

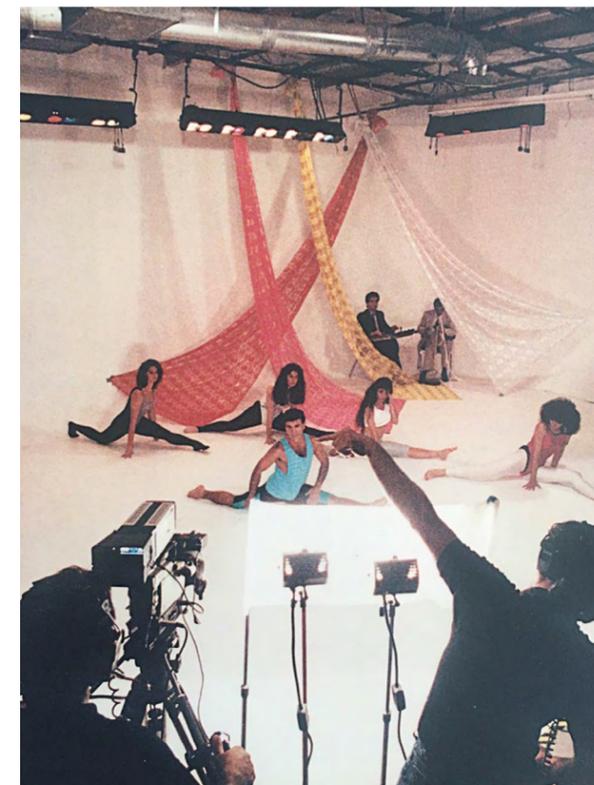
Interview

Dance After the Revolution

After the Islamic Revolution of 1978–79, Iran outlawed most forms of dance. But many people in the country still know some flashy moves, thanks to copies of smuggled videotapes by the exiled dancer Mohammad Khordadian. Long based in Los Angeles, his work mixes aerobics with traditions, rooted in 1920s Iranian cabaret and earlier forms of popular entertainment. The artists *Ramin Haerizadeh*, *Rokni Haerizadeh*, and *Hesam Rahmanian* talk about the ongoing draw of the Khordadian phenomenon with curator *Daniel Baumann*.

