

Never Run Away

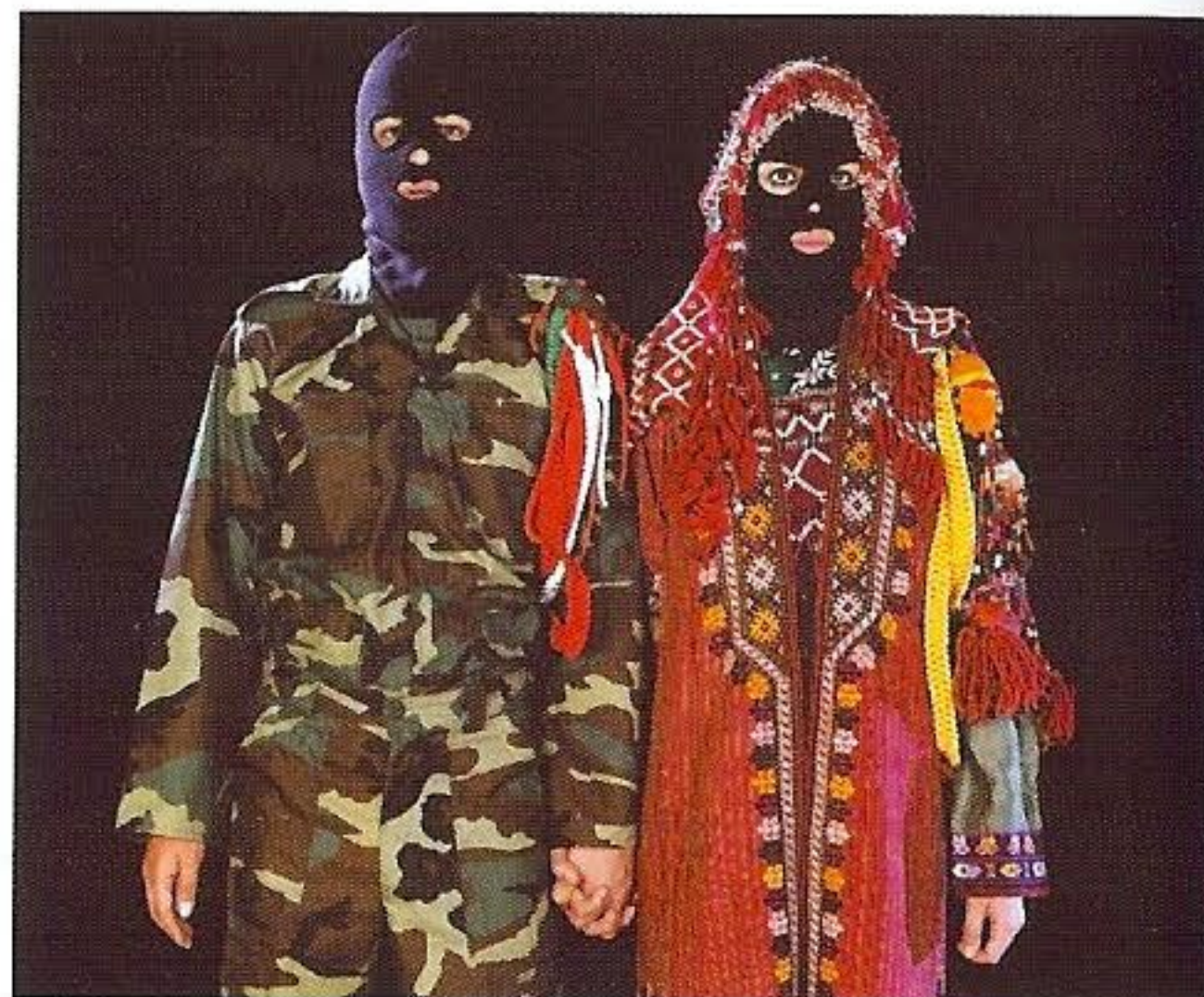
STUX

By Megan Marie Garwood

This two-woman show, dubbed *Never Run Away*, features the photography of Sara Rahbar, an Iranian native who lives in the United States and Iran, and paintings by Indian artist Reen Kallat. Rahbar shoots models in full costumes that reference Iranian and American iconography, e.g., the American flag, and revolutionary militant gear. Kallat constructs paintings out of rubber stamps painted with acrylic paint, which are then pieced together to form a portrait of her anonymous subjects. She also draws maps with archival ink applied to handmade paper, re-conceptualizing the form.

