



natural revival

iran issa-khan



photography

Iran Issa-Khan knows how to take a picture. Images of the almost-infinite spiral found in seashells, blown into over two metres in length and a metre in width, surround her studio in Miami's Design District. One of the leading fashion and celebrity photographers of the 1980s has put all that behind her and gone back to what she knows and loves best: nature, in its purest, and most real forms.



TEXT BY MYRNA AYAD
IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND
LEILA TAGHINIA-MILANI HELLER GALLERY

Previous pages: *Rouge*.
2008. C-print.

Facing page: *Forbidden Love*. 2008. C-print.

She begins by regaling me with her childhood stories – of shopping trips to Paris watching her mother being fitted with fabulous garments at the Houses of Dior and Chanel in the 1960s; of Sundays after church when her mother would take her three little children to impoverished areas of their native Iran to wash, clothe and feed the less fortunate; of the fruit trees and mountains in Shemiran to the north of Tehran, and blissful summers spent at the Caspian Sea. Like other privileged children in Iran at the time, Iran Issa-Khan attended boarding schools in Europe, albeit intermittently. “It was very important then to send your kids abroad for their pedigree,” she says. “The girls went to France and the boys went to England. Then it became Switzerland.” Her last memory of her beloved country is of the then-Mehrabad Airport, when the family was bade farewell by their servants. It was 1977 and the altitude in Iran did not help Issa-Khan’s father, who had suffered one too many strokes, so the family set off to New York where he would establish his own shipping company. It never occurred to Issa-khan that she would never return to her homeland. In 1979, the Shah of Iran was overthrown and America became her home.

Welcome to Glamorama

“I was a little party girl and had never worked,” she grins. “A journalist friend said, ‘you know a lot of people, you’re social and you’ve lived in Europe, so why don’t you try photography and I’ll do the writing and we’ll get to the people that no one can get to?’” Intrigued, Issa-Khan decided to take classes

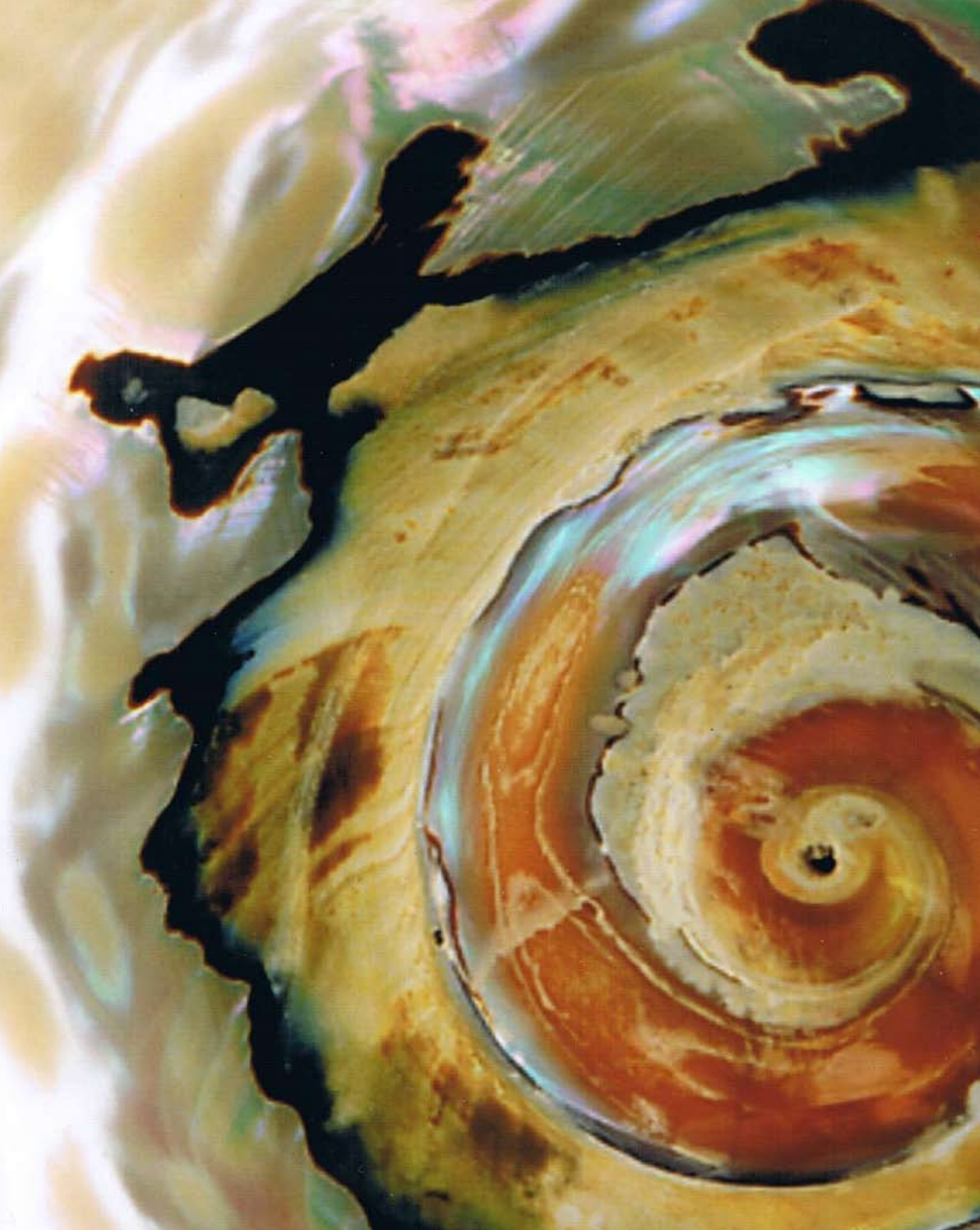
with the renowned William Minor Jr, and, when she first picked up a camera, “through that little hole,” she says with certainty, “I realised that this was the world I wanted to belong to.” Issa-Khan’s mother, however, was not pleased with her daughter’s choice of a profession “that was shunned in Persian society,” but Issa-Khan was adamant. “My mother asked why, ‘you, who have been photographed all your life, want to photograph others?’ I told her that I was in love with photography.” In

