



BENDIGO
ART GALLERY

Hoda Afshar

Historical and Cultural Contexts

- Born 1983, Tehran, Iran, Afshar moved to Australia in 2007 and now lives and works in Melbourne.
- Her work often explores gender, marginality and displacement.
- She completed a Bachelor degree in Fine Art-Photography in Tehran, and her PhD thesis in Creative Arts at Curtin University, Sydney.
- Although Afshar is an Iranian born Australian she often eschews the titles of Asian-Australian or Iranian-Australian, not wishing for her cultural identity to define her or her art.

Afshar's work has been widely exhibited locally and internationally and published online and in print. Her work is also part of numerous private and public collections. Through her work, she explores the nature and possibilities of documentary image-making. She also lectures at the Victorian College of the Arts, and Photography Studies College, Melbourne.

Her experience as a female emigrating from a country with a reputation for very poor human rights and discrimination against minority religions and women may influence her choice of subjects and themes. Migration and the experience of cultural and geographical displacement are common themes in her work.

To create *Remain* Afshar made contact with Behrouz Boochani, a Kurdish Iranian asylum seeker detained on Manus Island, PNG after the closure of Australia's offshore processing centre in 2017. Afshar's father is also Kurdish Iranian and Afshar saw in Boochani strength and resilience also shared by her father and others in the Kurdish community.

Front cover image

Hoda Afshar,

Remain (still detail) 2018

2-channel digital video, colour, sound. 23:29 mins.

Image courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery

Images:



Hoda Afshar,
Remain (still),
2018

2-channel digital video, colour, sound. 23:29 mins.
Image courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery



(Above) Hoda Afshar,
Remain (still),
2018
2-channel digital video,
colour, sound. 23:29 mins.
Image courtesy of the artist
and Milani Gallery

Ideas and Meanings

Remain, 2018 was photographed and filmed in collaboration with several men who were detained for over five years on Manus Island, Papua New Guinea after seeking asylum in Australia. Australia's Regional Processing Centre on the island closed in 2017, but the men remained on Manus Island. The installation of *Remain* at Bendigo Art Gallery is a two-channel video that shares the individual and collective stories and experiences of a small group of detainees.

The two-channel video is installed across a large wall with two videos synchronised together to play as one. The piece employs slow motion and reflects the lived experiences of the men which include memories and observations of murder, riot and suicide.

One such voice is Behrouz Boochani, a Kurdish Iranian writer who recites poetry. Another man communicates his experience of stripped identity and purpose through song. Afshar has chosen to contrast the traumatic experiences of the men

with what seems to be an idyllic environment of the tropical rainforest. Although the background scenery might seem lush and beautiful, it has been described as a 'green hell' by one of the protagonists as, at the time they were stuck in limbo, not knowing where they will go next. Most have now been released from detention and Behrouz has been granted asylum in New Zealand.

In Afshar's unique style she has merged the documentary with the conceptual in *Remain*. "I wanted to [move beyond] images of a refugee behind bars," says Afshar. "I wanted the subject to decide how to share the story: to give them autonomy and agency."¹

In *Remain*, Afshar explores ideas around untold histories such as the contemporary issues of Australian border protection and the human rights of asylum seekers.

"They aren't ideas: they are hard facts that exist around me, and that I intuitively respond to."²

Influences

Like many contemporary artists, Afshar's influences are varied and not restricted to the main art form she works in. She has indicated that most of her influences are outside photography and are more related to literature, philosophy, theory, poetry or film.

In particular, Afshar is interested in *slow cinema*, which is a genre of art cinema film-making that emphasizes long takes, and is often minimalist, observational, and with little or no dialogue or narrative. It is sometimes called 'contemplative cinema'.

Two major influential film makers from this genre are the Hungarian Bela Tarr and the Russian Andrei Tarkovsky. Both are renowned for their long takes and focus on the aesthetics of the film. Tarr is renowned for his seven hour 1994 *Satantango* (meaning Satan's Tango), which features very long takes in hazy black and white aesthetics. Similarly Andrei Tarkovsky is renowned for his dreamlike visual imagery, spiritual and metaphysical themes.

Another film maker who inspires Afshar is the Iranian Abbas Kiarostami. Kiarostami's films blur the line between documentary and fiction, simplicity and complexity and might be ambiguous in their messages. Change, continuity, life and death feature large in Kiarostami's films.

The visual artists Hoda Afshar looks towards include Palestinian multimedia artist Mona Hatoum and American Bill Viola, amongst others. Hatoum was born in Lebanon but as she is Palestinian, she and her family were never able to receive Lebanon identity cards; she now lives in Britain. Her art includes video, photography and installation work that reflects conflicting emotions, sometimes by rendering familiar objects or bodies into threatening or dangerous subjects. Afshar is inspired by 'her beautifully distilled way of communicating ideas related to power relations and the condition of global exile'.³

Bill Viola grew up in New York, USA and remembers as a child nearly drowning, an experience he ironically describes as both beautiful and without fear. His video works, shown in major galleries and museums are usually large scale, slowed down and frequently use nature's elements such as water and fire to explore themes such as human consciousness and spirituality through the concepts of birth, death and love.

