



Shirana Shahbazi: Then Again
Galerie Rudolfinum – small gallery
22.3.2012 – 3.6.2012

Shirana Shahbazi is a figure who is impossible to overlook within contemporary photography, a medium which in the new century has been strongly influenced by Conceptualism and undergoing certain revisions as well as enjoying a peculiar renaissance. Shahbazi confidently combines work in the still life genre, in both colour and black-and-white and consisting of geometric forms or objects inspired by 17th century Dutch painting, such as flowers and all manner of other organic items, with photographs from her earlier cycles, mainly portraits and landscapes. Inspired by motifs drawn from the history of fine art but without falling prey to sentimentality, she plays with “colour, subjectivity and a longing for the infinite“, without resorting to romanticising. It is in fact far from easy to decipher what exactly makes Shahbazi’s recent work so compelling and attractive.

The exhibition at The Rudolfinum’s small gallery presents a selection of 18 works, mainly medium-to-large format photographs by the artist. It also includes a wall painting – the reproduction of a photographic still life, executed on canvas by means of the traditional reproduction technique of painting advertisements onto house facades. Another non-photographic technique is the traditionally hand-knotted carpet, again commissioned from artisans in Iran. Shahbazi does not merely exploit these techniques to allow the viewer to taste the cultural traditions of her native country, but instead employs this shift in visual code to articulate the oscillating nature of her contemplation of the “representation of the photographic image.”

Shahbazi poses a fundamental question: to what extent is it possible to capture reality “authentically” in a work of art? For instance, what is more truthful, or lifelike – a black-and-white photograph or a colour one? The colour scheme will only ever be relative, the proportion of the photographic image to the model a matter of speculation (particularly in the case of Shahbazi’s geometric still life images), and in the end it can never be clear whether the image is not in fact just a figment of the artist’s imagination, fabricated precisely for the image itself. Just as with the re-painted still life or the hand-knotted carpets, one must ponder the question of the transfer of the photographed face to the texture of knots: is this a retreat from realism towards abstraction, a re-encoding, a restructuring of the very nature of photography? Furthermore, how is one to read the fact that photography as the supreme medium of reproduction is here imitated with a painstaking handicraft technique? Is this a protest, or a means of liberating photography from an allegedly slavish subservience to reproduction, a challenge putting forth a bold claim that the here and now is unique and worthy of amazement?

One cannot avoid the expression of amazement which comes to mind when faced with Shahbazi’s photographs of mountains and rocks. Before these images, one experiences once again a subtle terror of the ontological kind, the horror of beholding the world for the first time. One is returned to childhood years, when first climbing to the summit of a mountain, or reaching the horizon where there opens the vista of an ocean – there is a sense of horror mixed with curiosity, an astonishment at the monumentality of nature (comparing the scale of the world to oneself), and the impossibility of grasping this. One may feel amazement when gazing at a nocturnal sky, but often, purely out of an instinct towards self-preservation, and the fear of losing balance, we start to connect the stars into familiar patterns in an effort to create a structure, a reference point to something rational, a safety net. And here we suddenly find ourselves very close to the essence of Shahbazi’s abstract compositions.

Shirana Shahbazi, however, is no mere dreamer and conjurer of exquisite images. In 2000, together with the cultural critic and theorist Tirdad Zolghadr and the graphic designer Manuel Krebs, she founded a collective called Shahrzad. Their literary-visual essays, published in a variety of anthologies, art zines and books, pursue – with a degree of hyperbole, but at the same time critically – various social phenomena, issues such as the self-confidence of the individual within society, and his or her ability to reflect and stand up to the leveling pressure of social norms, the importance of local communities for pushing through concrete interests, or the changing role of art in society. Incidentally, it was one of these publications that the Shahrzad collective presented at the *Prague Biennial 2: Between New Painting and Political Action* in former industrial spaces in Karlín in 2005.

Shirana Shahbazi’s work, an particularly the gesture of placing alongside each other images of a diverse nature, stakes out a far broader compass than merely the distance between hyper-realist representation and total

abstraction. It is instead an attempt to grasp the distance between the subject and its representation, and ultimately perhaps also between the fragile individuality of each of us as individuals, and the social roles that we take on.

In this respect one should also mention the critical assessments of Shirana's earlier photographic work, before she began to create abstract geometrical compositions. Shahbazi initially became most well-known probably for her series *Goftare Nik (Good Words)* from the years 1998-2003, when she returned to Iran to make an extensive cycle portraying a familiar setting with a degree of detachment and nonchalant elegance, yet at the same time with seminal gravitas and visual clarity. She photographed the texture of what we call home. She would continue this topography of environments in other cycles taken in many other places in the world, in her series such as *Painted Desert, Mir, or Landschaften*. It is these series that made critics mention the influence of the celebrated Düsseldorf School, and especially the work of Thomas Struth and Thomas Ruff.

In their assessment of the aforementioned series, where Shirana Shahbazi "photographed the world", theorists and critics abounded in speculation about the "inner world" of the artist and her personal bonds to the places where she now lives and which she has left. I nonetheless believe that in this regard one must focus attention also in the opposite direction. Her recent work has shifted from the description and exploration of collective cultural identities towards more universal, abstract and intimate motifs. If formerly we looked in Shirana's photographs for Shirana Shahbazi and her own mental world, today in her abstract cosmic juxtapositions we should instead look for the nature of the real world in which we live.

David Korecký, exhibition curator

Then Again is a revised version of the exhibition *Much Like Zero*, curated by Urs Stahel and held at the Winterthur Fotomuseum in Fall 2011.

Images with labels

<ftp://www.galerierudolfinum.cz>

log-in: gr-media

password: oud3vek2

file: ShiranaShahbazi

mode: passive

Opening time

Tu – We, Fr – Su: 10:00 – 18:00

TH: 10:00 – 20:00

Tickets

Full CZK 80

Reduced CZK 50

Ticket from the exhibition is valid for one re-entry to the accompanying program.

Contact

Galerie Rudolfinum

Alsovo nabrezi 12

CZ 110 01 Prague 1

T +420 227 059 205

F +420 222 319 293

E galerie@rudolfinum.org

<http://www.galerierudolfinum.cz>

<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=35788744626>

<http://www.youtube.com/user/GalerieRudolfinum>