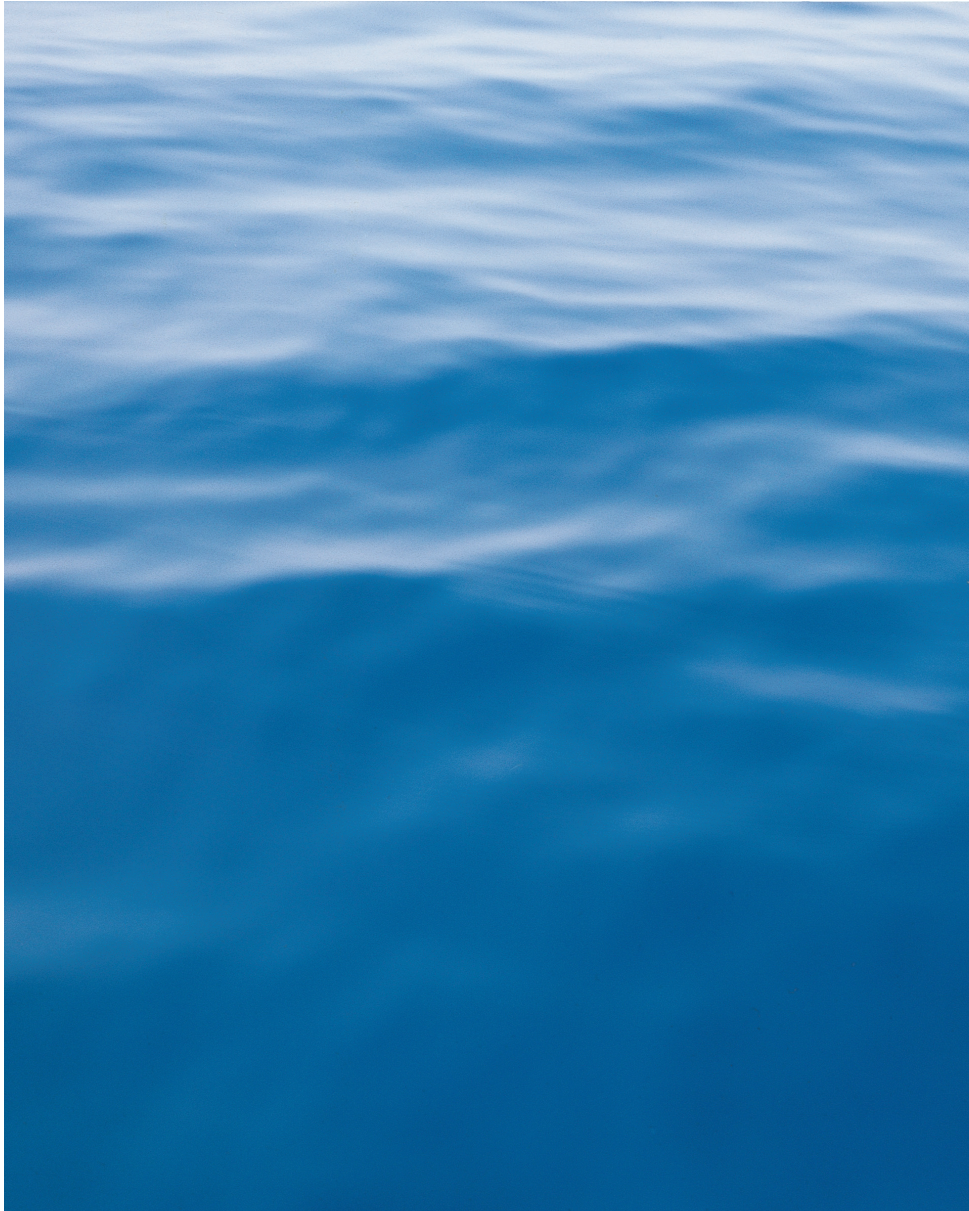


























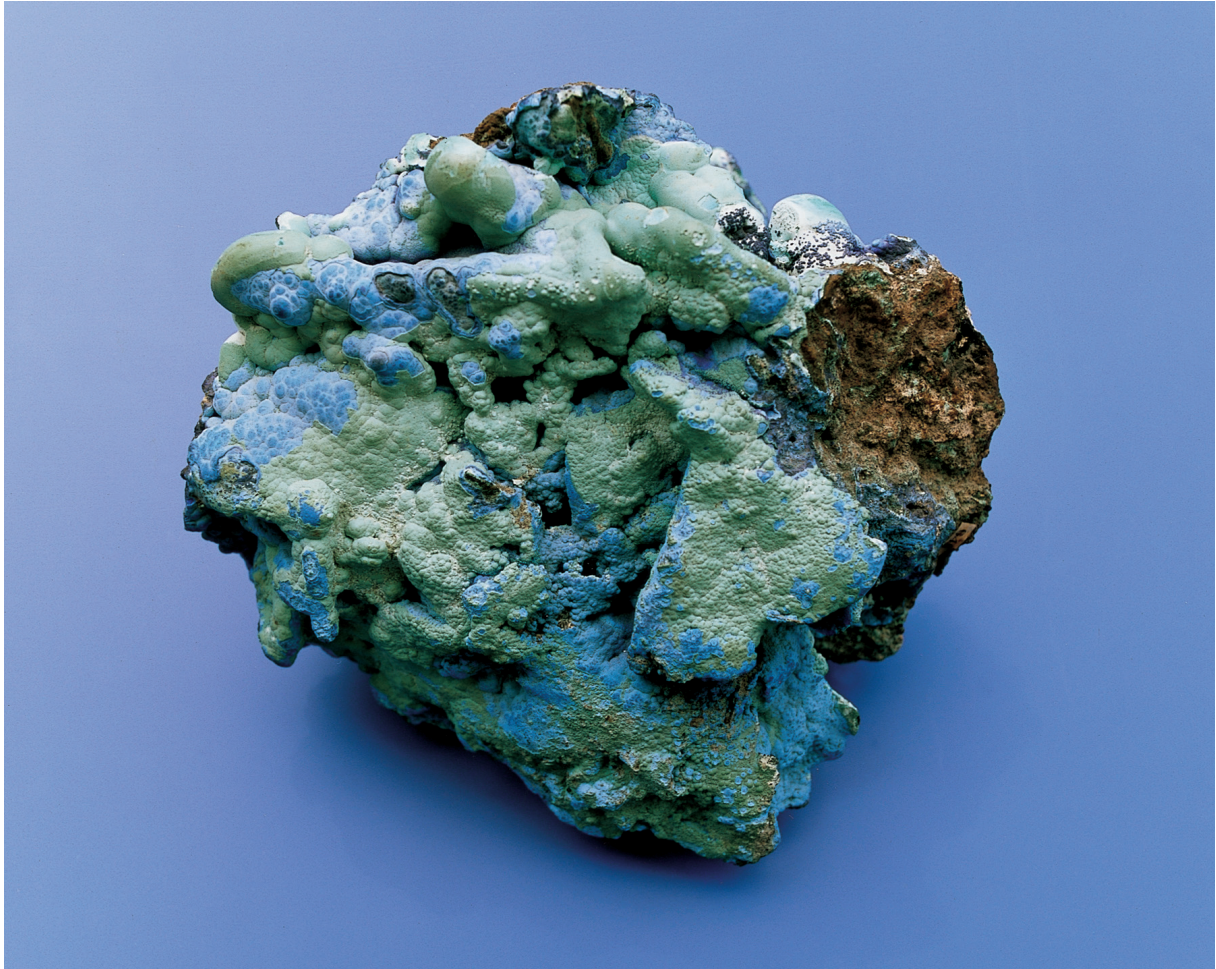




























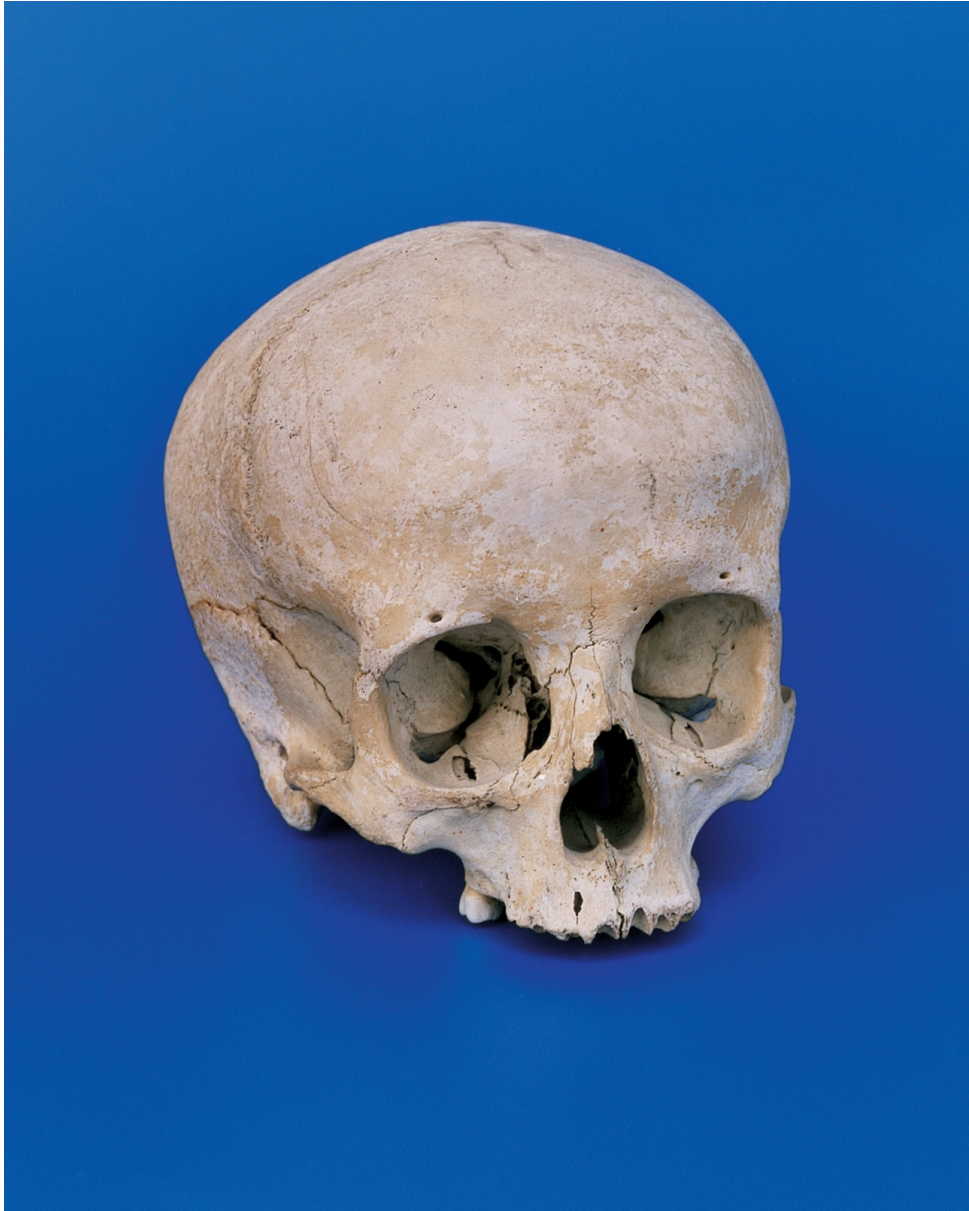














SEEING THINGS

Ali Subotnick

One sign of a good artist is when they infect your worldview. After looking at Shirana Shahbazi's photographs, seeing will never be the same again. A bird hangs from a string, but not limp like road kill; this bird with its brilliant orange and black bordered feathers is a hero, a martyr splaying its wings in all their glory. A path in the woods, a road to nowhere, and a clear blue sky above the treetops testify to possibility and hope, escape and challenge. A branch with fresh apples ready for picking, totally displaced and set on a bright pink background next to a beautiful girl in black and white. She faces us, but is looking to the far right, her head almost turning around to follow what is just disappearing, but it is clearly not apples inspiring such an intense gaze. So what is the connection between the two? Eve and the apple would be much too easy. It is a story we are not yet privy to. A story still not completed when we see her again, in a three-quarters profile, looking this time to the far left, her eyes almost vanishing entirely into her head. But it is not just that the things you see in Shahbazi's photographs look different, it is the kind of impression that plants itself in your head, and every time a trigger image