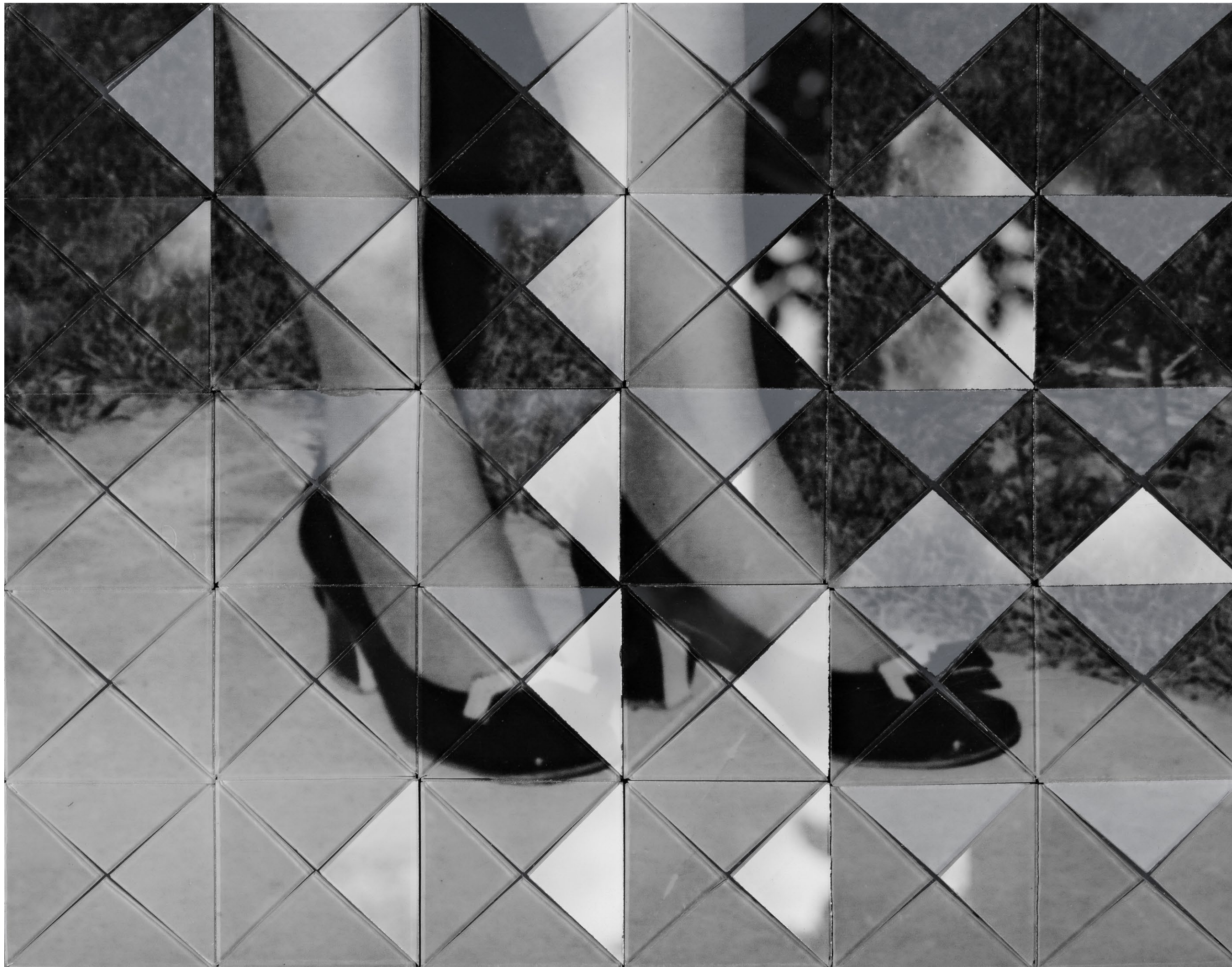


ALI TAHAYORI



PRIDE OF PLACE

VAULT spoke to Iranian-born artist Ali Tahayori about his work exploring queer identity, and the inspiration he takes from poetry.

