

# photography

A revolution, a stint studying economics and a fateful rendezvous with a scanner are all part of the mixture of influences and events that have resulted in the hard-hitting yet humorous works of Iranian Ramin Haerizadeh.

Working in photographic collages and digitally manipulated images, this jovial and kind man is producing some of the angriest, frustrated and controversial work in the Iranian Contemporary art movement.



TEXT BY ANNA WALLACE-THOMPSON  
IMAGES COURTESY OF B21 GALLERY  
LYRICS TO AMERICAN PIE BY DON MCLEAN

Opening spread: *Theater Group (05)*. 2008. C-print.  
100 x 70 cm. Edition of 10.

Previous spread: *Theater Group (03)*. 2008. C-print.  
100 x 70 cm. Edition of 10.

Facing page: Untitled. 2009. Mixed media on canvas.  
200 x 220 cm.

**S**wathes upon swathes of rich fabric vie for attention with equally decadent, rolling flesh. Hairy limbs are pressed against glass in kaleidoscopic patterns, sprinkled with the profiled face of a shouting and veiled man. Sometimes large, sometimes small, the bearded man with the closed eyes – often split down the centre to form a mirrored image, like a spatchcocked chicken, or a psychiatrist's Rorschach Inkblot test – shows up in stark black and white against a background of vivid colour. The angry man with the beard, eyes screwed up and mouth downturned in a sour, silent scream is in fact Ramin Haerizadeh, and he is sitting in front of me. The bearded man with the burbling laugh and kind eyes.

#### The Pivotal Moment

It is hard to imagine that this man, at the forefront of the Contemporary Iranian art movement along with his brother Rokni (see page 104), might have ended up an economist. Yet he

had different plans. "During high school I told my parents that I wanted to study cinema," he says, eyes twinkling, raising his hands up in mock horror, "and it was a complete disaster in the house!" And so, the 19 year-old enrolled at Tehran University in 1994 to study economics. This did not last long, however. "I began to read up on photography and practice drawing with my brother, and then..." he chuckles again and pauses, "it was my father who answered the door when the university rejection letter was delivered." After the family shock subsided, "there is a moment in life," says

Haerizadeh, "when you have to stop, and ask yourself, 'what is it that you really love to do?' and I suppose that's when everything really began." His commitment to photography intensified through a year studying under the watchful eye of the legendary Iranian photographer Massoud Massoumi. "Working with him opened up for me just what photography is capable of and what it could be," he acknowledges.

The work of Haerizadeh is complex – as complex as his photography techniques, for neither the theme nor execution

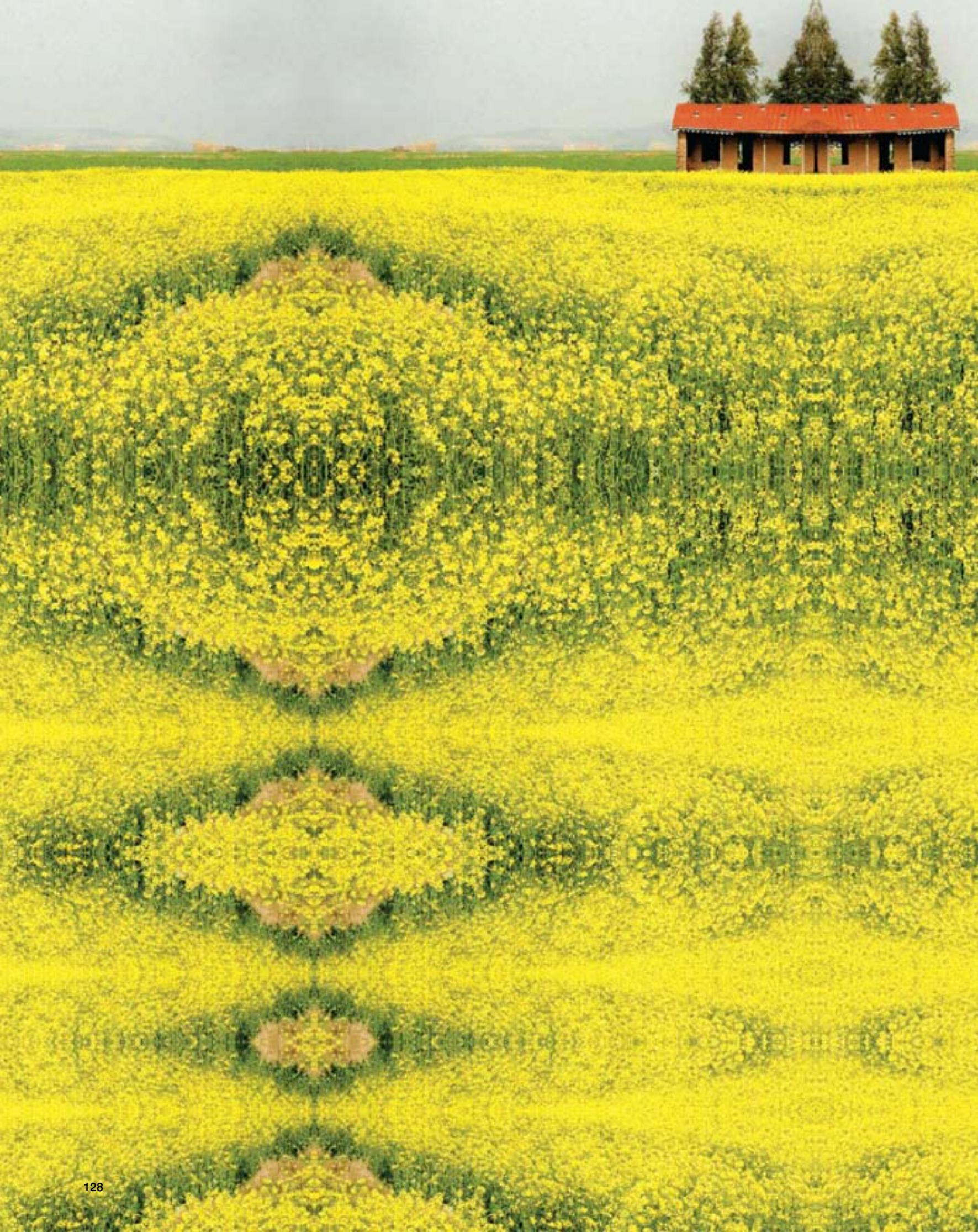
is straightforward. "I do not believe in the concept of 'pure' photography," he says, suddenly serious. "I always want to mix, manipulate and finish it in a painterly fashion. I draw, then take an image and colour it, like a painter." From collages on canvas with acrylics to hyper-real, hyper-clear digitally manipulated photography, Haerizadeh works by taking photographs or using images used in the

