

# WOMEN IN THE WORLD



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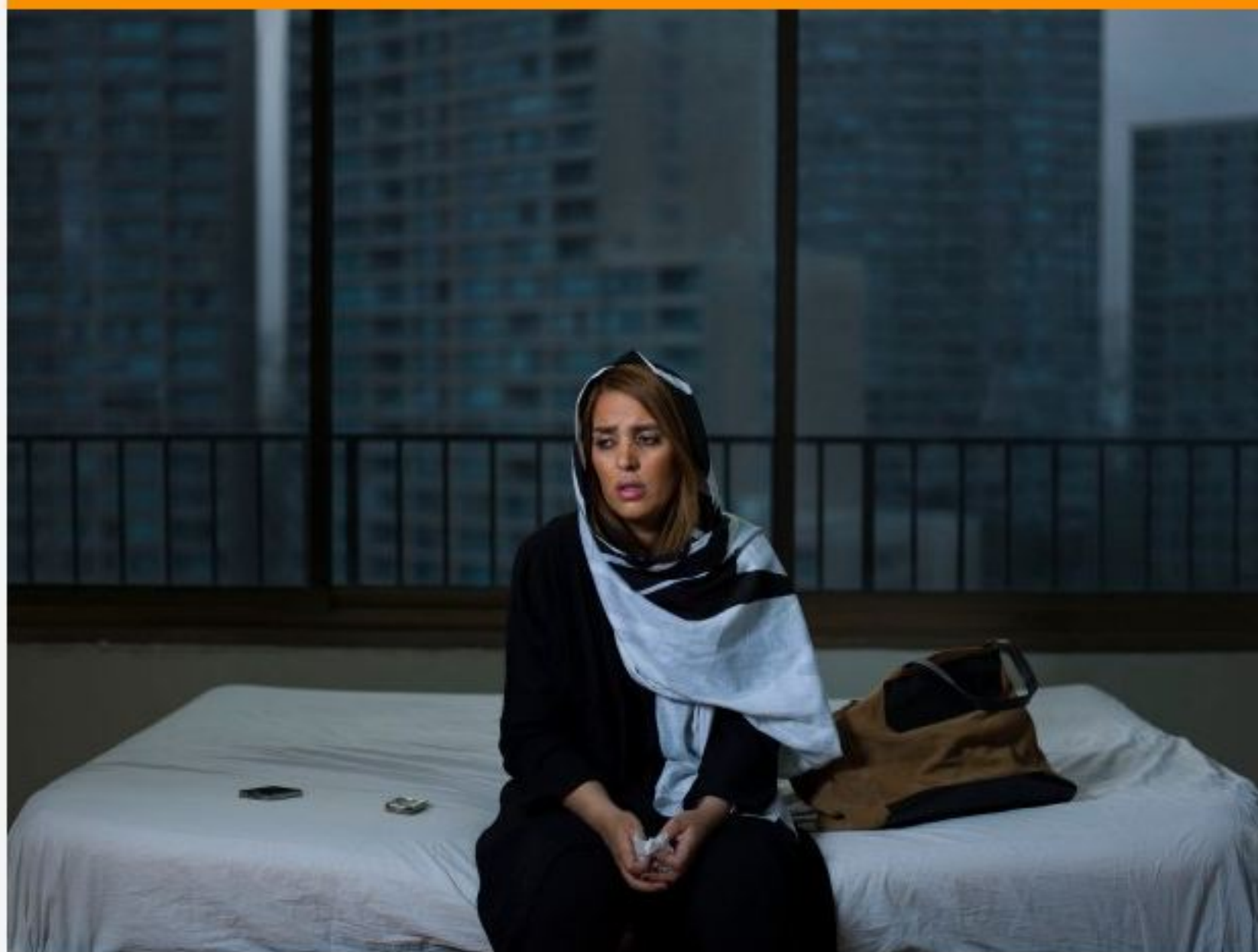
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Newsha Tavakolian

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## Newsha Tavakolian's "Look" Series: Photos Of A Young Iran

6 HOURS AGO - BY LISA LARSON-WALKER

**The artist's latest show captures emotional portraits of her country's frustrated youth.**



"If you can't breathe through your nose, you open your mouth to continue breathing," says [Newsha Tavakolian](#). The Iranian photographer is using a famous Farsi aphorism to talk about what it's like to work in her country's repressive atmosphere these days. It's a theme that informs her portraiture, which has become more emotional and poetic as creative opportunities in Iran have become riskier.

