

Impossible Desire

Me memoreview.net/reviews/impossible-desire-by-june-miskell



Ali Tahayori, *Impossible Desire*, 2023, Knulp. Courtesy of Bojan Bozic.

Ali Tahayori, *Impossible Desire* June Miskell

15 Jul 2023

● Knulp 7 Jul - 23 Jul 2023

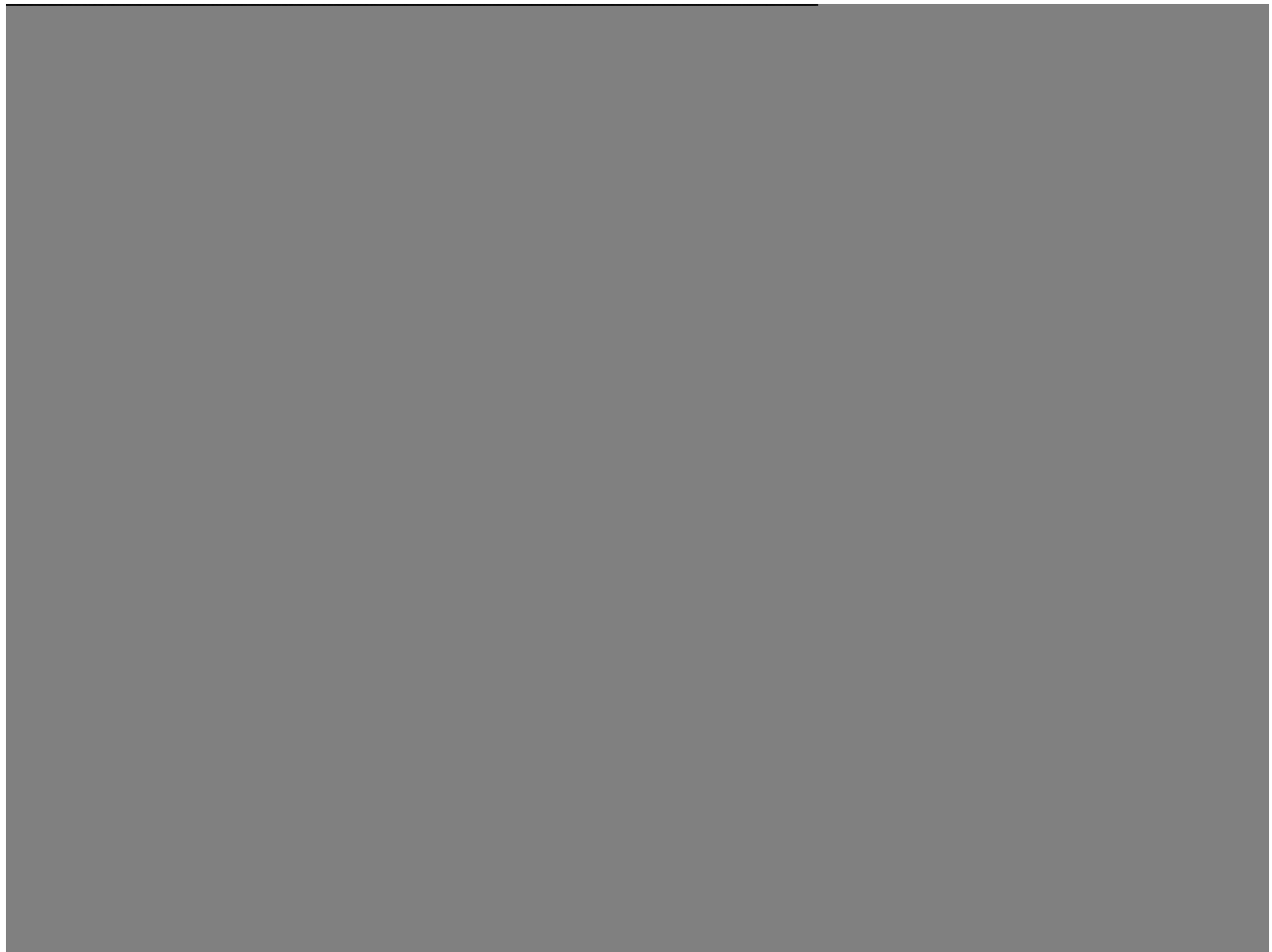
Rather than evoking an imaginary homeland frozen in an idyllic moment outside history, what is remembered through queer diasporic desire and the queer diasporic body is a past time and place riven with contradictions and the violences of multiple uprootings, displacements, and exiles.

— Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires* (2005).