When she first picked up a camera, “through that little hole,” she says with certainty, “I realised that this was the world I wanted to belong to.”

1980, after a year of classes with Minor Jr, Issa-Khan marched into *Harper’s Bazaar* and asked to create a cover. “They asked to see ‘my book’,” she laughs, “so I said: look, I don’t have a book, I’ve lost my country, I now have to work and I know everything about fashion because I grew up in Paris and watched my mother buy clothes.”

Models who were Issa-Khan’s friends became her subjects for several winning sample covers, which she showed to *Harper’s Bazaar*. She was hired instantly and was flown to Venezuela to shoot Carolina Herrera. “We broke the story in 1980 just before she became a designer,” says Issa-Khan, whose next destination was Italy to shoot the Ferragamos, Fendis, Versaces and Biagottis. Helene Rochas in Paris and the Duke and Duchess of Marlborough at their residence, Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire, were also among her string of high profile shoots, all of which she owes purely to “connections,” adding that, “when you know one, the other opens doors for you.”

It was the 1980s; MTV was launched, Reagan was in power, arcade games were in and so were the shoulder-







“There is something so sensual about plants and seashells, just as the Middle East is so sensual.”



photography



“I told her [Nancy Reagan] straight up from the beginning: I’m going to ask you to do the weirdest things and you’re going to have to go along with me and the images are going to be fabulous but you have to do as I say because I’m an Aquarian and I’m crazy.”

pads which Issa-Khan sported to her shoots along with high heels. “People really dressed up then!” she exclaims. Besides her innate talent and passion for photography, it was her worldliness and dress sense that helped her subjects feel at ease. “They felt I was somebody on their level,” she says. In fact, Issa-Khan’s next big break saw her waltz into the White House to shoot Nancy Reagan. “Important” as it was for Issa-Khan, the shoot was tinged with irony because of her team’s nationalities: a Cuban assistant, a Chilean editor and herself, an Iranian photographer; nationals from three countries that were at conflict with the USA. “And there we were, telling Nancy Reagan what to do all day,” laughs Issa-Khan, who

“drove the Secret Service crazy,” with the various rooms she chose to shoot in, not to mention the bizarre things she had Mrs Reagan do. “I told her straight up from the beginning: I’m going to ask you to do the weirdest things and you’re going to have to go along with me and the images are going to be fabulous but you have to do as I say because I’m an Aquarian and I’m crazy.” Reagan is a star-sign aficionado and an Aquarian too, and when the zodiac was mentioned, “I had her, she was mine,” smiles Issa-Khan.

