

# **Gone with the Madness**

by

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Sardar Farrokhi

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## **Abstract**

*Gone with the Madness* is a photographic book project that offers a critical yet intimate experience of contemporary Iranian society as it has evolved in the years since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. In development for almost a decade, the project juxtaposes exterior urban landscapes of major Iranian cities with images of interior, private and social life in these cities, drawing the viewer's attention to the dualities and contradictions inherent in every aspect of life in Iran today.

## Acknowledgements

This project represents a personal memory and a reflection of me and people that I met while back home for two months in Iran after being gone for 10 years.

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## **Introduction:**

Revolution represents hope for humanity; perhaps no other political phenomenon can signify the spirit of the age that we are now in. Belief in the will of mankind gives this will the power to change history. A hatred of the established order and rebellion against whatever has been built before are other factors that inspire revolution.

These bring skepticism about the realities of the past, and hope for the future. The 1979 Iranian revolution changed the way of life of every Iranian, whether they are now dead or still alive.

Human beings are a complicated species; it's funny how a small change in our lives can affect so much. It is ten years now since I left Iran, and this move changed me a lot. Since then I have become a photographer, a person who has a point of view with a tool to express himself. For the past ten years, my main theme was "seclusion." I photographed the isolation and solitude of people who were around me, without knowing why. I know now that I was seeking to find this state of being—and now with this project, *Gone with the Madness*, I have found it. This work is a book that includes a series of photographs to create a story about Iranian people which sums up 10 years of experience in capturing the mood of seclusion I encountered while I was back home in Iran.

I think a book is something that I can leave behind for those in the future to learn from the past. In my case, the book is a visual story, an observation on Iranian post-revolutionary society. The book also works as a document of my process in developing photographically during this time.

Don Snyder once said, "If they ever write a new history about Iran, this book will be part of it."

And I think as a documentarian this is all I wanted.

I traveled to Iran three times since I left, back in 2006. Everything started when I went to Iran for the third time and started to work on my master's project.

This project is not about me—you don't see me in it directly—but it's all about me, it reflects me. I see this work as if it is a battle ground, a fight to forget our true identities. It is useful to tell a story about myself, so you may find some answers in yourselves and understand what happened that got me started on this project after changing my topic so many times.

The way that this project started was like all Iranian poems in history: it started with a broken heart and a break up. This is how I explained it to my closest friends. I think the love was like a salve protecting me from all my problems, my thoughts, my pains. A temporary lie to keep me forgetting the past, everything that I was hiding under her name for more than many years, and when she was gone the bubble burst and the effect of the salve slowly faded away and the wounds opened again; all those problems hit me like a wrecking ball hits a wall to destroy it. At the time I was lost. I went down to the darkest and deepest holes in myself and my life and I became depressed. I was fighting to get out of the depression as fast as possible so I could at least work on my project before the trip ended. And suddenly it was at that moment that I saw this problem in Iran, I felt it during my last trip but I was focused on a different problem and at that time never cared much and I didn't think it was that important yet, but this time was different. Because I was lost in the battle of identities, I started to see many signs of depression in every place that I walked into.

I saw it in my friends, family, relatives, and people outside my circle. I let myself go and I accepted that I am depressed to understand everyone better. I accepted that I am addicted.

A whole new world appeared in front of me, everything I knew had changed, there was no more lying. The seclusion that I have been capturing for the past ten years now has revealed its meaning

to me; I have been capturing myself in different views for the past ten years and, this project is somehow a reflection of me in others.

## **Chapter 1: Contemporary Iranian Society**

This series is about me observing with own my eyes and documenting with my camera, a state of malaise or depression within Iranians after almost forty years of suffering from a loss of hope for having a better future.

A long time ago I remember I used to go on the roof of my childhood house after coming home from high school and for hours I would look at the buildings and the city itself and ask myself “*man kiam, inja chi kar miknam*” (“who am I, and what is the purpose of my life...”)

*Gone with the Madness* is a project about an unhealthy society, meaning a society that suffers from a bad economy, a bad social structure, and a bad education system... and Iran has all of them, because of the corrupted system put in place after the revolution.

Richard Wilkinson explains in *Unhealthy Societies: The Afflictions of Inequality* that social unity is critical to the quality of life. Iranians have been through forty years of suffering from revolution, imposed war, sanctions, and as the result and aftermath of those periods the society has become unhealthy.

In 1979, a revolution took place in the Middle East, one that changed the direction of everyone’s lives in that region. If the Iranian revolution had not taken place, "We'd be looking at a different

Middle East," said Gary Sick, former National Security Council analyst on Iran and a professor at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs. Sick said, "Basically, the Iranian revolution was an enormous shock to the system, especially in the Persian Gulf... The fact that you had this power coming in with really revolutionary objectives, including an objective to try and overthrow the monarchies - they don't talk about that any more - that scared them to death."<sup>1</sup>

39 years later, the same fear sets in motion conflicts that shape the region, because of the power that current supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei and his followers hold inside and outside of the borders of Iran. The revolution brought Iranians nothing but boycotts and discarded goods from western countries.

The sanctions that were placed on Iran by the United Nations and the United States lasted for decades. These jeopardized Iran's economy and inflicted chaos on the world's oil markets; some aspects of this situation can be traced to the American hostage crisis that happened right after the revolution.

The corruption in the regime and in the top figures who have control of Iran's ministries since the revolution has created and exacerbated class differences in Iran which used to be less obvious. The middle class has become poorer and the rich have become richer. And the poor class has no room in this discussion because I don't know what to call them anymore. The upper class mostly make their money from connections with the Ayatollahs, or someone with the same power in the regime

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<sup>1</sup> Parvaz, "Iran 1979: the Islamic revolution that shook the world." *Iran | Al Jazeera*. February 11, 2014, Accessed May 03, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/01/iran-1979-revolution-shook-world-2014121134227652609.html>.

to get the necessary permissions to work in sensitive areas such as oil companies, banks, exports and imports. Or simply the children of those ayatollahs are in charge of the big companies, without any supervision or fear of being terminated. *The Economist* reported that Porsche “sold more cars in Tehran in 2011 than in any other city in the Middle East.”<sup>2</sup>

Thomas Erdbrink reported for *The Washington Post*:

“Iran’s new wealthy class has succeeded in tapping the opportunities provided by a vast domestic market, sometimes aided by corruption and erratic government policies. It includes children of people with close connections to some of Iran’s rulers, as well as families of factory owners and those who managed to get huge loans from state banks at low interest rates. The oil windfall — nearly \$500 billion over the past five years — has also played a central role in establishing this small group that is visibly enjoying its profits.”<sup>3</sup>

Now, more than three decades later, evidence shows that oil incomes have brought in billions of dollars. But the trouble is that this is only for a small group of wealthy Iranians. Despite the promises of the revolution by previous supreme leader Ayatollah Khomeini, that the oil money is for every citizen of Iran, the gap between the rich and the poor has never been wider.

