


# This doctor fled Iran 15 years ago. Now he's using art to speak up

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Angus Thomson

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This doctor fled Iran 15 years ago. Now he's using art to speak up

By [Angus Thomson](#)

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Emblazoned on Ali Tahayori's shirt are three words that have become a rallying cry for widespread protests [led by Iranian women](#) across the world this year.

*Zan, zendegi, azadi*: [Woman, life, freedom](#).

Tahayori's homeland is never far from his mind, particularly as he prepares to show his work at the National Art School's postgraduate exhibition, launching this week.



Photomedia artist Ali Tahayori wears the words “woman, life, freedom”, a rallying cry for this year's protests in Iran. *Credit: Nick Moir*

“I’m preparing for a show that I’ve been working towards for two years, but I’m carrying with me the grief and heartbreak and hurt of what I’m witnessing happening in my country,” he said. “I’m so supportive of [the protests] because I think it’s a movement of a minority – women. For the first time after 43 years [since the Iranian Revolution], we see these voices coming out of Iran.”

Tahayori fled persecution in Iran as a queer person and arrived in Australia in 2007 with degrees in medicine and photography.

He pursued a career in medicine first, and he still balances his work as a rehabilitation specialist at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital while studying a Master of Fine Art. He abandoned photography after his camera was stolen not long after arriving in Australia, but a trip to Iran with his partner in 2014 helped him rediscover the cultural riches which fuelled his early creative endeavours.

“Showing him my country and my culture ... something was really resonating with me, something deeply touching, and the sparks of inspiration came for the first time [since leaving Iran],” he said. “I was missing that richness. Iran is a very conflicted country, but it’s full of history.”

Returning to the mosque he used to pray in with his mother, Tahayori rediscovered the traditional Iranian art of *Āina-Kāri*, which began in the 17th century with local artists making geometric shapes from broken pieces of mirror glass imported from places like Venice.

Tahayori has repurposed the art form to build intricate and engaging works which subtly fly in the face of authority. *No Queers in Iran*, on display at the postgraduate show, uses tiny mirrors to spell out the definition of “queer” in traditional Kufic calligraphy.

The title is a play on former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s famous assertion there were “no gays in Iran”, but the message is hidden in the geometry of the mirrors.

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*Ali Tahayori, photomedia artist*

“I could show this in Iran and not get in trouble because the government authorities wouldn’t be able to read it,” Tahayori said. “Artists and creatives are smart. They find their ways.”

Tahayori’s other works on display include *Kill Me Softly*, which juxtaposes pixelated videos of two men wrestling with footage of Islamic State fighters destroying ancient Persian artefacts. And *Meet me on Bondi Beach* projects vision of two pairs of feet entangled on a Persian rug, using sand to recreate the rug’s rich texture.

“I think our world needs a bit of queerness ... I mean in the sense of finding yourself at odds with everything, which was my experience,” Tahayori said. “It’s having to invent yourself, again and again. That is the real queerness for me.”

**The National Art School Postgrad Show opened to the public on Thursday, November 10 and runs until Sunday, November 20.**