Together, these works address the broad term, globalization, from an intimate perspective grounded in east/west experiences. Rahbar's photography captures paradoxical images of traditional Iranian and American (or western) symbols by manipulating the canonical meaning that these images hold in their respective cultures (traditional Iran textile lined with the American flag); her photographs question cultural identity in the modern world. Kallat's work speaks to India's economic development that outpaces the individual; her work literally delineates a list of a number of Indian citizens that have been "lost" during violent riots, changes in governmental policies and even natural disasters. In this regard, *Never Run Away* serves as a kind of contemporary history lesson in which the viewer examines other cultures through foreign eyes.

In the wake of Iran's Islamic revolution of 1979, Rahbar's family moved to the United States where she was sent to schools in New York and also in London, mingling with a mix of Iranian diaspora and international students. Her work echoes Marjane Satrapi's novels *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* and *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return*. Both artists left and returned to Iran, and as such their work deals with life in a capricious state of never feeling settled.



Sara Rahbar *Love Arrived and How Red #4*, 2008. C-print, 60 x 30 inches. Courtesy: STUX, New York

Rahbar's exploration of cultural identity is presented in three series: the photography series entitled *Love Arrived and How Red*; and *You Have Come Late and I Have Lost my Chastity*; and the installation series, *These Expectations for Sunshine*. The first series focuses on costume choice in eleven large studio portraits. The photographs follow a love affair between two masked people, who are depicted together and separately, ultimately ending with the death of the bride. The bride first appears wearing a ski mask and heavily draped in traditional Iranian garbs; eventually, she lies in a contorted pose now dressed in a white lace wedding gown, gold bracelets and the black ski mask, while she clutches and is surrounded by dismantled fruits. The husband is shrouded with a similar black ski mask exposing only eyes, nose and mouth, and he is dressed in a camouflage ghillie suit decorated on one shoulder with red, green and white braided fabric. Each photograph is framed against an opaque black background; the contours of their faces only illuminated by the casted light.



Sara Rahbar *You Have Come Late and I Have Lost My Chastity #1 (detail)*, 2009. C-print, 30 x 45 inches. Courtesy: STUX, New York

One work from the first series, *Love Arrived and How Red #4*, depicts both subjects in a full-frontal position grasping hands as they apathetically look out towards (and beyond) the viewer. Iranian textile nearly encompasses the bride, swallowing her silhouette. Standing next to a man uniformed in camouflage print, associated with military gear, she seems out of place. The couple embodies a dichotomy of love and war.

The ski masks and the subjects' gaze toys with exposition. (Notably, Satrapi's novels center around the veil and acclimation to cultures without the Muslim's sense of modesty.) The ski mask seems to allude to a hijab, a Muslim woman's traditional head covering.

Many see the hijab as an oppressive tool that hides the personality and suppresses individuality; on the other hand there are some who make the case for the veil's autonomous and empowering quality. Dividing the individual from the world, the mask grants a measure of personal space, taking control of what others see.

In #8, Rahbar photographs the profile of the bride in a white wedding gown veiled by the American flag. Again, she replaces expected iconography with disruptive canonical symbols. It seems that Rahbar's work not only questions the cultural identity of Iranians who live in diaspora, but also it questions the viewer's cultural identity. How similar is the hijab, the wedding veil, the American flag, Iranian textile and garb? Throughout the series of *Love Arrived and How Red*, Rahbar substitutes an expected and loaded accessory with another accessory incongruent with the "accepted" religious or cultural significance, challenging the viewer's preconceptions of cultural identity.

Kallat, who was raised in India, concerns herself with the economic and social state of India. After the worldwide economic bubble collapsed, the Indian government sought to revive the economy and state while many of its citizens still continued to fall through the cracks. Kallat focusses on the people who have been most impacted by the fallout from globalization in India in three series