In *Fragile States: Violence and the Failure of Intervention* by Lothar Brock, Hans-Henrik Holm, Georg Sørensen and Michael Stohl, the article talks about the fragile states around the world that left more than 340 million people in unsafe conditions and poverty, which leaves those people in a stressed condition that brings harm to them such as suicide, violence, anger and...

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<sup>2</sup> "When will it ever end?" *The Economist*, August 18, 2012, <http://www.economist.com/node/21560596>.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Erdbrink, "Iran's rich eat ice cream covered in gold as poor struggle to survive." *The Washington Post*, August 06, 2011, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/irans-rich-eat-ice-cream-covered-in-gold-as-poor-struggle-to-survive/2011/07/20/gIQAYKUmwI\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.60ba6c08a7a6](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/irans-rich-eat-ice-cream-covered-in-gold-as-poor-struggle-to-survive/2011/07/20/gIQAYKUmwI_story.html?utm_term=.60ba6c08a7a6).

The article explains that the government corruption, lack of leadership and use of force to push the laws in their favor, combines with the unstable economy, lack of social welfare between citizens and absence of freedom to leave people in a state that I call depression.

Looking back at Iran before the revolution, Iran was going forward, many people had a chance to study and live abroad, mostly in western countries such as France, England, and the United States, and they started to learn what freedom is, to know more about the basic rights of citizens and what monarchies are—and of course with influence of western culture people felt that they needed change. And because of the new demands, the revolution started, and 98 percent of the people voted and believed that one person and the monarchy must not control all the power. They thought that they fought for their freedom and democracy, but soon it became known that they were deceived and that there was manipulation behind the scenes and as a result of that, instead of going forward, going back to Brock's in *Fragile States: Violence and the Failure of Intervention*, it can be seen how this lack of leadership and unstable economy left many Iranians in a state of hopelessness.

The Islamic Republic of Iran put the country back in time; by the time people realized there was something wrong with this regime, Iraq declared war on Iranians which took Iran further back in time and took away eight years and many lives on both sides. During these years, "Sepah," The Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution, took control of the country and Iran slowly became corrupted, becoming a totalitarian regime which lost its connection with the world. Sanctions were the answer which put civilians under even more pressure and helped to militarise the country even more. This resulted in curtailing any sort of freedom, and years of exile, prison, and death as the punishment if someone crossed those red lines.

The chain between violence and colonization is something unbreakable. In 1908 Belgium took over the Republic of Congo and it changed the name of the country and their traditional culture. Uncertainty and civil wars left people of the Congo in harsh conditions that even today people pay a price for. A lot of them had to flee or migrate outside of the borders to survive the wars or famines; a lot died because of the corrupted people, chosen by Belgium, who were in charge.

Over the years I grew up with stories of revolution, wars, religious conflicts and enemies. Every class in the school, every program on TV was somehow related to remind Iranians of those past events, or the future. I was lucky enough to be in an open-minded family who raised me among their intellectual friends. Most of the time instead playing with toys, I stood next to family friends somewhere close and listened to their conversations when they were discussing or debating about Iranian social issues. I remember that in our house, the conversations were only about two things: football and politics, and I think both were designed by the system to keep people inside, rather than active outside. In politics, there is no freedom of speech, so automatically the conversations stay inside and there is nothing to watch on government-owned TV but non-stop sports channels that cover the best games around the world for free for the population of 80 million that hunger to see more.

Our memories of school are full of this destructive behaviour. We were constantly in conflict with the school system and faculty. They made us rebels, and like drug users, we were addicted: we had to do it every day to keep us going.

Those actions helped us at that moment to release our anger, but now that option is gone. When I see those same people, who are now keeping their anger inside, it is slowly destroying them. I see in their eyes that their souls are leaving their bodies slowly.

In the article *Aggression and Violence among Iranian Adolescents and Youth: A 10-year Systematic Review* it was suggested that “Relatively high prevalence of violence and aggression among Iranian youth and adolescents is a warning sign and a great challenge to the social system.”<sup>4</sup>

The youth violence includes numerous behaviors ranging from homicide to destructive behavior such as bullying, harassment, terrorization, sexual assault, stalking, burglary, theft and robbery, and it has increased within Iranians: the youth manifest high levels of instability and defective functioning. Also, the escalation of criminal violence among the youth population has become a major public policy issue and a serious public health problem: as the same article states, “Reportedly, prevalence of violence and aggression among the Iranian adolescents and youth ranged from 30% to 65.5% while males being 2½ times more affected than females. The role of gender, family environment, family size, socioeconomic status, and victimization in perpetuating the circumstances was apparent.”<sup>5</sup>

Consuming alcohol and drugs, and engaging in casual sex are against the religious authorities and the government, and that is why people choose to do them. At the same time, public acts of rebellion could harm family and friends, as we experienced during the 2009 election when we saw dead bodies on the ground, and many imprisoned in unknown locations. We lost many in those days because we wanted a change and challenged the system. Once again we became even more miserable, and even though we broke the invisible wall between the system and people, the system adjusted itself and it became more powerful than before and left us in fear of the future.

Now the fear of not having a future haunts each Iranian; the post-revolution events left Iranians with lost hopes and aspirations. So, drinking 20 liters of alcohol or consuming huge quantities of

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<sup>4</sup> Sadeghi, Saeid, Ziba Farajzadegan, Roya Kelishadi, and Kamal Heidari. "Aggression and violence among Iranian adolescents and youth: A 10-year systematic review." *International Journal of Preventive Medicine* 5, no. 14 (2014): 83.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 83.

drugs and cigarettes becomes the answer to forgetting the problems within people around me. In many of my photographs the presence of alcohol and cigarettes are evident, which always ends with meaningless sex, dead-drunk and passed-out situations.

## **Chapter 2: Malaise**

A lot of the people that I captured in these pictures are well educated people who don't have any part in improving and shaping the structure of the society. While they have the knowledge and power to do so, they are prevented inside from working, or had to leave the country because of the corrupt and closed system that only allows people into the loop who are supporting the existence of the regime. Jafar Panahi is one of those famous examples of individuals that are banned or cannot work in their field and in his case, he is under home arrest. Many other ordinary people, like engineers, doctors, lawyers, potentially work as a taxi drivers, because they can't have their jobs. And this is the reason why I say everyone is depressed, I see the society as identical to a human body. A healthy body is when everything works perfectly, and when something is wrong there is an effect on the whole body. With Iranian society, I saw those people who have the knowledge and power as the brain and heart of the body, and when these two are not working well (read it as controlled by the wrong people in power), this will have an effect on the entire body even if the rest of the parts are in a healthy condition: still in the long run this will change if the system is not adjusting itself to cure the problem. And sooner or later this pressure will arise and create crisis.

Because these people have no ability to release their energy into the right places, places that they are trained for, they become addicted in some way to such things as drugs, alcohol, or even refreshing their Facebook page.

