

# THE ANGEL

Collagist, photographer and cultural magpie Ramin Haerizadeh's new solo show in Paris sees the artist present a provocative series of visual positions. Harper's Bazaar Art meets Dubai-based Haerizadeh to discuss revolutionary imagery and how a deluge of shallow contemporary mass media shapes historical narrative

# OF HISTORY



PHOTOGRAPHY BY XAVIER ANSART

(All images courtesy Galerie Nathalie Obadia Paris/Bruxelles)



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he officers stand in rows on a rain-soaked runway and wait for the spiritual leader to descend. The men sport red-white-and-green sashes, and each has one hand ready to raise in salute while the other clutches a bright red rose. The doors of the plane open and Ayatollah Khomeini emerges. Security guards in aviator shades steady him, as they walk together down the gangway. This is his return from exile, ready to lead Iran towards its bright future.

Except this isn't 1979. It's a rather bleak grey day in February 2012. And that isn't Khomeini at all, but a ludicrously oversized and overly square cardboard cutout of the Ayatollah being awkwardly shuffled into a procession.

As pro-party pomp goes, the Islamic Republic of Iran's recent re-enactment of the Ayatollah's return to the country in the wake of revolution really kicked things up a notch. Photographs of the event emerged and titillated the world press at the start of the year. But aside from the questions that the images raise (such as why is Khomeini so big and what would the officers do with their roses?), they also resonated with the work of one of Iran's most wry artistic voices.

As with Ramin Haerizadeh's canvases, these images show that history can be collaged. A low-resolution cutout of a world leader can be paraded around today in a bid to inspire nationalistic fervour.

History can even be cut-and-pasted over; it was Air France that ferried the Ayatollah home, not an official jet as the re-enactment suggested.

This malleability of truth has dominated Haerizadeh's work in recent years, a consequence perhaps of growing up in a country going through a momentous ideological reshuffle. 'I'll Huff And I'll Puff' (2010) at Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde in Dubai was a series of collages that directly explored the intricacies of how Iran's history was remade in a more pious shape in the years after the revolution. At the centre of this often tragi-comic drama was the artist himself, bearded and clad in a black chador, howling out the country's pent-up frustrations that have accumulated since 1979.

His first solo show in two years, 'But I Prefer Dogs with Uncropped Tails', opens at Galerie Nathalie Obadia in Paris on September 13th.

'Each stage of my career has been zooming out further to better see what's going on,' says Haerizadeh, as we look at his crowded new canvases. 'My previous works could almost be details of these new ones.'

Snatches of earlier series – right back to the 'Wonders of Nature' (2006), featuring mirror-manipulated religious architecture – can be found in the tumult. Yet here, rather than the scratchy, absurdist landscape of imagery found in 'I'll Huff and I'll Puff', the works now possess a certain air of sanctity, when viewed from a distance.

'That's what I'm trying to achieve,' says Haerizadeh. 'When you see these works from far away they have some spiritual depth. But then when you come closer, you see the Coke advertisement, the dictators and kitsch oil paintings from the Chinese market in Dubai. You see it's really nothing, just the debris of history.'

At this scale, it is an onslaught of images: the viewer is dragged to the lowlands of a world littered with 'historical debris'.

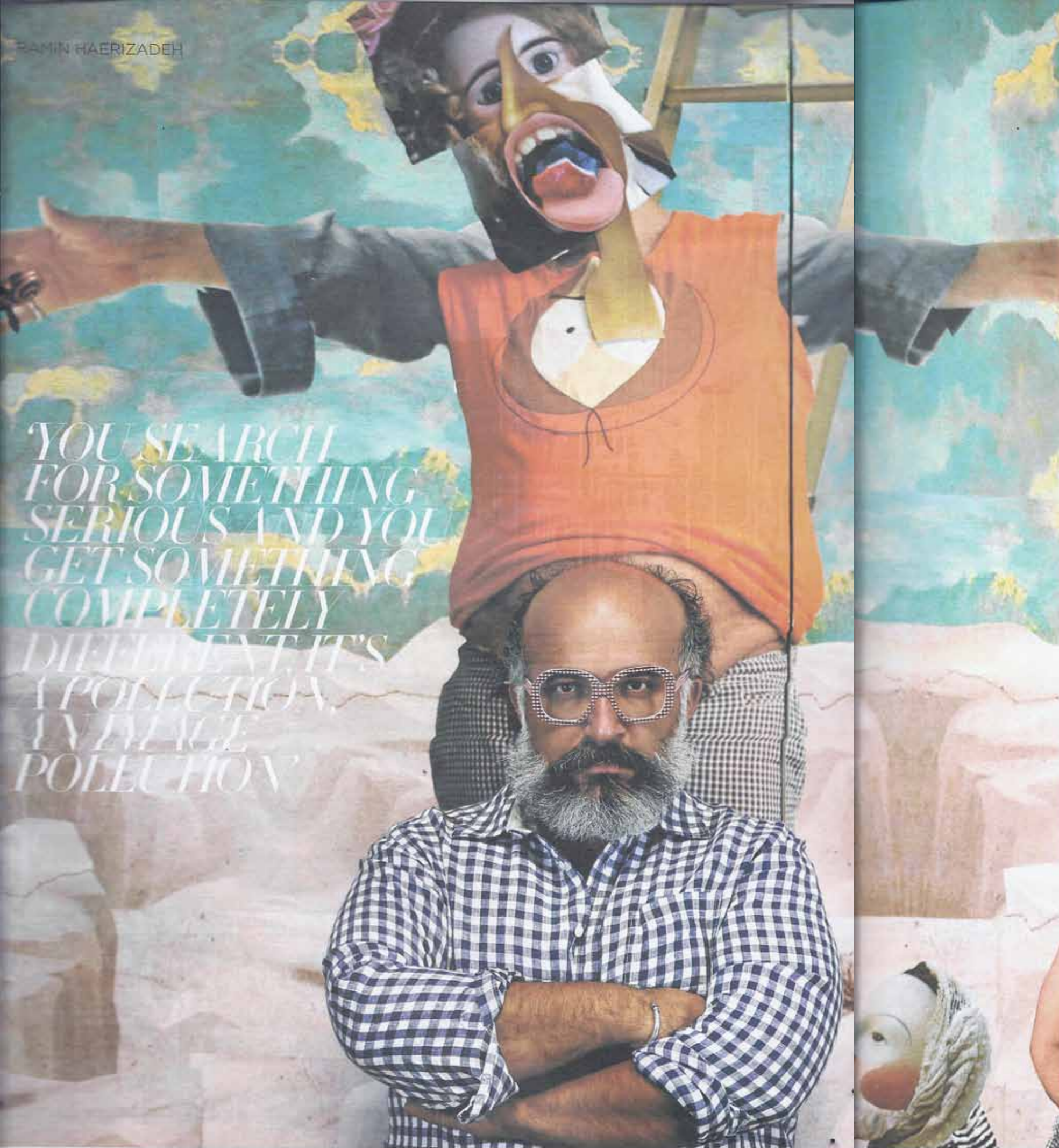
But it's one often watched over by a swarming mass of Giotto angels. They buzz around the sky in one work like a cracked mirror, gazing down at the jumbled skyline of a holy city complete with mosques, cathedrals and Italian villas. From this mass, a woman's torso towers skyward, cradling a crucifix.