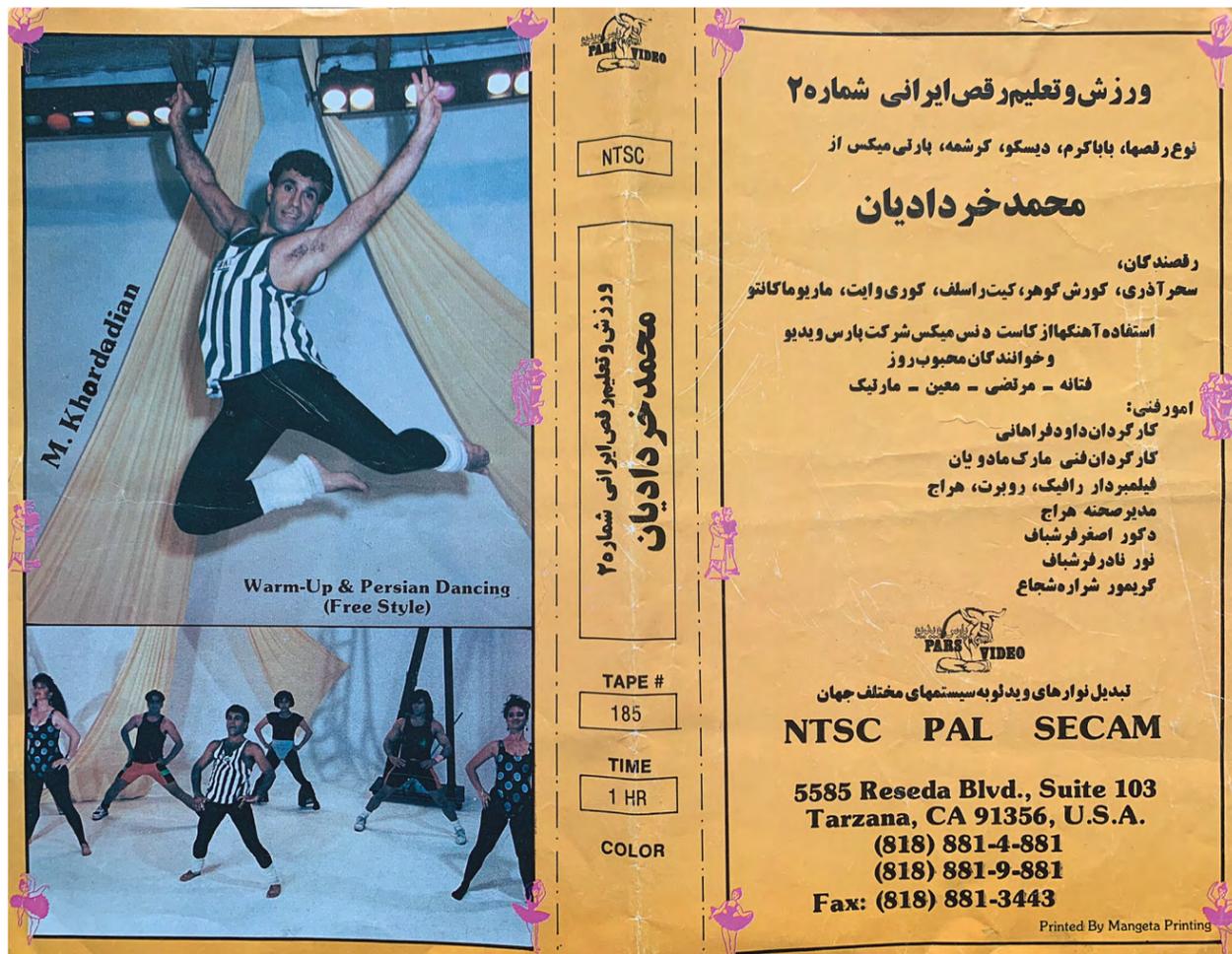


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Still from behind the scene of: Mohammad Khordadian, *Arabic Dance Lesson #1* (1987)

Courtesy of Mohammad Khordadian



Cover for Mohammad Khordadian's video *Warm-Up & Persian Dancing #2* (1987)

In 2016, the artists Ramin Haerizadeh, Rokni Haerizadeh, and Hesam Rahmanian took me from their home in Dubai to Abu Dhabi to assist a reception by the young Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan bin Khalifa Al Nahyan and his wife. While waiting for the royal couple in one of their pavilions, we looked at two diptychs installed there, painted by Rokni Haerizadeh a decade earlier. One of the works, *Typical Iranian Wedding* (2008), shows an Iranian marriage celebration with people dancing, and we started to talk about their movements, about folk dance, and about the reinvention of dancing in Iran through the dancer Mohammad Khordadian (*1957). Khordadian and his wife, the British ballet dancer Jean Beaini, left Tehran after the Islamic Revolution in the early 1980s, first settling in London, and eventually in Los Angeles. Presenting Persian folk dances to an exiled Iranian community, Khordadian gradually expanded his repertoire by adding influences from belly-dance

movements, American aerobics, Persian miniature paintings, workout exercises, and traditional Iranian dance. These led him to develop his own idiosyncratic dance style, merging smooth and swirling folk movements and aerobic-paced rhythms, all with a keen sensibility for cabaret-like showmanship. Smuggled to Iran on video tapes from the US, this dance was adopted as *the* new dance style in a country where dance was almost entirely banned and forbidden. Without his knowledge, he became the “King of Iranian Dance”, which ultimately led to his arrest at the end of a visit to his homeland in 2002.

Daniel Baumann: How did you get to know about Mohammad Khordadian and his dancing?

Hesam Rahmanian: His dance videos were illegal and had to be smuggled into Iran. One way they came into the country was by being added, like a hidden bonus, to the end of some popular mainstream films,

The bad quality of the copied tapes with their blurred images inadvertently produced a blurring of gender at the same time.

which were sometimes also illegal. I remember one such Betamax tape with Jerry Lewis dubbed in Farsi, followed, after the final scene, by Khordadian's dance video. You would get the tape from a smuggler, or borrow it from a friend who had copied it from another copy, which already had been a copy, and so on. It was even hard to recognise Khordadian's face in these videos because of the poor quality. About three years ago, we got to meet with him over a dinner at our house and recorded a conversation.

Ramin Haerizadeh: When we met him, we were starstruck. All of a sudden Khordadian was in the middle of our living room! This person who was in front of us was no longer a grainy memory related to the blurry video tapes we watched growing up. His presence stirred memories of the streets of Iran and its people – a breath of the street, if you will. His presence was amazing.

