



BROWN

DEPARTMENT OF THE HISTORY
OF ART & ARCHITECTURE

14th August, 2024

Dear committee members,

I write in very strong support of Dr. Hoda Nedaeifar's application for the Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Postdoctoral Fellowship in Iranian Studies at the University of Toronto. Dr. Nedaeifar is a very promising scholar and a significant intellectual force, with a deeply nuanced understanding of photography and its potential as the medium of art history.

Dr. Nedaeifar is a graduate of the PhD program in art history at Indiana University, where she worked under my supervision and in 2022 defended her dissertation, *Iranian Documentary Photography of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) and Its Artistic Legacies: Discursivity, Institutionalization, and Transfer in the Photographic Medium*. That dissertation, which focused primarily on the photography of the Iran-Iraq war and its afterlives, went significantly beyond any other study of the material that I am aware of. In it, Dr. Nedaeifar developed an insightful and nuanced set of arguments for the photographic visual culture of the Iran-Iraq war as a conceptual paradigm that continues to dominate Iran's visual sphere. At present she is developing an impactful series of publications from the dissertation, including two book chapters that are already in press and a journal article currently under review at *Third Text*, one of the foremost journals for scholarly studies in modern and contemporary art.

Dr. Nedaeifar's proposed research project for the period of the fellowship is a monographic study of Iranian women photographers of the 1950s to 1970s and the ways that they expose and subvert expectations about gender roles and female creativity within modern Iran. This book has the potential to make a significant impact not only on the history of photography but also the study of Iranian modernity. It represents a significant development of the work Dr. Nedaeifar conducted for her PhD dissertation, framing a new and important subject while building directly on top of the research she conducted for that earlier project.

For her dissertation Dr. Nedaeifar developed a deeply researched framework that proposed photography in Iran as a praxis that was uniquely institutionalized from its first arrival in the Qajar era. The detailed and lengthy first chapter of her dissertation tracked the *longue durée* of Iranian photography, with precision and detail, through its unique institutional histories. She showed how this engendered a relationship with photography and its discursive and documentary potential that has set the medium's history in Iran somewhat apart from that of other regions. She then demonstrated how these particularities of photography in the Iranian context were redoubled by the medium's outsize role in the Iran-Iraq war. In the proposed book project, she will use the deep historical and archival research of her dissertation, as well as the extensive interviews she conducted with artists and institutional actors, to frame a project that recognizes the matrix of

institutional discourse around photography in Iran while foregrounding the critically important role of women within it.

One of Dr. Nedaeifar's major contributions within the dissertation was the development of new conceptual frameworks for analysis of the photographic images she discussed, and this will be an important aspect of her proposed book project. Within the dissertation, she centralized the notion of a state-sponsored ideal of "hypercorporeality", the over-saturation of image fields with the human body through massing of groups, frame filling, and focus on the physical presence of the (usually youthful) male body in the photography of the war. This hypercorporeality was also, as she showed, invoked in its opposite by contemporary and subsequent photographers who centered human absence, aftermath, and voiding in their works. The conceptual force of this framework was particularly commended by one of her committee members, Hussein Banai, for showing how visual artworks could reveal important historical truths about the trajectory of the war and its reception within Iran more directly than any written source. This speaks to one of her great strengths as a scholar: she has an extremely highly developed ability to analyse the discursive nature of visual media and then present the artwork and its social context back to the reader in newly legible terms. This skill is particularly valuable for the questions of gender, creativity, and anonymity within the photographic medium explored within her book project.

I must add that Dr. Nedaeifar is an exceptionally resilient and resourceful scholar who managed to write an extremely good dissertation in the face of an ever-more difficult environment in the United States for Iranian students. Her work stands by itself and one would never know from reading her dissertation that the circumstances in which she produced her dissertation were so challenging. After arriving in Indiana in the fall of 2015, Dr. Nedaeifar found herself effectively shut into the US once the Trump travel ban came into effect in early 2017. Things were only made worse when the pandemic arrived in early 2020. For parts of her dissertation, the impossibility of travel meant that she employed a number of "proxies" in Tehran to make visits on her behalf to the archives of the Association of Holy Defense Photographers and other important collections, where they scanned and photographed documents and images for her and shared indices and inventories that enabled her to conduct further informed sleuthing in the archives. It says a great deal that she was able to produce a deeply researched and carefully conceived dissertation in such challenging circumstances.

I consider it my great good fortune to have been Dr. Nedaeifar's PhD advisor. She is a genuinely original thinker with a gift for teasing out deep and sometimes surprising layers of social and intellectual meaning from her subjects of study. I think her route to the field of art history—through an undergrad degree in English literature from the University of Tehran—has contributed to her critical thinking, keeping her especially alert to questions of discursivity that come out of her early literary training. To this she adds a rare sensitivity to the implications of medium and framing, making her a formidable art historian. I have no doubt that Dr. Nedaeifar would make excellent use of an Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali fellowship and I urge you to give her her application serious consideration.

Yours sincerely,



Margaret Graves

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