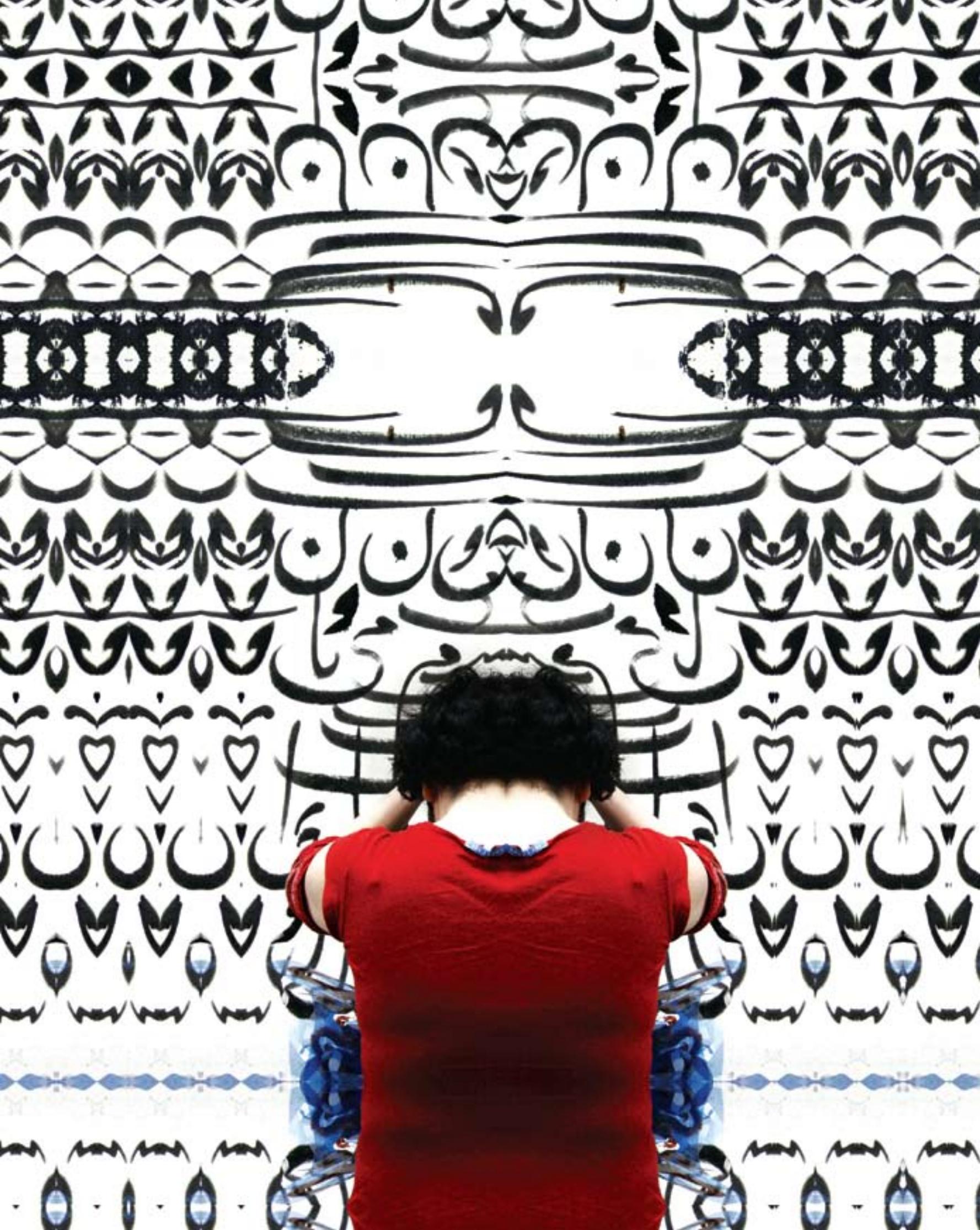
media, cutting them up, morphing and manipulating them and sticking them onto canvas mixed with colour. Drawing on the rich traditions of Persian myth and legend and the lifestyle of pre-Revolutionary Iran, Haerizadeh works with a surprisingly architectural eye. "When I first started working on my art," he says, "I would visit cities around Iran with Rokni. I am very keen on Iranian architecture and its use of symmetry, especially in mosques." Intrigued by the fact that often a large town mosque would be placed in front of a town, creating a mirror-effect, Haerizadeh began to think about

