

## Soody Sharifi: Worlds within Worlds

By: Jessica Hunter-Larsen



Baders Camera, Silver gelatin fibre print, 25x35cm, 2012. Image Copyright to the Artist and Courtesy of Cuadro Gallery.

*My work aims to add further layers of complexity and interpretation to subject matter—be it Islam, modernity, or youth culture—often depicted in a monolithic manner. The Miniatures demystify contemporary life in the Islamic Republic of Iran: not only bringing the intimacy of the private sphere out into the public, but translating them to an international audience via the collective experience of globalization - Soody Sharifi.*

By injecting contemporary characters engaging in

non-traditional behaviors into images of 15th and 16th Century miniatures, Soody Sharifi orchestrates a theatrical collision between traditional moral/cultural structures and the influence of a consumerist Western culture. Her intricately wrought collages capture the tensions that comprise the core of modern Iranian life. Here, the necessity to uphold a traditional code of behavior that is culturally generated and politically enforced, is balanced precariously with an individual's



Fashion week

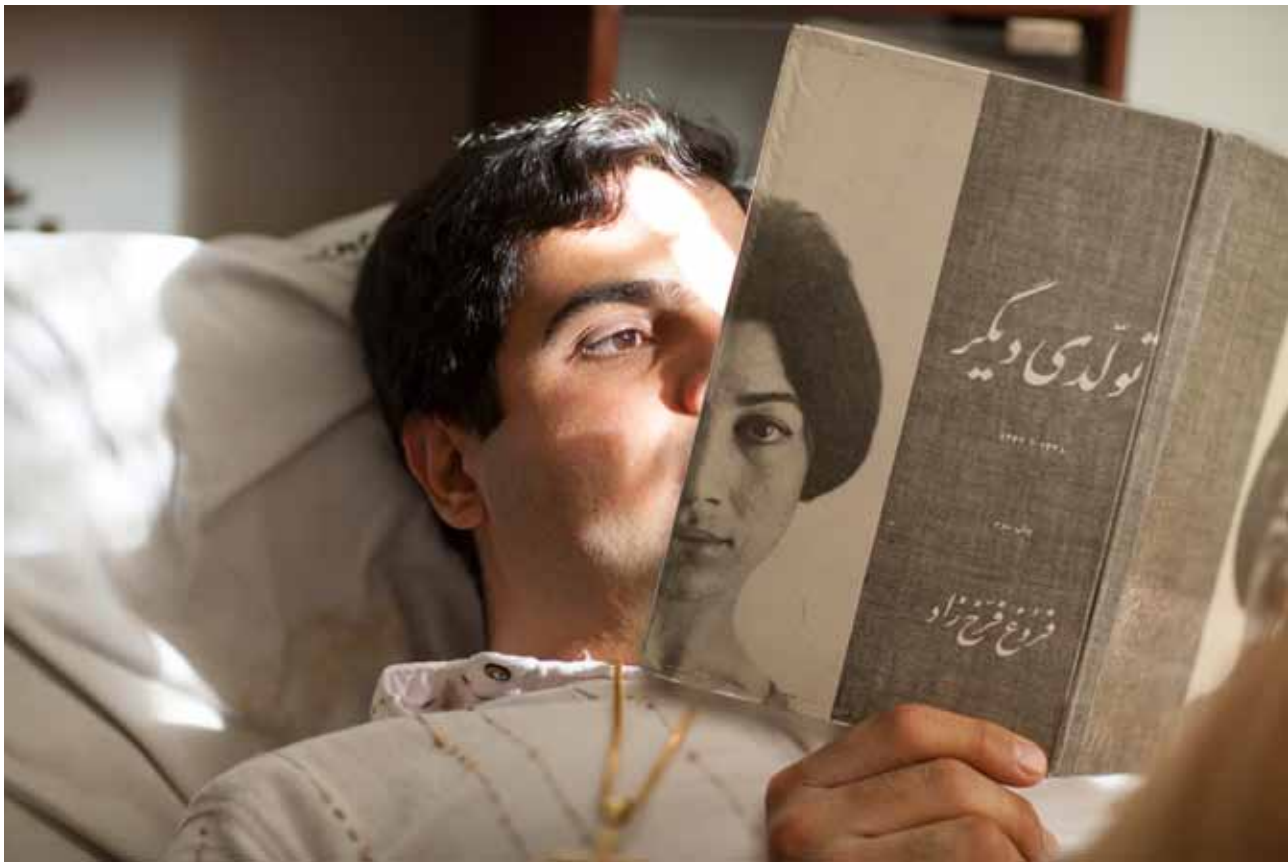
desire to operate with full agency within a modern global arena. Sharifi's reimagining of the classical Persian miniature form comes in two versions: the small, sparse arrangements that comprise the *Small Delights* series and the large, densely populated collages of the *Maxiatures* series. In *Small Delights*, the artist chooses and extracts protagonists from Persian manuscript illustrations and modern media images and places them within fields of deeply-saturated color – a strategy that conveys both visual opulence and psychological drama, without relying on an abundance of detail. Using this minimalist visual vocabulary, Sharifi effectively orchestrates highly charged moments of encounter between alternate universes, moments when traditional and contemporary cultures collide. Women from two eras wearing traditional hijabs play basketball; young lovers steal a moment together without a chaperone;