An article in *The Economist*, “Drug addiction in Iran, the other religion”, talks about this problem:

“The Islamic Republic has always had its addicts. Its long border with Afghanistan, the world’s biggest opium producer, and the Islamic stigma against drinking alcohol mean that opium and its derivatives are cheap, strong and readily available. An official youth unemployment rate of 28% and inflation running at 42% a year, both aggravated by American and European economic sanctions, have helped to turn ever more Iranians to hard drugs. According to Iran’s own figures, 2m Iranians in a population of 75m are addicted, the world’s highest incidence. Most experts put the real figure even higher.”<sup>6</sup>

Yet the same article also addresses the fact that Iran has some policies for tackling the problem, with methadone clinics, and charities for tackling drug obsession. At the same time, hundreds of smugglers have been hanged and thousands of police officers murdered in the past three decades to stop the drugs getting into the country.

“If Iran’s new president, Hassan Rohani, can fulfil his promise to reduce youth unemployment and cure Iran of its economic malaise, he may prevent a generation of Iranians from becoming the most addled in the world.”<sup>7</sup>

Even at a young age my friends and I never felt happy. I felt that there was something wrong with many things and that everybody was somehow looking for an answer. The lack of purpose or impact in the society that we lived in were the gifts from the post revolution. It was not like the society that I remember watching on the satellite channels, where all the American movies were about love, money, and heroes.

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<sup>6</sup> "The other religion." Drug addiction in Iran /The other religion, *The Economist*, August 17, 2013, <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21583717-why-so-many-young-iranians-are-hooked-hard-drugs-other-religion>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

After the revolution, we were told by our parents that we were special and we had the power to bring change which our parents could not do, but in reality we don't have that ability because of our narcissistic self-interest, and this brought us a great feeling of uselessness with only one purpose: to survive. I think the Green Movement in 2009 was a buried flame, raised from the ashes of our last hope to change something for the better. We found our purpose as the generation to correct our parents' mistakes, but in a few weeks, even that flame was just a mirage, like a dream you forget after waking up.

In Radio Farda's article in Farsi, *Iran after Iraq, the second saddest country in the world*,<sup>8</sup> Hassan Mosavi Chelek, the chair of community and social workers in Iran, gave a speech claiming that Iran is the second saddest country in the world after Iraq. He also said that in many parts of Tehran about 80% of the citizens are suffering from psychopathy. In the article *36 years after the revolution, where is Iran now?*<sup>9</sup> Seyed Hossein Mousavian, a middle east security and nuclear policy specialist at Princeton University, said that Iran has faced many challenges but that now, with access to education and a greater standard of living, corruption and human rights remain a big concern. Mousavian goes on to claim that since the revolution, about 60% of students who are enrolled at a university are women. Because of this corruption, inequality between men and women—those 60%—have no place in the work force, or they will not be treated as equal. And that puts those 60% in a much more difficult state of isolation and depression due to the fact that

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<sup>8</sup> Hassan Mosavi Chelek, "Iran after Iraq, the second saddest country in the world." *Radio Farda*, November 2015, [https://www.radiofarda.com/a/f4\\_iran\\_sad\\_nation\\_after\\_iraq\\_report/28090860.html](https://www.radiofarda.com/a/f4_iran_sad_nation_after_iraq_report/28090860.html).

<sup>9</sup> Seyed Hossein Mousavian, "36 years after the revolution, where is Iran now?" *Al-monitor*, February 10, 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/02/iran-revolution-anniversary-islamic-republic-education.html>.

those women have knowledge and education which before they were not allowed to have, but now they cannot use, due to Iran's patriarchy.

In Iran, men and women rarely work together, particularly in government jobs where they will be separated into two sections based on their gender. Almost all of the jobs are for men.

*A Woman Under the Influence* (1974) by John Cassavetes is a movie about a woman who is dealing with the problems of surviving in a sexist society, like all the women in Iran to date. Gena Rowlands brilliantly plays a woman who suffers from a great depression, identity issues, anxiety, and mental health problems while under the influence of family taboos and patriarchy, and how she tries or struggles to overcome all these problems while taking care of her three children. The presence of drinking, smoking and meaningless sex between Rowlands and the others in the movie are great symbols of that depression that she tries to forget.

"Men and women are different," says an upset soldier to a girl who's been questioning him in the film, *Offside* by Jafar Panahi. The movie is set in Tehran's Azadi Stadium, which is the biggest soccer stadium in Iran; however, no women are admitted anywhere in the stadium; and only men are allowed to attend the events. This is because of the oppressive separation of the genders in the Islamic Republic of Iran. This movie is simple: teenage girls cover themselves as boys, just to watch the Iranian national soccer team in a qualifying match that will send the winner to the 2006 World Cup in Germany. Although some of the girls slip by unnoticed, many are caught by soldiers and arrested. Robert L. Jones explains the women's situation in Panahi's film,

"Panahi's portrayal of fundamentalist Islam's oppression of its women is hardly oppressive; rather, he depicts their plight as a bureaucratic nightmare. Everyday life is absurdist theatre in today's Iran, where women cheer on their national soccer heroes at a game they cannot see."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Robert L Jones, "Film Review: Offside." *The Atlas Society*, September 08, 2010.

It is sad to say but in reality, Iranian women are living under a patriarchal society and family taboos, and this is not just a religious problem alone (but religion accounts for the majority of it). They are objects of reproduction and sexuality in the eyes of men and the clergy, and not as equals alongside men, like what Gena Rowlands' character was going through in the movie ...

In Iran, I saw a sick society, with many facing depression or the feeling of malaise that has changed the way of their lives. At many parties or gatherings that I attended, just for a moment, we felt good, like we were in it together, like friends, like partners in crime, in the moments that touched me deep inside, but those moments wouldn't last long because the loneliness and isolation would float like a cloud in the air and jump from one face to another face and cover them slowly as the night wore on.

This isolation is shown in many recent movies. *The Leviathan*<sup>11</sup> by Andrey Zvyagintsev is about the seizing of a man's property by a corrupt government official; it reflects the dark mood of Vladimir Putin's Russia. It is a film with lifeless skies, great quantities of vodka, and hidden anger. One of the most interesting acts in the film is the time that Nikolai (Aleksei Serebryakov) and his family shoot pictures of Lenin and Putin, and this act summarizes the anger of ordinary Russians about political ideologues who put their benefits above the people. Finally, the movie *Leviathan* talks about the cynicism and desperation of modern Russia, which is why I think it relates to *Gone with the Madness*. With that I think Iranian film makers such as Kiarostami are trying to create the same feeling or environments for their viewers.

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<sup>11</sup> Andrey Zvyagintsev, "The Leviathan" 2014.

As the sound of footsteps and rhythmic voices of marching Iranian militaries fades in over the black screen, the sound of the rain fades out. *Taste of Cherry* (1997) by Abbas Kiarostami is one of the many films that challenge viewers to think beyond what they see on the screen.

