

# Foreign Objects

Photographs by Shadi Ghadirian

Commentary by Ellen Feldman

**S**hadi Ghadirian was born in 1974 in Tehran, Iran, five years before the Islamic revolution exchanged the repressive secular culture of the Shah (although one in which gains were made by women and the middle class) for the repressive Islamic theocracy of the Ayatollah. She continues to live and photograph in Tehran, a fertile ground for her explorations of the contradictions in turn-of-the-twenty-first-century Iranian life. Ghadirian's work develops the ironies that come from being a modern artist in a repressive culture.

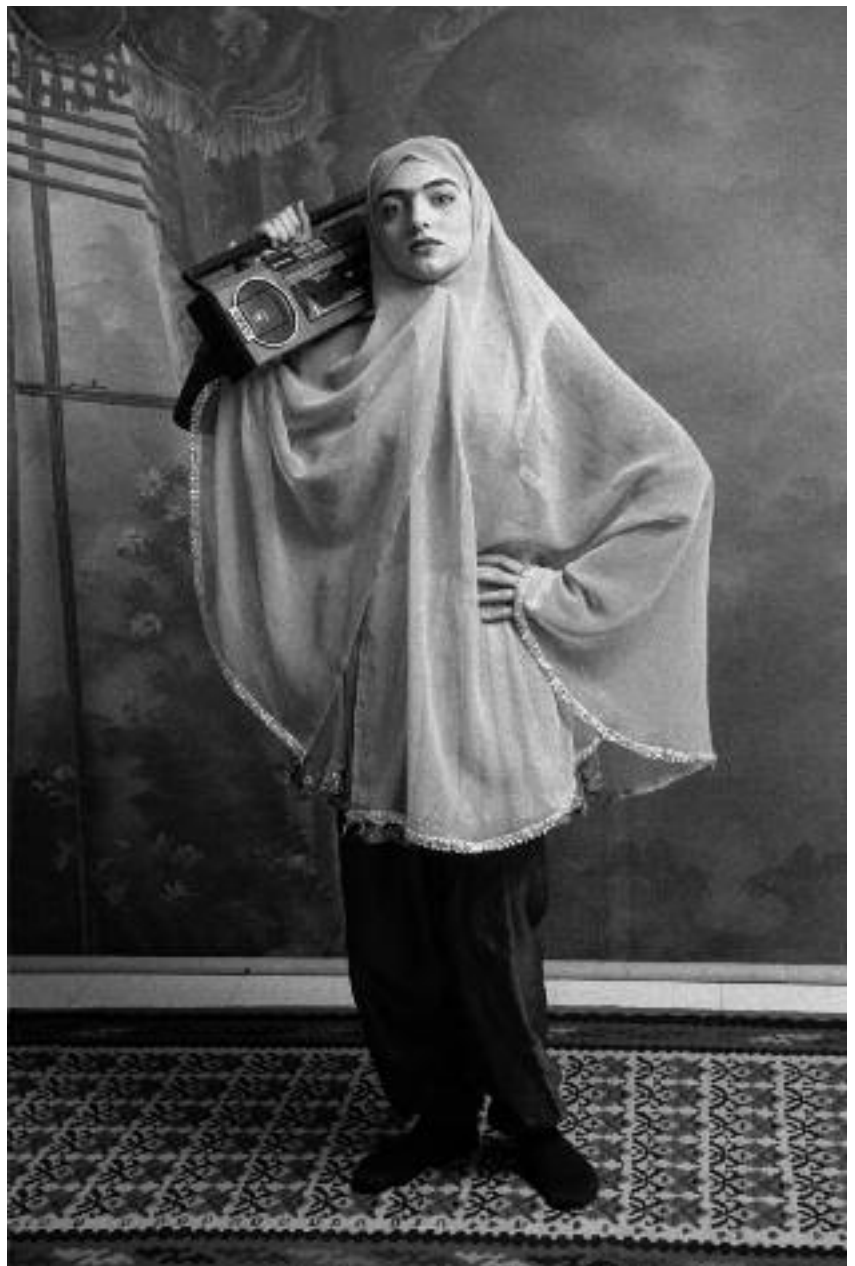
In her "Untitled Qajar" series, Ghadirian resurrects a traditional form of portrait photography popular in the Qajar dynasty in mid-nineteenth-century Iran. She takes pains to be faithful to the style, using period costumes, painted backdrops, and characteristic visual tonalities. The world she so faithfully reconstructs is studio portraiture at its most formal, stylized, and artificial—although she deviates from it in major ways. Ghadirian's portraits are exclusively of women, most of whom look directly at us; the gaze is direct, self-assured, even quasi-confrontational. The poses are contemporary, and most anomalously, "foreign objects" drop into these settings. These are everyday objects of our time—a can of Pepsi, a boombox; elsewhere in the series, a bicycle, a vacuum cleaner, a pair of sunglasses. The unsettling, if witty, placement of every-day objects of commercial, cosmopolitan, Western life in this studio-bound setting creates not just a clash of epochs, but also a clash of "realities."

