

# A chink in the veil

**EXHIBITION** Artists in Iran are starting to test the limits of freedom again. **John Russell Taylor** sees the results

**S**hadi Ghadirian is a photographer, 27 this year, a woman, and has lived and worked in Iran all her life. So what sort of photographs would one expect her to take? Obviously it is difficult to guess, considering how little we know about the arts in Iran today, but almost certainly what is actually on show in *Iranian Contemporary Art* at the Curve gallery of the Barbican will come as a surprise.

Ghadirian takes pictures very much in the manner of the Victorian Lady Hewardens. They are black-and-white, full-length interior portraits of, apparently, her young female friends and relatives. The women are envelopingly clothed, and quite often veiled. So what could be more fitting and respectable, even by the strictest Islamic canons, than that?

But look again. One is holding a can of Pepsi, another a bicycle, a third a ghetto-blast, while two veiled figures hold between them a mirror, token of unseemly vanity, which reflects a bookcase full of the sort of books a demure Islamic maiden is not supposed to come into contact with. The pictures, if not actually revolutionary, are definitely subversive.

How does Ghadirian get away with it? More precisely, what is she risking with these pictures? The answers to these questions provide the key to the situation of the visual arts in Iran. While there has been liberalisation in the past five years, it has taken the form of a general loosening of control rather than a principled move away from strictness.

Discretion is the hallmark of the newest Iranian art — or at least of its presentation. Timing may well be all. Ghadirian first showed in Iran three years ago, during a sort of censorship interregnum, and at a small gallery, for a short time, so that before anybody could take issue with anything in her work it had been whipped away again. This is in fact

very much the norm with contemporary Iranian art, and has more to do with the economics of art than with politics. But undoubtedly the authorities are much more relaxed about the unorthodoxies of artists than they were. The director of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, who has largely facilitated this exhibition, has been installed there now for nearly two years, which is apparently longer than any of his 18 predecessors.

The museum itself was set up in the latter days of the Shah, which meant it was automatically in trouble with the arrival of the ayatollahs. Not that the sort of art it contained was necessarily objectionable in itself. The work of the senior artists in this show, such as Mohammad Ehsai, Hossein Zenderoudi or Abol Qasam Saidi, dating mostly from the late Sixties and early Seventies, takes the traditional Islamic way of circumventing doubts about representational images by basing itself on calligraphy. These works were just stored away after the Shah's exit, and the museum was opened only for shows of Soviet-style portraits of political and military leaders.

Several artists of the middle generation have chosen to live and work outside Iran. Qasam Hadjizadeh, whose work is mostly based on a Pop Art-like manipulation of photographic images, moved to Paris. The sculptor Shirazeh Houshiari has spent all her adult life in England. Others coped in their own ways with a fairly repressive situation back home: Aydeen Aghdashlou is a highly individual Magic Realist when he chooses to paint, but most of his time is occupied with scholarly pursuits.

After about 15 years of the revolutionary era things started to relax, and the new wave of Iranian art begins to emerge in the mid-Nineties. As well as the artists like Ghadirian who work entirely in photography and video, there are several prominent figures who make

extensive use of photography. One of them is Fereydoon Ave, a painter and theatrical designer, who is represented in the show by a series of gleefully camp collages mixing photographs of wrestlers with roses and fruit and lacy patterns of white or red paint.

What does not seem to exist at the moment is any sense of national identity or even personal complicity. Each artist in

Iran seems to be working in his or her own little world, evolving in isolation. The typical artist, in fact, would seem to be someone like Khosrow Hassanzadeh, who got a grant to study art when he came back from fighting in the Iran-Iraq war, but soon gave it up completely and retired into a basic job in a packing office, using large sheets of the packing paper to make his own dream-like images

based on his immediate family and incidents in his own life. He certainly seems to have lost nothing by his period of isolation: perhaps no artist does. If it is too early yet to produce grandiose generalisations about trends in the new Iranian art, that may also be just as well.

● Iranian Contemporary Art is at the Curve, Barbican Centre, EC2 (020-7638 8891) until June 3



Shadi Ghadirian's demure portraits of Iranian women are subverted by tell-tale objects such as the Pepsi can in this 1998 study

## Around the galleries

**DANGEROUS** little girls hold no threat for **Laura Ford**. When she began, the menace of her figures was palpable, signalled by serious-looking weapons in their cute little hands. More recently it has been understated: a posse of little girls in frilly, flowery fabrics might, one by one, just be part of a junior ballet class, but en masse they whirl like devishes, worryingly out of control.

Some of these Chintz Girls crop up in Ford's latest show. But comfortably (lest we should wonder if we are imagining things), the whole show is entitled

*Desperados*. Some at least of these new desperados are male including the "elephant boy" figures, which have trunk-like protuberances on their faces.

Feminist criticism has made heavy weather of Ford's work. It is quite clear that considerations of gender are there, but represent only one among many possible lines of approach. It must be significant that most of the sculptures in the show are a woman's view of a woman's view of men, and that they are seen, predictably, as overgrown children. But then Ford seems to

see everyone as a child. The impression that we are visiting a subversive Toytown is emphasised by the presence of two animal figures, *Donkey* and *Stag*, which, like the rest, are made of upholstered steel.

This latest phase of Ford's work offers an experience that is at once funny, touching and vaguely disturbing. *Houldsworth Fine Art, 33-34 Cork Street, W1 (020-7434 2333) until June 2*

THERE are parts of **Yinka Shonibare's** work that come

within hailing distance of Ford's. He too likes to make tableaux out of colourfully upholstered figures, often deconstructing earlier works of art. One such is on show at the Stephen Friedman Gallery, constituting the West End half of Shonibare's new two-work show.

His programmes seem to have little to do with gender, being more concerned with class and ethnicity. But since the inspiration in this case is Fragonard's *The Swing*, one has to wonder.

The original image of a young woman swinging ecstatically, offering her legs and underwear to

the viewer's inspection, is so clearly erotic in intent that any reconstruction must have taken that aboard. Perhaps the use of a headless store mannequin as the basis of this lifesize rendering — tree, swing, flying shoe and all — indicates a desire to counter the sexual content. Or possibly, along with Shonibare's trademark use of African printed textiles, it is to suppress indications of ethnicity.

The other half of the show is in Vauxhall. There in a loft is Shonibare's latest photographic project, a sequence of 12 tableaux based on the 1945 film

of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Shonibare plays the central role himself, thereby setting up the ethnic question, since we do not exactly expect Wilde's decadent protagonist to be embodied by a hefty and virile black man.

The whole enterprise, whether camp or serious (or both), does, like all Shonibare's work, make one stop and question exactly what one is looking at. *Stephen Friedman Gallery, 25-28 Old Burlington Street, W1, and 12 Dolland Street, SE11 (020-7494 1434) until Saturday*

**John Russell Taylor**