The article by Michael Price, *Imagining life: The Ending of Taste of Cherry*, is about the concept that filmmakers in closed countries like Iran have to work within the framework that governments create.

Price says: "The notion of conceptually moving beyond – in both a practical and spiritual sense – is a key theme of Kiarostami's cinema. For instance, rather than haggle with Iran's notorious censorship office, which would create a film of compromise or a film-by-committee, Kiarostami accepts and uses their general guidelines based on precedents. He works within this framework and creates films that imply meaning beyond it."<sup>12</sup>

Abbas Kiarostami allows the story to unfold in a deliberate poetic and slow pace; this reminds me of Russian cinema. The shots are given plenty of time in the shape of long gazes, gorgeous landscapes and haunting symbolism while Mr. Badii, the main character in the movie, faces a different reality as he drives across the dusty landscape to meet his random passengers.

Personally, my interest in cinema is towards the Russian film makers and I barely follow Iranian cinema, but one of the movies that I think is close to this series of photographs that I am working on is a film by Bahman Ghobadi called *No One Knows About Persian Cats*. The movie deals with underground music bands, and how they struggle to create works and play for an audience under the nose of the government. Compared to *Gone with the Madness*, Ghobadi's film shows another perspective of Iranians who are trying to bypass the regime. In the movie, one of the characters tries to purchase an illegal passport, so he can leave the country, and play with his band outside

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Price, "Imagining Life: The Ending of Taste of Cherry." *Senses of Cinema*, June 08, 2011, <http://sensesofcinema.com/2001/abbas-kiarostami-17/cherry/>.

Iran. Ghobadi himself shot this movie in 17 days without permission and got himself arrested twice. Peter Bradshaw from *The Guardian* says:

“Bahman Ghobadi has made a freewheeling, semi-documentary picture about a group of twentysomething Iranian rock musicians desperate to get permission to play a gig in London. It has a weirdly Dick Lester-ish feel to it, but with an undercurrent of desperation. These are people without an obvious political motive — but they are certainly desperate to escape Iran and its stifling atmosphere of censorship.”<sup>13</sup>

Traveling to Iran, you must land at Emam Khomeini International Airport. Walking towards the passport check makes everyone a little bit worried because you never know if you can ever leave the country again—especially with an Iranian and Canadian passport.

Sina, an old friend of mine, was at the airport to pick me up. He was going to be in this project more than anyone else; many times in during my staying in Iran if he was not with me I wouldn't be as functional as I am now. He saved me from my madness when everything else failed me.

Sina was one of those people that opened my eyes to the current state of depression within Iranians, a person who lost his path, his identity. I saw him as someone who has nothing to lose so he acts as radical as he could when we were partying. He was destroying himself slowly, as so many other friends and friend of friends that I met during the trip. I saw and felt that each one was dealing with some sort of anxiety. We all were drowning in the extreme use of alcohol and drugs. After some time, weekdays and weekends lost their meaning to me, and as well for them for a long time. The first week I arrived, the first four days back to back I stayed up till 4 am with them. We were drinking, dancing, and during this time people would sneak into rooms to have sexual intercourse

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<sup>13</sup> Nicolas Rapold, "No One Knows About Persian Cats." *Film Comment*, April 2010, <https://www.filmcomment.com/article/no-one-knows-about-persian-cats-review/>.

or other activities, everything looked like a dream with a Wes Anderson colour palette from his movies or an Impressionist painting where everyone is happy, and everything is working well. This was like paradise to me—who wouldn't like it? This is perfectly illustrated in *Passionate uprisings: young people, sexuality and politics in post-revolutionary Iran*, when the author, Pardis Mahdavi, quotes from Ladan, a 25-year old female, about how our daily routine works: “In Iran, sex is in fashion. Luxury is in style. How do we live our lives in the Islamic republic? We go out to a party, go for drinks at someone's house, order some food, drink a little, dance a little, and go have sex. Then get up and repeat your routine, the next day.”

In the first couple of chapters in Hemingway's novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, we witness that all the characters in the story appear to have no obligations in their lives; they have everything that they want. All the time they are out in cafes or night clubs, enjoying the Paris nights. Hemingway with *The Sun Also Rises* beautifully describes the hedonism in Europe which had lost its meaning after World War I. While reading the novel, I observed that all his characters, in the last part of the chapters do not know the true meaning of happiness and they don't enjoy life. They are trying to fill the void in their daily lives, except they have only discovered an empty existence in Paris: they are lost souls who are traveling, drinking like fishes, smoking like chimneys and sleeping with each other's friends.

There is a quote from Ernest Hemingway in this book that reminds me of my project:

You're an expatriate. You've lost touch with the soil. You get precious. Fake European standards have ruined you. You drink yourself to death. You become obsessed with sex. You spend all your time talking, not working. You are an expatriate, see? You hang around cafes.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ernest Hemingway, “*The sun also rises: Ernest Hemingway.*” (New York, NY: Spark Publ., 2003), 115.

In the beginning this all seemed fine; we are in an age of exploring and when you live in a country in which these sorts of activities are banned they feel exciting. In many parties or gatherings that I attended, just for a moment, they felt good, when these activities lose their value because of doing them every day, then people ask themselves, “So, what is next?” In Mahdavi’s research she wrote about the results of her fieldwork which raise more questions for her too. She says:

I continue to struggle with the impact, meaning and future of the sexual revolution in Iran. The changes taking place amongst urban young adults in Iran are many. The young people seem to be using their bodies to make social and political statements against what they view as repression.<sup>15</sup>

In my opinion and my observation the 21st century has seen increased levels of isolation between people, this has been the outcome of many social issues, in many cases unemployment and global misery has caused depression. *The Globalist* in the article *The Global Unemployment Crisis: Costs, Causes, Cures*, reported that “Across the globe, an estimated 210 million people are unemployed, an increase of over 30 million since the start of the Great Recession of 2007. Three-fourths of this increase occurred in the advanced economies.”<sup>16</sup> Prakash Loungani wrote that the loss in incomes once people lose their professions continues into their future.<sup>17</sup> Loungani explains that even 15-20 years after the first job loss, the same people who were laid off earn on average 20% less than similar employees who did not lose their jobs. The same report suggested that the job loss also has destructive influences on health. Layoffs are associated with a greater risk of heart attacks and

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<sup>15</sup> Pardis Mahdavi, "Passionate Uprisings: Young People, Sexuality and Politics in Post-revolutionary Iran." *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 9, no. 5 (2007): 445-57.

<sup>16</sup> Prakash Loungani, "The Global Unemployment Crisis: Costs, Causes, Cures." *The Globalist*, November 14, 2010, <https://www.theglobalist.com/the-global-unemployment-crisis-costs-causes-cures/>.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

other stress-related diseases. And also the increased death rate due to joblessness will continue up to 20 years after the job loss.