FEATURE *by* EMMA COLLERTON

For Sydney-based multi-disciplinary artist Ali Tahayori (b.1980), Australia is a safe haven. Born in Shiraz, Iran, a year after the Islamic Revolution, Tahayori witnessed a period of great socio-political change, with the legacy of war, sanctions and oppression. "Australia, with its unique geography, an island so far from anywhere my family used to live, seemed like a safe option," he explains. "I also had a medical degree, and Australia was looking for young doctors at the time. Reflecting back, I think faith and destiny played significant parts."¹

His thought-provoking artwork *There Is No Queer In Iran* (2022) references the polarising statement by then Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2007, the year that Tahayori migrated to Australia. The kaleidoscopic mirror wall installation was showcased in the National Art School's acclaimed *Braving Time: Contemporary Art In Queer Australia*, an exhibition curated by Richard Perram and held in conjunction with WorldPride 2023. The exhibition celebrated the diverse voices of artists who identify as part of the LGBTIQ+ community. Tahayori's inclusion marked a milestone for the artist, "not only in my sense of belonging as a queer person within the larger queer community or as a migrant within the diverse queer voices in this country, but also as an artist among some very outstanding queer Australian artists, some of whom have been significant influences in my art practice."²

Identified by *Art Collector* magazine in its July-September 2023 issue as an artist to watch, Tahayori has earned a reputation for his innovative creative practice, which both pays tribute to his Iranian cultural heritage and serves as a tool for healing, navigating trauma and advocating for humanity. Accolades include the Smith



& Singer People's Choice Award at the 2021 Bowness Photography Prize (Monash Gallery of Art, Melbourne); the 2022 Prix Yves Hernot Photography Award (National Art School, Sydney); solo exhibitions at Gosford Regional Gallery and Gaffa Gallery; featuring in Photo London 2023, curated by Roya Khadjavi Projects, New York; representing his gallerist THIS IS NO FANTASY at the 2023 Unseen Photo Fair, Amsterdam; and most recently showcasing with Chinese-Australian artist NC Qin in *FROM FIRE* (2023–24), curated by Ellen Hewitt at the Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, Sydney.

His immersive installation *OUR HOUSE IS ON FIRE* (2023) at Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre is comprised of several large-scale text-based kaleidoscopic mirror artworks, a video with burning, crackling sounds and a poem by Persian-language poet Mehdi Akhavan Sâles (1929–90). The amalgamation radiates a cinematic quality, both visually and conceptually. "When I was still living in Iran, the cinema was a place where I could go and feel free," remembers Tahayori. The medium provided him with entertainment, intellectual stimulation underpinned by poetry and a gateway to the outside world. "Iranian directors

such as Abbas Kiarostami and Jaafar Panahi – both significant inspirations in my practice – can put the most complex and challenging topics on the screen in a beautiful and poetic way."³

The tragic political events that have recently unfolded in the Middle East were the impetus for *OUR HOUSE IS ON FIRE*. Tahayori explains, "As we watched thousands of Palestinians losing their homes, we lost ours, too. As we watched thousands bury their children and children bury their siblings, we buried our loved ones, too. Eight weeks on, over 20,000 people have been killed, 800,000 homes destroyed and over 1.7 million people displaced. I ask myself, 'Where are those people now? What happened to their homes?'"⁴ By incorporating the word 'HOMELESS' into his kaleidoscopic mirror artworks, with the shards returning both light and the viewer's gaze, the artist encourages reflection.

Drawing on the poetry of Mehdi Akhavan Sâles, in particular 'Faryad (Outcry)', further empathised the loss and struggle that Tahayori sought to convey in *OUR HOUSE IS ON FIRE*. Poetry is a great inspiration for the artist. His father would read poetry to him, and



Top to bottom
Installation view
ALI TAHAYORI
OUR HOUSE IS ON FIRE, 2023
video installation,
hand-cut mirrors and
plaster on wood, 6 panels
120 x 100 cm
video: 8' 15" with sound
in *FROM FIRE: NC QIN & ALI TAHAYORI*, 2023–24
Casula Powerhouse Arts
Centre, Sydney
Photo: Ali Tahayori

Courtesy the artist

Installation view
ALI TAHAYORI
Looking at Me
Looking at You, 2023
THIS IS NO FANTASY
Gallery, Melbourne
Photo: Simon Strong