Afshar's 2013 Warholian style series *Under Western Eyes* was exhibited in the *Waqf altagheer: Time of Change exhibition*. The series was inspired by the collective of Eleven; a national collective of

Australian Muslim artists, curators and writers."

Like the artists in proppaNOW, a Brisbane based Indigenous art collective which includes the colourful and politically confronting Gordon Hookey and Richard Bell, Afshar uses *Under Western Eyes* to interrogate stereotypes about her culture as a Muslim woman in Australia.

Theorists that inspire Afshar include Palestinian American academic, political activist and literary critic Edward Said. Through critiquing literature, Said raised issues with regards to social and cultural politics in particular raising the point of the political rights of Palestinians and the creation of an independent Palestinian state. Said is famously quoted as having said of the idea of exile: 'The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever'.⁴

Afshar's family are also a great influence: 'I think my father's poetic nature and my mum's love for stories have significantly impacted my way of looking and sensing the world'.⁵

Techniques and Materials

Afshar works with film, still photography and installation. Unlike a traditional photographer, her film based art blurs the lines between art, film, documentary and photography.

She often focuses on exploring a current issue or event, using techniques which mimic the documentary photography style, however, her images are staged.

'I always found the ambiguity of staged images to be closer to reality than (apparently) objective documentary images'.⁶

Remain is a two channel video requiring two different videos to be synchronised together and projected onto a wall or screen. Afshar would have worked with Audio Visual Specialists to realise such installations, ensuring that the resolution is appropriate for large scale projecting.

Art elements, art principles, aesthetic qualities and style

Afshar often focuses on the art elements of colour, tone and texture and the principles of balance and focal point to create confronting, brooding and melancholy imagery. *Remain* also focuses on the elements of sound and time; the gentle sounds of the protagonists' voices either reciting poetry or describing their experiences is made all the more moving with the inclusion of the sounds of the waves from the sea. In *Remain* the colour is realistic, with the warm colours of the men's skin projecting out against the cool colours of the sea background. The realistic colour scheme assists to play with the idea of a documentary rather than an art film. For Afshar's other series, she plays with colour to communicate different meanings, for example her seemingly playful series *Under Western Eyes* borrows from the bright hand coloured style of the Pop artist Andy Warhol and inspired by the collective Eleven.

Student focus

Watch the video

<https://vimeo.com/393267518> complete version or <https://vimeo.com/321028284> short version (make sure to have your volume on)

Then read this interview between the artist and Behrouz Boochani, an Iranian-Kurdish journalist and poet who was detained on Manus Island for seven years. Boochani is one of the subjects of *Remain*. <https://www.collecteurs.com/interview/a-conversation-between-hoda-afshar-and-behrouz-boochani>

Discuss the following points:

VCE Art Unit 3 Area of Study 1 Interpreting Art

Structural Framework

- For the *Remain* series and several other similar bodies of work, Afshar has chosen a realistic and cool colour scheme and central focal points to create portraits of selected refugees on Manus Island, a detention centre. In what way are these videos both similar and different to traditional portraits?
- Filming techniques such as slow motion have been used to create atmosphere and emotion in *Remain*. Read the following site and discuss what specific techniques you think Afshar has used: <http://filmstudies.info/terminology/manuscripts/slow-motion.html>
- In *Remain* and some of her other work, Afshar mimics the style of Documentary Photography but says that 'I always found the ambiguity of staged images to be closer to reality than (apparently) objective documentary images'. In what way do you think *Remain* is like or unlike documentary film or photography? Why do you think Afshar has made this serious ambiguous rather than have a clear message?

Personal/Cultural Framework

- In *Remain*, what do you think Afshar is communicating about Australia's effect of legislation around borders and asylum seekers on individuals?
- As Afshar is an immigrant to Australia, and having firsthand knowledge of the restrictive political climate in Iran that many in the country are trying to escape, do you think this gives Afshar empathy and knowledge to assist with exploring issues such as exile? Discuss.

Studio Arts Area of Study 3 Units 1 & 3

Influences

- Watch examples of films by Andrei Tarkovsky and Bela Tarr on Youtube.
Discuss the similarities in style, aesthetics and techniques between Tarkovsky, Tarr and Afshar's *Remain* series.
- Afshar is a member of the art collective Eleven, a national collective of Australian Muslim artists, curators and writers Brisbane based Indigenous art collective proppaNOW. Look up the work of some of the artists in both collectives and compare the ideas communicated, styles and techniques.