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mirror images. "For me, in the architect's mind, a building is 'finished' only when the finished work looks back on itself."

## Mirror Mirror

Starting with 36 pictures of nature which he spliced and mirrored together, Haerizadeh began to explore the human element. "When you split a face down the middle with a mirror, it becomes sculptural," he explains. "In a normal photograph, a 'pure' picture, wherever you go, it looks as if the eyes are following you. When you create a symmetrical image, the picture dies; the 'look' dies, for the face simply stares straight ahead and there is no life to the body. It becomes almost sculptural." Haerizadeh explains that *Wonders of Nature* is akin to a party which one is looking in on. The strange self-reflective images mix reality with fantasy, slightly out of kilter, creating a suspicion that something is wrong. Strange lifeless sculptures stuck in a parallel time and place. "My work is admittedly melancholy," says Haerizadeh in his rolling, melodic voice. "Iranian society is like that and that is how they raise us to be. Everybody is that way in Iran, and so *Wonders of Nature* dealt with the melancholy of the everyday."

This emotion is part of a strange dichotomy to Haerizadeh's work. Although he is so jovial in person, his work conveys angst, a suppressed rage at social injustice and a sharp, at times piercing, criticism of Iranian society. "When you are working on something, you have to channel a different personality," he says. "For me it's a must, whether it means thinking like a child or thinking like an adult. In my work, I channel anger at dictatorship and the pressure it inflicts on all of us. We may laugh on the outside, but there is a harsh feeling inside." He sighs, "in Tehran you lead different lives. From the very beginning of the Revolution, we learnt not to tell anybody anything. Don't tell your teacher; don't tell your friends, don't tell anybody what you have inside your house. You live in an atmosphere of fear, you have to be a completely different person to who you are inside."

## The Theatricals of Emotion

One such example of this dichotomy can be found in his now-famous *Men of Allah* series. Playing on fellow Iranian artist

Shirin Neshat's (see *Canvas* Volume 3 Issue 5) iconic *Women of Allah* works, Haerizadeh took the concept and mixed it with the ancient art of *Ta'ziye* theatre, popular during the Qajar period (1795–1925), and documented by Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami in *Looking at Ta'ziye*. Meaning 'crying' or 'grieving', it tells the story of the martyr Imam Hussein, grandson of the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH), and his death at the battle of Karbala in the sixth century AD. Haerizadeh is drawn to the theatrical aspect of these plays – improvised and often lasting as long as four hours. "The funny thing is," he says, "all the actors are men, even those playing women. They wear exaggerated makeup and make fun of people. In the Qajar period, they chose very theatrical topics and it was so flamboyant. That doesn't really exist now."

