

*Luscious*, a piece from Iran Issa-Khan's new self-titled photography book (INSET)



IRAN  
ISSA  
KHAN

PHOTOGRAPHS  
FOREWORD BY CATHY LEFF

## sight lines

FOR MORE THAN 30 YEARS, PHOTOGRAPHER IRAN ISSA-KHAN HAS HAD A KNACK FOR INTIMATELY CAPTURING THE WORLD'S ELITE ON FILM. IN HER NEW BOOK, SHE FOCUSES HER EYE ON THE GRANDEUR OF THINGS UNSEEN. BY CATHY LEFF

Standing more than six feet tall in heels and designer suits, the photographer Iran Issa-Khan cuts a distinct figure about town. And if there's a gathering of interesting thinkers from around the globe, she's probably there, which is why she has been an esteemed contributor to *Ocean Drive* for more than a decade, bringing the who's who and where to our pages each month in her column, "Social Studies." The world she's captured in her 30-plus-year career is a rarefied one of supermodels such as Paulina Porizkova and royalty including Prince Egon von Furstenberg. Her work has graced the covers of magazines from *Harper's Bazaar* and *Vogue* to *Elle* and *W*. In a word, "fabulous."

In recent years, though, Issa-Khan has turned her eye to the minutiae of nature, a subject not as obviously stunning, but—she would argue—just as beautiful. By playing with tight close-ups, unusual angles, and large formats, Issa-Khan forces the viewer to recognize the grand scale of the natural world, and possibly the scale of the self.

Some 25 of these photos were recently purchased by Miami International

Airport for its Art in Public Places program. Top art collectors such as Zaha Hadid, Prince Dimitri of Yugoslavia, Emilio and Gloria Estefan, and Paloma Picasso also own her work.

Here, Cathy Leff, her longtime friend and director of The Wolfsonian-FIU museum, sits down with Issa-Khan to discuss her latest book, *Iran Issa-Khan* (Whitehaus Media Group; \$150), and explore the evolution of her vision.

**CATHY LEFF: You were born in Tehran, and knowing you for about 30 years now, your Persian identity has always been a very big part of your life.**

**IRANISSA-KHAN:** I was born in Tehran, and I'm very Middle Eastern, but I was brought up in Europe and the United States and lived in so many different worlds. So I've always chosen the best parts of what I saw. I've always picked the most fabulous and beautiful parts of everything and made them my own. But anybody who has been to Iran has always said that they've never, ever,

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CLOCKWISE FROM  
TOP LEFT: *Purity*;  
*Soixante-Neuf*;  
*Yucca Ying*;  
*Forbidden Love*



*“When you see the details, you see the heart, you see the soul in the object.”*

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anywhere in the world seen such generosity of spirit, even from the poorest person. There would always be an extra plate at the dinner table. And there was always a feeling of living in the past and the present and the future all at once. I think that’s how I see the world.

**With your early portraiture, the idea was to make people look beautiful. You wanted to reveal the inner beauty. Do you think that’s part of the generosity of your culture?**

I think so. Also it has to do with how old we are as a nation. We’re talking about thousands of years living in this unbelievable part of the world where poetry and real life are mixed, and you have a new, modern way of putting it together. When you have all of this around you, no matter who you look at, you look at the inside of what makes that person. Even the ugliest person is going to become beautiful unless they’re horrible to begin with. But usually I don’t know those kinds of people. I only know fabulous people.

**Why did you transition from this glamorous world of portraiture to the work seen in this book?**

[Wolfsonian-FIU founder] Micky Wolfson is a part of how I eventually really got into showing my nature photography. I met the artist Michele Oka Doner

at a party in Miami given by socialite George Campbell in 1999. I had stopped shooting fashion, and she saw me and said to me, “I understand you’re a very famous photographer. Why did you give it up?” I said, “My makeup artist died of AIDS, and I just couldn’t shoot beauty anymore. It was just getting to be too much.” Then I moved to Miami and I looked at life differently. She said, “Have you shot any nature?” I said no. But I did seven black-and-whites for her and shot the cover for her book, *Natural Seduction*. Then Micky’s cousin, Michael Wolfson—a famous architect/designer who was living in London—saw them and gave me a show in London in 2001. Because of that, I made the cover of *The Independent Magazine*, *Sunday Review*, which launched my career.

