

Majid Afshar

Interview with Hans Georg Berger

The Hauzas of Iran are the focal point of an exceptional art project of German photographer Hans Georg Berger. His work on teaching and learning in theological schools and universities of Iran has been shown in Germany in October 2005 and is scheduled to soon come to Iran, for an exhibition in Qom. Majid Afshar talked with photographer Hans Georg Berger, who is also a writer and docent on photography at the Academy of Fine Art in Bangkok (Thailand), about his work in Iran and his ideas on photography.

Professor Berger, thank you for giving us your time. You have been working for several years in the Hauzas of Iran – you took photographs, and met students and teachers of these institutions. You are probably the first western artist who has concentrated on this very special part of Iran, on young Shi'ite clergy, and on life in the Hauzas. What is your interest in the Hauzas?

When I visited the first Iranian Hauza in 1996, I was struck by two things: one was the extraordinary concentration and the organization of learning, that is so very different from our system in the West; the other was the readiness of some young clergymen to talk to me. They asked interesting and surprising questions, and there was a feeling of a very natural and generous hospitality. My first Hauza was the Madrassa ya-Chahar Baq in Isfahan, so I also happened to start my work at a place where a breathtakingly beautiful, great idea of Islamic architecture comes together with a very efficient way of organizing space in order to make learning possible. This Hauza in Isfahan looked to me like a perfect place for study and concentration. I loved the quietness, the carefully planned presence of trees and water, the rhythm of space – I was impressed by the very intimate, bare rooms where the students were living, and the magnificently decorated, vast rooms reserved for prayer and teaching. I immediately had a feeling that it would be highly interesting, for me as a westerner and as a photographer, to learn more about the people who lived and worked in such a place. From my side it was more than curiosity – I imagined becoming, for some time, part of the teaching and learning in certain Hauzas, as I have done before in other projects dealing with cultures that are not mine. My work with a camera is a tool to achieve this.

Did you really plan this right from the start? Even to us it does not look easy to introduce photography, an art project, and a western artist into a religious school...

At the start, I had doubts that this would be possible, but my experience proved that we could communicate, start a process of discussion, and produce a very special art work together. We did something that now stands firmly for itself, we made a statement that can be looked at, that can be discussed and considered by others.

What are your previous experiences in art, before you worked on the Hauzas in Iran?

I am an artist who is interested in religious and social questions, also in anthropology and ethnology. My art work deals with the question "How can we relate to the Other?" We live in a complicated world that has different concepts and beliefs. It is important that we know about each other. We must learn about each other. This is why my art work is directed towards the study of religions that are not mine. Before working in Iran, and Shi'ism, I worked on different aspects of Theravada Buddhism in South East Asia, and on Taoism in China and Vietnam.

There are many Quranic schools (Hauzas) all over the world. Why did you choose Iran? Were there special artistic attractions in Iran?

There are several reasons why I started my work on Islam in your country. First of all, Shi'ism is very little known in the West today. Iran is the world centre for Shi'ism, though Shi'ism exists also in many other countries. I thought it would be more interesting to Western people to learn about Shi'ite schools than to learn about Sunni schools. The general public in the West unfortunately does not know much about Islam, but it does hear more about the Sunnis than the Shi'ites. There is also the fact that, from outside, it seems more difficult to work in a Hauza in Iran than in, let's say Egypt, or Indonesia. I like to try where it seems more difficult; I also wanted to see if the common western idea about religious schools in Iran being completely closed to the outside world was a prejudice – and I found out that indeed it was! Another important reason is that there is an uninterrupted tradition to study the thinkers of the Christian West in the Hauzas of Shi'ism. Shi'ite clergy study Western thought, up to our

contemporary thinkers. Shi'ite studies of western thought have been going on for centuries, and that makes dialogue maybe more meaningful with the Shi'ite world. I had this idea right from the beginning and I think my work, the way it functioned, the way we managed to understand each other, is another proof for this. In the course of the project I learned about Shi'ite theology and tradition, but it has been also fascinating for me to listen to the ideas of Shi'ite theologians on Thomas Aquinas, or great Christian mystics like Meister Eckhart or Thomas a Kempis – not to speak of their dealing with Western philosophy, from Kant and Hegel to Wittgenstein and Habermas.