She opens files of her magazine covers for *Harper’s Bazaar*, *W*, *Elle* and *Vogue* and out comes a plump file containing all of Paloma Picasso’s ad campaigns, shot by Issa-Khan. “You know how many lights I used on Paloma here?” she exclaims, pointing to an ad that featured a glowing Picasso, “Twenty! Because I wanted that white, mirrored effect and my makeup assistants were fabulous.” But as the

Previous spreads:
Whirlwind. 2008. C-print.
Left: *White Mischief*. 2008. C-print. Right: *Mirage*. 2008. C-print.
Above: Right: *Yucca Yang*. 2001. C-print. Left: *Yucca Ying*. 2001. C-print.

“I don’t know where this work will take me but I feel like I am coming back to Iran with this series.”

adage goes, what goes up must come down and it was only a matter of time before the bubble burst. Behind the alluring façade of champagne, catwalks and divas, fashion’s less glamorous side reared its ugly face and Issa-Khan’s makeup artist, Guillermo Herrera, died of AIDS in 2000, shocking her and halting her photography. “It ate me up,” she says, “from a beautiful human being to what he was reduced to.” Her parents then passed away, leaving Issa-Khan with a lot of soul-searching to do. “It hit me that I was living in this La La Land of excesses, such excesses, and I went into a hole within myself. I had to come back to real life and who I was.” Indeed, one thing rings true of Issa-Khan: no matter what, she believes in light at the end of every tunnel.

The Awakening

“Michele Oka Doner told me ‘Iran, you’re too talented to sit down and do nothing,’ so I shot plants for her to sculpt,” she says of her famed artist friend to whom she feels indebted. Again, the “doors” in Issa-Khan’s life opened wide and she landed a show in London’s Misson Gallery in 2001, featuring seven images of plants. Zaha Hadid bought one and *The Independent* described Issa-Khan as the “Georgia O’Keefe of photography.” “And that’s how my career started again,” she smiles, “I went back to what I was really all about, which is nature, the beauty of perfection and simplicity.” A friend gave her a broken shell which she found so beautiful she shot it, triggering an entire collection of seashell images, 25 of which were bought by Miami International Airport. Among her collector base are Gloria Estefan and Paloma Picasso, who once told Issa Khan, “You know Iran, as good as your fashion photography is, this stuff is better!”

Issa-Khan still uses film and has never done any retouching on any of her images, be they fashion or her

contemporary nature-inspired work. The shells she uses are either gifts from friends or purchased; she then puts them on a light table and prints them on silver paper or Plexiglas and gelatine, sometimes working for weeks at a time, depending on her mood. “There is something so sensual about plants and seashells, just as the Middle East is so sensual,” she says. Her next subject included stones and fruits for their “voluptuousness and juiciness.” On her ‘to-do’ list are books she would like to publish on her fashion portfolio and nature series. “I am learning life as I should, through plants, seashells and all the natural things in life,” she says, “and I am coming back to a place where I am free.” Despite living in the USA for decades, Issa-Khan has always felt Persian – a naturalness derived from a love for her country’s poetry, hospitality and ancient history – aspects she admits she has not found anywhere else in the world. “When I am around my Middle Eastern friends, I feel alive. They have all that I need to be with,” she says. Her return to all things real is in a sense, a homecoming. “I don’t know where this work will take me but I feel like I am coming back to Iran with this series.” As for an actual return to her motherland, Issa-Khan prefers to keep the beautiful memories she has of Iran intact.

She begins to get excited and swiftly takes out image after image of beautiful seashells and flowers, getting carried away, “Look how beautiful they are,” she enthuses, “this one looks like a ballerina... look at this orchid... look at how perfect this silly little thing is... this one is called *Eternity* because it just goes on and on.” As she holds the images against a light box, I steal a glance at the content expression on her face and her piercing green eyes and deduce: Issa Khan is as genuine as her images. ©

For more information email iranissakhan@bellsouth.net