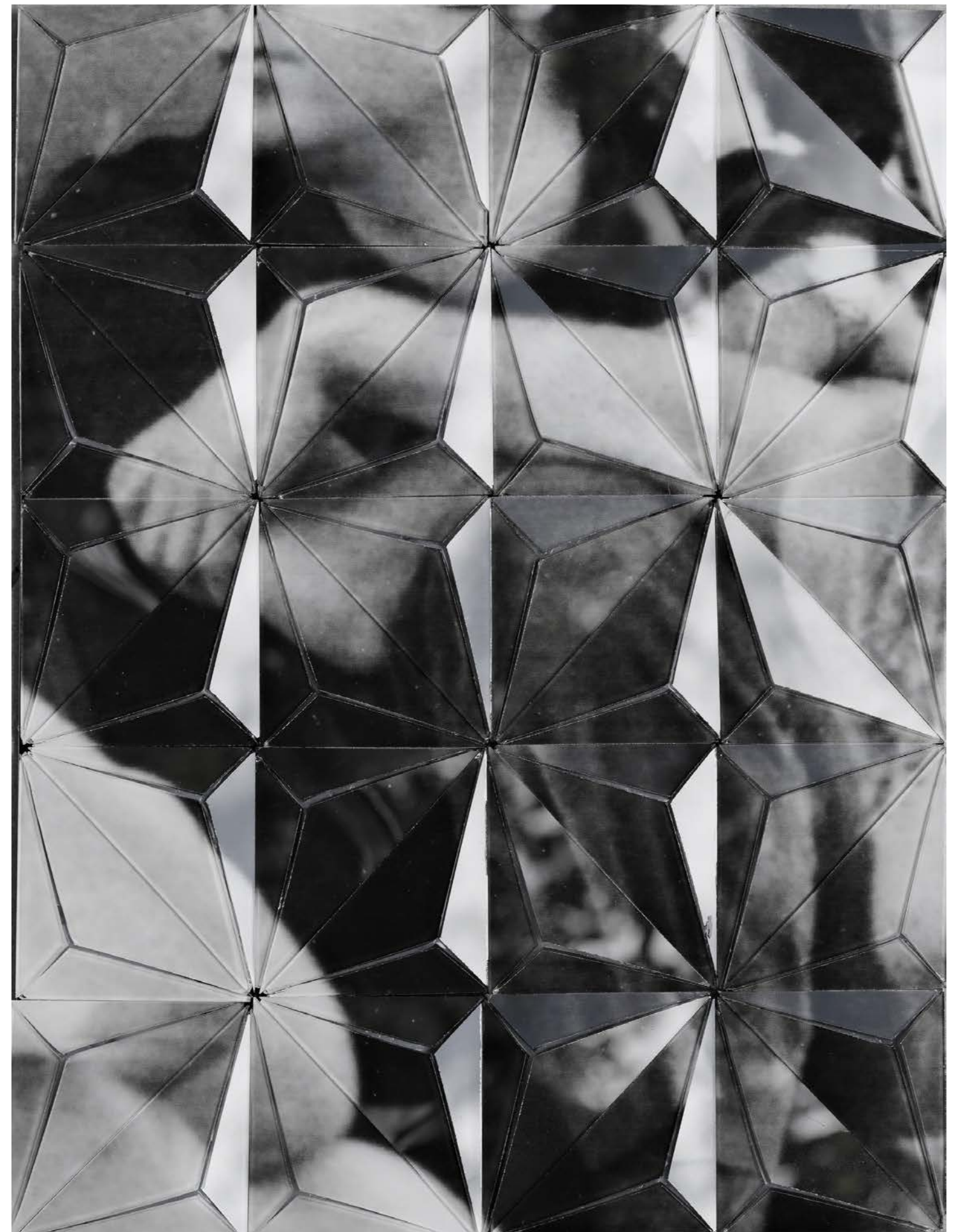
Courtesy the artist and
THIS IS NO FANTASY,
Melbourne

Opposite
ALI TAHAYORI
Untitled 2, from *Archive of Longing* series, 2023
UV print of photographic
archive on glass,
hand-cut glass, silicone,
aluminium DIBOND
52 x 35 cm
Photo: Ali Tahayori

Courtesy the artist

Page 50–51
ALI TAHAYORI
Untitled 1, from *Archive of Longing* series, 2023
UV print of photographic
archive on glass, hand-cut
glass, silicone,
aluminium DIBOND
41 x 37 cm
Photo: Ali Tahayori

Courtesy the artist



“LIKE DAGUERREOTYPES, THE CONTENT VISIBILITY SHIFTS AS THE VIEWER MOVES AROUND THE IMAGE. THE BROKEN GLASS IS USED TO PLAY WITH THE VIEWER’S GAZE WHILE REFLECTING ON MEMORY FROM A QUEER DIASPORIC LENS, SEARCHING FOR GLIMPSES OF INTIMACY AND DESIRE WITHIN A VIOLENT SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT.”



