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Artist interview: Anahita Razmi

Strictly come dancing in Tehran

How a 12-screen video installation on show at Frieze was filmed despite Iran's strict regime

By Belinda Seppings

Anahita Razmi, the inaugural winner of the Frieze Art Fair's Emdash Award (for the past five years, the award was sponsored by Cartier), is presenting *Roof Piece Tehran*, 2011, a video installation made up of 12 screens showing 12 dancers on the rooftops of Tehran, in the fair today. Razmi appropriates Trisha Brown's *Roof Piece*, 1971, a performance that took place on 12 different rooftops over a ten-block area in New York's SoHo, to refer to the rooftop protests in Tehran in 2009. Razmi, 30, was born in Hamburg but is now based in Stuttgart after studying video, installation and performance at the Akademie für Bildende Künste from 2007 to 2009. She also studied in the faculty of Media Arts and Fine Arts at the Pratt Institute in New York from 2005 to 2006, and is represented by Dubai gallery Carbon 12. Like the Cartier Award, the Emdash Award is open to artists from outside the UK. The winner gets a three-month residency at Vauxhall's Gasworks gallery and £10,000 to realise a commission as part of the Frieze Projects series.

The Art Newspaper: Why do you base yourself in Stuttgart instead of, say, Berlin?

Anahita Razmi: Normally nobody chooses to stay in Stuttgart, even if you've studied there. Last year I travelled so much, and next year I'm not going to be there at all. My family and friends are based all over the world so there aren't



Anahita Razmi, a Stuttgart-based artist with relatives in Iran

many personal ties. I really enjoy having a base in a small, vivid, ambitious art scene. I go to Berlin quite often, too, and try not to miss good shows there. **Do you get to travel to London much? What do you think of the art scene here?**

I really enjoy the off-space galleries in Hackney, which have some really good programmes. There's one gallery where I showed my work about three years ago called Elevator Gallery. They're quite funny there; they have a lot of parties, but also really nice shows. **Why did you decide to submit your Tehran video proposal to the Emdash Award?**

I thought it would be nice to

show this work at Frieze because it's a video installation using 12 screens spread all over the fair, so it uses the architecture and involves the audience, which is part of the concept of Frieze. **The piece depicts dancers on the rooftops of Tehran. What connection do you have to Tehran and why did you choose to film there?**

Iran plays an important role in my work because I'm half Iranian: I have family there and my father is from Tehran. But we never travelled [there] as a family and I only went for the first time six years ago. I'm always emphasising this outsider point of view in my

“There is a connection to [the protests] but I am not showing them”

work—I don't want to explain the country or suggest political change, but instead aim to work from the background of these long-distance connections and the issues that come up.

The work refers to Tehran during the protests associated with the Iranian presidential elections.

The piece is a re-enactment of Trisha Brown's *Roof Piece*, so it's using 12 dancers—all moving and all dressed in red. I didn't want to produce anything political. For me, the interesting part of the project is that we are taking a concept that isn't mine, and redoing the same thing in Tehran. Automatically you get different associations because you have the rooftops but they are somehow a political space. Rooftops are an in-between space between public and private, and these opposites are so extreme in Iran. So there is a connection to the protests but I am not showing them. The film is silent: it is not about shouting and violence.

Did you experience any practical difficulties producing the film?

Yeah, in Iran it's always crazy. You can't officially do this project because in Iran, dance is forbidden. But we didn't experience any hostility. We chose a very calm, residential location and filmed during the day when everyone was at work. A friend from an Iranian production company sought permission to make a film “about Iranian architecture”. If I had asked as a foreigner, I would have attracted so much

attention and we wouldn't have got permission. I started planning in May but I had a few difficulties because the dancers had to get to know each other and their different movements, because if somebody moved too fast, it disrupted everything. **How did you go about gaining permission to use people's rooftops?**

It was quite hard. We started on a friend's roof and then went round to ask the neighbours. We just turned up and asked and people usually said yes, but if they thought about it, they changed their minds. We had to be spontaneous, which made me crazy.

Appropriation features a lot in your work; for example, I've got it all (too), 2008, where you're photographed gathering money into your crotch, as Tracey Emin did.

As soon as you work with images that people already have in their head, something different comes. For example, I show 12 dancers in red and people think “OK, it's Trisha Brown,” but I have a different background for the piece, which makes the whole piece different.

How do you feel about showing the piece in a fair?

I love the thought of showing at Frieze. The whole time we were filming in Tehran, we didn't have an audience. Some people won't get it at all, whereas some people will get it straight away and say: “Oh, that's Trisha Brown!” And then somebody will get the connection to Tehran because of the girls with the covered hair. ■