A mixture of visual complexity and torn-apart Renaissance imagery gives the scenes an impression of corrupted sacredness.

'Religion and modernity clashed in Iran,' says Haerizadeh. 'This made the people dizzy, they got lost between these two poles, and the dictatorship of the monarchy in Iran was replaced with a dictatorship of religion. It was much like what happened in



(Above: 'Untitled', 2012)



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the Renaissance, when the power came back to the church. You can see this happening everywhere now; religion is coming back and the world is becoming more conservative.'

Major cultural exhibitions patronised by religiously affiliated bodies, and a growing aversion to work that is stridently combative or political are all signs of a creeping conservatism, according to the artist. It is a phenomenon that has, presciently, not been reserved to the Middle East.

The grander perspective of 'But I Prefer Dogs with Uncropped Tails' is a counter to the suggestion that Haerizadeh's previous work was too Iran-centric. 'But I don't care about being pushed into that bracket,' says the artist, who was born in Tehran in 1975. 'You can make your vision as vast as you like but at the end of the day you're a Muslim, Iranian artist. You can't remove your tag.'

Yet there's a broader meeting of imagery in these new works. Khomeini's beard is crossed with the face of Queen Elizabeth I, the 1968 student riots in Paris and the 1979 revolution in Tehran are set alongside each other to create an awkward symmetry, and the works connect stories found across the three Abrahamic religions – Marc Chagall's depiction of Jacob's Ladder, for instance, though here a bellied figure in a 'South Park' T-shirt is caught halfway on his ascent to heaven.

Parallels and similarities can be drawn from these meetings – the fundamentals of power, protest and ideology. Ultimately, it's a wearying barrage of imagery that abides. The sacred and the profane cavort together in a ballroom of chopped-up Renaissance paintings. Yet they're not Renaissance at all – they're torn-up copies, made in 'art factories' in China. Look closer at this 'holy city', and the Pope, striding through the streets, is mocked up in tacky trinkets and white facepaint.

The collages reflect the sludge of information and images that we wade through and are bombarded with, daily. Through the sump pipe of the internet – one of Haerizadeh's tools for sourcing images for his collages – the value of images has been corrupted into one indeterminate mass. 'I was looking for a painting by Giotto while preparing these works and all these horrible kitsch paintings kept coming up. You search for something serious and you get something completely different – wildlife photography, pornography. It's a pollution, an image pollution.'

In this confusion, Haerizadeh suggests, lies the root of a fundamental blindness that has overtaken society, tied up with the banality of consumerism and omnipresent media. 'People have become blind and deaf with all this sound and flood of images. We get news of a disaster, then the next day after is covered with another disaster somewhere else.'

Talk turns to 'Angelus Novus', a savant 1920 print by Paul Klee and Walter Benjamin's apocryphal description of the work, which once hung in the writer's study.

'His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history,' writes Benjamin, in 'Theses on the Philosophy of History'. 'His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet.'

Benjamin goes on to describe a storm blowing into paradise, a storm called progress that propels the angel into a future in which his back is turned and the debris is piling up to the sky.

'Everything has become ephemeral,' Haerizadeh says, resting his neck in his hands. 'I try to keep people busy with one big image, let them rest in front of it a little bit. And the more you stand and stare, the more the details start to emerge.' **HBA**

'BUT I PREFER DOGS WITH UNCROPPED TAILS' IS AT GALERIE NATHALIE OBADIA IN PARIS FROM SEPTEMBER 13TH-OCTOBER 20TH. WWW.GALERIE-OBADIA.COM



WE CAN'T SHOW  
YOU THE WHOLE  
IMAGES...

But here are some details  
from Ramin's new works on  
show at Galerie Nathalie  
Obadia.

(From top)  
'Untitled, 2012' (detail)  
'Untitled, 2012' (detail)  
'Untitled, 2012' (detail)