

## **BAHMAN JALALI**

### **Text by Catherine David, curator of the exhibition**

Bahman Jalali's photography of the past forty years constitutes an original and exemplary body of work. And yet, the particular circumstances of its development and the restricted conditions for showing it - for reasons that relate as much to the biography of the author as to the recent and ancient history of his country, Iran - have kept the work relatively unknown.

Since the sixties, Jalali has been passionate about photography, its history and early development in Iran, a country where the first photographers who surrounded Naser al-Din Sha (1848-1896), himself an enthusiastic amateur, became active barely eight years after the invention of the technique in France. An amateur and self-taught photographer, Jalali produced his first images while studying economics and political science. Subsequently, he became a collector, historian and teacher while travelling and researching throughout the country. His work on the Qajar collections of images in the Golestan Palace, published in *Visible Treasure*; his involvement with the team that opened the first museum of photography in Iran, Aks Khanek Shahr; the rescuing and preservation of the archives of several photography studios including the exceptional collection belonging to three generations of the Chehrenegar family; and the creation of a study programme at the University for Audio-Visual Media, bear witness to a life dedicated to the preservation and transmission of a varied and endangered heritage.

Equally, his documentary work of the past forty years in Iran, well represented in the present exhibition, pays homage and continues the journey of discovery and invention of a modern nation, with and by means of the photographs, started by his predecessors at the end of the nineteenth century. Photography and the production of photographic images are central to the idea of an Iranian modern culture that Hamid Dabashi has described as 'formed centripetally - tending towards a centre that exists only by a collective will, by an imaginative osmosis, cosmopolitan and syncretic, multifaceted, a festive carnival of incongruities'. The various stages and moments in the work of Bahman Jalali, from his documentary projects to the 'Image of Imagination' series, realised using the negatives of the Qajar photographs, relate in a complex manner to cultural history and memory (but also to that which has been suppressed), through a process of anamnesis that leads us to certain obscure points originating in forgotten images.

Undoubtedly, it is also the profound relationship between Jalali and a country and people traumatised by the violence of their recent history that is expressed in the two exceptional testimonies that constitute *Days of Blood, Days of Fire* (1978-1979), about the popular uprising against the Sha and the development of the revolution until the return of Ayatollah Khomeini when it was confiscated by the religious powers, and *Khorranshahr. A City which was Destroyed* (1981) - both testimonies also appear in this book -, which documents the horror of the Iran-Iraq war that lasted eight years and was conducted almost behind closed doors, away from the glare of the international press.

When acting as a faithful witness and recorder of the soldiers' daily life and torments, of the military operations and the near total destruction of Khorranshahr and Abadan - two port cities strategically situated on the south battlefield - Jalali is not at the service of any agency or discourse, of any propaganda or suspect humanism. At a time when some people like to think modern wars 'haven't taken place' or deaths are 'virtual', he assumes the humble but implacable role of the witness and the photographer who stands against the barbarian history of our age.

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