comes into view, you're reminded of how she's taught you to look at things differently. A bird is no longer a simple bird (fallen or flying). The bird now becomes an icon, a solitary image removed from its everyday uses and functions.

A pirate's booty still life on a stark black backdrop: a creamy white jawless skull matches a strand of pearls and pile of seashells, contrasting with the rich red roses, dusty supple grapes, and close to some rotting lemons. A butterfly stretched out, its wings spread proudly, but clearly not a natural position for these most beloved of bugs. It is frozen, caught, a painting with its exquisite patterns and

colors, so brilliant they bleed onto the next page, bright red at the top and fading to clear white at the bottom. Into a dark and stormy desert, and onto another still life, this time no skulls or shells, but berries and peaches with roses of violet and cream.

"If a mountain is depicted ... it has to be the highest, the most beautiful, important mountain," the artist recalled when speaking of the tradition of photography in Iran. And if her images appear banal, it is entirely intentional. She was inspired to take her early photographs of everyday people and things in Tehran precisely because in her native Iran it is not common to represent "normal" things. She plays against this tradition and turns the seemingly ordinary into something to contemplate and celebrate.

A skull—an artifact or evidence—sits like a diamond in a shop window, on display, set apart and enveloped in bright pink, absolutely isolated and removed from any indicators of why it exists. We are left to consider the skull as it is with no ties to history or even reality. This technique of isolation gives the objects an almost royal quality. As with relics or artifacts or precious jewels, we are forced to reconsider the familiar as objects of importance, items of a certain value.

An earlier image, [*Frau-01-2003*] (2003), features a young woman with smooth, ivory skin who reappears in three nearly identical pictures. Two capture her right profile, the other her left. Shahbazi then enlisted a traditional Iranian rug-maker to translate the photographs into small carpets, breaking each portrait down to its simplest form: threads and colors arranged in a grid. In its new incarnation the woman's skin looks even smoother; the carpet's soft texture nearly brings her to life. By involving commercial fabricators in her working process, Shahbazi solicits alternative interpretations that add new layers of meaning to the resulting works. She also took the opportunity to capture a woman as she transitions from girl- to womanhood by revisiting the model she

captured so elegantly as a young girl. She points her keen eye on the fine traces of aging and change, freezing the moments that slip away unnoticed. We see the girl again and again, in color, in profile, in black and white, always different, always the same, an enigma in progress.

On a slightly shocking red background, green leaves all but conceal a lonely fruit. At first the color combination recalls Christmas, but this is not holly. The ocean, a detail of a section of irregular waves, after a break, before the tide picks up, the calmness, never ending stillness and hope, bleed into the otherwise innocuous black and white picture of a country house with a yard full of strong trees and a truck parked in front: now it is another safe haven mirroring the ocean—it's home.

In an older photograph [*Baby-01-2000*] (2000), Shahbazi enlisted a commercial sign painter in Tehran—with whom she has collaborated for several years—to transform her photograph of a baby into a large-scale wall mural. In his hands the photograph is re-imagined, turned into a vibrant larger-than-life portrait on the side of a building, which Shahbazi then photographed, retrieving control over the photograph. Like the girl turning into a woman, each image of the baby freezes a stage in its life as an image, a representation of a fleeting moment.

He stares at you directly, without fear or judgment, a delicate cleft in his chin and slight arch in his right brow; there's a little tuft on the top of his head that needs patting down. The artist gives us a white page for breathing. And then a butterfly, captured in black and white; its timeless, and the colors even more beautiful when reduced to tone and sharp lines.

