



# REFLECTIONS OF ANOTHER WORLD

*From war zones to the streets of her native Iran, the iconic photographs of photojournalist Newsha Tavakolian tell of the shrouded personal stories of her generation. **Tahereh Sariban** speaks candidly with Newsha in Tehran*





From the *Öcalan's Angels* series, 2015.  
Courtesy of Newsha Tavakolian/ Magnum Photos



**T**here is a woman looking sadly into the void beyond the candles of her birthday cake. There are armed female Peshmerga fighters wrapped in camouflage and pride, their eyes cast in a dull downward gaze. There is the dejected middle-class youth, slumped in a dark apartment – not his – averting his eyes from a future he cannot

define. Even when they take the camera face on, Newsha Tavakolian's portrait subjects display eyes of disbelief or sheer hurt by what they have been made to experience. "I've been told my photography is dark," she says, "but it is merely a reflection of the world." Photographed on the front line of conflicts physical and psychological, her subjects are rarely rejoicing, but also seldom openly grieving. Rather, they seem to embody a yearning for a truth beyond the camera, for a promised, yet always elusive sign of hope.

Newsha's body of photographic work spans a wide range of documentary photography from the Middle East and Africa as well as a growing portfolio of artistic photography and video installations. Introduced to the camera some twenty years ago at age 16, she likens her debut as a photographic news reporter in Tehran to "an alien having landed in the middle of nowhere." For Newsha, snapping photos wasn't a pastime to avoid topping the statistics of Iran's unemployed youth; it was a ticket into the world, refused to her by circumstance. It also quickly became a tool to express her passion for social issues. "I'm not a particularly curious or extraverted person but when I get behind the lense, I feel another personality emerging," she says. "I grow instant empathy for my subject. It's like I'm able to access the deep recesses of their minds and become one with them."

Opportunity wasn't a staple of her generation and when assignments started coming in, so too came the chance to hone her skills. "The crazier the job, the keener I was to go," she laughs. Twenty years later, working for *Time*, *The New York Times* and *National Geographic*, to name a few, as well as the winner of numerous prizes rewarding her work, Newsha is a household ►

From the *Iran* series, 2015.  
Courtesy of Newsha Tavakolian/ Magnum Photos

From the *Look* series.  
2012. 124 x 106 cm.  
Edition of seven and  
two Artist proofs.  
Newsha Tavakolian/  
Magnum Photos



name in the high circles of photojournalism. Her artistic shots also figure in collections of the British Museum, the LACMA and the Boston Museum of Fine Art.

But there's a lot about Newsha that has changed since twenty years ago when photography became a mechanism to open the closed doors of her physical environment. "For once, I'm not that sixteen year old girl any more. If you tell me today that I can't access a certain topic or region, I won't kill myself to get there." Rather, Newsha's praxis these days focuses on "how to remove the layers in portrait photography, how to get my subjects to shed all the background noise" —a time-consuming task to capture the core moment when people offer themselves nakedly to the camera, themselves and the outside world.

Newsha's turn to artistic photography seems to have been a natural evolution of her work as a photojournalist. It happened around 2010, after the defeat of Iran's Green Movement. For many months, the volatile political atmosphere made espionage of street photography and she was

unable to work. "There's a saying that goes something like 'when they take your nose, you don't die. You open your mouth and continue breathing,'" she states. "So, that's what I did. I started developing art photography, from a project that is dear to

