

SOODY SHARIFI IN COLLABORATION WITH PAYAM SHARIFI

PROUD AND SAD / WRONG AND STRONG



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

APRIL 2 - MAY 7, 2005

AUSTIN, TEXAS

The very title of Soody and Payam Sharifi's exhibition, *Proud and Sad/Wrong and Strong*, foregrounds the thrust of their collaboration. Their installation epitomizes the blurred dichotomies of Iranian and American cultures, gender issues, and generational perspectives. Just as the words in the title are not quite opposites but rather kinds of polarities, the Sharifis explore the spaces in between.

In this site-specific installation, Soody and Payam Sharifi address an array of important issues including the politicization of Iran, the clash of cultures between the United States and Iran, and a changed global climate. They ask their viewers to participate in each of these exchanges, even to rethink how art is defined, presented, processed, and produced. The range of materials in the installation echoes the diversity of ideas and the multiplicity of cultural responses they have documented.

In addition to displaying Soody's fine-art photographs, the Sharifis have mined



Payam Sharifi. *Father and Son, Jandagh*. 2004
Lambda print. 11" x 14"

popular culture employing traditionally-viewed "lesser" material in order to both complicate and subvert more "official" viewpoints, such as those propagated in the news media and film. The minor occurrences they document and present illuminate how the seemingly slight can explicate larger issues. Anecdotal material, found objects, and ephemera function as counterpoints to official propaganda, which Payam documented on his first trip to Iran. Walking through a corridor of ubiquitous Iranian murals of martyred heroes whose images adhere directly to the walls, the viewer is immediately immersed in the experience of the urban Iranian landscape. Indeed, this opening sequence functions as a kind of foundation for the remainder of the show. Tellingly, all of these figures are men.

Walking into the larger gallery, the viewer encounters the Sharifis "selective archive." Ephemeral material is interspersed with Soody's highly constructed material and Payam's snapshots and text. The "maleness" of the opening corridor murals is here answered by what appears to be a more "feminine" space, featuring primarily images of young girls and women.

Soody and Payam respond differently to gender issues, yet both seem to attempt to negotiate Iran through the lens of gender construction, both male and female. Soody's work has

long addressed her particular interest in gender and culturally-defined femininity. It is interesting to think about how the present collaboration with her son has forced her to rethink some of her ideas, or, at least, to clarify them. Abigail Solomon-Godeau has argued that photography is "a medium which by virtue of its supposed transparency, truth, and naturalism has been an especially potent purveyor of cultural ideology—particularly the ideology of gender."¹

Many of Soody's photographs of young women document shifting female roles in Iran as well as the multiplicity of roles available to them. In fact, Soody's photographic production seems to indicate a very personal struggle to document both her own social and creative roles as well as those of fellow Iranian women. Soody's effort to picture her own realities as well as those of her younger female contemporaries challenges prevailing modes of representation by including a wide array of self-imaging possibilities for women. Many of the photographs, including *Stairway to Heaven* from her *Teenager's Series*, portray Soody herself. This image of a couple embracing on a swirling concrete structure conveys an intimate moment, perhaps stolen, between a man and a woman. Here, Soody literally situates herself as a young Iranian girl, stealing a private moment with a lover, outside of societal strictures. In other photographs not featuring herself, Soody provides props and chooses locations but otherwise lets her female subjects determine their own poses. She allows them to play, perform, and fantasize within the confines of her lens.

The interrelationship between photography and gender construction, as suggested by Solomon-Godeau, is potent and deeply-rooted. Both Soody and



Soody Sharifi. *Installation View. Wall Murals of Martyred Heroes*. 2005
Printed digital images mounted with adhesive backing, various sizes.

Payam are conscious of the power of the image to mold perception. Payam's text on ideals of male and female beauty points to the need to understand constructions of gender and identity within the context of culture. Yet Payam also addresses other sociocultural issues through photography and the written word. Payam's texts document his own encounter with Iran. He approaches it through the lens of sociopolitical history and theory, deconstructing misconceptions of life in contemporary Iran through a personal, even confessional, format. In his photograph, *Hashish*, in a series of cityscape images, and in photographs of roadside sculptures of animals and fruit, Payam reinterprets the Iranian landscape.