Her most recent project, *Look*, is a series of portraits featuring young Iranian men and women—mostly family and friends—shot within the confines of Tavakolian's home, inside a large concrete apartment building. "I wanted to bring to life the story of a nation of middle-class youths who lack hope for the future and are constantly battling with themselves in isolation," she says. "Everyone hides this moment of insecurity through social conformity; you'd have no indication of these private moments of doubt were you to walk through the streets of Tehran."

Tavakolian took care in framing each photograph, basing her composition on her intimate understanding of the subject's moods and life story. The result is evocative, though never overdramatized. The subjects, she says, "are not acting. This work is a documentary incorporating artistic elements to make it more challenging and engaging both for the viewers as well as for myself."

The series originally began as a more traditional work of reportage portraiture, documenting her subjects in situ as they went about their daily lives. Yet Tavakolian found her first images to be flat and emotionally unexpressive. Then, she happened to see the film *The Yacoubian Building*, released in 2009 as an adaption of the Egyptian book by the same title. It's a roman à clef critiquing pre-revolutionary Egypt through the intertwined narratives of residents living in the same apartment building. Tavakolian realized that the perfect location for the shoots had been right in front of her for nearly 10 years.

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## Newsha Tavakolian Look (PHOTOS)



Newsha Tavakolian

"The building captures the mood of the city, and is representative of Iran as a whole," she says. The dim and dusky façade of the apartment complex channels a sense of melancholy: the country's struggles with undemocratic elections and its stifling autocracy echo in the bluntly repetitive architecture. Inspired by *Look*, Tavakolian hopes to portray similar conflicts within the youthful generations of China, Russia, and Cuba.

When Tavakolian first became a photographer, she had two desires that still hold true to this day: to be independent, and to work creatively. After dropping out of school at the age of 16, she pursued employment as a photographer in order to not be a financial burden on her family. "For a long time no one took me seriously. I was young and had no experience in photography, but was really eager. I would turn in every frame they needed to publish, I did so many crazy things to get photographs," she says. Little by little, she established her place on staff at *Zan*,

the first women's newspaper in Iran, getting her first big break with her coverage of the student uprisings in 1999 at the age of 18. Just two years later, Polaris Images started to represent her work, and since, her photographs have been published by nearly every major publication, including *Newsweek* magazine.

"Iran is such a diverse place," says Tavakolian. "People are very modern and educated yet this gets lost when what comes across internationally are flat conversations with self appointed figureheads ... If I speak, it is only for myself. I am always asked to speak on behalf of all Iranian women, but I don't want to be representative of anybody. Nevertheless, Iranian women are very powerful, smart, and hardworking; they can do so much more were there greater support for working women. They have potential for so much more than what is possible now."

Tavakolian's assignment work avoids many of the clichés—wide angled glimpses of flag burning angry men, that scream "Death to America" simplistically like a corporate trademark more than a manifesto—that plague much photojournalism in the Middle East. Instead, she works to reveal different perspectives and moments of bare emotion. "Becoming a photographer changed my world," Tavakolian says. "When you're into it, you witness so many things, yet you're constantly hungry to know more, do more and see more. It's no different than a philosopher's self-aware lack of understanding in the face of this perpetual increase. There's no end to it, photography is like this to me."

*Look is currently on view at [Thomas Erben Gallery](#), in New York City, through May 11, 2013.*