Within the Spectrum of a Gaze: Tooraj Khamenehzadeh's Inspired Tableaux Vivants
by Natasha Chuk

'Nothing is ever quite arranged.' – John Berger[1]

Photographers have arranged people and objects before their cameras since the medium's beginning, observing minute distinctions between light and shadows, which produce dramatically different effects when shifted. Storytelling depends on these arrangements, and thrives when precision yields powerful results that encapsulate their real life counterparts, allowing the gaze to linger and study the connections between representations and reality. What's possible within a gaze's reach varies from image to image. In Tooraj Khamenehzadeh's photographic series *Apprehension Jungle* (2014), light and shadow indeed have a dramatic effect on the subjects and their surroundings, but they venture beyond the writing of light and pull and reinterpret moments of human anguish, fear, grief, and despair from the annals of time and the visual representations that chronicle such experiences to connect them with contemporary social and political contexts. In doing so, these tableaux vivants – with their dramatic lighting and staged scenarios – emulate the art historical sensibilities of the past as well as the lived experiences of the present, effectively mixing the personal and the political and bravely avoiding their distinction.

These tableaux vivants, or living pictures, utilize theatrical lighting and staged situations to produce moving but mysterious narratives in the borrowed styles of European painting of the past. Classicism, Baroque, Romanticism, Realism, and Expressionism flow together to reassemble iconographies of human fear and distress. As such, in addition to bringing their drama to life through the use of hyperrealistic lighting, the images carefully weave time, history, and cultural associations through this clever use of intertextuality. One image shows a man and woman uneasily making their way through the forest, which invokes Eugène Delacroix's *The Barque of Dante* (1822), a Romantic painting that alludes to various fictional details of Dante Alighieri's Inferno from his 14th century poem *The Divine Comedy*. In Delacroix's visualization, the figures nervously cross a choppy river laden with tortured bodies. Their facial expressions of fear and agitation are recalled in Khamenehzadeh's recreation, in which a similar distressed crossing is underway and in which the darkness of the travelers' surroundings both engulfs them and hides any surrounding threats, contributing to their (and our) uncertainty of their path and the fate that awaits them.

Another image takes its cues from Edvard Munch's expressionistic depictions of inner turmoil and dread. A young girl holds her head in anguish like the frazzled woman in Munch's *Ashes* (1894). Though their narrative contexts greatly differ, their aesthetic similarities are difficult to

overlook: both gaze desperately forward; both are staged in a forest. In this way, Khamenehzadeh's image pays tribute to this recurring figure in Munch's work, including the maniacal figure in *The Scream* (1893), and more dishearteningly to the young child in *The Dead Mother and Child* (1897–99). However, the girl in Khamenehzadeh's image is slightly twisted, caught between moving forward and returning backward, situated at the threshold between past and future, danger and safety.

In another image, a woman is settled on a precarious branch in the forest, clutching a young child whose face is obstructed by her protective grasp. As in the other images, her facial expression signals fear and distrust as she looks off into the distance, perhaps in recognition or anticipation of the dangers that lurk outside the frame. The image poignantly references Käthe Kollwitz's, *Death Seizes A Woman* (1934), an illustration whose harsh, charcoal strokes attest to the artist's personal struggles with loss and grief and illustrate the look of horror and panic induced by the firm grip of Death, there personified by a human-like figure. This kind of allusion forces one to linger more intently on the significance of Khamenehzadeh's images, whose narratives are charged with the weight of visualized grief in other imagined frameworks throughout time. These influences range from the harsh, dramatic chronicles of human suffering by Francisco de Goya to the mythological imaginings of Nicolas Poussin. Additionally, one might also consider Peter de Francia's series of charcoal drawings that depict men, women, and children in everyday situations and don't refrain from illustrating the expressive character of human nature. These allusions to past visual grievances are at once pitiless in their bold depictions of hopelessness and sympathetic for doing so. They urge viewers to wonder at the source of apprehension and fear of these unknown figures, as well as recognize the ubiquity of their situation, figuratively and literally.

In addition to visualized apprehension, these images have in common the subject of pursuit, of which there have been numerous representations throughout art history. In a perverse way one might find common ground between Khamenehzadeh's images and James Hamilton's *Two Hounds Pursuing a Hare* (c. 1700), which illustrates an unusually comparable look of victimhood in a forest setting wherein, as the title suggests, two hounds advance on a seemingly swift but likely unfortunate hare. This comparison visually links the figures in Khamenehzadeh's images to the hare, the object of pursuit. Likewise, the forest in his images is similarly represented as a site of hiding and active pursuit, conflating its condition of calm with uncertainty and foreboding. Other works also openly illustrate the act and sometimes the remunerations of the hunt, like Peter Paul Rubens's *A Forest at Dawn with a Deer Hunt* (c. 1635) and Gustave Courbet's *Hunting Dogs with Dead Hare* (1857) and *After the Hunt* (c. 1859). But in Khamenehzadeh's images, the perceived victims are human and their pursuers are left out of the frame and therefore those details are left to the viewer's imagination and possibly their

worst fears. This creates a metaphorical tabula rasa onto which the possibility of many variations and sources of fear, hopelessness, grief, and apprehension are conceivable, and the quality and character of the pursuer also are varied. Moreover, Khamenehzadeh's photographic approach builds on existing visual representations of such themes as the hunt or the pursuit and modernizes them with social and political messages that resonate with contemporary issues.

