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Complex U.S./Iran relationship explored in Saint Mary's exhibit

By A.K. Carroll

How is it that art can open up the creative process of a viewer to forge new associations with familiar iconic material?



This is one of the driving questions behind IRAN|USA, an exhibition of video art and prints by artist Peter Freund, professor of art theory & practice and chair of the Saint Mary's College Art Department. An expansion of Freund's solo exhibition, which ran at the Sazmanab Center for Contemporary Art in Tehran, Iran in August 2015, the 10-piece multi-language exhibition will show at the College of Saint Mary's Art Museum through May 28.

Photos from the US/Iran exhibit of the Shaw
Courtesy of the Saint Mary's Art Museum

It's a timely debut given a recent executive order that bans immigration from six Muslim-majority countries and places a temporary blanket on refugees, the growing discussion surrounding the issue of "fake news," and the current political climate of the United States in general, though the exhibit as a whole has been some five to six

years in the making. Its springtime show is, in many ways, mere coincidence.

"The political situation has itself appropriated and re-contextualized this art of appropriation, most of which was produced before the current shift in political tides," Freund wrote in an early draft of his preface for the show. "I can only welcome this sort of coincidence. For such contingency is no stranger to my artistic process, which relies heavily on associative and dis-associative interventions."

The original exhibition is comprised of five photographic prints and five pieces of video and is divided into two major segments. While the first portion of the exhibition explores the intersection between key moments in the history of the US and the history of Iran, the second part extends to the broader region of the East, what was once called "the Orient," and includes Iran, the Arab World, and parts of Asia.

The seeds for the project were planted when Freund was an undergrad at Berkeley. "I lived and studied in Cairo for a year and began to develop a sense of the Middle East region as a kind of geography of fantasy for United States policy," said Freund. "The Middle East has become a kind of fictionalized geography of what goes by the name 'terrorism.'"

Indeed, the construction of the concept of terrorism and its geo-political association is one key to understanding Freund's work and the parallels he draws between the 1953 coup d'état in Iran and the fall of McCarthyism in the United States, which occurred at roughly the same time.

"Thematically there's a question of this (historical coincidence) and historical memory," said Freund.

Freund's work utilizes and even relies on historical documents; yet the factual evidence itself is not what he's keen on exploring. While the exhibition includes actual footage, the artist is quick to point out that it's not a documentary, but has been re-edited in an unusual and evocative way.

"What I'm interested in is this sort of fictional layer of it, the mythology of the Middle East as a site of terrorism," said Freund.

In addition to exploring the relationship between visual documentation and historical memory, Freund also dips into the complications of language. "The problematic relationship between the original language and the subtitle is actually part of the concept of the work," said the artist. English, Farsi, and Mandarin are all used in the exhibition, and other artists have been brought on to help in the execution of an international vision.

"These are my ideas," said Freund. "But I'm working with actors and other artists who are (originally) from Iran and who are very interested in history, as well as people from the Arab world and from China and Hong Kong. What better way is there to combat a stereotype than to seek out collaboration with the people belonging to the stereotype group? So these projects are partly about developing relationships with people from these regions and developing artwork with them."

Another correlation that Freund has spent time studying involves questions of what he calls historical traumatic memory and its relationship to fantasy and enjoyment. "I'm very interested in how these things (traumatic memory and enjoyment) can converge when you're trying to represent and the problem of

representing," he said.

Freund most clearly sees this relationship at play in "The End of an Error," a piece of video art that serves as the focal point of the first part of the exhibition. In it, Freund takes a landmark piece of documentary video regarding the end of McCarthyism and refashions it as an Iranian history lesson narrated in Farsi. While there is a sense of enjoyment generated by the historic end of The Red Scare, there is also an allusion to the emergence of a new enemy external to the country.

"It will be something very familiar to people visually, but presented in a very unfamiliar way," said Freund.

While the exhibition provides experimental interpretations of historical events, it also leaves space for viewers to bring their own thoughts and develop their own perspectives.

"My interest is really to look at the document and question it as a direct point of access for historical memory," said Freund. "I'm interested in an audience that is open to looking at familiar materials in a different light and being in this sort of reflective space."

The Saint Mary's College Museum of Art, located on Saint Mary's campus, is open Wednesday-Sunday from 11 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Admission is \$5. stmarys-ca.edu/museum.

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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