Across the bend of a white picket fence of Camperdown Oval is a bright and flickering fluorescent glow. The source is *Impossible Desire*, a solo exhibition-or should I say, screening-of new video installation works by Ali Tahayori currently projecting through the glass façade of the artist-run gallery Knulp. For the duration of the exhibition, Tahayori has transformed Knulp into a lightbox cinema (minus the popcorn) where weekly screenings are scheduled to take place during the gallery's alternate night-time opening

hours of Friday and Saturday between 5 and 8 pm. And if you're lucky like I was, you'll happen to experience *Impossible Desire* as a private screening, complete with direct insights from the artist himself.

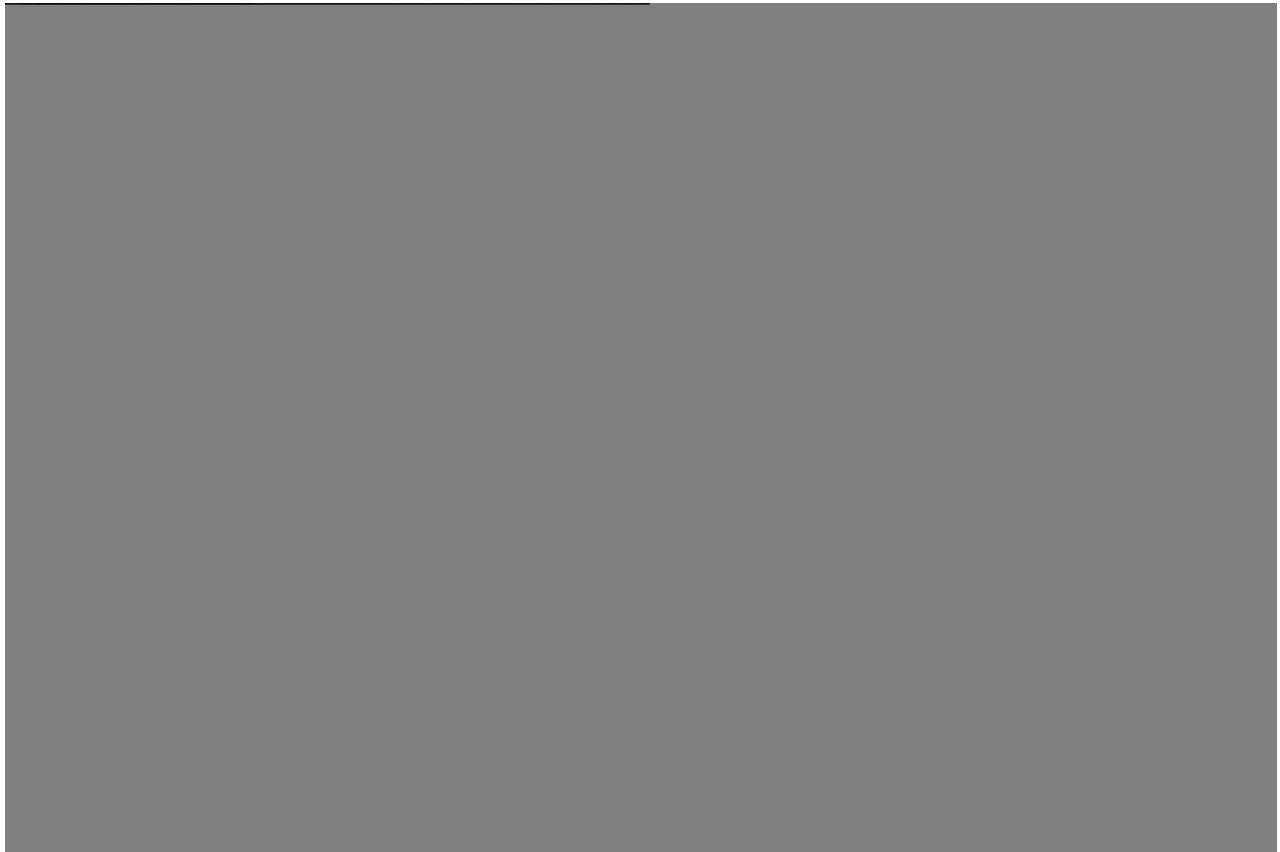
When I arrived at Knulp on a relatively quiet Saturday evening, Tahayori was outside testing the sound and documenting the exhibition. Upon my approach, Tahayori introduced himself and provided a brief introduction to the two video installations that comprise *Impossible Desire*. Similar to the light emitting from the projected video installations screening inside, sound too leaked beyond the borders of the gallery—a tap dripping, a toilet flushing, a fan circulating. When I asked him where the sound was coming from (as Knulp's door was shut), he pointed to the mail-slot in the door before suggesting that I head inside to watch the works (it was extremely cold and windy outside). On my way in, Tahayori offered another piece of information: the series of black and white hand-painted photographs that comprised one of the animated video installations were of a public toilet (a gay beat) attached to a library in his hometown, Shiraz in Iran, where Tahayori had his first intimate experience.



