

# THE PHOTOGRAPH SERIES *By an Eye Witness* BY AZADEH AKHLAGHI

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*By an Eye Witness* (produced between 2009 and 2012) is a photograph series of the artist Azadeh Akhlaghi. It shows seventeen important deaths in Iran's twentieth century history via staged photography. All dead protagonists were public figures who were, by any means, politically active against the ruling elite. If only one of them had not died, Iranian history might have taken another course.

Akhlaghi's original inspiration for the series was the shooting of Neda Agha Soltan during the Green Revolts in Tehran in 2009. The whole world could watch Neda dying via YouTube - but there were so many other deaths in Iranian history without any pictorial evidence. This formed the artist's concept to reconstruct the deaths of important political activists and freedom fighters in order not to forget them. The pictures are very dramatic and thoughtfully staged. They are characterized by linear and diagonal compositions, depth, the elaborate use of shadows and lighting and the emphasis on interiors and architecture. Repeating elements in *By an Eye Witness* are books and other written documents lying around; mirrors, posters and paintings on the walls; Iranian national symbols; photographers with cameras and the presence of the artist. Akhlaghi portrays herself as an eyewitness in every picture, wearing a wine-red hejab and a black dress.

Beside to Akhlaghi's witnessing of the deaths, the title could also refer to two other aspects. Etymologically, the term witness is strongly connected with the word 'martyr'. 'Martyr' derives from the Greek word 'μάρτυρ', meaning 'witness', that is, one who attests the truth by suffering. Similarly, the common words for both witness 'shahid' and martyr 'shāhid' in Persian derive from the same root in Arabic, 'shahida', which means 'to witness' or 'to testify.' Thus Akhlaghi tells the stories of the martyrs of the nation.

*By an Eye Witness* as the title of the series could also make mention of the artist's efforts to include written accounts and interviews by eyewitnesses, who were actually present at the deaths, into her photographs. One part of *By an Eye Witness* seeks for realism in following the narratives of eyewitnesses and information derived from archives. The other part though consists of fictive elements. They have their origins in three different sources: photographs of the late Qajar period (1880-1925), historical European painting and iconic photographs of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## Azadeh Akhlaghi...

is an Iranian photographer, filmmaker and translator. She was born in 1978 in Shiraz and moved to Australia in 1997, where she studied Computer Science at RMIT University in Melbourne. Akhlaghi returned to Iran in 2005 and worked until 2008 as assistant director of Abbas Kiarostami. She currently lives and works in Tehran and Melbourne.

## Photographs of the Late Qajar Period (1880-1925)



Fig. 2: Photographer unknown. Constitutionalists in chains at the Bagh-e-Shah after the Coup d'État of June 23, 1908. Published in Edward G. Browne, *The Persian revolution of 1905-1909*, Cambridge 1910, Fig. 23.



Fig. 3: Photographer unknown. Colonel V. Liakhoff. Before 1910. Published in Browne 1910, Fig. 24.

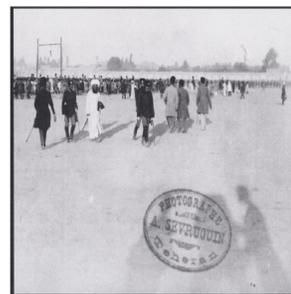


Fig. 4: Antoin Sevruguin. Public Hanging of Mirza Reza, Assassin of Nasir al-Din Shah August 12, 1896. Albumen print. Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives.



Fig. 1: Azadeh Akhlaghi. Bagh-e-Shah, Tehran - Jahangir Khan Sur-e-Esrafil, Nasrollah Malek-al-Motekallemin / 24 June 1908. 2012. Digital print on photo paper. 110 x 188 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

The photograph (Fig. 1) depicts a moment after the execution of two leading persons of the Constitutional Revolution. Both were imprisoned together with a group of Constitutionalists. While the other hostages are still alive, only two pools of blood remind of the killed men. Akhlaghi herself is leaning against a wall in the background.

- The formation of the prisoners in two rows in front of a window correlates with a contemporary photograph of the actual happenings. (Fig. 2)
- In front of Akhlaghi stands Colonel Liakhoff, who was responsible for the killings. His uniform, beard and posture are quotations of a portrait of him. (Fig. 3)
- The position, the camera on a tripod and the gesture of the photographer in the right foreground is identical with the self-depiction via a shadow of the Iranian photographer Antoin Sevruguin in an image of the hanging of the assassin of the Shah. (Fig. 4)

## Historical European Painting



Fig. 6: Caravaggio. Crucifixion of St. Peter. 1601. Oil on canvas. 230 x 175 cm. Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome.



Fig. 7: Jacques-Louis David. The Death of Marat. 1793. Oil on canvas. 165 x 128 cm. Royal Museum of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels.



Fig. 8: Jan van Eyck. Arnolfini Portrait. 1434. Oil on oak panel of 3 vertical boards. 82.2 x 60 cm. National Gallery, London.



Fig. 5: Azadeh Akhlaghi. South Mehrabad House, Tehran - Hamid Ashraf / 29 June 1976. 2012. 110 x 175 cm. Digital print on photo paper. Courtesy of the artist.

Hamid Ashraf was the leader of a guerrilla organization, that waged armed warfare against the Pahlavi dynasty. He was killed together with other guerillas by the Shah's secret police SAVAK. Akhlaghi shows policemen standing between the dead bodies on the morning after the murders. (Fig. 5)

- The posture of Ashraf's corpse central in the foreground is similar to Caravaggio's St. Peter in *Crucifixion of St. Peter*. (Fig. 6)
- The position of the man next to Ashraf, whose head rests on a red, over typed armchair, reminds of David's *The Death of Marat*. (Fig. 7) While Marat's head is leaning back, his head lies in the same position in the front.
- Akhlaghi portrays herself like Jan van Eyck in the *Arnolfini Portrait* in a mirror. Van Eyck wears a wine red turban, Akhlaghi a wine red hejab. (Fig. 8)

## Iconic Photographs of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century



Fig. 10: Photographer unknown. The body of Che Guevara in a washhouse in Vallegrande/Bolivia 10 October 1967. Dimensions and technique unknown. Courtesy ullstein bild.



Fig. 9: Azadeh Akhlaghi. Atlantic Hotel, Tehran - Gholam Reza Takhti / 7 January 1968. 2012. 110 x 184 cm. Digital print on photo paper. Courtesy of the artist.

Gholam Reza Takhti was the most popular Iranian wrestler of the twentieth century and supported a party oppositional to the Shah. After his dead body was found in a hotelroom in Tehran (Fig. 9), the authorities announced that he had committed suicide. But soon rumours, saying he was killed by SAVAK because of his political activities, appeared.

- The composition refers to a photograph of the dead Che Guevara. (Fig. 10) Both pictures show the dead body, lying on the back, surrounded by a group of men. One of them is taking a picture of the corpus with a camera in his hands. A man on his right side is wearing a uniform and a billed cap, the man on his left glasses.