In government jobs, the actual time that people work in an 8-hour shift is under 20 minutes. A lot of times I asked my friends how they function, after staying up till early morning and then leaving the house at 6 a.m. sharp to go to work. And they are partying almost 4 days a week if not more. Speaking at Inside Quest, Simon Sinek, who studied millennials in their workplace, says he believes that social anxiety, financial pressure, and career tension are pretty much the motives for alcoholics to drink.<sup>18</sup> He said that alcohol helps them to cope with the stress and anxiety. Sadly, that develops a hard wire in their minds and for the rest of their lives. Whenever they hurt from that difficulty and pressure they will turn not to a person but to the bottle. During my time in Tehran I had access to more people with alcohol problems in underground parties than ever before. I also saw a group of 4 or 5 people go in the toilets and taking drugs—cocaine is the new trend within the upper classes and crystal meth and heroin for the lower classes. Unfortunately, during my stay, I couldn't photograph those people in the toilets, even though they would ask me to join them, because people still wanted to be anonymous. Alcohol is acceptable within society because many of their parents are consuming alcohol too, but drugs are still taboo. Cigarettes are just part of everyone's life. I think the amount of money people spend on buying cigarettes and alcohol is skyrocketing. Unless your parents are part of that one percent of rich families and support you financially, it's impossible to have your own place, when the economy is broken and the price of living is as high as New York. There is no way to save up, so people spend their earnings just on having fun; no one has a clear view of the future, so they believe living it now is better than not having it in the future. So, they just want to experience everything in a short amount of time.

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<sup>18</sup> Simon Sinek, "Millennials In the Workplace." *YouTube*, December 28, 2016, <https://youtu.be/5MC2X-LRbkE>.

This idea basically is destroying the 90s generation which has experienced everything--especially sexually. They had access to everything. They were raised with the internet and information in a country in which everything is taboo and banned. And because when something is *prohibited* they will do it because that is the nature of human beings. It is like when they tell you “don’t push the red button” and you have an urge to do it. In the case of my generation which are the 80s generation, we still live with some taboos so we weren’t as open as the 90s generation. In another interview by Mahdavi, 19-year old Leila Somagh, who lives in Tehran, talks about the problem with the regime’s system,

To me one of the most obvious flaws of the system and an issue that is unique to the Islamic Republic: We are not supposed to be seen in public with a man, otherwise we go to jail. That means no dinner dates, no walks in the park and no movie theatres. So what do we do? We go straight to his house, and what do we do there? I’ll let you figure that one out; there is a room and a bed and not much more. Do you see the problem?<sup>19</sup>

Mahdavi says again, according to Leila and several other young women, that because men and women cannot be seen in public, they skip the “normal” procedures of a few dinner dates before intimacy. In my opinion the 90s generation are interesting people but because of the society which doesn’t understand them, and doesn’t provide the necessary tools to help them, they find themselves lost in feelings of depression and nothingness. In many cases, the government of Iran ignores any problem that makes them look bad, even though a lot of research shows the opposite of what the government believes. Thus, when youth experience everything within the limitations of the society they don’t have anything more to gain, and they become depressed. I think our generation has suffered the most among the generations of our parents and those after us. We came right after the new regime took over the country; we were the test subjects. They came to change

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<sup>19</sup> Pardis Mahdavi, "Passionate Uprisings: Young People, Sexuality and Politics in Post-revolutionary Iran." *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 9, no. 5 (2007): 445-57.

the system, and we were the subjects to test it on. We never experienced the best system, the good things from the past which our parents saw, and we were never given a clear vision of our future. We were raised in the aftermath of the revolution, wars, and sanctions. In *The Economist*, in an article about young Iranians, "Children of the Revolution," an anonymous writer notes that:

Iran has an overwhelmingly youthful population. Some 60% of its 70m citizens are now under 30. This group did not experience the revolution directly. Nor did they suffer under the Shah's rule that preceded it. They did not fight in Iran's brutal and lengthy war with Iraq. They have grown up exclusively under Iran's strange blend of theocracy and democracy and they are far from happy with it.<sup>20</sup>

Consuming alcohol and drugs, and delving into sexual frustrations are somehow against the religious establishment and the government, and that is why people choose to do them, because acting against the rules of Islam and the regime is less obvious and this becomes our fight against their powers; and what they prohibited us from doing is what we will do.

Now the fear of not having a future, haunts many Iranians. The post revolution events left Iranians losing hope and aspirations.

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<sup>20</sup> "Children of the Revolution." *The Economist*, 2009, <http://www.economist.com/node/13088969>.

### Chapter 3: My project

During my depression in Iran I wandered everywhere that I could explore. A lot of my pictures of outsiders or public spaces are the moments that I felt like they are “broken,” like me. I could see sorrow and pain in their faces. Many of these are the supporters of the regime but because of corruption, and a bad economy, they could not improve their lives. Joblessness and unemployment has the same effect on them too, but their faith keeps them going and doesn't allow them to seek more. Many times, going out and driving around I observed that every intersection was filled with child labourers, and the homeless. I could not believe that a country with oil, gas, and rich soil could exist in this state of conflict between poverty and wealth.

At one point a Lamborghini and a Porsche were waiting at a light and one of those children begged for money and they were simply ignored—most probably by the sons and daughters of the people in charge. A country revolts to become free from monarchy, a country revolts to give working-class families more than what they have, and now nothing has changed, except for the middle class becoming poorer and the rich, richer.

I could see pain and anger in the everyday lives of others. This was perfectly illustrated by my observation of a who man got out of his car and slapped a 9 or 10-year-old girl who tried to wash his windshield as he waited behind a red light. He yelled in Farsi “Don't ever touch my car again.” I was frustrated and angry with him, but seeing the situation with the bad economy, social injustice, and how ordinary people are surviving with the minimum, I could see that his frustration and anger wasn't with the girl or the car but the system that doesn't give him a chance to better himself. We can go back to Mousavian's article *36 years after the revolution, where is Iran now?* In which he

said that “High levels of inflation, unemployment and a bloated bureaucracy have also contributed to a “brain drain,” or the emigration of many educated Iranians.”

This photography essay is a portrait of daily life in Iran and of the incomprehensible paradoxes between home life and public life in Iran during the Islamic Revolution. I see this book as another version of Marjane Satrabi’s graphic novel *Persepolis*; of course not as powerful as hers, where she uses the format of graphic panels to illustrate very simple images, and which communicated a great depth of emotion. Also, her use of contrast between light and dark, and the symbolism in the panels were apparent and very effective in communicating the message to the novel’s readers; her approach is somehow my goal, to show that contrast in my book too. Satrapi's book combines political history and memoir, portraying a country's 20th-century upheavals through the story of the family and a child, as my book is also somehow from my perspective and my observation of the current situation, using image pairs in black and white to also help to illustrate that feeling of struggle people face in the current Iran. In *Persepolis*, Marjam Satrapi buys an illegal tape and gets stopped by the Guardians of the Revolution, which is exactly what I want to show in this series too: that any basic rights are prohibited and people are forced to do things underground, and the fear of getting found out always stays.

