

Ali fled his homeland because of his sexuality. He dreams of showing his art in a 'free Iran'

[sbs.com.au/language/persian/en/article/ali-fled-his-homeland-because-of-his-sexuality-he-dreams-of-showing-his-art-in-a-free-iran/aidwa97bv](https://www.sbs.com.au/language/persian/en/article/ali-fled-his-homeland-because-of-his-sexuality-he-dreams-of-showing-his-art-in-a-free-iran/aidwa97bv)



Ali Tahayori at his recent exhibition opening in St Kilda, Melbourne. Source: Supplied / Shelly Xue

Key Points

- Having fled persecution in Iran, Ali Tahayori explores themes of displacement and LGBTQIA+ identity through art that combines fractured mirrors, text and imagery.
- His recent exhibition confronts the reality of 'honour killings' in Iran, focusing on the 2021 murder of a young gay man.
- Despite his exile, Tahayori dreams of showcasing his art in his homeland.

In 2021, Alireza Fazeli Monfared, a 20-year-old Iranian man, was kidnapped and murdered in what

human rights groups

allege was an "honour killing" by family members after they learned he was gay. He had previously confided in his friends and partner about threats from family members, expressing his intention to emigrate to Turkey as a first step before seeking asylum in Europe.



Alireza Fazeli Monfared. Credit: Instagram/alireza_locked

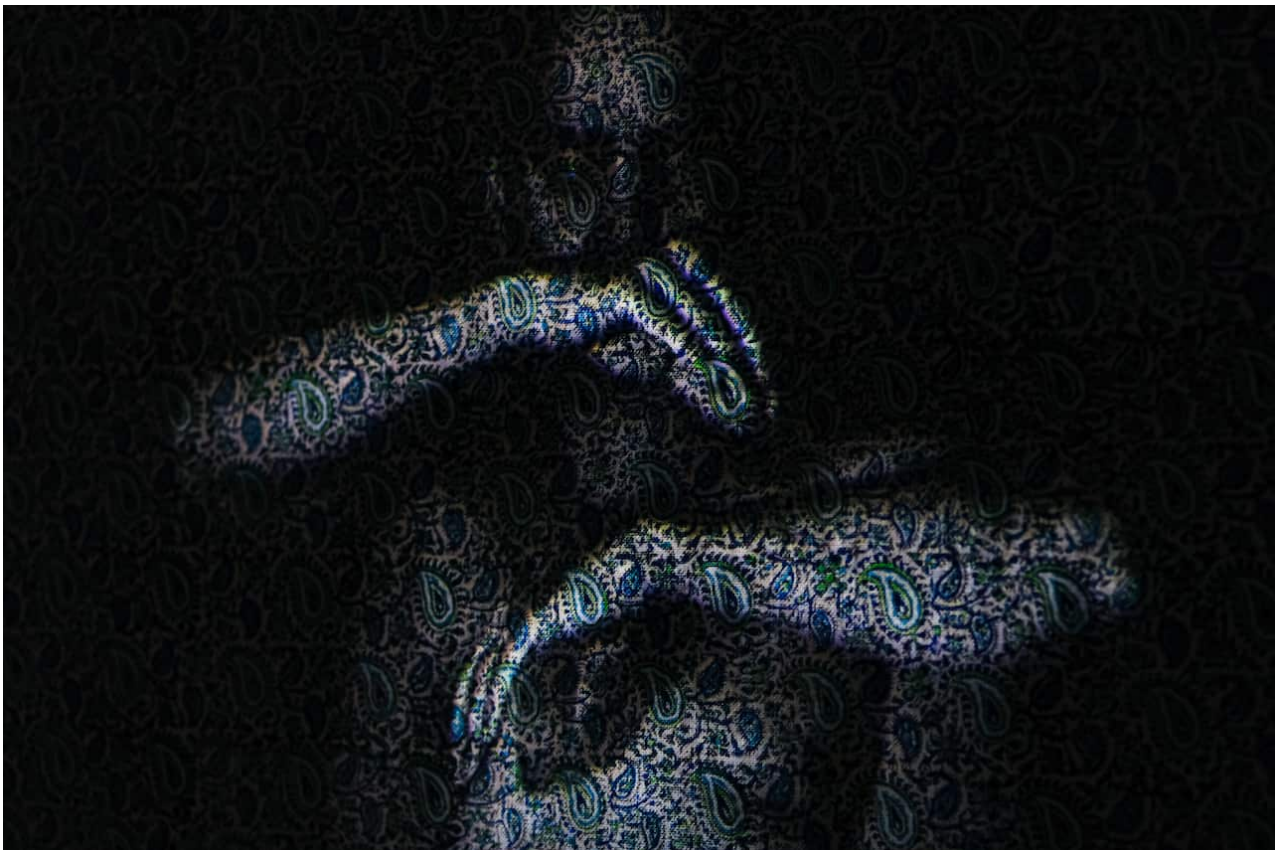
Ali Tahayori, an Australian-Iranian artist, said he was deeply affected when he learned about Monfared's killing.

The Sydney-based artist, who identifies as LGBTQIA+, said he felt compelled to create works that honour Monfared's memory and raise awareness for the fight against homophobia.

“Denied a proper funeral, Alireza was buried in secret with no ceremony to honour him. This secrecy stemmed from his family's fear of societal disapproval surrounding his sexual orientation and his death,” Tahayori told SBS Persian.

He said he was inspired to create a multimedia work titled 'After Everything Has Been Said'.