For the 2003 Venice Biennale Shahbazi gave viewers a new vision of the Madonna. Iranian sign painters filled a vast rounded vestibule with a wrap-around portrait of a bright-eyed young woman surrounded by huge white lilies. She invited us to literally

step inside her vision and re-imagine the announcement in a new day and age.

Supple, perfectly ripe pears, three of them, situated on a green screen followed by a purely purple screen, so perfect in saturation it needs no object to make it whole. A piece of coral bares its holes and crevices on a simple black background. The girl is back again, this time in color, her perfect profile turns with her eyes to the left; it is amazing how soft she becomes in color, how new and alive.

"Many aspects of a picture get forgotten or overlooked. In a picture you might see a woman with a veil, but you can also see many other things. How you read a picture is very complex, and that's the challenge of photography." This reveals so much about the artist's practice. She generously offers the viewer a wealth of information to dissect and interpret so each viewer sees an entirely different picture.

So perfect they could be plastic orchids of fuchsia orange and red, their delicate green stems and leaves set against the bright blue last seen in the ocean. Then the same plant again, in pink, a soft pink that draws out the violet of the flower, the orange of the leaves. And a furry, thick caterpillar turned butterfly so dramatic in its black and red and tan robe.

Shahbazi ventured into a natural history museum and spent a great deal of time studying and photographing the gems, butterflies, and crystals. Like a scientist or jeweler, she isolates the finest details that make each rock and wing formation unique. In capturing the seemingly mundane, she actually emphasizes the individuality of her subjects.

Another still life teaming with cucumbers, plums, flowers, and a bunch of grapes: the cucumbers an odd inclusion but formally a good fit. A rock with blue and light greens, coral, or a treasure of precious stones, it casts a subtle shadow. Nothing subtle in the combination of a duck wearing an emerald green mask, its head twisted uncomfortably atop its deli-

cate brown, black, and white feathers, sitting next to two perfect heads of lettuce and a textbook-ripe lemon. A recipe for an epicurean delicacy. A forest of tall trees whose tops we can't reach offers a feeling of safety like that of the calm ocean waves. Orchids with leopard-like spots dusting a few of their petals, in black and white, reduced to purity. A still life of apples, leaves, and flowers, a fragile branch reaching to the sky. The sky framing a great tree and mountaintop offering a glimpse of the edge of the world. Icicle-like appendages of a piece of coral, cut off from its roots, isolated in that exquisite blue.

From berries to a woman in profile the images mutate and become a part of a larger story when paired and combined with each other. Each presentation is carefully calculated to offer a different perspective, whether in an exhibition or a book. The combinations are never obvious or blatant, there's always an air of mystery or abstraction that goes back to the aura of royalty. She breathes new life into the people and things she photographs by isolating, drawing attention to their ordinariness which eventually becomes unique, and hinting at a relationship to other people, places, and things. She gives each image a story that can never be fully told without the participation and imagination of the viewer. Her eye is not passive and she requires that ours not be either.

A grand still life on black, a Christmas feast with three hanging birds in absolute dignity, holly and red berries, plums and a small bird cocooned uncomfortably on the side. A black-and-white still life of pumpkins and leaf-filled branches and the dusty fruits. And then the grand shell, its curving lines and grooves like the rings of an old tree. And the soft youth and beauty of the girl, gazing vaguely ahead, we see her right profile, her hoop earring and golden strands against the wheat-colored hair. Another piece of coral looks a lot like a bone and a blue wave of sky curves above a snow topped mountain,

or is it just a tonal play? More orchids, this time tall with proud dark petals in black and white. We return to the skull. This butterfly is nearly all brown with white icing-like ruffles, its lower wings stained with red, black, and a slight drip of orange.

Like a delicate spider spinning a web, she deftly manipulates viewers' perspectives: her mixture of Middle Eastern figures and urban scenes with Western landscapes and still lifes resists any easy initial political reading; instead the connections are left ambiguous and unresolved. To amplify this existential effect she prints her photographs in three different sizes and arranges disparate images alongside each other. Whether photographic prints, carpets, or murals, Shahbazi's view of one street, one person, or one city tells a story in which the viewer's own interpretation determines the ending.

