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Blurring the boundaries

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Anahita Razmi, who was born in Hamburg is of Iranian origin. Her work focuses on issues of identity and gender, examining processes of cultural appropriation by recontextualising images, artefacts and identities. In her latest show in Dubai, *Take Me to Your Leader*, the Berlin-based artist has used well-known Western tropes to talk about Eastern cultures, politics and stereotypes. Her new work also has an interesting Japanese link.

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Razmi's work also blends east and west. The title of her show refers to the well-known meme of an alien landing on earth and demanding from the first thing it sees, be it a horse, a tree or a stone to be taken to their leader. She has played with the literal and socio-political connotations of this phrase and situation to explore the complexities of language and power structures in the context of Eastern cultures and politics.

"When you look at politics and leadership today, the alien's misunderstanding does not seem so absurd. I wanted to use it to explore semiotics, notions of representation, shifts in perspective and the impact of failed communication," Razmi says.

An example of a literal work is a set of lenticular prints where the word 'leader' changes to 'dealer' as viewers move around them, highlighting the relationship between politics and trade. Another work, *Parties*, is a video showing logos and banners of various Iranian political parties throughout history. But within those visuals is inserted a pair of hands performing the traditional Persian finger snap or 'beshkan', a gesture of joy done at parties in Iran. This juxtaposition of different types of parties is presented against the background noise of a well-known image of protestors during the Iranian revolution of 1979. The work is part of *The Future State*, an ongoing project that Razmi initiated during a residency in London this year, where she hosts a series of round table speculations about the future state of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

In a multi-media installation from her ongoing project, *New EastEnders*, Razmi is presenting scripts, trailers and spoilers for her proposed new version of the cult British soap opera *East Enders*. The work contemplates the ambiguous roles of the 'East' in contemporary popular culture by examining its representations in a 'Western' globalised present.

Her serial is set in the Middle or Far East, and the trailer introduces six lead characters, all played by Razmi that have been created by condensing different 'eastern' identities into stereotypical images. These include belly dancer 'The 1001 Night Shifts'; 'The Influencer', a bearded terrorist-like figure; and the kimono clad 'Xenocentric Eccentric'. The characters are displayed against a background featuring covers of *The Soap Opera Digest*. Her spoilers have the characters enacting clichéd, exaggerated scenes, and her script is a neon ticker endlessly displaying the words 'kismet and another kismet'.

"I took the title *EastEnders* quite literally, thinking about the East and its end. My characters are exaggerated, light hearted stereotypes of nation and race, enacting emotionally charged scenes with no definite end. They question our perceptions and the soap-operafication of politics that we are seeing today," Razmi says. The artist did a residency in Kyoto in 2015 and has since travelled often to Japan. Her work *Reign Coats* is inspired by a *jinbaori* she discovered in the Kodaiji Temple there.

"A *jinbaori* was a coat worn by samurais over their armour. In 16th century Japan, the textiles for this garment were sometimes imported from China or Europe. But in a rare case a Persian carpet made its way to Japan, perhaps via the silk route from Kashan. Since textiles are not placed on the floor in Japanese culture, the carpet was tailored into a *jinbaori* for a high-ranking samurai. This is an interesting example of a cultural misunderstanding, telling a history of multiple displacements. My 'reign coats' are new versions of *jinbaoris* made from Persian carpets as a modern interpretation of mis-communication and displacement in the context of current economics, global trade and questions regarding production and outsourcing," she says.