Courtly love, Courtesy of Deborah Colton gallery.

two women in modern and traditional clothing stand together, linked yet absolutely distinct. Despite their relatively sparse visual fields, these are visually and thematically complex compositions. Carefully chosen, each extracted historical image or contemporary figure contains multiple meanings, and when read together, the interpretative possibilities shift subtly from witty commentary to pointed cultural critique and back again. Created with few characters and relying on minimal detail, these small stories uncover broader themes about contemporary Muslim life, capturing moments of humor and joy as well as cultural tensions. In the *Maxiatures* series, Sharifi employs a distinctly ornamental visual style that is typical of 15th and 16th Century Persian manuscript illustrations to uncover and critique the hidden ruptures between traditional values and the pressures of contemporary life as they





mehdii

manifest within Iranian culture. As art historian Sheila Canby notes, *“At their best, (miniature paintings) do not illustrate a story, but breathe life into the hills and animals, clouds and trees that populate the scene of the narrative. . . . By favoring two-dimensionality and compositional harmony, they presented things as they should be, not necessarily as they are. They are unrivalled in their perfect realization of an ideal world.”*<sup>1</sup> Traditional Persian miniatures typically present grand fictional histories, referencing epic tales of courtly intrigue, moments of illicit romance, heroic battles, and the glories of the successful hunt. For her *Maxiatures*, Sharifi chooses specific, well-recognized miniatures, playfully enlarges them, and reworks the compositions by including photographic images that reflect contemporary culture. These mash-ups place the idealized historic narratives of the original paintings in pointed dialogue with the modern realities of living in a globalized world; the disjunctions between the past and the present, between fictive and lived experience, all

create spaces for new – and increasingly sophisticated – reflections on the tensions that roil beneath the idealized façade of conservative Iranian culture.

Focusing specifically on historic miniature illustrations that reference architectural sites provides Sharifi with a platform in the *Maxiatures* to parse the boundaries between public and private spaces, an important distinction within the Islamic world, and one that becomes increasingly difficult to maintain as technology escalates. Globally, the segregation of spaces has historically been aligned with gender role boundaries – and this holds true in Western culture as well. For example, did we ever see June Cleaver outside the suburban home? Within the Islamic world, public and private spaces often continue to remain gendered. Within the miniature tradition, women certainly occupy the private world of domestic interiors, while men are denizens of the larger public sphere. Injecting anachronistic modern figures into



the affair

well-known traditional images, Sharifi's hyper-narrative scenes challenge perceptions of established gender roles. In the Moslem Youth series of photographs, Sharifi leaves behind the idealized world of the miniatures to focus on the daily realities of Muslim teenagers who are attempting to navigate between often-conflicting versions of themselves. Here, the identification with a typically Westernized and secular contemporary youth culture visibly comes into conflict with the desire to maintain Muslim traditions. By photographing the teenagers in their natural habitats – their bedrooms – Sharifi affords the viewer an intimate, almost voyeuristic access to private realms, sanctuaries where questions of identity can be explored safely. The subtle complexities of living between worlds are played out in the details of the scenes. Contemporary cultural references, in the form of pop music and Western fashion, coexist with signifiers of traditional Islamic culture. The idealized history found in Persian miniatures emerges here also,

although obliquely, found only in subtle background details such as the artwork on bedroom walls or patterns within textiles. Focusing closely on individual Muslim teenagers as they engage in the universal process of forming adult identities, the series challenges the perceived boundaries between adherence to a traditional faith and individual growth.

*About the Writer*

Jessica Hunter-Larsen, *InterDisciplinary Experimental Arts at Colorado College*

*Notes*

1. Sheila R. Canby, *Persian Painting*, London: Interlink Pub Group (2004) p. 7

*We would like to thank Deborah Colton Gallery (representative of the artist in USA) for their support in providing material needed for this essay.*