ALI TAHAYORI
Untitled 4, from *Archive of Longing* series, 2023
 UV print of photographic archive on glass, hand-cut glass, silicone, aluminium DIBOND
 62 x 35 cm
 Photo: Ali Tahayori
 Courtesy the artist

Opposite, left
 Installation view
 ALI TAHAYORI
Looking at Me
Looking at You, 2023
 THIS IS NO FANTASY, Melbourne
 Photo: Simon Strong
 Courtesy the artist and
 THIS IS NO FANTASY, Melbourne

Below
 ALI TAHAYORI
Untitled 3, from *Archive of Longing* series, 2023
 UV print of photographic archive on glass, hand-cut glass, silicone, aluminium DIBOND
 110 x 80 cm
 Photo: Ali Tahayori
 Courtesy the artist



at age five Tahayori started reading the Persian poet Hafiz (1325–90), memorising his poems without fully grasping the layers of meaning and references. Akhavân Sâles' poem 'Faryad (Outcry)' evocatively captures the experience of someone's house burning, of suffocating from the smoke while trying to save precious belongings acquired over a lifetime. "While he manages to put out the fire in one corner, the merciless fire rages in another part," explains Tahayori. "He screams and shouts, asking for help while his neighbours sleep comfortably in their beds. He questions if anything will be left of him and his house by dawn. I feel all of us, in one way or another, can relate to his experience."⁵

Visiting the 12th century tomb of Shah Cheragh in Shiraz as a child made a lasting impression. Tahayori was mesmerised by the spectacular mosaic of mirror fragments (âina-kâri) adorning the interior. "There is something transcendental about being in that place," he recalls. "You feel the weight of light in the space around and inside you."⁶ He has emulated that experience in *OUR HOUSE IS ON FIRE*. Exhibition curator Hewitt elaborates: "Enduring the fire and observing your identity split, reflect, fade, shatter, refract, intensify, crack and somehow re-form stronger than ever all in one motion, again and again, is a common experience and it is conveyed via the symbolic power of glass, performance, mirrors, language and light in this intimate exhibition."⁷

The legacy of lived experience underpins Tahayori's practice. His compelling inkjet photograph *Sisterhood* (2021) emerged from a series of photographs that revealed his mother's life before marriage and the Islamic Revolution. As noted by Geoffrey Smith, chairman of Smith & Singer Auction House, "*Sisterhood* is a striking image that is simultaneously engaging and perplexing, literally challenging the viewer to question preconceived notions of identity and belonging."⁸ The family photograph captures two seated women in modern 1950s attire. Digitally manipulated by the artist, the personal becomes universal as complex layers emerge that allude to an undisclosed trauma and sense of loss.

Tahayori recently returned to his mother's photographic archive to create *Archive of Longing* (2023), which will be showcased at the 2024 Melbourne Art Fair. He has also returned to his creative origins, having studied analogue photography and darkroom techniques at Sepid-O-Siyah Art School in Shiraz. In his new body of work, Tahayori has cropped and enlarged the family photographs and, in the process, removed personal identifying features. Printing the imagery on glass, then breaking the glass and reassembling the fragments as sculptural reliefs, implies a sense of vulnerability and resilience. Speaking about *Archive of Longing*, the artist explains: "Like daguerreotypes, the content visibility shifts as the viewer moves around the image. The broken glass is used to play with the viewer's gaze while reflecting on memory from a queer diasporic lens, searching for glimpses of intimacy and desire within a violent socio-political context."⁹

Art is a vehicle that documents and inspires change. It also aids in processing grief and combatting trauma. For Tahayori, his practice is an opportunity to encourage thought and his works require time to reflect upon, "not to change political views, but to change the way we see life, pain and other humans."¹⁰ **V**

Ali Tahayori is represented by THIS IS NO FANTASY, Melbourne and will be exhibiting with them at Melbourne Art Fair, February 22 – 25, 2024
thisisnofantasy.com

- 1 Correspondence with Ali Tahayori, December 13, 2023.
- 2 *ibid.*
- 3 *ibid.*, December 14, 2023.
- 4 *ibid.*
- 5 *ibid.*
- 6 *ibid.*, December 13, 2023.
- 7 Ellen Hewitt, 'FROM FIRE,' *exh. catalogue*, 2023, www.alitahayori.com/our-house-is-on-fire.
- 8 'Ali Tahayori wins Smith & Singer People's Choice Award for *Sisterhood*,' *Australian Art Review*, December 7, 2021, <https://artsreview.com.au/ali-tahayori-wins-smith-singer-peoples-choice-award-for-sisterhood/>.
- 9 Correspondence with Ali Tahayori, December 14, 2023.
- 10 Rose of Sharon Leake, 'ALI TAHAYORI: QUEER LIGHT,' *Art Collector* #105, July-September 2023, p.166-73.