*Gone with the Madness* is the image of a failed dream; it is the image of an engineer who holds a bottle of alcohol in his mouth with his eyes closed to forget the pain for just a second. It is the image of a failed fantasy that Iranians will never kneel to a higher power again, it is the image of a failed society where even a child laborer standing in an intersection is not safe from the passing passengers anymore.

## Chapter 4: Methodology

I was once asked about the choice of my lenses. In the past I have used 50mm lenses, and I also used zoom lenses, but in recent years I became a wide-lens shooter. Going back to this question I never thought about why I started to shoot wide, I began to understand that using a wide-angle lens assisted me to see openly, and it gives the viewers a chance to see more information, such as lighting, patterns, small pieces of symbolism here and there. I leave clues in each frame, so hopefully people will see them in the series and understand the concept without needing too much information. Also, with the 28mm lens I could be close to someone's chest and still have enough space to show the background, which with a tighter lens would not be possible. The wide lens gave me the ability to step back, and to freeze different actions in those moments that reflected the conflict, anxiety, and feeling of that unhealthy society within these Iranian lives, inside and out, that I think I witnessed. In many cases in the series I squeezed many people into a frame to bring out the feeling of a pressure within Iranians that is waiting to break out and explode, or the hands of people are reaching out for answers, floating on the air which many are suffering for lack of it. I have focused on one subject within a bigger environment to show that solitude, and the conflicts within that solitude, some looking down or up, or left alone to find meanings for their meaningless lives. And some look into my lens with many questions. Or as in the work of Atget, the wide lens aided me to capture emptiness and a soulless environment to emphasize a crisis in society, or disenchantment with reality within the Iranian people.

My proposal for this program was something else. At the beginning of the program I wanted to document the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq war from 1980 to 1988, and the effects of that war on

people and lands around the border in Iran. My first visit to Iran for the project was the Christmas holiday of 2015-2016, after the first semester. In Iran visiting the cities which were affected the most, I found connections and I took some pictures; I think they were in good shape to make something out of the project and I went back the following summer to gather more material so I could have a cohesive work for the final presentation. I think it was during that Christmas holiday that I was exposed to the new topic somehow; as I was traveling to the war zones, I would come back to Tehran to rest and to see friends and family, so I started to take pictures of them where they were, out in public or inside their houses. I started to know them through taking pictures and later what you will see in the book, that initiated this work. But I didn't think about it too much at the time; it was there, but I wanted to finish the aftermath work and think about this as a further topic to work on.

Coming back to Canada I showed some of the pictures from the trip and those moments with my friends to Masoud Eskandari, another Iranian photographer in the program, and he suggested that these were good, and they are interesting subjects, but I thought I have enough material from the aftermath of war so I can work on this another time...

Traveling to Iran in the summer and the break up at the beginning of the trip left a door open for me, without my knowing at that moment that I am documenting the malaise and hopelessness instead of traveling to the war zone. I started to know and hang out with more people, to pass the time, to forget about the problems in those cities where I could go and hang out, especially Tehran. During the days when my friends were at work, I was wondering around, mostly walking, to capture the sense of seclusion, the images of isolation that are in the book, and by night I was at the parties and..., so simultaneously I was observing or documenting the two paradoxical lives that would become the most important part of the book.

I think I was even addicted to wandering and taking pictures too, it was something to make me calm from my own madness, or simply I became like the rest of the subjects in the book, I found something for myself to forget the actual problems: getting high, getting drunk, and taking pictures, every day, what else, I wanted more.

I think the most important part of this project is the book itself. I have been making books since I received my BFA from OCAD University, and I have been always fascinated with collecting photography books. By now I have collected more than 250 books from many different photographers and artists. I have never published a work, but mostly I made online and self-published projects to practice. As my portfolio to get into Documentary Media program, I gave them my 300 pages of documentation of Iranian nomads, and in Professor Katy McCormick's bookmaking class in first year of the program, I made a handmade book about Japan to introduce myself to the faculty as someone who is interested in bookmaking. But for some reason I felt that the Ryerson program was placing an emphasis on installation-based documentary. Of course I understand that this project was not yet ready to be published, but it was good just as a dummy for the future. I know that with only two months shooting, especially since my original project was about something else, I haven't had a chance to think about how to make the story and shoot it completely in the way I wanted. But for me, sequencing and editing are the most important parts of photography and bookmaking is critical in documentary work; choosing the best 5 pictures and hanging them on the wall doesn't satisfy me, and ordinary people only remember the wine and cheese of the opening. With a low budget, time, and the space that I had to work on the project, I couldn't come up with a show that would stay in the audience's mind and also satisfy myself, but when you can put 100 pictures that work together and hold each other from the start to finish to make the story that I want to tell, that is very satisfying. In *The Book as Physical Object* Keith

Smith gives examples of some possibilities with binding and how it will have an effect on viewers. The book itself has volume and it is a physical object, so viewers can control the distance to their eyes and this is an advantage. During the reading Smith explains and explores the concept of the book and the pages inside the book: how turning the pages will show the concept of the book (which is the most important part of my book as well). I tried to connect each page to the next, every page has some sort of similar element from the previous page that ties the book together.<sup>21</sup> As Smith expresses it, that turning of pages will reveal the order and give the book a time line experience. Each page in the book tries to show each picture as true and as equally strong. Reviewing the book at least more than two times will help to understand the meaning and layout and how these two will help each other to create a stronger book. As in *Gone with the Madness* I tried my best to achieve these concepts. As you go through the pages and the book over and over, you learn more about the situation and concept and see more details that you will miss with just one look.

In documentary work, the photographer needs to convey a story and in my case, that I am talking about forty years of history, the book is the answer in the long run. I have never been a good writer, nor speaker, but I am an observer and listener. I see the social issues, I see the problems, I hear people's concerns and I want to share them somewhere or somehow. Photography was the medium to let me express myself in many cases, during the years that I was shooting. And based on people's knowledge about the situation, they could have interpreted their stories with the work, wrong or right. If someone knows what big brother is in a dictatorship, then when I use a picture of a soldier with his face hidden behind a wall, what the viewer sees in the photograph, are only army boots and his two hands locked to each other, to me this is what control is: how they consistently are

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<sup>21</sup>Keith Smith, "Structure of the Visual Book" (Rochester, NY: K. Smith Books, 2010), 6-16.

watching you from hidden places, but their presence is always above your head, like the book *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell. Possibly for people without knowledge about the situation, they are going to see a beautiful picture with nice lighting on the boots and this will still satisfy the ordinary viewer.

Unfortunately, my vision in photography is not powerful enough yet, to let me capture the one photo that speaks a thousand words, like what Gordon Parks' portraits can do to my mind and my heart, but I think the selection of good photographs lets me do the job for now, and allows me to communicate with the viewers through a well-sequenced book.