Materials and Techniques

- Afshar has said of her choice of photography as her main material and technique: 'I was first drawn towards photography, like many others, through the magic of the darkroom—when I saw an image appearing on a paper floating in the chemical liquid tray. Later, I became obsessed with the ability of photography to materialise unseen and hidden realities—the intrusive nature of the camera and the spectacle that it creates. This very intrusiveness became a point of interrogation in my post-migration practice. I became more interested in the relationship between photography and truth—the realities that the camera creates and perpetuates.'⁷ Discuss how, although *Remain* is filmed in colour, Afshar has incorporated the tonal qualities of darkroom photography. How would she have achieved this? Discuss the concept of photographic intrusiveness with reference to the planning and filming of *Remain*.
- Discuss the digital editing tools Afshar may have used to create the effect of selective colour against a monochromatic background in this series.

Communication of Ideas and Meaning

- What do you think Afshar is communicating about life for asylum seekers and refugees and Australia's treatment of them?

Historical/Cultural Contexts

- Afshar started work in Iran as a photojournalist, but after arriving in Australia, she decided to adopt a more subjective rather than objective approach, so that she could express emotion through her film and photography. How is emotion expressed through *Remain*.

- As a contemporary Iranian born artist, how does her experience of being new to a country and knowledge of concepts of exile influence the subject matter and techniques used to create *Remain*?

Elements and Principles of Design/Aesthetic Qualities/Style

- Explain Afshar's choice of a landscape format and the principle of scale.
- What is the aesthetic quality of the use of realistic and cool colour, and the elements of sound and time?
- Afshar's style blurs the line between contemporary documentary film and conceptual photography. Which elements of *Remain* appear documentary and which ones are conceptual?
- Explain how Afshar combines historical traditions of portraiture with contemporary references to raise issues about the history of Australia and its treatment of refugees and asylum seekers.

Worksheet questions

Subject Matter

- Explain what you can see in the subject matter of the male figures and the beach in *Remain*. Is there anything traditional or non-traditional about their depiction?

Communication of Ideas and Meaning

- What do you think Afshar communicating about the subject matter of the beach? Is it always an idyllic environment? How does her depiction of the beach interrogate our idea of the beach as a place for a holiday? Why do you think Afshar chose not to depict the male subjects behind bars or something more literally explaining their detainment?

Materials and Techniques

- Discuss the digital editing tools Afshar may have used to create the division between the male subjects and their backgrounds. Research slow motion filming and discuss how she could have achieved this in *Remain*.

Historical/Cultural Contexts

- As a contemporary Iranian born Australian artist, why do you think Afshar has chosen film, depicting poetry and singing to communicate ideas about Australia's treatment of refugees and asylum seekers?

- Although Afshar is depicting the detained subjects on Manus Island, do you think this relates in any way to her experiences of moving to a new country? How does Afshar communicating ideas about displacement through both her own experiences and those of the subjects in *Remain*?

Elements of Design/Aesthetic Qualities

- Explain Afshar’s choice of a central focal point of the figures. Does this mimic any other photographic or media convention?

- What is the effect of the realistic and cool colour scheme and the use of the elements of sound and time?

- What other aesthetic qualities has Afshar used?

References

- <https://vimeo.com/321028284>
- <https://photoworks.org.uk/4-staged-hoda-afshar/#close-no>
- <https://www.liminalmag.com/interviews/hoda-afshar>
- <https://www.artistprofile.com.au/hoda-afshar>
- <https://www.collecteurs.com/interview/a-conversation-between-hoda-afshar-and-behrouz-boochani>
- <https://witness.worldpressphoto.org/hoda-afshar-and-how-to-see-people-as-individuals-d50146ec92b3>
- <https://www.hodaafshar.com>
- <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/nov/13/from-manus-island-to-sanctions-on-iran-the-art-and-opinions-of-hoda-afshar>
- <https://www.broadsheet.com.au/adelaide/art-and-design/article/time-change> - about her series *Waqt al-tagheer: Time of Change*
- <http://www.fourbythreemagazine.com/issue/time/slow-cinema> - about slow cinema

Footnotes:

- 1 Seabag-Montefiori, Clarissa**
From Manus Island to sanctions on Iran: the art and opinions of Hoda Afshar
The Guardian
2018
- 2 Afshar, Hoda**
#4 Staged - Hoda Afshar
<https://photoworks.org.uk>
2019
- 3 Afshar, Hoda**
Liminal Mag
Interview #86
<https://www.liminalmag.com/interviews/hoda-afshar>
2019
- 4 Said, Edward W**
Reflections on Exile: And Other Literary and Cultural Essays
2000
- 5 Afshar, Hoda,**
Liminal Mag
Interview #86
<https://www.liminalmag.com/interviews/hoda-afshar>
2019
- 6 Afshar, Hoda**
Artist Profile, Issue #45
2018
- 7 Afshar, Hoda,**
Liminal Mag
Interview #86
<https://www.liminalmag.com/interviews/hoda-afshar>
2019