The interaction between mother and son has also precipitated a generational exchange: Soody is almost 25 years older than her son, the same amount of time that has elapsed since the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Generational difference, and,

thus, in many ways, cultural difference is evident in many of the photographs, especially *Grandma* (2003) and *Father and Son, Jandagh* (2004). In these works, old and young, tradition and modernity co-exist within the frame, just as they do in everyday life.

Their different approaches dovetail most clearly in Soody's *Maxiature* series, a group of digital prints derived from modern photographs collaged onto traditional Persian miniatures. One in particular, *Martyrdom*, references the Christian pietà, with Soody holding the body of her son. These collaged narratives reflect the pieced-together nature of the exhibition itself. Contemporary and traditional Iranian and Iranian-American culture(s) are both integrated and disjointed at once. There is no one view, no one truth stated here.

Payam has said that he and the other material in the installation are "dancing

around [Soody's] photographs." Soody's concern with gender roles in both Iran and the United States, an examination centered on the artist's own duality as an Iranian-American woman, is complemented by Payam's dual nature as an American confronting his Iranian history. Soody's interest in the disparities and similarities between public and private spaces is furthered by Payam's highly personal texts, self-portraits, and documentation of the culture he discovered in Iran. Finally, the contrast between Soody's constructed photographs and Payam's reliance on found materials and a more documentary approach (albeit itself of a constructed nature) is highlighted throughout the exhibition. This is much more than a clash of cultures; rather it is the intersections thereof, the spaces in between. Through their excavation, documentation, and interpretation of Iranian culture, the Sharifis have ultimately argued that there is no one answer; rather, fluidity, hybridity, and layers of meaning are the results of their examination.

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Assistant Director of Development
Program Support
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX

¹ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Sexual Difference: Both Sides of the Camera," *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1991), 257.

SOODY SHARIFI

Born in 1955, Tehran, Iran

Since 1974, resides in Houston, Texas

EDUCATION

- 2004 Master of Fine Arts in Studio Photography, University of Houston, TX
1982 Bachelor of Science, Industrial Engineering, University of Houston, TX

AWARDS

- 2005 *Cultural Art Council of Houston Individual Artist Grant Recipient*,
Houston, TX
2004 *National Graduate Seminar Nominee*, Columbia University, New York, NY
2003 *Photography Fellowship*, Houston Center of Photography, Houston, TX

SELECTED INDIVIDUAL EXHIBITIONS

- 2005 *Maxiatures*, Golestan Gallery, Tehran, Iran
Proud and Sad / Wrong and Strong, Women & Their Work,
Austin, TX
Blue Sky Gallery, Portland, Oregon
2004 *Dom Fotografie*, Poprad, Slovakia
Simply Girls, Center for Photography, Woodstock, NY
Veiled / Unveiled, with Saida Fagala, Anya Tish Gallery, Houston, TX
2002 *Women of Cover*, FotoFest, Houston, TX

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2005 *REALITÄTEN II: Gesellschaftswerte*, FOTOGALLERIE WIEN,
Vienna, Austria
Co-Existence, Houston, TX
Pingyao International Photography Exhibition, Pingyao, China
2004 National Graduate Seminar *Fellowship Exhibition*,
Columbia University, New York, NY
Sharpening The Point, Blaffer Gallery, Houston, TX
2003 *Layered Evidence*, Lawndale Art Center, Houston, TX
Fellowship Exhibition, Houston Center of Photography, Houston, TX
Open Exhibition, Visual Art Alliance, Houston, TX
2002 *Northlight Southwest 2002*, Northlight Gallery, ASU, Tucson, AZ
Membership Exhibition, Houston Center of Photography, Houston, TX
Big Show, Lawndale Art Center, Houston, TX
2001 *Membership Exhibition*, Houston Center of Photography, Houston, TX
Graduate Student Exhibition, Blaffer Gallery, Houston, TX
2000 *Snapshot*, Contemporary Museum, Baltimore, MD
1999 *Fresh Mix*, Video Installation, Community Artist's Collective,
Houston, TX