Coming to the program, I knew that I wanted to leave with a book that I produced. The process of making this book started with almost 300GB of images from 2 months of shooting, mostly useless. I edited these down to 500 images and from there I initiated the book, by laying down all the pictures, and making a draft of what I thought is a good start, inspired by the work of Moises Saman's *Discordia*; which I will talk about later in the documentary relevance section. I started with a conservative edit for the first presentation, and after basically no positive feedback on the book, I made a radical edit. Going straight to the problem with Sina holding a bottle of water which is filled with home-made alcohol and from there, I was using my knowledge in bookmaking to sequence the book, using shape, geometry, lines, to make a story. Over Christmas 2016 and with the advisors' suggestions, I went over almost 200 photobooks and studied their sequencing and editing, mostly Magnum photographers, but a lot of contemporary books as well; sometimes I went over the ones that did not even relate to my work. And in many cases based on my knowledge of the medium I started to read the photobooks like you read a text-based book: either a right or wrong interpretation was still enjoyable for me.

Professor Vid Ingelevics was the one who actually picked up on the coding that was hidden in the pictures, during the presentation in December 2016. He said that the work reminds him of Baltic photographers, during the Soviet era when it was problematic for them to display the truth about people's conditions; which is also his own background. He could somehow see the signs that I left in the pictures and I think this gave me the go-ahead to make this book with no captions. I believe that a good photograph needs no text, at least in this project; I like that viewers challenge their minds and their understating of the situation about Iran, which is an unknown to a lot of westerners. I tried to use the pairs of photographs to represent the two paradoxical lives that happen simultaneously in Iran and in the book, to create a narrative in each page and also overall in the entire book, and this decision gave me the ability to not use captions, because the singular image doesn't carry the meaning that I want to convey, but all pairs together create the story that I want. Living under a totalitarian regime makes people use codes in their conversation, and what I wanted from critique and presentation was to help me show that to the audience. What I needed from the program was guidance for me to create a collection of photographs that communicate and talk with ordinary viewers, and for people who understand or try to understand what the situation is in Iran. In the book, I used some repetitive elements such as curtains, pools, water, pictures of ayatollahs, hands, smoking, alcohol and..., this decision was first to bring that feeling of repetitive life that happens in Iran, that 365 days a year people drink, work every day, and I wanted to make a book with no break, make the viewers tired of just going on without feeling that it ends somewhere, like the reality that I witnessed. Again, in another chapter in Keith's book called *Movement*<sup>22</sup> he talks about repetition that can be in the form of following a pattern or bringing the same identical layouts in the book back again in order to create an extra meaning. Nevertheless, repetition introduces the

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<sup>22</sup> Keith Smith, "Structure of the Visual Book" (Rochester, NY: K. Smith Books, 2010), 46-64.

concept of a book in a tricky manner by letting the readers get used to the layouts while flipping the book. I have used the same repetitive layouts and elements throughout the book.

The first dummy book started with opening on a curtain. In Iran curtains are used to separate men and women, private from public, and I think the use of curtains in the pictures helped to express something about the double lives we experience. Also, here and there in the book I used clothes or the hijab, that has the same meaning for me at least. In the dummy books that I was working on during the second year and mostly after January 2017, I made some hidden sections: the first section involved the use of hands from one page to another page, and the viewer would continuously see the movement of the hands flying around as pages go forward. I introduced the second section which involved the use of pools as a theme and then in the third section I brought in geometrical shapes. The fourth section was about gender, men and women; and then in the fifth section I introduced smoking and then in the sixth, I was using the supreme leaders' signs in different places. And the end was about going back to the beginning, which was to show the state of depression on people's faces: this circle turns and turns, with no answers, and brings the feeling of hopelessness. I guess these were the hidden elements in sequence to let the book flow from the beginning to the end. On top of this, I used paradox and juxtaposition to show the private vs public, insiders and outsiders, and the double lives that Iranians are going through.

In secret and apart from the class and faculty (mostly), I have collaborated with two Iranian women artists as part of my belief that as a documentarian with a platform hopefully in the future, I should give more voice to Iranian women while I work for or with them. First and for the most important part of the book which is the cover, I gave full control and responsibility to my close friend Avidah Saadatpajouh to design the front and back of the cover. The assignment for her was to create a

cover that holds and expresses everything I tried to say with pictures in the book, as I believed that she has the ability to design it without any background in that field and I think she did a really fantastic job.

Secondly, I don't really like to talk about my work or try to examine and critique my work. As with so many other photography books out there, which mostly come with an essay from a third party, a close friend or partner of the artist with some knowledge of critiquing, or simply just another artist, I asked Parastoo Anoushahpour, an Iranian multimedia artist, to write an afterword for the book. She wrote a striking poetic essay about the situation by putting those pictures into words.

## Chapter 5: Documentary Relevance

Hemingway books:

Once professor Elle Flanders said about using Hemingway in the paper, “The reference is very old, very modernist and we are living in a different time. If you think you can connect the two times, great, but otherwise, comparing Iran to Europe of that time, is not an obvious connection.”

But I think he influenced me in my editing and the way I deconstruct any image to find the best rhythm in the series. For many years, I have been studying western masters in photography, Henri Cartier-Bresson .... so, what I shot in Iran is almost like a western point of view, and when I look at the works of the Iranian Magnum photographer, Abbas, I see the same style that all the Magnum photographers follow somehow, the work is different but when you see the work without any background you still feel it, this is work of a Magnum photographer.

Hemingway taught me how to look at the work of masters in painting and photography and deconstruct and analyze their work, so I could use it in my editing.

He said himself that he learned how to express nature in text from Paul Cezanne’s work. By looking at Cezanne and Monet paintings he learned to use words, like those painters used color on canvas. He used words like painters use a brush. Simple but harsh like what you see closely in Monet paintings; it looks like a thick rouge, but when you step back the paint become alive, and this is how Hemingway uses words in many of his novels or short stories. The reader struggles to make sense of the situation but when they step back, you can see the coding hidden under words.

Hemingway in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* uses these coded words; the book is one of his few politically-oriented views compared to the rest of his works. The character in the book says:

“Are you a communist?”

"No I am an anti-fascist."

"For a long time?"

"Since I have understood fascism.”<sup>23</sup>

By understanding how Hemingway’s uses a painter’s techniques to write, I used the same method to understand how *Robert Frank: In America* was sequenced, so I can use that technique in my book.

Making documentary is like making a story, making a documentary film is a little bit easier compared to photography projects, in terms that viewers can understand the concept and story..., this is the place where Hemingway’s style comes to help me to make my project with my story. Hemingway writes a story without giving away any sort of background and information about their subject in his book and still the viewers follow the story, they just witness a timeframe from Hemingway’s creation. It is like listening to two strangers’ conversation on the street and you don’t know them and their history. And that was the problem for me, to create a story out of forty years of Iranian post-revolution history with only two months of shooting.

