

# IS *that* THE QUESTION?



**Ramin Haerizadeh**  
*speaks with Saira Ansari about his fantastical, whimsical and salacious collage works in his latest solo show at Dubai's Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde*

Ramin Haerizadeh in front *To Be or Not To Be, That is the Question. And Though it Troubles the Digestion*. 2015-17. Collage, pencil, acrylic, school uniform, metal hooks, wooden ladle on a wooden plank, fake fruits, found oil painting and polycarbonite chair with prints. Canvas 170x140cm, overall variable dimensions.



**S***till Life* appears at first glance as a photograph of a demonstration; a man in the center raising his arms in protest, flanked on both sides by military men and several women in hijab. It could be one of hundreds of images you see every day in newspapers and on TV, and while the setting looks oddly familiar, you can't quite pin it down. It makes you stop and look again. This time you catch the details that lend the image a deeply unsettling and sinister air. The man in the centre doesn't have a head, or a hand at the end of his extended right arm. There seems to be second right arm though, which grabs his left leg. His left hand has mutated into its own mirror image, sprouting extra fingers that clutch multiples of a flyer with a kaleidoscopic portrait on it. The Protestor is clothed in a dark pinstripe suit and sitting atop another man's shoulder. However, the other's head has been manipulated as well, and turned completely around to nestle in the groin of his rider. Another hand (its owner not immediately clear), with a henna tainted pinky finger, rests upon the Protestor's right thigh. Together these elements create a fantastical, salacious energy that permeates through these faceless bodies. This central position in the image exudes such chaos that it almost becomes a centrifugal force, spreading out visual debris to all four corners of the image. The faceless, cyclopean people on the side adopt their positions as actors in a tableau.

I notice that the photo-manipulation varies, and while some effects are digital, others are clearly collaged on top (a treatment that is applied in other works in the exhibition). It creates a layer of confusion as the eyes try to adjust to the technique. Ramin Haerizadeh, the artist, nudges me gently to take one more step back so that I can behold a third layer to the image that I had completely missed. The image of the Protestor is on a photograph, which is being held in the artist's visible, paint-stained hands, within another photograph: the one installed on the gallery wall.

Haerizadeh calls himself the Witness, and he takes pictures of images that are already published in books and magazines. Then begins a multi-layered process of repetitive photography, printing, manipulation, superimposing and collage. He deliberately removes all recognizable elements and morphs the faces into unrecognisable flesh-coloured ovoids. In doing so, he says, he takes the content out of the image, stripping it off its original narrative and presenting it like an embellished object. "Like a still life," he adds.

The exhibition *To Be or Not To Be, That is the Question. And Though, it Troubles the Digestion* is a solo presentation by Haerizadeh at Gallery Isabelle Van Den Eynde. Apart from the news stories, it includes another body of work that has developed entirely from Haerizadeh's mother's photography archive. In the 1950s, she was part of the first generation in her family who was sent to the UK to study. But as a Muslim, Iranian woman, she felt different and alone in an alien country and culture. To keep a record of her life, she started maintaining a visual diary where she took photographs of everything and developed them almost ritually every Sunday. It was as if she were collecting evidence of her existence. "Sometimes there's nobody in the picture," Haerizadeh remarks, and it is clear that he is enraptured by these fleeting moments which seem to bottle pockets of history.

The artist then decided to enlarge these photographs and worked on them with the same technique of digital layering and collage. Here the



Above: *First Rain's Always a Surprise*. 2017. Collage and colour pencil on paper. 70x100cm. Below: Installation view at the gallery.

Cyclopean features, though still unnerving, are much less threatening, almost appearing on the verge of comical. Haerizadeh says that he traces historical events, which were taking place simultaneously as these photographs were being taken, by juxtaposing found images on personal pictures, tracing them through the evolution of his mother's face who has lived through war, revolution, and much more. Her photographs become markers on a timeline, and ones sees how her face grows older, changed with experience over time. Haerizadeh's mother loves that he uses her photographs, and particularly takes delight in noticing details that have only seen the light of day with such magnification—details that she had forgotten. One work in the exhibition is a large photo-manipulated/collaged family portrait hanging loosely on the wall, and in the enlargement I spot a small pile of silver eggs—something immediately intimate and delightful. Who bought them? What was happening when the family was cutting that cake, or skiing in the mountains, or simply sitting together for picture?

As we walk through the gallery exchanging stories, Haerizadeh constantly touches the works, lifting sheets, turning objects, peeking through glass bottles, encouraging me to follow suit. He wants the same engagement from the viewer, and accepts wear and tear, and ageing as part of his process. He explains how other works in the exhibition have gone through multiple iterations; one particular work is now in its fourth phase since 2010, changing with each installation. Abound with tales of autonomous creatures controlling content, solitary performances in front of images, images as talismans and voodoo objects, Haerizadeh's stories and images exists on a parallel plane that is populated by impossibilities, which in the strangest of ways are not disconnected from reality. Clearly, Haerizadeh takes much gratification in telling these stories. He just asks that you do too. ■

Ramin Haerizadeh's exhibition ran until 2 November at Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde. [ivde.net](http://ivde.net)