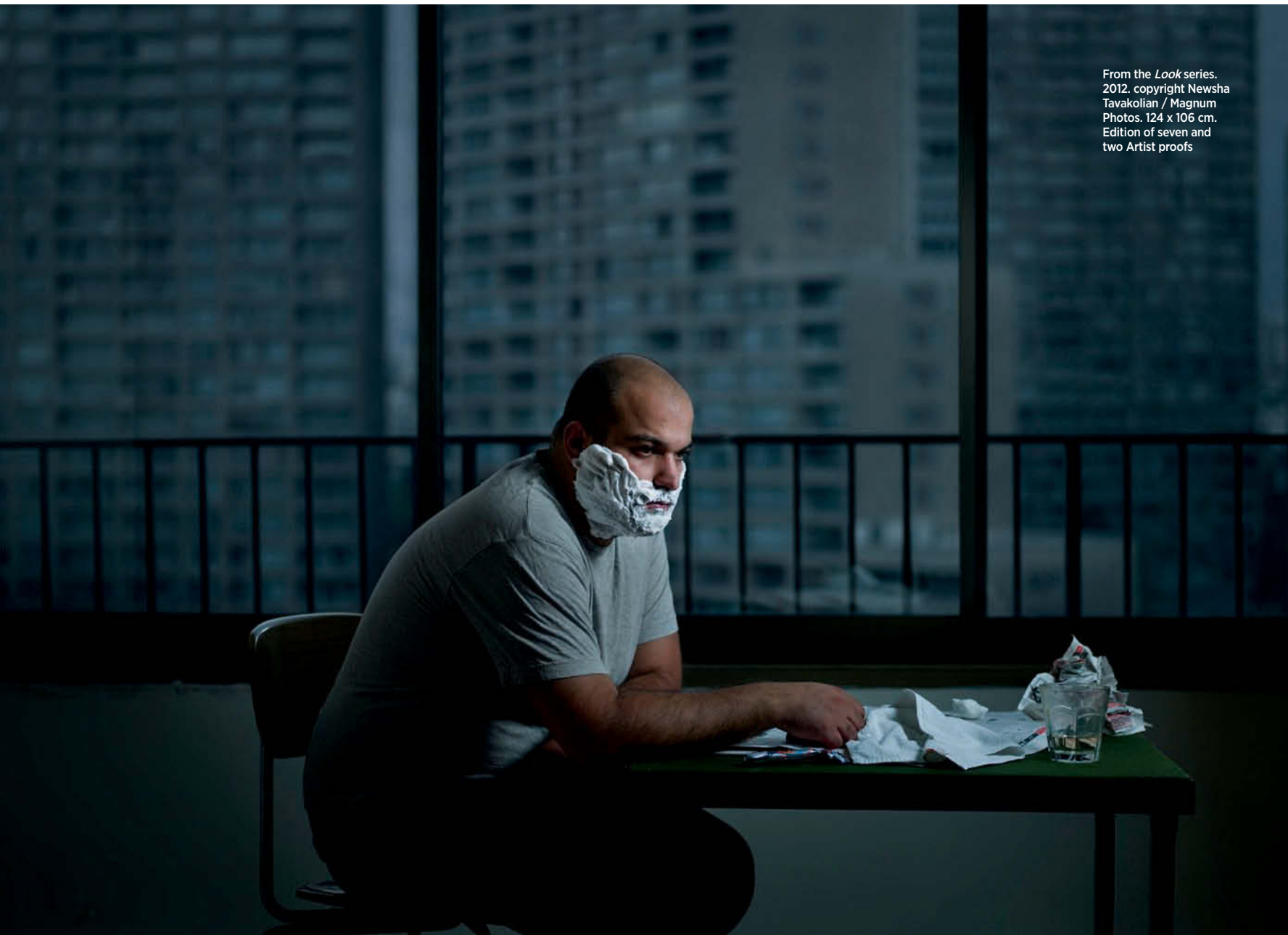
me." Listen is a series of portraits depicting aspiring female singers— forbidden to perform in the Islamic Republic— singing to an imaginary audience, with a sparkling background curtain, hijab and all. "After all these years of snapping Iran for international magazines, I've become interested in showing Iran to Iranians," she says. "Through photographs, we can attempt to understand who we are, how we think and the issues we face."

Look is a more recent body of rare existential magnitude, created through a challenge the artist gave herself to break through a period of personal isolation. Using the confines of her own home, she transformed her bedroom into a makeshift studio and over the course of several months, invited people living in her building to come pose for her. Here Newsha's lens became the link

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2012. copyright Newsha  
Tavakolian / Magnum  
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between the enquirer and the subject, exposing humans at both ends of the camera, toying with the idea that neighbors share spaces that transcend physical location.

The work of a photographer can call for expectations to be laid aside. Asked about moments that required her to disengage, Newsha mentions the young girl who was captured, drugged and raped by ISIS and refused to have her picture taken. “I was torn between wanting to capture this girl’s anguish and wanting to respect her wish,” the artist says. *A Thousand Words for a Picture That I Never Took* is Newsha’s take on the experience, a video installation that includes a black photograph—a non-photograph of sorts—accompanied by an audio recording of the girl’s story. Newsha is equally fierce about protecting her own artistic integrity. In 2013, she forfeited a €50,000 (approximately Dhs201,300) prize money from the Carmignac Gestion foundation after a disagreement over the presentation of her work. Newsha’s appetite and respect for the people she captures on film is obvious in the depth of her photography. A more rarified disposition is called for to stay grounded in the values of the profession, and at this it appears she also excels. ■

*Newsha Tavakolian will show at Atlas Sztuki Gallery, Łódź until 4 December and at Ab-Anbar Gallery, Tehran in April 2017*

From the  
*Öcalan’s  
Angels* series.  
2015. Courtesy  
of Newsha  
Tavakolian/  
Magnum Photos

