The photograph series *By an Eye Witness* by Azadeh Akhlaghi

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 'μάρτυρα', meaning 'witness', that is, one who attests the truth by suffering. Similarly, the common words for both witness 'شاهید' and martyr 'شاهید' 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 20th century.

Photographs of the Late Qajar Period (1880-1925)

![Figure 3](image3.png)


![Figure 4](image4.png)

Asghar Bakhshi, Assassin of Nasir al-Din Shah. (Fig.4) August 12, 1896. Albumen print. Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives.

Histotical European Painting

![Figure 5](image5.png)


![Figure 8](image8.png)


Iconic Photographs of the 20th Century

![Figure 9](image9.png)


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 hotel room 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 corpse 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.

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

- The position of the man next to Ashraf, whose head rests on a red, over tided 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)

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