

The Sunday Review



THE INDEPENDENT ON SUNDAY

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Passion flower

The photographs
of Iran Issa-Khan

Plus

Blake Morrison

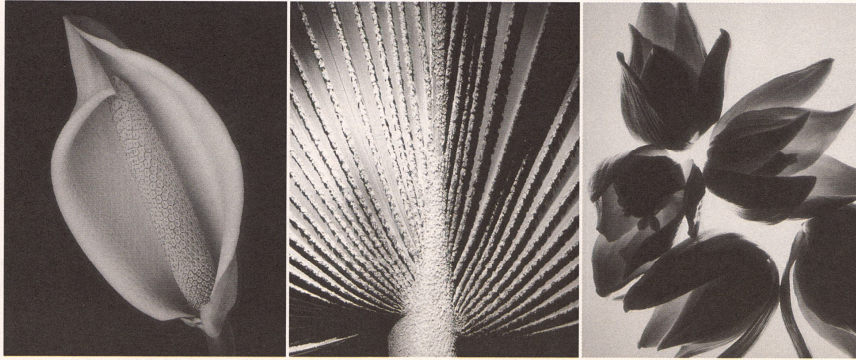
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IN FULL BLOOM

From the Shah's Tehran to society Miami, the artist Iran Issa-Khan has lead a colourful life. Now, with her black and white portraits of plants, her name is moving from the gossip columns to the art pages

WORDS BY ROSE GEORGE & PORTRAIT BY JILLIAN EDELSTEIN

Fabulous!" is the first word I hear on entering a west London gallery in search of Iran Issa-Khan. There she is, embracing the photographer who has come to take her portrait, declaring her adorable, marvellous, unbelievably good. An hour or so of interview later and her passion hasn't diminished a jot, only now I'm the fabulous one, and she takes my snapshot under one of her striking black and white photographs of plants, the subject of the gallery exhibit. Iran Issa-Khan, photographer of plants, socialite, exile, is not someone you forget in a hurry.

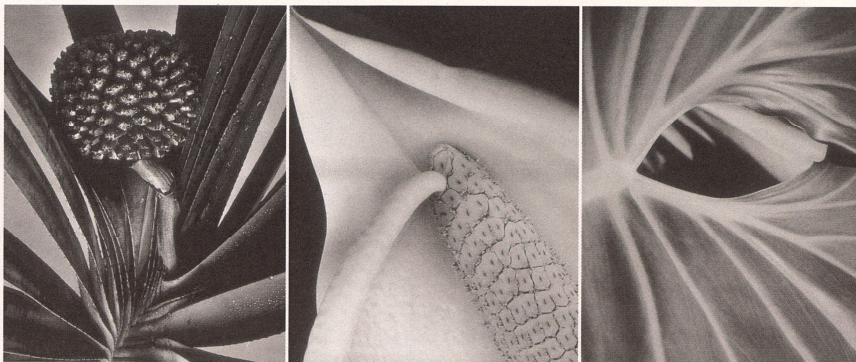
"I am very Persian," says Iran (her real name – "it's Irene in French"), though she fled her native

city of Tehran in 1977, just before the revolution. "We are very passionate people – I think it's because we come from a very old world. Thousands of years of culture! I sometimes think we were born old." There is nothing old about her, except her refusal to reveal her age, but she does seem typically Persian – crackling with tactile energy, leaning over to touch me to make a point, a woman of strength and warmth. "My ambition is to be nice to as many people as possible before I die," she says, a cue to her legendary socialite status in her adopted home towns of Miami and New York. In January, Miami's *Ocean Drive* magazine ran a huge headline: "Who is

Iran Issa-Khan, and why do flashbulbs pop whenever she enters a room?"

"Oh," she says now, "can we drop the socialite thing? I mean, I do like to party, I love to go out. But now I want to get back to work." The *Ocean Drive* people can be forgiven their puzzlement, Issa-Khan had a high-profile career as a high-fashion photographer, leading Paloma Picasso's ad campaigns, consorting with the famous, but these black and white nature pictures are her first photographs in 10 years.

Issa-Khan began shooting in 1978, when a friend told her bluntly, "Now you have no country, you'd better get a job." Coming from a ▶







hotel displayed it on its walls in 1999. "She just gets better and better."

Some may wonder at the progression from models to *Monstera deliciosa*, but to Issa-Khan, it makes perfect sense. "Natural beauty is what stands the test of time. And if you catch it, it's there forever. I always photograph character – that's why I do close-ups. You can't hide." She picks up a photo of the back view of the *Monstera deliciosa*. "Look at that. It's so beautiful. But doesn't it look exactly like a woman in a *chador*?"