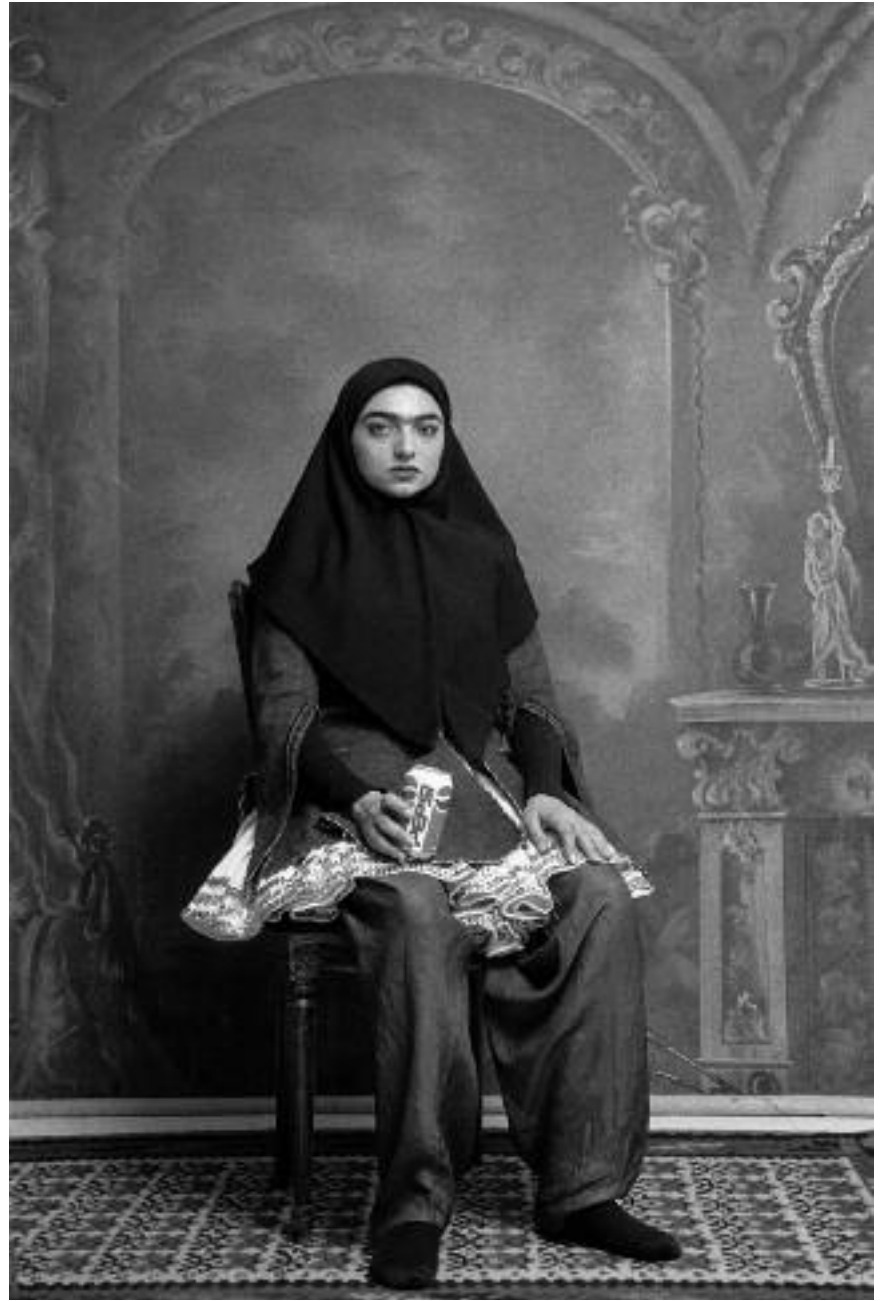
The series "Nil Nil" creates glamorous, elegant, almost hyper-real still lifes, (the original photos are in vibrant color) into which are inserted gritty objects of war—combat boots, grenade, army knife, bullet. The objects "fit" in the still life: the army knife is in the traditional dinner place setting; the bullet echoes the shape of the cigarette (it would make an effective advertisement for the deadliness of smoking).