"The work consists of a series of photographs and a video installation depicting a traditional grief ceremony in various stages, performed by me," Tahayori said.



Ali Tahayori's art draws on traditional Iranian mirror work (aine-kari). Credit: Shelly Xue

Through his artworks, he said he hoped to bring attention to the plight of LGBTIQ+ people in Iran, using Monfared's story as a call to action.

“The lack of justice for his killers is a constant source of frustration and anger,” he said.

'Living a lie'

Tahayori grew up amid the Iran-Iraq War. Born in the 1980s, he said his first eight years were spent seeking refuge, constantly moving from shelter to shelter.

The war ended around the time he turned eight, but its shadow loomed large.

I always felt ashamed, living a lie that hid my true self.

Ali Tahayori

Tahayori hails from Shiraz, a city renowned for its artistic heritage and celebrated poets,

His parents, however, steered him towards a career in medicine.

A couple of years into his degree, a classmate's suggestion to pick up a camera awakened his artistic desire.



Ali Tahayori is an artist based in Sydney. Credit: SBS Persian

Tahayori transformed a space in his home into a darkroom and began exploring photography.

Growing up, I felt increasingly different, even though I didn't yet have the word 'gay' in my vocabulary. I yearned for a label that could help me understand and express what I was going through, believing it would bring clarity and a feeling of belonging.

Ali Tahayori

As internet access boomed in homes, Tahayori said he and other teenagers flocked to online communities seeking connection.

In his search, he stumbled upon a Yahoo chat room for LGBTQIA+ individuals, operating under nicknames and without photos to protect their identities.

He joined in the chats until one member, seizing a rare moment when their parents were out, invited the others to their house for a party, Tahayori recalled.

Fariman came to Australia to live as a trans man. He dreams of the same freedoms in Iran

"Someone alerted the authorities. These 'revolutionary guards', armed and threatening, raided the house. They blindfolded us all before hauling us off to the police station," he said.

"They held us captive for days, inflicting torture on some and levying fines on others. Forced calls were made to families, securing our release on bail."

He claimed that since gatherings of same-sex friends at home are common, the police lacked evidence of any illegal activity. As a result, they could only issue charges for alcohol consumption and subsequently released them.

Tahayori said the incident left a "devastating" mark. In the aftermath, some partygoers took their lives, others fled the country seeking refuge.



Ali Tahayori on his last trip to Iran. Source: Supplied / Ali Tahayori

One of his closest friends, fearing exposure of his sexual identity, entered a marriage and now has a child, he said.

"Confined within those walls a realisation struck me: 'this wasn't a life'. I wanted a life free from shame and fear," Tahayori said.

"I craved a place where I could be authentically myself. That's when I resolved to find a new beginning, a place where freedom awaited.

"Australia beckoned as the farthest possible escape, a place where I could finally be myself, unknown and free."

LGBTQIA+ in Iran

Dr Rojan Afrouz, a senior lecturer in social work at RMIT University, highlighted the lack of official recognition and data on LGBTQIA+ individuals in Iran.

This absence stems from the government's and many communities' refusal to acknowledge their existence.

Dr Rojan Afrouz, lecturer in social work

"Additionally, if individuals come out publicly, they risk homophobic violence from family members and others in society, as well as prosecution by the government," she added.

According to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's (DFAT) country report on Iran, sexual intercourse between males is illegal and punishable by death.

DFAT reported executions for consensual same-sex activity in February 2022 and noted that to avoid legal and social discrimination, gay men may be coerced into undergoing sex-reassignment surgery.

After fleeing anti-gay persecution in Iran, Bijan found 'freedom' serving a community.

6Rang, the Iranian LGBTQIA+ network, reported that Monfared was murdered after his half-brother discovered his military exemption card.

These cards, issued by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, are granted to individuals with sexual orientations deemed incompatible with military service.

A 2008 British cable published by WikiLeaks estimated that between 4,000 and 6,000 gay men and lesbians had been executed in Iran since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

A new beginning

Despite some newfound freedoms, Tahayori described a loss of artistic inspiration following his immigration to Australia.

But before coming out as gay, he embarked on a journey through Iran, travelling from north to south, which he said rekindled his creative passion.



Ali Tahayori's exhibition is on show in St Kilda, Melbourne. Credit: Shelly Xue

Upon returning to Australia, he channelled this focus into his studies, culminating in a Master of Fine Art (Photomedia) degree from the National Art School in Sydney in 2022.

His artistic practice now delves into complex themes of identity, particularly the struggles of belonging and feeling like an outsider, using mediums such as photography and video installations.

Drawing on traditional Iranian mirror work (*aine-kari*), his pieces combine fractured mirrors, text and imagery to reflect his own experiences of displacement as a queer Iranian living in Australia.

The mirror holds a direct connection to identity. Breaking it into pieces and reconstructing them reflects my experience of life as a queer migrant — a fragmented reality.

Ali Tahayori

Tahayori's latest collection is showing at Linden New Art gallery in St Kilda, and he acknowledged the Melbourne suburb's historical importance to the LGBTQIA+ community, particularly during the 1970s and '80s.

Dr Vincent Alessi, the gallery's CEO and director, echoed these sentiments.

"St Kilda emerged as a vibrant birthplace of Melbourne's LGBTIQ+ political movement," he said.

While Tahayori has showcased his art in Australia, Europe and the Middle East, he said his dream remains to exhibit in a "free Iran".

While several galleries there have expressed interest, he said returning home as a queer artist is currently "impossible".