The architectural beauty of some of the schools I have been working in has been helpful too, but I also worked in very simple or modern schools. And then there was the very special ways of hospitality that you have in your culture, the unique Persian way of receiving and taking care of a guest which made me come back again and again, with the greatest pleasure.

Tell us about the first shot!

Well – I must tell you that I do not like this idea of "shooting" a photograph, and my work as a photographer is in fact completely opposed to this idea! I tell my students that "shooting" a photograph should be avoided! This idea implies that you surprise somebody, like a hunter surprises a deer, and above all it implies that you take something that is not freely given! Of course I know that this is the usual way to take photographs, especially by tourists; but I think this does not lead very far, and in my opinion it is a very un-reflected, often sad use of photography... It excludes the Other, you could say it only pretends to be interested in him. In fact, it means a true limitation of the possibilities that lie in the photographic process. Photography in my concept is part of a process of communication and learning. This is what fascinates me in photography. I use photography as a tool to discuss certain situations more deeply, to get acquainted with people, or to be understood by a precise social group that accepts me as a newcomer/outsider. The camera forces me to concentrate on what can be seen in its frame, and photographic images I produce give me and the people I am working with a rather solid base from which to start a discussion of contents, meaning, judgements and, finally, truth. It makes us discuss the different ideas on truth we may have.

But you must have done one very first image?

Yes, of course I did - I apologize for not having been to the point of your question. Of course there was one first photograph. And I can tell a story about it. I took the first photograph in Isfahan, after a discussion with a group of young clergymen in the courtyard of their school. Out of one of the Iwans of the Madrassa, a very old mullah and a very young mullah sitting next to each other had followed our discussion from a distance. They were perfectly calm and sat there like quiet statues. I thought, in their quietness and serenity, they gave a wonderful image representing teaching, representing age and youth. I asked them if I could do the photograph, they accepted. You see in the photograph their serenity - but you also feel a certain tension that had been introduced by me, by my presence, and which they accepted. You can imagine the sound of the fountain and the voices of the birds in the garden that lies in front of the two. It is not in the picture. But it is there in the viewer's imagination! It is there as there is also the path of teaching and learning that they took together.

There are also aesthetic and artistic aspects of the photograph, like the holding of their hands, so different between the two figures, and the play of black and white between their beards and their turbans – but what I said first is more important to me: the photograph shows a process of communication. It transcends time, it is a message. This is an image about ideas - not only a visual document of a precise situation that is limited in time. Isn't that fascinating? This is the strength of art, and it is an example of the strength of photography.

When you started your work in Iran, did you know what to expect? Have there been surprises? Did you have prejudices towards the religious schools?

My work has been full of surprises, and doing this interview with you, a young Iranian whom I met in an institution of religious studies at Qom, is yet another surprise. My knowledge of Iran, of the Hauzas, of Shi'ism and of Islam is very limited. I am not an expert. I am a person who wants to learn, who wants to be part of a process of intellectual and spiritual exchange. I have no difficulty to say that I am in the position of an apprentice – to whom the most obvious things must be explained in detail, step by step. The photographic process is a process of visual learning and discovery; any good photographer must be always ready to be taught new things through his eyes and through the lens of his camera. I try to make these two attitudes meet in my projects.

What kind of surprise did you experience?

Of course I had been hoping to be surprised from the beginning! The biggest surprise was how deep and serious my discussions with most of the students were – sometimes right from the start. I discovered a world of high concentration, learnedness, serious study, of sincere humbleness, and a serious desire to exchange ideas. I discovered a world that had many different facets, where different opinions reigned. There is such diversity in the religious schools in your country! I realized that I knew nothing of this, as most people in the West know nothing of this. But I also realized that most of the teachers and students in the Hauzas never had met people like me before. They rarely have a chance to meet a person from the West other than an occasional tourist. I certainly was the very first Western artist who came to learn from them, who wanted to build a project with them.

And what about prejudices?

