

HAMZIANPOUR & KIA

Mania Akbari

The Night

August 12 - August 26, 2023

Opening reception: Saturday, August 12, 4:00 - 8:00 pm

Hamzianpour and Kia proudly presents ***The Night*** by acclaimed Iranian artist and filmmaker **Mania Akbari**. This marks Akbari's first solo exhibition in the United States. This intensely personal show presents fourteen variously allegorical and documentary photographic images that center on the relationship between trauma, threat, the self, and the body. The works on show exemplify a consistent focus of much of Akbari's creative work and are a powerful, raw, and demotically beautiful manifestation of art as a reflective and protean space in which the self can shape and express itself in the face of adversity and change.

Profound struggle has shaped much of Akbari's life and experience. Alongside many Iranian creatives, Akbari is a political exile who was viciously targeted by Iran's punitive theocratic regime. She is a survivor of multiple cancers, has undergone a double mastectomy, reconstructive breast surgery, multiple rounds of IVF and endured difficult personal and emotional issues common to the human experience. Akbari has made her experiences of trauma central to much of her work, sharing without fear or shame deeply personal physical and emotional intimacies with her audience. In doing so, she transcends the narrative experience of the sufferer, becoming both artist and witness.

The main body of work was directly inspired by the discovery of two of the earliest known depictions of breast cancer, the **16th Century paintings *The Night*, by Michele di Rodolfo del Ghirlandaio, and *The Allegory of Fortitude*, by Maso da San Friano**. Akbari's response to these paintings comprises ten allegorically styled and dramatically staged photographs featuring herself as the central protagonist. Shot in the home that she shares with her partner and artistic collaborator Douglas White and their young son, the images delicately dance the line between the casual and the formal. The setting is everyday; a home, a couch, a kitchen, a child, however the compositions, in which Akbari's pose is typically the key element, are unexpectedly and captivantly formal. In this compositional formality, the works recall the Renaissance paintings that informed them.

In the images she is variously posed with her son, found pieces of wood, raw meat, flowers, and an oversized toy dinosaur, which features as both a harmless toy and a symbol of threat. The domesticity of the setting, contrasted with the theatrical poses, imbues the series with knowing and gentle bathos. In contrast to earlier works, Akbari's nude body is apparently 'whole', the breasts reconstructed and decorated with an extensive floral tattoo. Combined with her seemingly calm, quietly confident demeanor, this gives the series a powerful sense of resilience and fortitude. Akbari, as a protagonist, has weathered the storms that have come and is in her space with her family, awaiting whatever the future might bring.

A series of four images from Akbari's pregnancy complete the show. At first glance, these seem a simple record of the body of a pregnant woman, the ultimate image of fertility and natural fecundity. In reality, however, they depict a body and natural process radically altered by disease. The breasts are reconstructed, the left nipple a tattoo, and the pregnancy is facilitated by reproductive technology. Accordingly, these images become a depiction of the will of the subject to regain her body and agency in response to forces that wish to remove them.

By Nick Hackworth

Mania Akbari (b. Tehran, 1974) is an internationally acclaimed intersectional feminist artist and filmmaker who gained early recognition in the Iranian underground art scene, seeking freedom beyond censorship. During the digital cinema revolution in Iran, she transitioned from a painting career to the camera as a mode of storytelling. Akbari delves into the webs of body politics by documenting personal narratives through the female gaze as a form of empowerment, encouraging critical reflection on bodily oppression and suffering. Concerned with the socio-political traumatization of female-identifying bodies, Akbari transforms lived experience into an act of resistance by uncovering hidden historical and cultural memory and examines the transgenerational transmission of trauma. Weaving through the relationship between the camera and the body, Akbari identifies the body as a metaphor, as a political message with a revolutionary capacity against the patriarchal status quo. Led by a therapeutic approach, Akbari's practice is often collaborative and participatory.

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