This image is one of the few things that makes Issa-Khan stop in her tracks. She has never returned to Iran, and cannot go back, even now. "Many of my relatives were killed, because they were in government, because they were wealthy." So she watches from afar, aghast at the veiling of women who used to be the most free in the Middle East. "Persian women had all the rights. Everything! And Iran was as perfect as possible. We had mountains, the ocean, the greatest poets."

There are no plans to exhibit in Iran, despite a new open-minded director at Tehran's Museum of Modern Art, and she has never wanted to be known as a specifically Iranian artist. "If Iran opens up, I would be first on the plane." But until then there is other work to be done. "Photographers don't mean anything until they die. You always want the perfect picture; you never get it. None of these pictures have come close to what I'm capable of."

She hands me a book of Blossfeldt's work – to keep, "so you know where I'm going". Even though she will start photographing people again, the miraculous pitilessness of plants will continue to loom large in her lens. "Don't write about my party life. Talk about my work." She gestures at the walls. "This is my beginning."

Iran Issa-Khan's work is part of 'Natural Form', which runs until 11 August at Mission, 45 Hereford Road, London W2, tel: 020 7792 4633

wealthy Persian family (she went to school with the Empress Farah), she had great connections, so the friend suggested photography. "I got behind the camera and I was hooked," she says. She had private tuition for a year, with renowned photographer William Minor, she got her first *Harper's Bazaar* cover and never looked back. Paulina Porizkova, Farrah Fawcett, Nancy Reagan, Paloma Picasso; *Vogue*, *Elle*, *W* – the Issa-Khan lens oozed 1980s glamour, and helped set the visual tone for the decade.

She shot Nancy Reagan with a chandelier seemingly coming out of her head "like a crown" in an empty ballroom in the White House. "I wanted her somewhere that showed that she was temporary, but somewhere with the grandeur she loved." Nancy's legendary toughness was no barrier to Persian passion. "I said, 'I'm Aquarius, and so is your husband, and you know we're crazy people.' She laughed, and she stood up on a chair for the chandelier shot, though the Secret Service men were going mad." Typically, after shooting Paloma Picasso – in leathers, in 90-degree heat – they are now best friends, and there's a bouquet from Paloma in the corner of the gallery.

But in the early 1990s, her make-up artist and closest friend Guillermo Herrera died of Aids. "He had been part of my eyes. When he passed away, I stopped shooting. I have to feel things when I shoot, and my feelings were dead." The next 10 years were spent travelling between houses in New York and Miami with her Irish businessman husband, and her many friends.

Then in 1999, the artist Michele Oka Doner asked her to take pictures of plants to help plan some sculptures. Issa-Khan got hooked again, only this time with nature. "My feelings came back. Plants are so beautiful, so graphic, so sensual." Mostly, she shoots with available light, no flash, and absolutely no Photoshop. "I hate

computers! I don't have a cellphone, I don't have a computer. The world has become too mechanical." Ironic then, that her idol is the great German plant photographer Karl Blossfeldt, whose 100-year-old pictures of plants have yet to be bettered. Swiss art historian Peter Meyer called Blossfeldt's pictures "mechanical, abstract-mathematical", so rigid were the lines, so geometric the aesthetic. Issa-Khan's pictures have more softness, a touch of the sensuality of supermodels, but there is the same uncompromising look. They are shot in black and white, "because with colour, people only see the plant,

Some may wonder at the progression from models to 'Monstera deliciosa', but to Issa-Khan, it makes perfect sense

they don't look at it. With black and white they have to look at it."

And, like Blossfeldt, she is not above tweaking nature and does not always photograph in-situ. For one striking, Georgia O'Keefe-esque shot of the *Monstera deliciosa*, she had to cut 20 flowers before getting the perfect one. Only this way can she capture, as August Endell wrote in 1909, the "exquisite curves of the blades of grass, the miraculous pitilessness of thistle leaves, and the callow youthfulness of shooting leaf buds".

It was the sensuous forms that persuaded Mission Gallery director Yvonne Courtney to take Issa-Khan's pictures, though the gallery rarely shows photography. Curator Michael Wolfson thinks her work well deserving of the "Georgia O'Keefe of photography" tag it has picked up since the owners of Miami's hip Nash

That's Bazaar: just a few of Issa-Khan's magazine covers. She gave up fashion photography when her make-up artist, Guillermo Herrera, died of Aids in the early 1990s

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