With this in mind, the title of the series also is an important aspect and meaningful contribution to the images, beyond their visual power and narrative audacity. Inspired by the Persian هول, a motif located in the poetry of Nima Yooshij, worry and uncertainty generated by social and political issues are immediately registered by the series title. In English, apprehension refers to disquiet or foreboding. There is a kind of distance and stillness induced by trepidation, which lends these images a pronounced moment of recognition — the awareness of the moment being temporarily suspended, locked in place for the feeling of unease to settle in. Each image illustrates this with each figure simultaneously revealing a look of acknowledgement and fear, two feelings that are often inseparable, which leave us wondering about their fate. Jungle refers both to the tangled forest that serves as the selected site of these stagings, as well as the feelings and sensations associated by its darkness, unpredictability, maze-like qualities, and density. Again, the forest conflates the possibility of protection and shelter as well as danger.

There is a depth to this work that exceeds first impressions and first glances, the latter of which inevitably summons the desire to know more, to stare longer, to make sense of what one sees. For what reason are they fearful? From what do they run? And there is an uncanniness that sets in, the feeling that this is a familiar experience that can't be placed. It could be argued that photographs inherently apprehend. They suspend and take hold, temporarily forcing a pause for reflection and inquiry. Unlike paintings, a photograph's relation to time requires such an arrest or shock, mimicking in its own way the apprehension of Khamenehzadeh's staged events. One gets the feeling that the subjects in these images are figuratively and literally arrested in time and space, within and beyond the arrest of the photographic images in which they appear. Within the frame of each event, a subtly placed rope zig-zags behind each of the figures, suggesting a kind of unwanted tether to their environment as well as a visual mapping of their trajectory. As such, the images themselves provide but also encourage profound contemplation of these particular suspensions and from where they originated. Desire, shock, and fear all are within the spectrum of one's lingering gaze on these images and, eventually, so are intention and compassion.

Though they could, Khamenehzadeh's staged events avoid representing a so-called theater of cruelty. Instead, they carry massive dramatic, even melodramatic, weight. In this way, they

produce a kind of moral theater informed by the sensibilities of emotional and political reportage. As John Berger writes, 'Photographs do not translate from appearances. They quote from them.'[2] The melodrama of *Apprehension Jungle* is at once illusory and realistic resulting in a visual rhetoric that informs and moves, quoting the recognizable iconographies of war, political turmoil, and human suffering as well as the unanticipated flights in and away from homes, the diaspora of bodies and minds. At the same time, these images avoid being overly sentimental, which would weaken and trivialize their qualities of apprehension and downplay any feelings of empathy or affinity with the subjects therein. On one hand, their theatricality serves as a protective device on the part of the viewer: one's gaze is shielded from the conditions that precede and follow these suspensions. We neither confront the cause for alarm nor the outcome of the subjects' desperate attempts to flee. However, there is no certainty for the viewer either: along with the staged subjects, the viewer also is suspended in a black hole of apprehension. Berger also writes, 'In every act of looking there is an expectation of meaning.'[3] Photography asserts this, allowing for time and contemplation, for meaning to brew and mature, become whole or complete. But for those who gaze at the images of *Apprehension Jungle*, meaning is both profound and subtle: it's theatrical and realistic, general and personal. Though Khamenehzadeh's photographic approach draws on various conventions of theater and cinema, its realism cuts through this artifice. In this sense, the images effectively arrive at the truth of apprehension via this overextension.

Jacques Rancière writes, '[Artistic images are] operations: relations between a whole and parts; between a visibility and a power of signification and affect associated with it; between expectations and what happens to meet them.'[4] Photographic images in particular, with their unique relation to time – which is carved into discrete parts – proffer such operations that infuse the suspension of the gaze with significance, suspending a singular drama from its source. As Berger observes, 'It is not time that is prolonged but meaning.'[5] One's awareness of this suspension – the gap produced within the flow of time – introduces a perhaps necessary uncanniness that extends (amplifies) and limits (distorts) recognition. For these reasons, the images in *Apprehension Jungle* not only remind us that the flow of time can be interrupted to linger on the profound moments that construct the greater narrative, but also that through their amplification – their suspension, theatrical lighting, and bluntness – we recognize a common truth of human fear within the spectrum of a gaze.

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[1] John Berger, *Understanding a Photograph* (New York: aperture, 2013), p. 92.
[2] Ibid., p. 60.
[3] Ibid., p. 73.
[4] Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image* (New York: Verso, 2009) p. 3.
[5] John Berger, *Understanding a Photograph* (New York: aperture, 2013), p. 75.