If you don't know a situation by own experience, it is likely that you have prejudices. I certainly had my prejudices when I started my work in the Hauzas. When your experience is limited, you take prejudices as answers to your questions. My experience on the Hauzas was nil. I did not know, for example, how seriously some of the students were studying modern western thinkers. I did not know that there were Hauzas with a very international crowd of students, coming from very different countries, all of them Shi'ites. I met Shi'ite students and clergy from Nigeria, from Pakistan, from Tadjikistan, from India, from the Gulf states. I did not know before that there are highly qualified Hauzas reserved for women, like Jamiat al-Zahra in Qom, where I had the privilege and pleasure to work at one point. I certainly had misconceptions as well. And certainly, some students and some teachers had prejudices towards me as well...

We managed to deal with them, to put them aside, and eventually we got over them. We managed to meet with respect and intellectual interest. This is maybe one of the great achievements of my project.

You are a prominent photographer, your work has been shown internationally in many shows, your photographs are published in Europe, in America and in Asia. Has it been difficult for you to work in Laos? Were there obstacles? Did you encounter similar obstacles in Iran?

My work in Laos has been going on for almost 10 years now. Laos, and particularly the former royal city of Luang Prabang, has become part of my life. When I started working there, the government had just decided to permit foreigners to enter this town which had been practically closed to the outside world since the end of the Vietnam war. I was interested in the religious life of the city, in the life of the monks in several dozens of monasteries. I turned to them to explain my desire to understand and learn, and I have been received in these Buddhist monasteries with generosity, friendliness and intelligence. I explained that my art projects take time and that it is necessary to develop trust, respect and understanding in order to make them work. We did a huge, beautiful work on Sacred Ceremonies of Laos, and, more recently, a rather different, much more intimate work on Meditation traditions of Laos. The situation was pretty much the same in Iran – I started something quite new which seemed impossible at the beginning – most of the "experts" were sceptical that it could be done - but in both cases the participant's desire for exchange and communication, and my readiness to listen and learn, came together in a positive way. Of course there were obstacles and difficulties – in Laos and in Iran. We managed to get over that, to get around these obstacles. Language is a problem in such a project, though not as big as one might think. I had to learn about certain cultural mechanisms, in order not to offend my partners– that was more difficult than language. Sometimes there was the problem that someone did not want to communicate, or wasn't interested at all in listening to my questions. This may happen anywhere – we all can be afraid of the outsider, and stick to our fears rather than open up. Sometimes you cannot go against this, sometimes you do not manage to build trust. If this happens, it is a sad moment. I usually withdraw in such situations. I do not insist, I do not impose my presence.

Religion is a fragile and complicated subject to work on. Why do you risk relating your art to religion? Isn't that a very unusual thing to do for a Western artist?

You are putting forward a very important question!

I can give you a personal answer first, followed by a quite political answer. The personal answer is that I have always been interested in religion (my university studies were on History of Religions), and that I follow a personal quest to know more about religion. I personally find it necessary to learn by experience, not only by books. My art projects are steps on this long path. In a way, they are religious practise – I very well know that not everybody will follow this idea, but I think it is true for me and for my life. So far, I have done some of these steps, but I cannot see the end of the path yet.

From a more general point of view, I cannot see how we can live next to each other and how we can understand the world if we do not see that our religious beliefs are important, that they are indeed different. We must develop a capacity to relate to these religious differences. We must find a way to peacefully accept our differences – also the differences of religion. We all sense the danger that comes from the actual state of world politics. Nobody can ignore that there is a dangerous situation today. As an artist, I believe in the strength of dialogue, communication, and images, as long as they are used in a good way – so I try to do my best, the little part I can contribute, as far as I can, to make communication more serious, more profound and helpful in the attempt to avoid misunderstanding and conflict. This is why I try to work with people who have a culture and religion which is different from mine. This is why my art projects deal with religion.

While working in Iran, you encountered a large number of clergymen. How did you deal with them? We have seen you work here in Iran, your approach was very subtle, quiet and respectful. We could see that very often you enjoyed being with them.

Of course I was happy to be with them! I have been treated with great kindness, by people whom I found highly interesting! I managed to build an art project with them. A friendly and respectful way of being with each other set in at a very early point of my work. I see that you can imagine a westerner coming inside a Hauza and acting with arrogance and superiority. I can imagine that too, and I would not only feel ashamed for him, but I would also think that such an attitude is stupid and unacceptable – since it does not lead to understanding.

