



HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

An Iranian Artist Exposes Totalitarian Power and Defaces Its Iconography

by Amelia Rina on June 18, 2015



Farideh Sakhaeifar, "Pedal" (2015) (wall piece detail) (all images courtesy William Holman Gallery)

The manipulation of the masses is ubiquitous in everyday life, from pop culture to religion to politics. Sometimes the stakes are relatively low: I buy or don't buy a product because an ad campaign makes me feel as though my choice associates me with a particular community. Sometimes the stakes are much higher, and the loyalty to organizations can lead to credulity or unthinking aggression toward outsiders. In her show [Sacrosanct](#) at William Holman Gallery, [Farideh Sakhaeifar](#) addresses issues surrounding institutional censorship, and religious and political manipulations of the publics they claim to serve.



Farideh Sakhaeifar, "Workers Are Taking Photographs 13" (2008), inkjet pigment print, 25.5 x 19.5 in. ([click to enlarge](#))

A grid of eighteen portraits hangs on a wall in the gallery's front room. In each, a man stands in the center of the image, removed from his environment (a butcher shop, a factory) by a white board that frames his torso and appears to be floating, with disembodied female fingers grasping either side of the board, from behind. The men hold the bulb of a shutter release cord connected to the camera, and stare straight at its lens.

The images recall Richard Avedon's 1980s series, [In The American West](#), for which he made portraits of people that he felt exemplified working class people in the United States. Some controversy surrounds the portraits regarding to what degree Avedon misused his position of power and betrayed the supposed "truth" of the images by manipulating the appearances of his subjects to make them appear dirtier or poorer. In her series, *Workers are Taking Photographs* (2006–2008), Sakhaeifar both continues Avedon's tradition and negates it. By giving her subjects the ability to choose when the picture is taken, Sakhaeifar puts them in the rare position of control. Made in the semi-industrial areas outside Tehran, Iran, the images also address the traditional gender inequality that still exists outside the nation's more modern capital by depicting two subjects: the visible male and the nearly invisible female.



*Farideh Sakhaeifar, "Tehran Aloud" (2011) (photo transfer detail), photo inkjet transfer on plywood,
9 channel video with plywood, sound, 8 sheets of 8 x 4 ft plywood*

The white rectangle that frames the men reappears in different roles in other works. In the back room of the gallery, "Pedal" (2015), an 8 x 16 foot wall collage of found images of attendants at political rallies appears to be a never-ending sea of men. Several of the men hold blank posters that originally showed their leader, but after Sakhaeifar erased the images, the former tributes become rectangular voids that illuminate the perfunctory nature of idolatrous glorification of political leaders; with the right campaign strategy, any face could fill the posters. The wall faces a carpeted stage in the middle of which a small pedal rises and falls. When compressed, the pedal triggers the sound of a crowd's roaring applause, amplifying the sense of drama used by people in power to affect their massive audiences.



Farideh Sakhaeifar, "Toppled" (2015), bronze with cement base, 17.75 in. sculpture on 27 x 10.5 x 10.5 in. base (click to enlarge)

Continuing the theme of erasure, the two works "Tehan a loud" (2011) and "NASA/ISIS" (2015) both address the visibility of government actions, or lack thereof. In "Tehan a loud," a map of Tehran covers two sheets of plywood leaning against the wall. Sakhaeifar cut out of the map the locations of protests in 2009. On the opposite wall, nine small screens glow through rectangular openings cut out of more pieces of bare plywood. The screens play videos of the locations where the 2009 protests took place, one day after they ended. The eerie scenes, devoid of any humans or record of the previous day's violence, demonstrate the government's ability to control our perception of history. In *NASA/ISIS*, Sakhaeifar collages videos of NASA launching rockets and ISIS bombing historical sites in Iraq, creating an unsettling combination of the awe and pride associated with space travel, and the horror of cultural destruction by an oppressor. Sakhaeifar does not veil her disdain for pervasive totalitarian power, and the most direct defacement stands in the front gallery. For "Toppled" (2015), a bronze statue of a



faceless man in a business suit, standing on top of a concrete pillar with his arm raised and a noose hanging around his neck, Sakhaeifar was inspired by the instances when the public revolted and brought down the monuments of their leaders, such as Saddam Hussein in Iraq after the US invasion, Gaddafi in Libya, Nicolae Ceaușescu in Romania, and many others throughout history. Through images of specific locations and individuals affected by pervasive oppression in the Middle East and abroad, *Sacrosanct* highlights the injustices enacted on the general public and is a call to arms: we must not allow ourselves to be blinded by disinformation masquerading as valor or virtue.

[Farideh Sakhaeifar: Sacrosanct](#) continues at William Holman Gallery (65 Ludlow St, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through July 10.