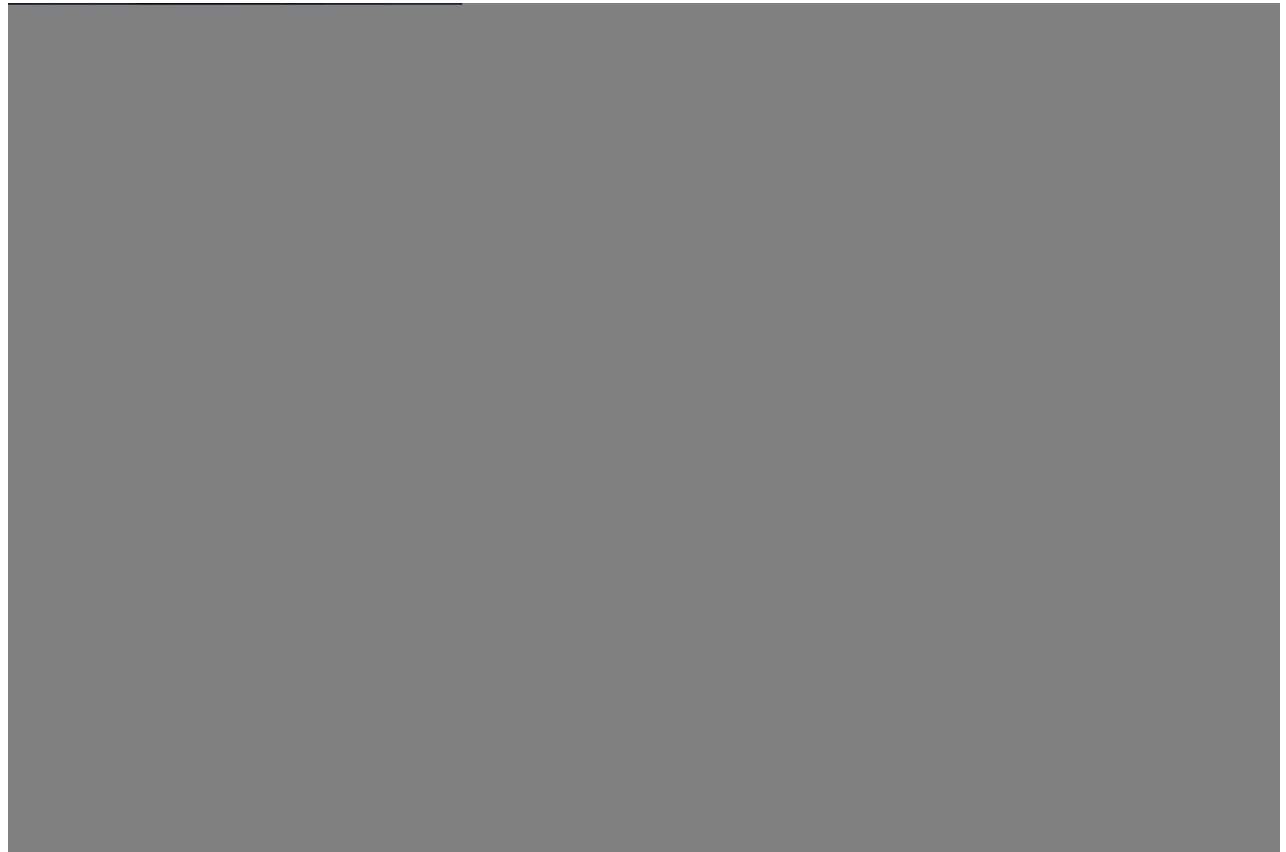
Impossible Desire wrestles with diaspora, displacement, and queerness. If we were to place these words into a Venn diagram, “impossible” and “desire” would emerge at the intersection. Drawing on the tensions within the phrase “Impossible Desire,” this intimate and sophisticated exhibition extends Tahayori's ongoing preoccupation with the intersections of his subjectivity as a queer diasporic artist from Iran—this time via two video installations. In previous investigations, Tahayori—who is probably best known for his

tessellated mirror-mosaic work-draws upon the traditional Iranian craft of *Āine-Kāri* (mirror-works) to create kaleidoscopic experiences that straddle the line of queer visibility and opacity. A recent example of this is Tahayori's *There Is No Queer in Iran* (2022) included in the exhibition *Braving Time: Contemporary Art in Queer Australia* at the National Art School for Sydney World Pride earlier this year which dappled light onto the floor of NAS Gallery. While no mirror works are included in *Impossible Desire*, a connective thread here (beyond an exploration of queer diasporic subjectivity) is Tahayori's deep consideration of the porosity of light-how it shimmers, leaks, and captivates our attention well beyond the surface of the mirror or the glass façade of Knulp.

