Tahmineh Monzavi

The work of Tahmineh Monzavi (b. 1988, Iran) focuses on Iranian society and its inner conflicts. She talks to Unseen about turning her lens onto those considered invisible by the rest of society.

Q: You have worked on many different projects that engage with social issues and conflicts. What do you find so appealing about the documentary aspect of photography?
A: The most important part of my projects is social conflicts. These contrasts matter to me. Documentary photography is a very convenient medium to express my ideas and to capture events happening around me, however, I have also used video and film in some of my projects. My subjects belong to a part of society that remains invisible to the rest. Being a woman in Iran gives me the opportunity to understand these people much better. While photography allows me to capture a moment, there are unique features in moving image such as sound and movement, that help me capture the opportunity to develop these themes.

Q: Both in Grape Garden Alley and Galagy or Innocent you present your subjects with incredible sensitivity, portraying them as victims rather than responsible for what has happened to them. Why do you feel drawn to these subjects?
A: They were very kind and friendly to me from the beginning. There was a kind of faith in our friendship, they had nothing to lose and they expressed themselves very comfortably. I tried not to abuse their feelings, to have a non-judgmental approach to them.

Q: Do you think that your photographs also offer a refuge for people who fight against similar adversities by creating a narrative that can relate to?
A: Actually I think my photos are mostly observational. I just want to capture people as they are. Their life and situation might improve by letting these pictures be seen. I tried to study their stories, while considering the lighting, composition and aesthetics of my images, not just to capture a moment in their lives.

Q: You seem to have taken a new direction with your latest series All About Me, Nicknamed Beauty Queen. Did you tell us what you are trying to convey with this project?
A: In the real world, Miss Beauties appear on stage to display their best features in a predefined framework with a booming smile, and a doll-like face devoid of their inner feelings. The individuality of these girls is contrived and their physical appearance is the sole element of their attraction. The way Miss Beauties are chosen seems somehow similar to a childhood game: whoever sits fastest on the chair, descends to the lowest status. Every woman in society has hidden capabilities and deserves to be a “chosen one”. Admireable Iranian women, regardless of their looks, culture and even social class, can be found easily in any street or square.

Q: In the West, Iranian photography is considered to be going through a rich period of development. Do you think this is an accurate impression? What are your views on the state of contemporary photography in Iran?

A: Iranian contemporary photography is in a unique era at the moment: having so many successful female photographers has created a very fertile situation, even for young artists to start their careers and be creative. I would say that the photographic education in Iranian universities is now as good as in the West and sometimes even tougher.