In the Hauzas of Qom, Mashhad and Isfahan, I have been treated with great friendliness and intelligent curiosity by most of the students and teachers. While it was impossible for me to give back their hospitality, I enjoyed sharing their friendliness and understanding – too often not good enough, I am afraid. They have really been very, very good to me.

Did you ever stay with the clergy or the students in a Hauza?

Yes I did, after some time I was invited to stay in several places. You see, it is for several years that I have been coming to Iran, so with some teachers and students we became real friends. I spent long days in the Hauzas. It is in the evening and in the very early morning that you understand the importance of silence there. Silence in the West is something that is missing as a value, it certainly does not exist in most Western places of learning. I have unforgettable memories of the simplicity of life, the humbleness of the young clergy in the Hauzas.

We know you have recently exhibited your work on the Hauzas in the city of Trier, Germany. How did people in Germany react to the photographs?

It is hard to imagine anything that is more unknown, surprising and unexpected to a Western art public than a series of photographs of Shi'ite scholars and clergy, taken today, as part of a contemporary art project. Most people in the West would think that I risked my life working in the Hauzas (obviously, I did not), and that it would be completely impossible to work together peacefully, on a high level of understanding, not to speak from really enjoying it! This all comes from a huge bulk of misconceptions that unfortunately stand between our cultures, and which I am afraid are constantly growing. Showing my photographs in Trier (at the Catholic Academy) and hopefully in other places in the West in the near future, gives a different vision of Iran, of the life of Shi'ite clergy, from what people would expect. The exhibition comes as a surprise. It goes against these misconceptions and is an occasion to reflect. One always hopes that thinking and reflecting may change people's ideas to the better...It is obvious that it is not enough to hang my photographs on a museum wall in the West, and leave visitors alone with their questions. In Trier there were two conferences that accompanied the exhibition, and a small catalogue with several learned texts was produced, one of them by Saeid Edalatnejad, an Iranian clergy and theologian. The book and the conferences were an occasion to learn about Islam, Shi'ism, and to understand the system of teaching in the Hauzas of Iran. I am also giving public lectures, where I project my photographs, in Germany, Italy and Switzerland. One of my conferences has been organized by the Embassy of Iran in Berlin. This embassy has been very helpful in the preparation of my work, as the Embassy of Germany in Tehran has helped me to work in Iran. I am very grateful for this support by our two governments.

Will your work be shown in Iran?

I hope so! I would be very happy to show it in Iran. There is a plan to bring it to the three cities where I have been working – Qom, Isfahan and Mashhad.

Showing my work is part of the work process. Most of the people I photographed have already seen their portrait, and have had an occasion to give comments on the body of work. I very much need this feedback which sometimes makes me change ideas about what to do, and about single photographs. Sometimes I redo photographs when I realize their meaning is not clear, or not correct. But showing the photographs in a work-in-progress is of course different from showing them in an exhibition. I would be very happy if we could do that. It would also be great to find an Iranian publisher interested in a small book of these photographs.

What is your best memory from the Hauzas in Iran?

The discussions with certain students, when we managed to speak openly, with great seriousness, about essential theological questions, and about different visions of the world.

You have been working in Iran from the year 2000 to 2005. Do you consider your project finished? If so, will you nevertheless come back to Iran?

My projects never really come to an end... They are so strongly linked to people I meet and to friends I find. This has been the case in Iran in a very particular way. I know I have good friends now in Qom, Isfahan and Mashhad, also in Tehran. We are in touch and I miss them. I am longing to go back to the Hauzas, continue working there. I think we have something to say that is interesting to other people. And I have an idea about a project dealing with Islamic architecture in Persia – this I would like to continue. I do hope it will be possible.

What would you say as the last word?

I would like to thank you for your questions! Thank you kindly for your idea to do this interview. Persia and its culture is like a wonderful, ripe pomegranate: if you have tasted it once, you can never forget its mixture of sweetness and bitterness, a taste truly unique in the world!

(2006)

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