To return to the epigraph, the title of the exhibition recalls a book of the same name by Gayatri Gopinath published in 2005. Before visiting *Impossible Desire* (the exhibition by Ali Tahayori), I'd been reading *Impossible Desires* (the book by Gopinath). As a text situated at the intersections of queer, postcolonial, and diasporic studies, Gopinath critically engages a "queer (specifically, queer South Asian) diaspora" framework to unpack notions of home, nostalgia, and desire. Gopinath is specifically concerned with the "impossibility" of queer fem desire in the context of the interconnected processes and conditions of colonialism and globalisation. While *Impossible Desires* (the book) is not in any way referred to specifically in *Impossible Desire* (the exhibition), it would be remiss to not to make this connection given the serendipitous timing of the exhibition and how it punctuates my reading of Tahayori's works. Although Tahayori is working from a vastly different geo-cultural context and subject-position than the one Gopinath speaks to, it seems to me that his exhibition *Impossible Desire* is occupied with a similar "impossibility" at stake in queer diasporic desire-one that exists in relation to, *yet* in excess of the nation-state.



Each of the photographs within *Impossible Desire* draws attention to the interior and exterior of the bathroom attached to the library. The photographs zone in on hidden corners, gritty floors, and walls, as well as the windows and doors which suggests a kind of liminality. The perspective is situated both *inside* and *outside* of the space. As these photographs cycle through, an opaque white fluid begins to coat the image. It drips from the sink faucets, splatters on the walls, fills in the doorway, traces the zig-zag patterns on the door, dots the trees, and gradually paints the exterior of the building. Later, Tahayori clues me in: he has used bodily fluid (probably cum, but this is unconfirmed) mixed with paint to queer the image. Searching for more information, I turn to a recent IG post by Tahayori where he explains that these photographs invoke “feelings of loss and longing for a past that was disrupted and a future that never followed.” Tahayori “reorients the traditionally backward-looking glance of diaspora” that Gopinath speaks to. For Tahayori this desires “a future where homosexuality is no longer prohibited.” If this video installation attempts to reconstruct a queer memory in order to lament a place and time that is no longer accessible, then it is via Tahayori’s queer method that his desire-in spite of its “impossibility”-remains palpable.



If homoeroticism is explored at the level of the private and the discreet in *Impossible Desire*, then it is examined at the level of the public and the spectacle in *Kill Me Softly*. In this work, scenes of the irreparable destruction to cultural heritage sites in Iran are juxtaposed with intermittent scenes of an international wrestling match between Iran and the United States. In the former, we watch bombs explode into plumes of smoke, extremists drilling into ornate bas-reliefs, and a bulldozer charging into the debris. In the latter scenes, the wrestlers don tight costumes that hug at the contours of their ripped bodies as they wrap their muscles and limbs around each other in a competitive jostle. To queer the scene's verisimilitude, Tahayori employed a number of tactics: he has slowed down the frame rate, reversed the footage sequence, digitally altered the wrestler's costumes so that they do not represent the colours of each respective nation but rather the colours of the pride flag, overlaid a melodic orchestral score, and censored the field of vision via a light layer of eight-bit pixelation. This is however no WWF WrestleMania X8 video game; it is a delicate *cough* macho choreography and quite frankly, I'm obsessed. On my way out, Tahayori offers another detail: the shakiness of the image is a result of Tahayori filming the recording of the wrestling match. These tactics render the work with a retro pornographic feel to it, tipping the scale of a hypermasculine nationalist spectacle into a homoerotic camp performance. Bridging these two spectacles together-the destruction of cultural heritage vis-à-vis the wrestling match-Tahayori reveals the pornographic violence at the hands of the nation-state.



The phrase “Impossible Desire” then, for Tahayori, simultaneously refers to the queer desire that is rendered impossible in the homosexuality-prohibited nation-state of Iran and the impossibility of fulfilling the diasporic desire to “return” to Iran, precisely because of his queerness. To return again to Gopinath, “suturing “queer” to “diaspora” thus recuperates those desires, practices, and subjectivities that are rendered impossible and unimaginable within conventional diasporic and nationalist imaginaries.” Indeed, this is the enduring double-bind of queer diasporic desire that Tahayori is occupied with. This is not to say that the exhibition forecloses on a kind of nostalgia oft enlisted in artistic and literary representations of diaspora where the temporal and/or spatial distance from the “homeland” remains at the centre. Quite the opposite. In *Impossible Desire*, Tahayori does not so much as memorialise the past in stasis as he queers its contemporary articulations. The result of this powerfully positions *Impossible Desire* is a critical dialogue with the intricacies of queer diasporic desire.