

ERIC PARNES



ayyam  gallery

CUSTODIAN OF VACANCY:
The Iranian Embassy in the USA

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Ayyam Gallery DIFC
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Born in the West with immediate family roots in Iran, Eric Parnes' vision reflects one's internal struggle to define identity and can be traced to early childhood experience. As a conceptual artist, the catharsis of creation has compelled him to examine and portray the perceived differences and similarities of the world in which he was born, as well as the echoes of the eras of his forefathers, allowing his concentration on crafting a series of works that revise and explore one's understanding of 'The Orient'.

The term Orientalism has been commonly described as the Occidental West's long time attempt to depict the Middle East. Fantasy-driven concepts and themes, often idealized or romanticized, provided for a continuous melding of these cultures, producing imagery that continues to affect our perception today. Reaching far beyond the borders of the United States and the Middle East, Parnes' art assesses the modern, the mystic, and the visceral reality of a "Neo-Orientalist™."

Today, the delineations between the East and West are increasingly blurred, with the cardinal points both exporting and interpreting their respective societies. As an artist seeking to define Neo-Orientalism™, Parnes' work continues to explore this intriguing correlation and contribute to the intersection of culture and modern identity.



Custodian of Vacancy: The Iranian Embassy in the USA

Withdrawn, silent, and inaccessible, the Embassy of Iran in Washington, DC has been closed for over 12,000 days since the fall of the Shah and the US Embassy hostage crisis of 1979. Yet, the majestic building stands and has somewhat been preserved, an inadvertent living testament to what once was.

Much of my work focuses on explorations of the ongoing chrysalis of Orientalism, a term usually applied by art scholars towards the West's interpretations and fantasies of Middle Eastern cultures and traditions. However, I have termed my particular area of interest Neorientalism (or Neo-Orientalism™), as in more modern times this area of study can't only be limited to classic representations of the Middle East in the Western arts, but also how the West emerges within the contemporary worlds of the Middle Eastern regions, as globalism continues to make this exchange an international phenomena that can now be found in a multitude of varied incarnations - not only in art, but in the visual science of branding and commercialism as well as in the cultural by-products of political events and historical dialogue. The unique history of the Iranian Embassy in the United States, as well as whatever its future may hold, offers a wealth of neoriental imagery and aftereffects, besides remaining itself a veritable testament to what was once a hub of American celebrity merged with, and immersed in, Persian culture. I have discovered that the visuals of the Embassy's current uninhabited status has a particular rich aesthetic that captures the exclusive solitary nature of this institution. The resulting photographs, featured in this exhibition, become works of art in themselves in uniquely expressing a historic moment in time as well as conveying the immediacy in the artistic emotion of seclusion, by bringing us to a magical space that was once very celebrated and alive with vibrant festivities.

While the modernist building was first constructed in 1959, the popularity of the Iranian Embassy really emerged in the 1960's and 1970's under the leadership of then-Ambassador Ardeshir Zahedi (b. 1928). Reinventing the interiors to reflect elements of traditional Persian folklore and design, Ambassador Zahedi's reintroduction of Iranian beauty and culture quickly made the space a magnet for preeminent stars of the cultural and political worlds. Guests included such

luminaries as Liza Minnelli, Elizabeth Taylor, Gregory Peck, Henry Kissinger, Nelson Rockefeller, and countless others. Andy Warhol wrote in his diaries of frequenting dinners alit with Hollywood glamour at the Embassy of Iran, which hosted events such as legendary dancer Rudolf Nureyev's birthday party.

Interestingly, despite its kinship to authentic Persian elements, many of the artisans leading the design implementations of the Embassy were of Western or European origin. Still, the results of their work show a true dedication to maintain a genuine sense of Middle Eastern aesthetics. The grand entrance doors, which featured the very traditional 12th century Iranian image of The Lion and The Sun as well as an array of other animal symbols, were actually commissioned works by the American architectural sculptor Ulysses Ricci (1888-1960). Meanwhile, the rooms were lavishly decorated with recognisably Persian flavor (with some small European touches) by UK-based designer Michael Szell (1930-2002) under Ambassador Zahedi's instruction. The end result was reportedly a truly unique showcase of Middle Eastern design and culture in the United States.

Today, the Iranian Embassy stands as a custodian of vacancy. Only shadows move within the structure, as nature seems to slowly reclaim it with the tireless ravages of time.

The Embassy of Iran seems alone on Massachusetts Avenue - commonly known as Embassy Row - even though it is cushioned alongside the active homes of other standing diplomatic missions from countries such as Italy, Japan, South Korea, Brazil, India, Turkey, Iraq, Greece, Australia, South Africa, and the United Kingdom, amidst many others.