PUBLICATIONS

- 2004 "Grand Angle" Ados d'Iran... comme d'ailleurs, *Libéraction*,
Paris, France. 12/24
"Soody Sharifi's Photography," *SME Kultura*, Bratislava, Slovakia. 4/11
Cover page of *Chronogram Arts. Culture, Spirit. Mid-Hudson Magazine*
of *Events & Ideas*. 11/04
"Simply Girls: Teenagers in Iran," *Tatonic Weekend* press cover page.
September 2-8
"put on your Sunday best, or Friday best or whatever...;" *Cross Magazine*,
(issue 1, winter), Milan, Italy
"Surprise;" *M-Publication*, (issue 3, winter), Frankfurt, Germany
2003 "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun" *Fluid Magazine*, (issue 30, June), Poland
"A Guide to Ecstasy" Nigel Coates, Author,
London: Booth-Clibborn, Publisher

PAYAM SHARIFI

Born in Austin, TX

Resides: London, UK

EDUCATION

- 2000 Masters in Philosophy, Royal College of Art, London, England
1998 B.A. Columbia University, New York, N.Y.
1997 St. Petersburg State University, Russia
1996 Université de Paris III, France

FELLOWSHIPS

- 1998-2000 Marshall Scholar
1998 Magna Cum Laude, Phi Beta Kappa, Columbia University,
New York, N.Y.
1996 EESTI Fellowship

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2005 *Proud and Sad / Wrong and Strong*, Women & Their Work,
Austin, TX
Official Selection, FIAMH, Villa Noailles, Hyères, France
2004 *Selfish*, 128 Rivington, New York
Borne of Necessity, Weatherspoon Art Centre, Greensboro, N.C.
2003 *Somewhere Totally Else*, London Design Museum, London, England
Emergencias, Casa Encendida, Madrid, Spain
2002 Official Selection, Sweden for *Hall of Fame*. Stockholm International
Film Festival, Stockholm, Sweden
Hall of Fame, Fanclub, Amsterdam, Holland
2000 *Degree Show*, Royal College of Art, London, England

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 2004 "If they had a place to stand upon, they might raise the world,"
Cross Magazine, (no. 3.) Milan, Italy
"Not a Just Idea, Just an Idea," *Cross Magazine*, (no. 3.) Milan, Italy
"It is of utmost importance that we repeat our mistakes as a reminder
to future generations of the depths of our stupidity," *Cross Magazine*,
(no. 2.) Milan, Italy
"Je vois le communisme toujours partout," *Magazine* (no. 24)
"Babouche et cravate," *Magazine* (no. 23)
2003 Anne Melcer, "Le paradoxe de la virgule," *Etapas* (no. 103 / December)
Loïc Prigent, "Pol'art," *Beaux-Arts Magazine*, October
Grayson Perry, "Grayson Does Venice," *Art Review*, September
"Hyères," *Pictured*, July
"Paris finds the seductive in the institutional," *Pictured*, June
The Annual, *Creative Review*, April
"Gypsies are for real," *Fluid* (March) with Robert Podbereski.
Erick Grisel, "Ca passe ou casse?" *20 ans* (March).
2002 "Hall of Fame," *Tank Magazine*, Vol. 3 Issue 4
Anne Melcer, "Fuite de cerveaux," *Etapas* (No. 89 / October).
Patrick Lindgren, "Major Players," *Stockholm's Fjortond Internationella*
Filmfestival (November)



This Panel: Payam Sharifi. *Hashish*. 2004, Archival-pigmented print. 11" x 14"
Cover Panel: Soody Sharifi. *Stairway to Heaven*. 2002, Archival-pigmented print. 29" x 36"



Soody Sharifi. *Hair*. 2004, Archival-pigmented print. 16" x 20"

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Now celebrating its 27th anniversary, Women & Their Work presents over 50 events a year in visual art, dance, theater, music, literature, and film. The gallery features on-going exhibitions of Texas women artists and brings artists of national stature to Texas audiences. Since its founding, Women & Their Work has presented 1,748 artists in 231 visual art exhibitions, 102 music, dance, and theater events, 13 film festivals, 19 literary readings, and 277 workshops in programming that reflects the ethnic and cultural diversity of this region. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in *Art in America*, *ArtForum* and National Public Radio and was the first organization in Texas to receive a grant in visual art from the National Endowment for the Arts. Women & Their Work reaches

over 2,500 school children and teachers each year through gallery tours, gallery talks with exhibiting artists, participatory workshops, in-school performances, dance master classes, and teacher workshops.



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