

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Wilson, William. "Through the Lens of Iranian Culture." Los Angeles Times. July 2, 1994.

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SATURDAY, JULY 2, 1994

LOS ANGELES TIMES

Through the Lens of Iranian Culture

■ Two exhibitions at UCLA's Fowler Museum enrich images of these immigrants in L.A.

ART REVIEW

By WILLIAM WILSON
TIMES ART CRITIC

In many ways modern art is the language of the misunderstood. In the beginning it was spoken by visionary bohemians and beats within this culture. Today, that language embraces and is embraced by immigrants, exiles and refugees sea-tossed to these shores by a world off its axis.

UCLA's Fowler Museum of Cultural History addresses the issue of the modern outsider in two exhibitions that look at the art and life of Los Angeles' Iranian immigrants—one a documentary photographic essay, the other works by immigrant artists. With an estimated population between 150,000 and 400,000, it's the most populous enclave outside Iran proper.

It has thrived here to create a subculture with its own periodicals, television and radio programming and artists of every stamp. The bulk of its membership is made up of educated, upscale professionals who fled to escape the Ayatollah Khomeini's fundamentalist revolution of 1979. Their run for freedom curdled into absurdity. Americans, angered and humiliated by the hostage crisis at the embassy in Tehran, turned the immigrants into the villains.

Photographer Ron Kelley spent five years documenting all this and more in a project that evolved into "Irangeles: Iranians in Los Angeles."

Now it's a national traveling exhibition of some 120 black-and-white photographs handsomely premiered at the museum and accompanied by a 400-page book-catalogue that amounts to an in-depth sociological study. Kelley, Jonathan Friedlander and Anita Colby acted as project editors and curators. The show was organized by the museum in conjunction with UCLA's Gustave E. von Grunbaum Center for Near Eastern Studies and its International Studies and Overseas Programs department.

Kelley's photographic style has a populist flavor located somewhere between Robert Frank and Diane Arbus. That means it's a



UCLA Fowler Museum

A work from Shirin Neshat's series "Women of Allah" is on view at Fowler.

little funky and slightly inclined to exaggeration. It works well depicting a people whose appearance leans to the vivid. Kelley captures the disorientation of trying to fit into a new culture without losing cherished values. In non-propagandistic reality, that is bound to involve elements of comedy, pathos and courage.

Pictures prove there is no one monumental Iranian character or sensibility. We see bikers and belly dancers, salesmen in silk suits and a turbaned Kurd at a picnic in the Pacific Palisades.

There are women in traditional chadors and fashionable yuppies on Rodeo Drive. There is one taste for opulence and another for austerity.

There are Iranian Muslims, Jews, Bahais; Armenians, Assyrians and Zoroastrians. We see a dignified Iranian executive and his Japanese wife one second, an unruly protest against Saddam Hussein the next. There are traditional weddings and others in American style with little bride and groom figures on the cake. There are cops and hairdressers.

Kelley's pictures have a welcome-to-the-rich-chaos-of-America touch that is tolerant and inclusive, but he doesn't forget tragedy. There is a recurrent feeling of enforced anonymity in pictures of people trying to have fun in the antiseptic precincts of rented hotel banquet halls and conference rooms. There is the repulsion of an American with her "Down With Iranians" sign. Then comes the horror of watching a young man named Neusha Farrahi burn himself to death in front of Westwood's Federal Building in 1987. Many Americans were not quite clear just what he was protesting.

If Kelley glimpses the epic, a simultaneous exhibition by four immigrant Iranian artists touches the intimate. It's called "Labyrinth of Exile: Recent works by Ali Reza Dadgar, Payam Farrahi, Taraneh Hemami, and Shirin Neshat." Its curators are Doran Ross, Betsy Quick and David Mayo.

Contemporary art styles have become so international, it's no surprise there is a certain familiarity about this work along with a certain exoticism.