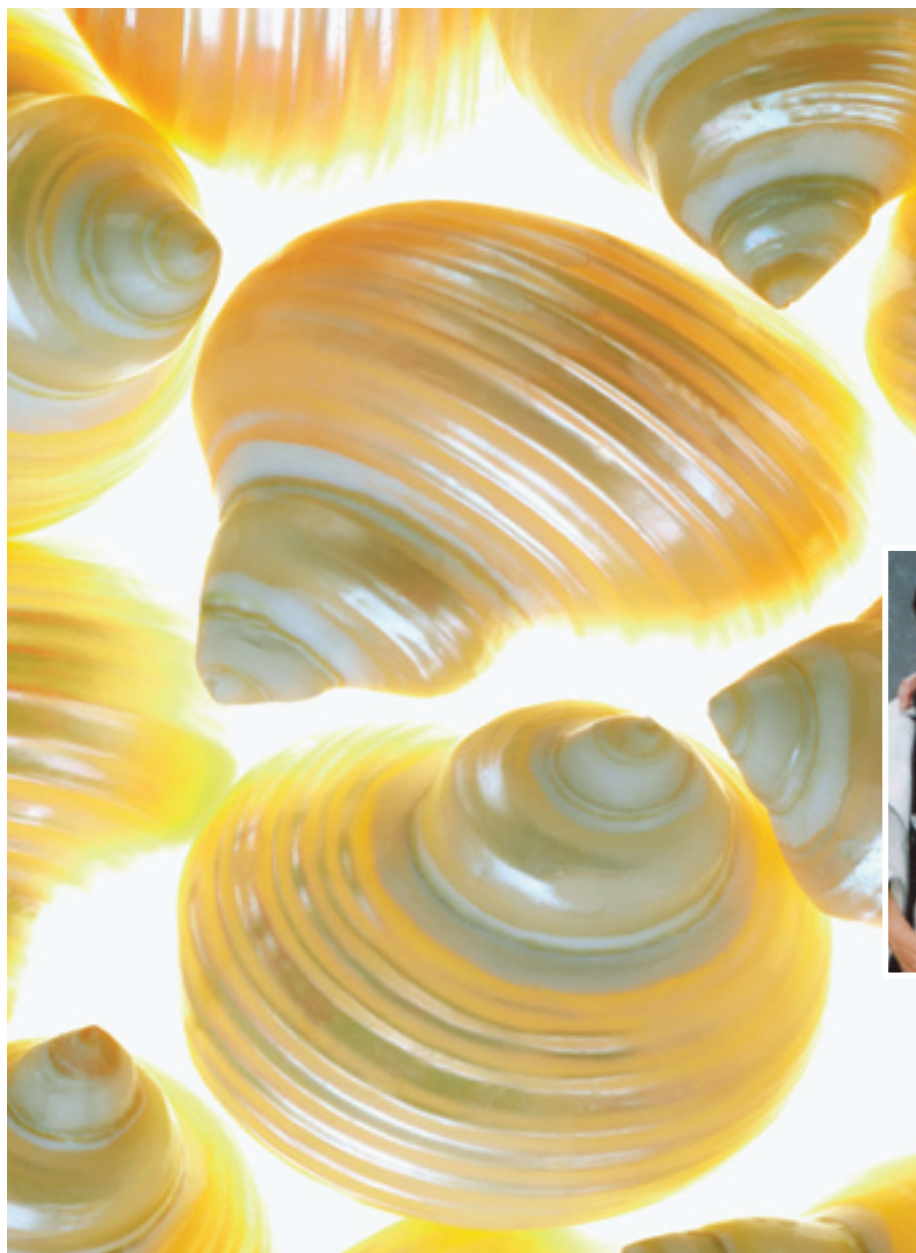
**How do you think the nature work connects back to the portraits?**

There’s a purity to nature that I really love, because the other [portraiture] was a little more fake. You know you have to do makeup, you have to get dressed up, you have to do the whole number. But what comes from the earth, nobody can change it and it’s perfect. That’s why I blow them up so big, because I want people to respect what we’re taking for granted.

**Looking at your portraits of sea life and plant life, you’ve taken these tiny little photos and scaled them so they look huge.**

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## FROM ONE ARTIST TO ANOTHER

Celebrated architect Zaha Hadid on dear friend Iran Issa-Khan's work

Iran's provocative and sensual photographs evoke a degree of strangeness from within the complexities of the most recognizable organic structures. [Her] seemingly effortless manipulation of nature's most intensive elements serves to magnify our appreciation of each subject.

These immaculate, detailed images do not merely document a singular moment in the life of

a growing organism. Each is structured in a composition that invites further investigation. Deeper observation reveals formal complexity, repetition, color, and texture flowing from the images.

Iran's motifs of choice—flowers, shells, and corals—are among my own inspirational sources of artistic creation. The formal arrangements provide a timeless reference...

evoking a rich and varied architectural language with the inherent capacity for complex spatial programming.

The passion is embedded within the intricacies of every organism Iran photographs. Her work simultaneously captures and liberates, offering us the endless possibilities of evolution and discovery.

—Excerpted from the foreword of Iran Issa-Khan



Zaha Hadid  
and Iran  
Issa-Khan

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I've always played with scale. I miniaturize people because they're always so big in their own heads. So then you bring them down to a little size and you see the real character there. And then with plants and seashells and anything that comes from the earth, they are magnificent but they're small. Nobody even looks at them, but when you blow them up, you start seeing everything there.

**You're very Wolfsonian in that you follow your own ideology.**

Very. Why do you think I love The Wolfsonian? This is why I got involved with it from the beginning when I met Micky.

**We're really interested in context. Our collection is comprised of ordinary objects, but by putting them in the museum, we've elevated their importance. By you picking up these objects from the ocean or the land that nobody else notices, you're looking for the inner message of the object.**

That's something I learned from Michele Oka Doner, who is my mentor and who really started me. I've learned to respect nature. I've learned to love what

comes out of the earth. I've learned to respect humanity. Even though it can be horrible at times, there is still that side of a person that melts when they see a flower or a shell that's really beautiful. Those are the things that she's taught me. I think when people see my nature photography, they think, "How is it that I've never seen this before? It's so strange." But when you see the details, you see the heart, you see the soul in the object. It's amazing. I'm so in love with my work that I hate to sell it. That's my biggest problem. I love my work.

**Is there any other subject matter now that you think about that you might want to explore?**

I still haven't finished. Now I'm shooting fruits and plants and succulents, and I'm shooting different things that are a part of nature. Not just seashells and flowers, but going into deeper things. So once I go through that and I feel satisfied that I give it all the respect it deserves, then I'll go on to something else.

Iran Issa-Khan is available for preorder at [iranissakhan.com](http://iranissakhan.com). **OD**