But even though I think I could follow and read the story in the book, some viewers could not understand some points, and that is due my lack of experience and material to create a powerful story.

Living under a totalitarian regime or under pressure, people learn to use codes to represent the reality in their daily conversations. I tried to use those coding strategies and turn them into pictures.

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<sup>23</sup> Ernest Hemingway, “*For whom the bell tolls*” (London: Macmillan Collectors Library, 2016), 37.

I never hide the fact that Henri Cartier-Bresson, Elliot Erwitt and other Magnum photographers are my source of inspiration every day. They always fascinated me, the way they looked at the world and captured it, and I always wanted to be like them. Because of that, a lot of my pictures are coming from the same roots, the way I frame and use composition are because of me continuously living my life through their books. But once in my life a photographer changed something inside me, or perhaps it is better to say a body of work which was not from a Magnum photographer created that change: *Tulsa* by Larry Clark was a series of photographs that he shot with his friends every day for years. This phrase from Clark in *Tulsa* never leaves me: "once the needle goes in, it never comes out." I remember that friendship was the most important part of my life, being in a community being an insider. Bresson, Erwitt, Rene Burri, Larry Towell, Alec Soth, Martin Parr... they all taught me photography, they taught me how to see, how to frame, and how to edit and select pictures that might be interesting for the viewers, but in most cases, they have never been an insider. *El Salvador* by Larry Towell is a ten-year project and in many pictures in the book, Towell is really close to his subjects (you see pictures in Salvadorian houses or even a mother breastfeeding her child); there are guns and coffins, but it is not the same as Clark's *Tulsa*. *Tulsa* is visceral book, a view of a teenager and his friends, living life with no rules, sex, drugs, guns, and violence all in one series. I understand that *Gone with the Madness* is not something like *Tulsa*, it doesn't have that feeling of insiders, but for someone who went back after 10 years and connected with new people and with the environment that Iran has -- in which many pictures could do harm and put the subjects at risk of being found by government agents -- this was the closest that I could be to an insider, at least for now. Also, I don't know if I can say it myself, this is up to the people to tell me how far I went, but maybe one day I could use the technique of Magnum

photographers that I practiced and combine it with that intimate feeling of Clark's approach, and take this body of work to a new level.

I think when I became depressed and addicted, those same people accepted me, they accepted my camera, because they saw me as one of themselves. At least this is how I feel, they saw my struggles, they had some sort of empathy, and maybe deep down they knew that the camera was the only thing keeping me going like their drugs and alcohol, something to pass the time and life. I was there with a camera pointing at them and capturing the moments that are new for western viewers. This environment has been hidden from the eyes of the media for a while and this book is just scratching the surface. There are many "insider" photographers that I can talk about here who in different ways photographed people with whom they were closely connected, such as Nan Goldin, Danny Lyon, Richard Billingham, or Mary Ellen Mark. But I would like to start with a photographer who started his journey as an 18-year old: every time I open his book I see and learn new aspect of his projects. Mike Brodie's *A Period of Juvenile Prosperity* creates a new level of intimacy with his photography, one that touches the soul. Brodie was a teenager from Pensacola who started a journey by walking, hitchhiking and train-hopping across the United States, which he traveled for more than 50,000 miles of unticketed routes. The pictures are intimate and honest and came from an untrained and self-taught photographer. Even though I have been trained, compared to Brodie, I always tried to capture my subjects honestly as I got closer to them, and in the right moment, tried to seize what I think was that best representation of the situation.

It is interesting for me too that both *Tulsa* and *A Period of Juvenile Prosperity* are lacking extensive text. I always believe in similar ways of making books, but also I got inspired by Moises Saman's *Discordia*, in which his approach to design initiated my own book. Clark's *Tulsa* has just a page of his text, one paragraph with only four lines. Also, the book contains few words like two names,

two dates and a line, “dead is more perfect than life” and the word “DEAD” here and there. In the Brodie’s *A Period of Juvenile Prosperity*, it only contains two pages of a personal essay which ended with this quote “I don’t want to be famous, but I hope this book is remembered forever” and just pictures with no supporting text in the book. As Danny Lyon said about Brodie’s book,

“There are no captions on these pictures. We never learn anyone’s name, and worse, we do not know if they are in Idaho or Canada, or where they are. There is a beautifully written afterword that Brodie wrote in Santa Fe. In it he briefly lays out his difficult life growing up, the outline of how he made the work, and his early retirement from photography to become a diesel mechanic. He says he is looking for a job, just not in photography.”<sup>24</sup>

Since the beginning of making this book I felt this is the right approach in my book too, even though I know that I will lose critical information that might be helpful for viewers to understand a world that they haven’t seen or do not know about, and mostly was hidden from view. But sometimes you must make a sacrifice to achieve something you believe in. I think not knowing everything sometimes help you seek for answers rather than just providing them. Have you seen anyone open a photobook and read the text first?

There is always an inspiration before someone starts a project; my first inspiration to start the book was *Discordia*<sup>25</sup> a self-published book by Magnum photographer Moises Saman. The book symbolizes a personal memory of time he spent living in the Middle East during the Arab Spring from 2011 to 2014. Saman offers extensive and complex photographic sequences, with an absence of captions that I am trying to achieve as well. *Discordia* introduces a new movement in photojournalism with an unpredictable and less straightforward journalistic depiction of the Arab Spring. Saman collaborated with the Dutch-Iranian artist Daria Birang to include a series of photo collages in the book.

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<sup>24</sup> Danny Lyon, "Danny Lyon on Mike Brodie, A Period of Juvenile Prosperity." *Aperture Foundation NY*.

<sup>25</sup> Moises Saman, “Discordia” *Crocetta del Montello: Grafiche Antiga*, 2016.

Birang created the collages from Saman's photographs, rough cut-outs exploring the repetition of human gestures and theatrics that Saman witnessed and captured during the incidents. After going over the book countless times I have found that *Discordia* is a masterpiece, the book includes all the rules in book making while breaking all the rules at the same time by using double-page spreads, isolated photographs, provoking two-image contrasts, and juxtapositions which shape a graphic illustration of Saman's up-close experience during the Arab spring.

**Conclusion:**

*Gone with the Madness* hints at the ways in which these opposing realities within Iranians co-exist and affect each other, but offers no easy conclusions. With a young population and a fast-declining economy, concern about the possibility of maintaining a stable future haunts every Iranian. The effects of these precarious living and working conditions are especially visible amongst Iranian youth and have become considerably more pronounced since the 1979 Islamic revolution. These scenes of hazy decadence, sites of ruin left from the Persian Gulf war, snapshots from Iran's often tense street life, and images of rapidly growing development sites in the suburbs of Tehran are there to remind the viewer of the deep-rooted corruption and ongoing social and class struggle that continue to grow in Iran. There are no easy answers or solutions for this current state of malaise or depression within Iranians after almost forty years of suffering from a loss of hope for having a better future.

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