Morphing images of his own body parts, Haerizadeh draws the viewer in with a visual illusion. "As you approach my work, all you see at first is a landscape or figures, and then suddenly it's too late and you are up close, and you notice something is very very wrong. What you thought was just lace and fabric is entwined with hairy flesh and there's nothing you can do!" he chuckles. "People don't quite know what to do with it." Similarly, *Theatre Group* also draws on this tradition, with Haerizadeh's face draped by colourful, patterned fabric, reminiscent of fellow Iranian artist Shadi Ghadirian's *Like Everyday* series, except where her figures are anonymous, hidden behind common household items, Haerizadeh uses his own face, garishly daubed with bright red blush, lipstick and blue eye shadow.

"I needed to scan photographic negatives," he explains, "so my mom bought me a scanner, and one day I started playing around scanning my elbow, my thigh, and then I borrowed some of my mother's shawls." And the rest, as they say, is history. The Rubin-esque and almost lascivious body parts that Haerizadeh uses in his works are often more lewd than they appear – private body parts or

Previous spreads: *Wonders of Nature* (32). 2007. C-print. 100 x 150 cm. Edition of 10.

Left: *Wonders of Nature* (14). 2007. C-print. 150 x 70 cm. Edition of 10.

Right: *Wonders of Nature* (17). 2007. C-print. 150 x 70 cm. Edition of 10.

*Telephone Booth*. 2009. Mixed media on canvas. 220 x 200 cm.

*Here Comes the Sunrise*. 2009. Mixed media on canvas. 200 x 220 cm.

suggestive positions are achieved with a relatively innocent elbow or leg, pressed against the glass of the scanner in all their fleshy decadence. In these works, the modesty of the veil is subverted as the theatrical faces pout in blind indifference, just as in the *Bab Hijab* series. Using images of the media in which female religious police are attacking ‘immodest’ women, Haerizadeh replaced the faces of each policewoman with his own, grimacing; the sharp nose and trademark beard rendered ridiculous and powerless through the female garb.

### Results and Ramifications

It is no small wonder then, that with works like these, Haerizadeh, along with his brother Rokni, with whom he shares a studio, is on an Iranian government blacklist. Currently unable to return home, the brothers are based in Dubai for the time being. “I saw this coming,” Haerizadeh says, brow furrowed, “two of my major shows, participating in *Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East* at the Saatchi Gallery in London (see *Canvas* Volume 5 Issue 2) and *Raad O Bargh* at Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac in Paris (see *Canvas Guide* Volume 5 Issue 3) were a sign of things to come – I saw that a reaction was building. Of over 70 press reviews, only a couple said negative things – and of course only the worst was published in Iran.”

He admits, “I don’t feel I need to be in Iran to keep producing my work. I spent 32 years there, I don’t need to go back and refuel, my battery is full, and it’s on overdose!” he laughs. “When I was in Iran, I never heard a single compliment about my work, everything was just negative, negative, negative, and worst of all, this also applied to fellow artists.” He is saddened by the lack of support amongst the art community in Tehran, which he feels only backs the underdog. “When you are an unknown, they support you, but when you start to become known, they pull you down. The government doesn’t want ‘celebrities’, you have to stay a struggling artist.” Haerizadeh pauses, “in Tehran there is a feeling that every day could be your last. It doesn’t matter to me where I live, because I’m Iranian, it’s in my upbringing, and I like meeting different cultures, it’s more interesting. Here, in Dubai, I am more relaxed, much more focused on my work.”

With raids performed on the houses of some of the

Haerizadeh brothers’ collectors, he is undaunted. “You have to make fun of trouble,” he says matter-of-factly, “sometimes you can’t really do much to change a government or a society, other than use humour.” In Persian history, there existed a character called *Talkhak*; a court jester. “He was the only one who could say it like it is,” Haerizadeh says with a wry smile, “the jester could stand up in front of everybody and say what he wanted to the king. And I wanted to have this role.”

### To the Moon and Back

Despite the troubles at home, with works in the collections of Charles Saatchi and the British Museum, as well as a slew of exhibitions in the last few years, things are looking good for Haerizadeh. His latest series, *We Choose to Go to the Moon*, involving images of the Shah and Empress of Iran, along with former Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, will go on show at Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac in 2010, and is already raising eyebrows in some circles. So what is it that he wants people to take away from all of this? He looks straight ahead and thinks for a second before answering; “There is always one phrase which comes to mind when people ask me that question,” he says with a grin starting to creep across his face. “A famous artist once said, ‘if you want to look for the message in my work, go to the telegraph office’. I put all these different elements that don’t have any relation to each other into my work, and really, people can take from my art what they want.”

*Now for 10 years we've been on our own*

*And moss grows fat on a rolling stone,*

*But that's not how it used to be.*

*When the jester sang for the king and queen,*

*In a coat he borrowed from James Dean*

*And a voice that came from you and me,*

*Oh, and while the king was looking down,*

*The jester stole his thorny crown.*

*The courtroom was adjourned;*

*No verdict was returned. C*

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