Shahbazi's artistic practice derives from an intense attention to seeing and representation. Many of her photographs and other images appear familiar; we have seen portraits and landscapes much like hers, yet she looks beyond the surface of what is in front of her—two chickens with bright white polka-dotted feathers, a shiny bowl of fresh fruit, a skyscraper, a bride on her wedding day—to create images so sharp and vivid they seem almost unreal. These are not snapshots or travel pictures. From landscapes to still lifes, portraits, and travel photos, she wrestles with endless possibilities of objective representation of what she sees and how she sees.

All quotes from the artist taken from an interview with Michele Robecchi in *Flash Art* (233), November–December 2003.

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BIOGRAPHY

Shirana Shahbazi was born in 1974 in Tehran (Iran). In 1985, she moved to Germany, and in 1997 to Zurich, where she now lives and works. She studied photography and design at the Fachhochschule in Dortmund (1995–1997) and specialized in photography at the Hochschule für Gestaltung und Kunst (HGKZ) in Zurich (1997–2000).

After her studies, she received several prizes (the Citigroup Private Bank Photography Prize in 2002, the Swiss Federal Art Prize in 2004 and 2005) and was invited to residencies in New York (Atelier Stipendium der Stadt Zürich, 2002) and Berlin (Atelier Stipendium der Stiftung Landis & Gyr, 2005).

She has solo exhibitions at the Photographers' Gallery in London (2001), the Bonner Kunstverein in Bonn (2002), the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago (2003), the Wrong Gallery in New York (2004), the Centre d'Art Contemporain in Geneva (2005), Milton Keynes Art Gallery (2006), and the Raum für Fotografie of the Sprengel Museum in Hanover (2006), among others.

Her work was included in numerous group exhibitions, such as *M Family*, Migros Museum, Zurich, and *Das Versprechen der Fotografie*, Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt, in 2001; *Everland*, Expo 02, Biel, *Girls Night Out*, Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, *Nation*, Kunstverein Frankfurt, and *Identität Schreiben*, Galerie für zeitgenössische Kunst, Leipzig, in 2003; *Non Toccare la Donna Bianca*, Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, in 2004; *Universal Experience: Art, Life and the Tourist's Eye*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, and *Rundlewelten*, Gropiusbau, Berlin, in 2005; *Reale Fantasien*, Fotomuseum, Winterthur, and *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 2006. She also participated to the Venice Biennale

in 2003, the 2nd Prague Biennale in 2005, the 7th Sharjah Biennial in 2005, and the 4th Berlin Biennale in 2006.

With the collective SHAHRZAD (Rachid Tehrani, Shirana Shahbazi, and Tirdad Zolghadr), she exhibited at the Kunsthalle St.Gallen in 2002; the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, and the Centre d'Art Contemporain in Geneva, in 2004; and the Kunsthaus Glarus, in 2005; while they also published five issues of an eponym journal (2002–2007) and a book, entitled *History*, by JRP|Ringier (2005).

Her work has been published in numerous catalogues and magazines, and she has realized four books: *Goffare Nik/Good Words*, codax publisher, Zurich (2001); *Risk Is Our Business*, Swiss Re Centre for Global Dialogue, Zurich (2004); *Accept the Expected*, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Cologne (2005); and *Wer drei Mal die gleiche Bar betritt hat ein Zuhause im Stehen* (with Judith Kuckart), JRP|Ringier, Zurich (2006).

Shirana Shahbazi is represented by the gallery Bob van Orsouw, Zurich, and Salon 94, New York.

SHIRANA SHAHBAZI MEANWHILE

EXHIBITIONS

SWISS INSTITUTE | Contemporary Art, New York
September 12–October 27, 2007

SI

Director: Gianni Jetzer
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Administration Associate: Celeste Balducci
Gallery Manager: Evi Vingerling
Installation Team: Mike Levy, Owen Gray
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Curator: Lydia Yee
Assistant Curator: Ariella Yedgar

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