

## Under the Eye of Colossus

**Amna Malik**

The urban spaces of cosmopolitan cities throughout the world bear a degree of uniformity, aspiring to a horizon of shining glass and steel towers as symbols of their modernity and to varying degrees littered with billboards bearing signs of commodities. In Tehran where an increasingly youthful population has access to almost everything that can be found in the US, these billboards are nowhere to be seen. Instead monumental murals celebrating the memory of numerous martyrs cover the sides of offices and apartment blocks. Beneath the long shadows cast by these memorials, the everyday life of Tehranians continues unabated.

In his series *Shadowlands*, Zadoc Nava attempts to convey this tension between the gigantism of the war hero, the martyr to Islam, obsessively commemorated by the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the microcosm of life lived in all its poetry and passion. These photographs were taken in the summer of 2005 that saw the defeat of the reformists in the July elections. The newly elected President Ahmadinejad's religious fervour signals the degree to which the country is caught between the religious and reformist forces that have struggled for control since the Islamic revolution in 1979. Iran's complex role in the Middle East is evident in the dual position it currently holds, targeted by the US for its accumulation of nuclear arms yet courted by it behind the scenes to assist the Bush administration in allaying Islamic sectarianism in Iraq. For Nava, this conflict is nowhere more intensely fought out than in Iranian women's sense of identity caught between modernism, demonised as a western import since the Shah's reign and tradition, a nostalgia for the Islamic heritage, and rural customs largely erased by the Pahlevi's cultural propaganda. In women's clothing this tension is evident in the few inches of hair shown beneath a scarf, or the slight hint of a lipstick, or the daring image of a woman seen holding her partner's hand. Perhaps what is most arresting about these photographs is the way they capture a sense of these conflicts through representations of space at a moment that is fraught with national anxiety over Iran's sovereignty as a political force in the global scene.

If public space has become privatised by the onslaught of capitalism in western post-industrial cities, in Tehran private life behind the veil or behind closed doors has no public presence whilst the public arena is incessantly expunged of any trace of the personal. Perhaps it would be more accurate to suggest that in Tehran private life is constituted by a network of alliances, exchanges and relations that are not as visible to the stranger, the tourist and the journalist, entering the city from elsewhere. Nava was at once stranger and citizen, frequently mistaken for being Iranian, he nonetheless held the position of a newcomer to the city; these photographs are marks of

a first impression, taken at times under conditions of duress. Through his eyes, the strangeness of Tehran's material fabric as a city is most evident in the many murals made by craftsman over many years. In recent years this communal and artisanal aspect of Iranian culture has come to the fore in the international art scene, most notably in the Swiss pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2003. Iranian mural painters were hired by the Swiss-Iranian artist Shirana Shahbazi to create a series of large-scale portraits of a young woman. In contrast to Shahbazi, Nava's interest in these murals is less a concern with those aspects of Iranian culture that do not migrate to the international art world's venues. Rather, it is the scale of these murals and their appeal to a collective commemorated through the martyr as hero or images of Khomeini that comes to the fore in these photographs. It is the position of the camera, in relation to this space that is particularly significant, often placed low on the ground and contrasting the human scale of people with the vast edifices that rise above them. The framing of these images pits the human scale of the populace against the monolithic structures of skyscrapers and public monuments, and reveals the brief moments of respite or forbidden pleasure that city life can offer and withhold. On an isolated patch of grass, a figure lays sleeping, long shadows cast across it, yet beyond its frame there is a motorway that forms part of the stretch of a vast urban road network. Its disruption of street life is caught in a photograph of a man standing isolated at the edge of a pavement, the horizon line cut by the unending stretch of a motorway above him. Nava's fragmentation of these spaces in the framing of the image suggests a desire to maintain the sense of the human scale within the rapid flux of a changing urban cityscape that can easily dehumanise its inhabitants.

In *Tehran 1380* (2002), described as a homage to the city's uncontrolled growing metropolis, is a film made by Solmaz Shahbazi and Tirdad Zolghadr examines differing attitudes to the urban landscape. The social housing project Ekabatan, created under the Shah's rule and widely viewed as a ghetto, where drug addiction and teenage suicides proliferated, emerges as a microcosm of all aspects of Tehranian life, suggesting the ways in which old modernism has been incorporated by the changes in everyday life. It is contrasted with the emergence of large motorways that have cut through existing communities and become the site of numerous road accidents. These contrasts of scale are also evident in one of Nava's dyptich: a young boy selling flat bread seems incongruous against the shining glass and steel building behind him, its other half reveals a young woman looking out apprehensively from the midst of a crowded market, the camera positioned to frame her against the decorative surfaces of the old quarters of the city. There is a contrast of the human and monumental implied by the position of the camera, that suggests we are looking up from below and hence situated in a space somewhere between the intimate and the panoramic. This liminal space creates a sense of unease as though the surrounding edifices might somehow swallow up these figures; in a sense the remarkable large-scale murals that tower above the skyline occupy space in a similar manner.

