



The Indefatigable Rose Issa

Words Yasmine Mohseni



One of the world's major curators for art from the Middle East, Iran, and North Africa, Rose Issa proves that the last 25 years of her career in the arts is just the beginning

London-based curator Rose Issa has just opened an exhibition by British-Iranian photographer Mitra Tabrizian at Tate Britain, is curating four consecutive shows at London's Leighton House (each one accompanied by a catalogue written by her), is putting the finishing touches on a book of Iranian photography set to be published in September, and is preparing an exhibition of contemporary Arab art at the

European Parliament in Brussels for their "Arab Week" in November 2008. And those are just the projects she's ready to talk about right now.

A woman in her fifties with a shock of wavy white hair and bright green spirited eyes, she has the energy of someone thirty years her junior. For the past twenty-five years, Rose has been a promoter/fairy godmother to contemporary Arab and Iranian artists. Through exhibitions and publications, she is raising international awareness of Middle Eastern artists and creating scholarship for a region whose contemporary cultural achievements have been ignored by western mainstream media in favour of sensationalist political headlines. It is thanks to Rose that young Iranian artist Shadi Ghadirian's Untitled (Qajar series) photographs were acquired by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). LACMA is now the only museum in the United States to have Ghadirian's entire 33-part photo series in their permanent collection.

We meet at Rose's office on Kensington High Street on the eve of her first Leighton House opening, an exhibition by Iranian artist Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian. On the walls hang works by Palestinian artist Raeda Saadeh and Egypt's Chant Avedissian. Her desk is littered with photos from her new book along with invitations to the different shows she's curated. She apologises as her mobile rings and people knock at the door. In between interruptions,

we spend an hour traveling in time to her formative years in the Middle East and Europe. This is a woman who has lived a fascinating life and has already done more than most hope to in an entire lifetime.

Born in Tehran to an Iranian mother and Lebanese father, Rose lived equal parts in Tehran and Beirut. At 13, she studied math at the boys' Lycée Français in Beirut because "sciences is the boys' domain. There were about four girls and 30 boys," she explains. "If you wanted to study literature you went to the Lycée Français for girls." She went on to study math at the American University in Beirut and, quite by chance, was recruited by the director of the Iranian Radio Television in Beirut in the summer of 1973. In October 1973, the Arab-Israeli War erupted. For three years, she travelled all over the region covering Middle Eastern affairs for the Iranian Radio Television. It was at that time that she learned the cultural nuances of the different Arab countries, a knowledge that is infinitely useful to her today as she works with artists from all over the region.

In the late 1970s, she left for Paris to get an MA in Islamic culture at the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales. She says she thought to herself, "If I'm doing all these cultural things, I also want to know it academically." Her developing interest in culture took shape in 1982 when Israel invaded Lebanon. Rose was in Paris when the bombs started dropping on Beirut, and feeling frustrated and helpless, she found an outlet through which to channel this energy. She recruited all of her Middle Eastern film director friends and raised funds from different Arab embassies to start a two-month Arab film festival focused on the theme of occupied lands. "I did it because nobody else was doing it, not because I knew more. At that moment I realised there's a need for people who can promote the cultural side of the Arab world." She has since dedicated her life to promoting contemporary Middle Eastern art.

Rose hopes to slow down at some point and encourages younger generations to take over. But watching her in action at the opening of Farmanfarmaian's exhibition as she juggles taking photos, graciously greeting friends and acquaintances, enthusiastically thanking strangers for coming, and tending to the artist and her family, you get the impression that, even if she had a slew of twenty-year-