

Tehran Bureau Iran

Men at Work: Iranian workers taking photographs - exhibit

Houman Harouni finds betrayal, toil and a disappearing way of life in a series of Tehran images from Farideh Sakhaeifar heading for exhibition in New York and Barcelona

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Today, every artistic portrait of blue-collar men and women that portrays them as such – that is, as a class – contains a betrayal. This is only partly because the subjects are almost invariably aware, from experience, that their images will be taken away to a world of galleries and art schools that exclude them. The photographer will insert his or her lens with the innocuous violence of an unwanted guest, recording the disdain or cold indifference that exemplifies such photographs.

It is possible for the photographer to alleviate this problem by becoming closer to the subjects, gaining their confidence, allowing them to say something more than their first reactions.

The main betrayal, however, occurs at a far more collective level and accepts no solutions.

The labourers know that whatever they say through their portraits to a middle-class audience will fall on deaf ears. They know from historical experience that at this point in time nothing can be said to middle-class citizens that will convince them to curb their own interests – which lie in cheaper commodities, higher profit rates, and the exile of industrial production to more and more marginalized zones where workers have even less of a say in the processes that define their lives.



Farideh Sakhaeifar's workers Photograph: Farideh Sakhaeifar

This is as true now in Iran as it has been for decades in the United States. The Iranian street protests in 2009 occurred during one of the worst downturns for industrial production, at a point when the government was rapidly dismantling the protective measures it had conceded to workers in the aftermath of the 1979 revolution. Corruption and bad economic policies had further harmed all levels of industry.



Workers Are Taking Photographs Photograph: Farideh Sakhaeifar

And yet workers' rights were in no way part of protesters' demands. Marx's controversial pronouncement about the inability of peasants to represent themselves has come, with an added vengeance, to be true of industrial workers. Not only can they no longer represent themselves, they can no longer be represented.

Farideh Sakhaeifar shot her series of photographs of blue-collar workers between the Aprils of 2007 and 2008. The timing of the project and its technique, as well as its sheer magnitude – 200 images in dozens of locations in the semi-industrial outskirts of Tehran – all give it the feel of a classic. In *Workers Are Taking Photographs*, each man – they are all men – stands dressed in work-clothes surrounded by his

working environment. He holds a cable release connected to the medium format camera, allowing him to choose the moment of exposure. Behind him, someone, presumably the photographer herself, holds up a large, white board, framing the head and torso.

The photographs allow us temporarily to cut out the background environment. One can imagine these faces and bodies, framed in white and nothing else, looking out of gallery walls. A different encounter than the usual portrait has taken place. Because the men have waited, composed themselves, and considered the moment of release, the faces have the integrity of a mind talking to itself. Each subject seems to speak the same thing: "Here I stand."

Of course the faces and bodies convey more, and part of this, even with the environment excluded, has to do with the work the men do. It would be wrong to generalize about the photographs, since each subject is undeniably an individual and radiates a unique experience. Nonetheless, looking at a random sample of even a dozen photos would communicate general qualities that could help the viewer decide at least what sort of people he or she is *not* seeing here.

These are definitely not merchants, dealers, teachers or bureaucrats. Nor are they politicians, students, or business owners. The older men who carry a heavier load of repeated experience are

particularly not of those professional categories. They don't look like bureaucrats because they don't project the over-calculating self-consciousness of people whose worth is decided by variable standards. The blue-collar worker's wages, workload and competence are set in advance. These faces have not kissed much ass, because while they could be fired for insolence or laziness, they could not get a pay raise or a promotion for any sort of song and dance.

For that reason they also do not have the ever-solicitous look of tip-earners or salesmen. Almost none of them holds himself up like a boss or pushes his chest out like a policeman. They are settled into bodies that refer to their own ability to perform work and become weary with it. In the older men this continuous experience of working without thought of self-advancement has jelled into another distinct quality: these men are capable of hard work entirely on behalf of someone else. With a little imagination, the men's bosses and families, as well as a larger, unnamed "other" – the entire society that holds them in their division of labour – are also present.

But we have to zoom out of the white-board background and see the men in their work environment. In all the photographs from the series I have seen, Sakhaeifar has asked her subjects to stand away from the shop's machinery. The effect is subtle. On the one hand, these men belong (in every sense of the word) to the background that surrounds them.

Their clothes are stained with the same materials that stain the walls. Their bodies, particularly their hands, have the shape and texture given by the work that takes place there. In a few moments, they will hand back the cable release and get back to work, because while they are there, their hours belong to the place. On the other hand, while they stand in the photograph it is not easy for the viewer to mentally push them back into the machinery that would otherwise occupy them. They are seen as both of the place and not of it.

Wherever they belong, though, it is not the gallery space. This is partly why the held up white board works so well. It acknowledges the distance between viewers, the photographer, and the men. The workers might be photographing, but they are doing it with the real photographer standing at an intentionally awkward distance behind them. Her hands – small, delicate hands – protrude from the edges of the board. Even if the cable release lets the man make a decision about the photograph, he is still aware that this photograph will eventually belong to other



Workers Are Taking Photographs Photograph: Farideh Sakhaeifar



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people. The betrayal is still there, but it doesn't try to hide. Rather, betrayal is a subject of the series.

The photographer has absented herself in a second way that is even more disquieting. Where are her legs? They should show behind the workers, but she has meticulously hidden any evidence of her own body other than her hands. So the white board and the hands stand on nothing. As they float, they also put afloat the image of the workers.

As a child, I was raised among men like these. They worked for the most part in medium-sized workshops forever on the verge of failure. My father, who started out as a blue-collar worker, owned one of these shops. Years after he declared bankruptcy for the last time, I found the

discarded draft of a letter he wrote to the local branch of the ministry of industry: "All my skills manage to accomplish is to keep this workplace afloat; there has been no income to speak of for two years." In 1995, the year he shuttered the place, there were 25 work places like his in or around our town of Hamadan. By 2010, two remained open. Where shops could stay open, of course, the brunt of the ongoing crisis was born by the workers.

Together the image of the worker and its photographer lift off and move out, not just of the workshop and toward the gallery, but away, to the same place in history into which these types of faces are steadily disappearing.



Workers Are Taking Photographs Photograph:
Farideh Sakhaeifar

Sakhaeifar's The Workers are Taking Photographs will appear in an exhibition of her work, entitled Laugh Track, in Cathouse FUNeral in 260 Richardson St, Brooklyn 11222, New York, 24 January- 15 February. The exhibit at Centre Cultural la Casa Elizade in Barcelona, starts on 4 February