

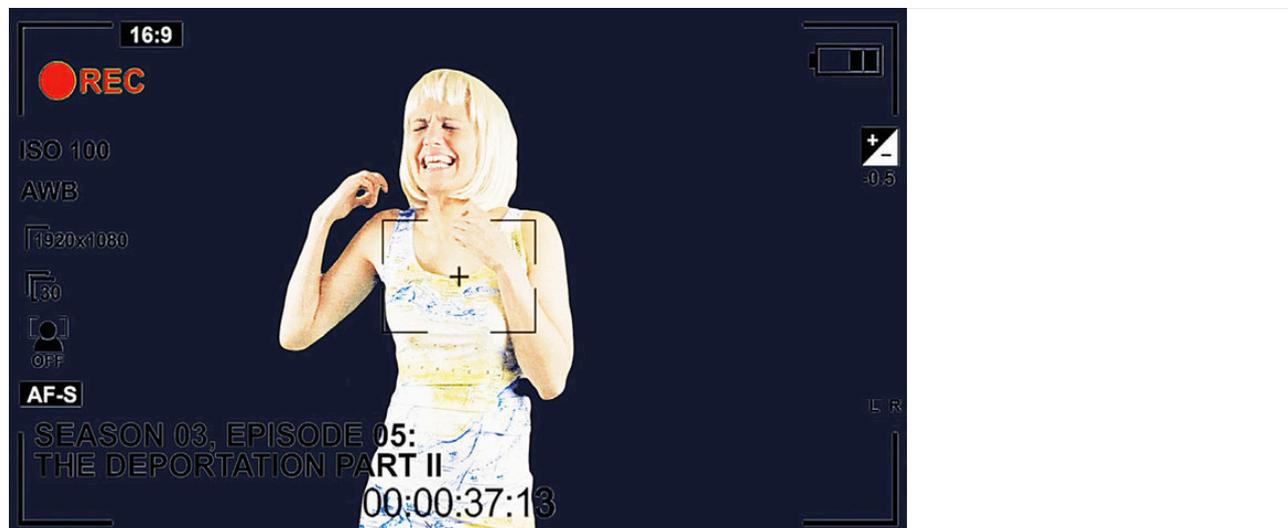
## Artforum

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### Anahita Razmi

By Stephanie Bailey

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"Take Me to Your Leader" was not an easy exhibition—even if it appeared so for all the wrong reasons. Hanging at the center of the gallery's back wall, which was covered in vinyl wallpaper photo-printed with black-and-white *Soap Opera Digest* covers, a screen displayed a short video, *New EastEnders—THE TRAILER*, 2018. The video introduces six characters that Anahita Razmi created for a hypothetical serial. All are played by Razmi, and all embody over-the-top stereotypes. They include the chador-cloaked Desperate Housewife; the Ching Chong CEO, wearing glasses and a *shanzhai* Giorgio Armani top that reads NIORGIORAMNAL; and the Influencer, with a beard, kaffiyeh, and JESUS FREE ZONE T-shirt. Digital imagery in the background pushes each reductive characterization further: 1001 Nightshifts, a belly dancer, gyrates in front of a shot of a back alley at night, while the Xenocentric Eccentric wears a red kimono in front of cherry blossoms. Nearby, two standing screens played *New EastEnders—THE SPOILERS*, 2018. In this video, characters lip-synch to English-speaking voice-overs culled from classic Western soap operas, including the original British *EastEnders*, the American shows *Dallas* and *Days of Our Lives*, and others. "Season 01, Episode 06: East End Empathy" shows the Influencer miming to an American woman's voice, saying, "See what happens when you care about people." "Season 03, Episode 05: The Deportation Part II" portrays the character Global Glam—in blond wig and patterned Lycra—acting to audio of a man shouting, "Get out!" repeatedly.

The original *EastEnders* has run since 1985 and follows the lives of residents of a fictional London borough, providing a rather nostalgic (read: whitewashed) microcosm of Britain. The show has been praised for dealing with social issues such as rape, and it has been accused of casual racism; recently, the proposed introduction of a gay bar drew cheers and jeers. Razmi offered an inversion of this Western "East"—this time from the "Near East, Far East, Middle East and it's [sic] End." An LED ticker display positioned on the gallery floor, reading A KISMET AND A KISMET AND NOTHER KISMET AGAIN . . . , entrenched "the end" into these geographies. "Kismet," Razmi notes, means "destiny" and refers to the soap opera's endurance, the fact that it is "doomed to 'cliffhang' forever"—an idea that sits uneasily with *New EastEnders'* overgeneralized representations. Historically, the concept of destiny has galvanized not only invaders of the Middle East but also those who have defended their right to it. However, even this characterization is a stereotype. Consider the criticism former president Barack Obama drew in 2016 when he pinned the region's instability on "conflicts that date back millennia," voicing a notion that Doug Bandow, writing for *Time* magazine, called the latest example of a US official blaming the ancient past to evade the complexities and particularities of the present.

Ambiguity was an organizing principle in this exhibition, which made clear differences seem equivalent—the most explicit example being four lenticular prints, all 2018, in which the word LEADER becomes DEALER; then there was *PARTIES*, 2018, a video from the project *FUTURE STATE*, which pairs logos of Iranian political parties and groups to footage of a hand performing a *beshkan*, the "Persian snap" normally done at celebrations (read: another kind of party). This sense of overlap continued in a pair of Japanese *jinbaori*—traditional vests worn by samurai over their armor—made from silk Persian carpets, or kilim (*REIGN COATS #1* and *#2*, both 2018). These pieces are based on a sixteenth-century example from Kyoto, which was made from a kilim most likely imported from Persia via the Silk Road: "a high-value object of a cultural misunderstanding," says Razmi. The practice of placing textiles on the floor was uncommon in Japan, which explains how a Persian carpet became a Japanese garment. Here, the artist offered another perspective on cultural difference and misunderstanding: The value given to misinterpretation became the subversion.