Inside, a sense of time is quickly forgotten as the remnants of endless ballrooms, offices, and studies echo



an environment that once ruled a mere four decades ago. Gilded mirrors, remarkably intact, leaves us wondering who and what times they bore witness to, in the not too distant past.

Jubilant lights and voices no longer fill the building; only sunlight crosses forth through beautiful stained glass works. Windows are guarded by cast gates organised in the form of the Lotus Flower. Since ancient times, the lotus has held a special presence in Persian culture, and has been incorporated for centuries in textiles, ceramics, and architecture. Historians have found that the flower's symbolic importance descended from Sumerian, Assyrian, and Babylonian traditions, and was even identified by archaeologists in Persepolis, the ceremonial epicenter of the Persian kingdom. Their 20th century reincarnation at the Iranian Embassy are only a fraction of the many additions of age-old tradition in the building. The homage to Iranian folklore lends an additional layer of almost supernatural allure to the building's present atmosphere.

Discarded portraits of the longtime Shah of Iran lay discarded across the mansion-like structure. His rule, which spanned over a third of a century, as well as the 1979 Iranian Revolution, feel remarkably recent in this environment. Documents and diplomatic books, including what appear to be official passports, are scattered, discarded and abandoned. Metallic drawer after drawer are deserted, appearing to still likely contain annals of materials once regarded as vital and highly important.

The grain that results in these images I realise actually assist in retaining the unusual haunting quality that is very palpable in the Embassy's eery silence. The aspect ratio of the images here become cinematic and contribute to the ethos of the conceptual arrangement. There's the sense that you've just arrived, but the party just ended and everyone - and everything - hastily left the space minutes ago.

The intricate, hand-laid ornamental tile works that adorn the outside of the Embassy of Iran is remarkably intact and is truly a highly aesthetic nod to the tile work of Kashan, now mostly visible in museums, classical buildings or national landmarks in the Middle East. The Persian word for tile emerges from the name of the town Kashan, which became known for its unparalleled production of pottery and ceramic works centuries ago. It's truly a marvel to see this quality of lavish custom architectural work in the United States.

The Iranian Embassy seems to have become a silent monument, yet now is akin to a memorial, one that is not recognised and never visited. I peer inside as an outsider, a metaphor for this American-born Iranian reaching into one's dreams.

- Eric Parnes



3005 Massachusetts
2013
Archival print on cotton paper
56 x 100 cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP



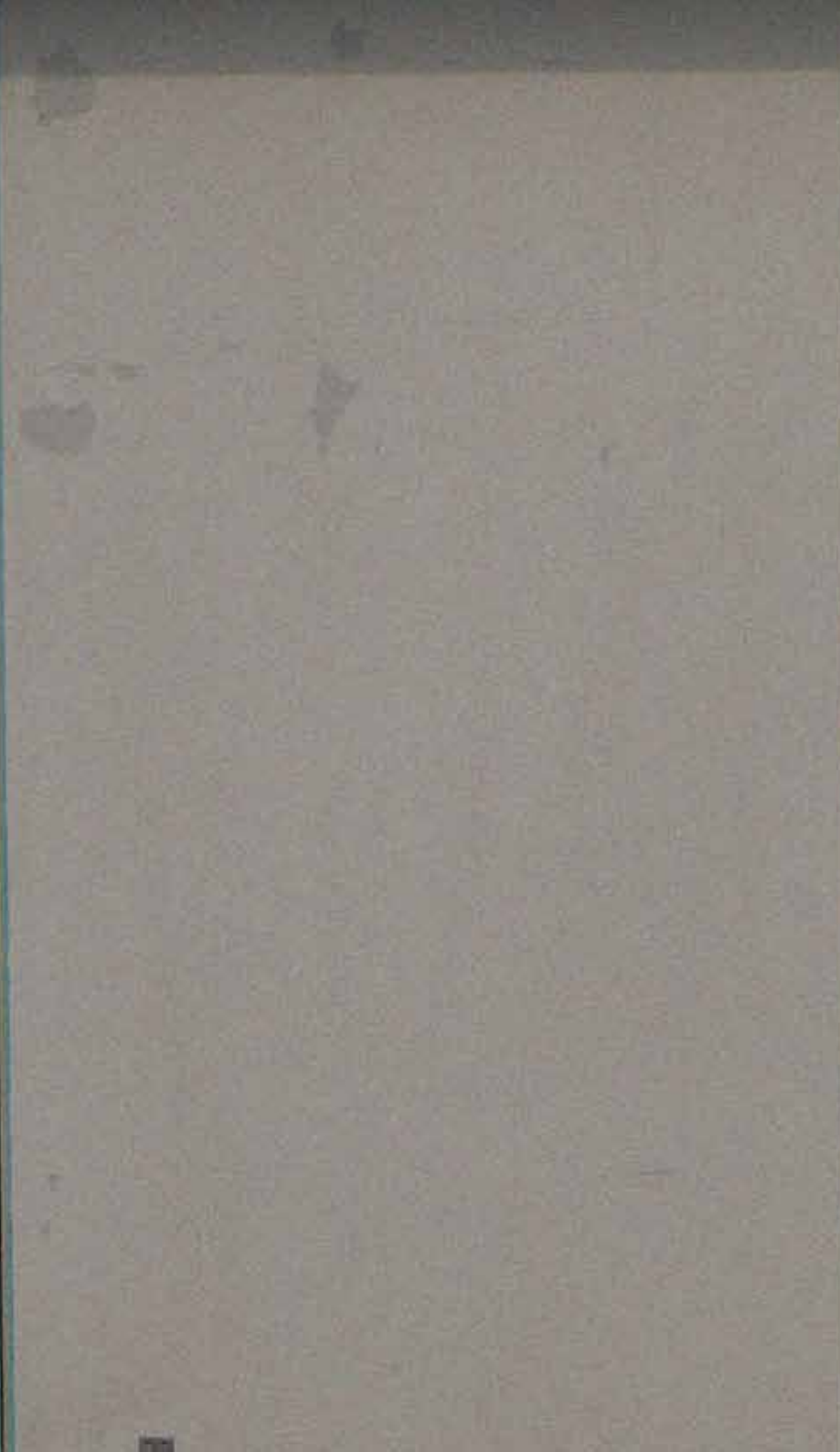
Illumination
2013
Archival print on cotton paper
56 x 100 cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP



Timeless Reflection
2013
Archival print on cotton paper
56 x 100 cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP



Sanctuary
2013
Archival print on cotton paper
56 x 100 cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP





Khatam Kari Lives
2013
Archival print on cotton paper
56 x 100 cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP



Magic Mirror
2013
Archival print on cotton paper
56 x 100 cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP



Cyphers
2013
Archival print on cotton paper
56 x 100 cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP



Radiance
2013
Archival print on cotton paper
56 x 100 cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP



Night
2013
Archival print on cotton paper
56 x 100 cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP



Hospitality
2013
Archival print on cotton paper
56 x 100 cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP



The Annals
2013
Archival print on cotton paper
56 x 100 cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP



Aryamehr
2013
Archival print on cotton paper
56 x 100 cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP



Discarded Importance
2013
Archival print on cotton paper
56 x 100 cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP



Meditation
2013
Archival print on cotton paper
56 x 100 cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP



Testament of Tradition
2013
Archival print on cotton paper
56 x 100 cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP



Memory
2013
Archival print on cotton paper
56 x 100 cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP



The Lion and The Sun
2013
Archival print on cotton paper
56 x 100 cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP



Witness
2013
Archival print on cotton paper
56 x 100 cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP



Empty Seat at Embassy Row
2013
Archival print on cotton paper
56 x 100 cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP



Last Dance
2013
Archival print on cotton paper
56 x 100 cm
Edition of 5 + 2AP

Ayyam Gallery

Founded by collectors and cousins Khaled and Hisham Samawi in Damascus in 2006, Ayyam Gallery sought to nurture Syria's burgeoning and dynamic contemporary art scene through landmark non-profit initiatives such as the Shabab Ayyam Project, an incubator for emerging artists. Expansion into Beirut and Dubai enabled Ayyam Gallery to broaden its scope from the promotion of work by Syrian artists to those from the wider Middle East region. In doing so, Ayyam Gallery has established itself as one of the foremost exponents of Middle Eastern contemporary art to the international community.

Today, Ayyam Gallery is recognized as a leading cultural voice in the region, representing a roster of Arab and Iranian artists with an international profile and museum presence. A number of non-commercial exhibitions, as well as the launch of Ayyam Publishing, Ayyam Editions, and The Young Collectors Auction, have further succeeded in showcasing the work of Middle Eastern artists with the aim of educating a wider audience about the art of this significant region. Ayyam Gallery Damascus currently functions as a studio and creative haven for artists who remain in the war-torn city. In early 2013, Ayyam Gallery launched new spaces in London and Jeddah.