Ghadirian has chosen her title well: Nil, Nil. With the first word, we have the literal meaning: "nothing." With the repetition, we move into its extended meanings—from nothing to nihilism to denial. These photos create visual metaphors for absence—of the war and violence that make no appearance in our daily lives, and that we keep at more than arm's length. Ghadirian gives the lie to our self-deceptions.

Ghadirian is part of a new generation of Iranian artists that has gained international recognition. This past November, when *Art in America* surveyed young Iranian artists, one of her Qajar photos appeared on the cover. She takes her place alongside other prominent Iranian artists, such as filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami and graphic novelist Marjane Satrapi, all of whom explore the uneasy co-existence of dual cultures. 

**Ellen Feldman** is a photographer and writer with a Ph.D. in cinema studies from New York University. You can view her portfolio at [ellenfeldman.net](http://ellenfeldman.net)





## POETRY

### My Sister and I

We were never close.  
 Never dyed our hair together.  
 No tandem manicures.  
 No joint shopping excursions.  
 We fought.  
 Earlier, in the back seat  
 of the Caprice Classic  
 on family vacations  
 and later on the telephone.  
 Before she died, I told her  
 no one could take her seriously.  
 It was the way she talked.  
 So fast. And breathless.  
 Ending every declarative  
 with the intonation of a question.  
 She dismissed me, angrily.  
 She said, *You don't understand  
 my artistic personality.*

I didn't. The dancing.  
 The boyfriends. The alternative  
 music. I disdained  
 them all. This is the truth:  
 I've loved many women  
 more than my sister.  
 Had she lived, she would  
 have been nothing more than  
 a familial correspondent—  
 treacly holiday sentiments  
 and Hallmarked birthdays.  
 Occasionally, I might have  
 called her; late on Sundays,  
 with an obligatory update.  
 But now we're closer  
 than we've ever been. Dead,  
 my sister is finally present.

As this issue goes to press, we have learned that Kate Daniels's poem "A Walk in Victoria's Secret," first published in the May/June 2009 *Women's Review of Books*, has been chosen for *Best American Poetry 2010*, edited by Amy Gerstler.

### Dress

When it was time that Monday afternoon  
 to choose a dress for her for the funeral  
 I wanted sweats and a t-shirt—the outfit  
 we'd all eventually remember her in.  
 Instead, I picked a black-and-white check  
 with a Peter Pan collar. It made my mother  
 happy, but for me it was too formal.  
 Laid out, she looked like a child,  
 not a young woman: tall, lithe, and hip,  
 a dancer who favored simplicity.  
 Besides, the dress was too small.  
 Now when I see her walking away from me,  
 there's a sliver of her back showing—  
 hardened from desiccated skin  
 with no circulation and yellowed like  
 a cheap paperback novel. The dress is  
 cut down the center and held together  
 with eight or ten safety pins. I always  
 call out her name; she turns, smiles.  
 Facing me she wears blue sweats,  
 a plain, white T. No pins  
 pressing her waxy, dead skin.

—Julie R. Enszer

**Julie R. Enszer's** first book of poetry was *Handmade Love* (2010). Her chapbook, *Sisterhood*, which includes "Dress" and "My Sister and I," is forthcoming. She has her MFA from the University of Maryland and is working on a Ph.D. in Women's Studies. Her poetry has previously been published in *Iris: A Journal About Women*, *Room of One's Own*, *Long Shot*, the *Web Del Sol Review*, and the *Jewish Women's Literary Annual*. She is a regular book reviewer for *Lambda Book Report* and *Calyx*.