This sense of being swallowed up is a theme that marks the opening passages of Susan Stewart's study of gigantism in her book *On Longing, Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Its wider thesis considers the relationship of language to experience through narratives of objects that identifies scale as an important but neglected factor. In the opening sections of the chapter on gigantism she draws on the example of Leviathan in the Book of Job, when God asks Job "Can you draw out Leviathan with a fish hook, or press down his tongue with a cord? Can you put a rope in his nose or pierce his jaw with a hook?" The attempt to contain this giant fish is of course an impossibility, in visual terms it refers to the sense of being enveloped and dwarfed that in the context of the city takes on a particular significance. Andreas Gursky's photographs of the Tokyo stock exchange or of the Olympic village in Atlanta arguably convey this sense of gigantism in relation to the totality of capitalism captured in Lyotard's concept of the technological post-modern sublime, but they seem too remote from any sense of the human to effectively convey a monolithic structure. By contrast Nava's focus on the tensions between the human and the monumental place the viewer in an ambiguous position. It is only in the shots of these murals that gigantism as a swallowing of the human emerges partly because of its occupation of public space, as Stewart argues: "...the art of public space is an eternalized parade, a fixing of the symbols of public life, of the state, within a milieu of the abstract authority of the polis. The reduction of the individual viewer in the face of the public monument is all the more evident in the function of the inscription, one is expected to read the instructions for perception of the work – to acknowledge the fallen, the victorious, the heroic, and be taken up in the history of place. All public monuments of this type are monuments to death and the individual's prostration before history and authority."<sup>1</sup>

In the inscriptions on these murals the nation's debt to martyrs of the Iran-Iraq war is presented in a form that conveys a vernacular aesthetic tradition, far removed from the western convention of commissioning famous artists and architects to produce public memorials. The vernacular form of these murals makes a powerful case for the appeal to the populace that mirrors the political conditions surrounding the rhetoric of martyrdom. Most of the young men who were martyred came from poor families, who were promised financial aid from the State; by contrast the sons of the ruling clerics were sent to study abroad and hence spared the necessity of making such a sacrifice. Poverty and religious martyrdom appear to be inextricable, although now it is young women who are eager to follow the cause. However, the appeal to the masses indicated by the vernacular form of these monuments has become the contested terrain of modernity in Iran as elsewhere. This appeal to the common man has been a notable feature of New Labour's political strategy, evident in Tony Blair's style of rhetoric in the 1997 elections. In Iran appeals to the populace, the common people have directed the resurgence of the religious hard liners. Ahmadinejad's image as a man of the people, whose simple clothing and decision to continue living in his modest home rather than exchange it for the luxury of a presidential

residence, have made him popular amongst the poor and the downtrodden who arguably have not benefited from Iran's integration in the global market since the death of Khomeini.

This has also been the terrain of cultural exchange in the news coverage of Iran that has dominated the British media in recent weeks, in the attempt to form connections between the ordinary people of Iran and westerners. Its role is uncannily like the diplomatic role Britain has sought to occupy in the new world order as a mediator between super powers or nations in conflict. The stakes are sufficiently high to necessitate diplomacy, be it cultural or political, but the terms in which this universality is conveyed are problematic. The sense of commonality conveyed in Channel 4's special report has been to identify a global consumer citizenship amongst Iranians that suggests shared perspectives, a similar love of baseball, an interest in the Oscars, etc. etc. Against this backdrop, Nava's choice of subject matter and the many instances where figures are captured in everyday activities, like a pair of women in a fairground, crouched at ground level to take a shot, pits the absurdity of propagandist images of armed, veiled women with the fragility of life lived in the microcosmic structures between work, play and love, in the face of impending disaster. Here the medium of photography plays a significant role, in its altered scales and as fragments of time these images offer isolated instances that encourage us to weave connections between disparate parts in a manner that marks the tradition of street photography. At times the pensive glance of a young girl, or the rather austere gaze of a man standing at a cross-roads looking in the distance recalls Robert Frank's photographic series *The Americans* (1956) that portrayed a nation as depressed, lonely, lethargic and somewhat isolated. If Nava's images are more pensive than depressed they do so to create a pause in the otherwise triumphalist or apocalyptic rhetoric that has emerged from Iran in recent months.

1. Susan Stewart *On Longing, Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Duke University Press, 1993, 2003, 90