Rokni Haerizadeh: Interestingly, the bad quality of the copied tapes with their blurred images inadvertently produced a blurring of gender at the same time. The dancing figure's gestures were a mixture of aerobics and familiar Iranian dance moves usually performed by women. The binary man/woman had somehow faded away, gender had become fuzzy. The reception of Khordadian's videos and dance classes varied from family to family. Religious families reacted differently to conservative ones, the ones influenced by Western culture had a different take from liberals, and so on.

DB How would you describe the different attitudes to Khordadian's videos?

HR One example: I had a friend whose parents were very religious. For them, dancing in general was not accepted, except for at weddings, where men and women were separated. This friend and his brother had a tape by Khordadian, and when asked by their

mother what they were watching, they answered that it was an exercise video. As such, it was accepted by her, but not by their father. As a very religious Muslim, he rejected the idea of men dancing, especially in such a “feminine” way as Khordadian did. However, the same father had no problem with folk dance. So each story is very different, depending on which specific Iranians encountered Khordadian's dance.

DB What was his relation to Jane Fonda and her popular aerobic tapes?

HR Khordadian was very much inspired by Jane Fonda's Jazzercise videos; he somehow “Iranianised” Fonda's version of aerobics classes. Fonda's videos were workout exercises, to which Khordadian added his dancing. His first video, *Workout and Dance Lesson #1*, came out in 1983. But it was the second video *Warm-Up & Persian Dancing #2* (1987) that became a hit among Iranians of all ages, genders, and degrees of religiousness, in a society that was just recovering from the Iran–Iraq war (1980–88). The tape was so influential that for a long time at weddings or parties everyone would be dancing exactly the same way, as if they all came out of the same class, which, in a literal sense, was true.

DB What about the strong presence of folk dance?

RaH It is obviously complicated, but let's put it this way: It is a collage of different folk dances from different parts of Iran. For instance, you can see a certain theatricality that comes from northern Iran; or there are moves coming from dances where men and women wave a handkerchief, which is more present in central Iran and within nomadic cultures.

DB What about traditional Iranian dance versus folk dance?



Still from Mohammad Khordadian's video *Warm-Up & Persian Dancing #2* (1987)

Courtesy of Mohammad Khordadian



Mohammad Khordadian at a post-wedding ceremony performing with a group of dancers in Blair, California, mid-1990s

RoH It's complicated as well. In Farsi, it is called "traditional dance", but actually "vernacular" is more accurate. It is a style of dance that is more urban, linked to the city and the modernisation of Iran. In my painting *Typical Iranian Wedding*, you can see the transformation of dance styles – one man is doing a mock folk dance, waving a handkerchief above his head, while some macho young men are imitating Khordadian's effeminate moves. Next to them are young guys in branded shirts, arms raised, snapping their fingers, which you see both in Khordadian's and in traditional Iranian dance. Young men

dancing together and having fun was never pictured. According to Khordadian: "In old times and before the revolution, it wasn't common nor popular, and in fact embarrassing, for a 'bro' with a big moustache to get up and dance in weddings or parties."

DB So Khordadian's dances had a wide influence and became very popular, but what makes them so special?

HR⁸ He was breaking lots of rules and traditions.

RaH He changed the way Iranian men would dance, which was usually very slow, whereas Khordadian's gestures were fluid and fast. Through this, he brought a certain coquetry

into Iranian dance, introducing more movements reserved specifically for women: like flipping the head left to right as if swinging long hair in an exaggerated way, and delicate hand and wrist twists combined with gently twirling hips. In order to teach the new routines, Khordadian invented a story unique to each movement, so people could follow him and remember them.

RoH One important aspect is the presence of humour in Khordadian's dances. Breaking the rules, and especially also breaking the gender barrier through humour, can actually be traced back to Siah-Bazi, an important figure of *motreb*.

RaH *Motreb* were a group of itinerant entertainers bringing *tarab* (gaiety, enchantment) to the stage. This improvisational theatre/dance troupe existed outside of any institutional structures. You would just hire them through small local agencies, and they would come to your house and perform. Initially, they were respected, but with the modernisation of Iran, they gradually lost their prestige and ended up in the cabarets.

RoH Yes, and part of this *tarab* was performed as mockery of those in power. After the revolution, all movements and music that would put you out of your rational self and make you

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His dances function like a meme, like an unfaithful replication, mocking authority.



Rokni Haerizadeh, left panel of *Typical Iranian Wedding* (2008) diptych, oil on canvas, 200 x 300 cm

Photos: Ramin Haerizadeh



Rokni Haerizadeh, right panel of *Typical Iranian Wedding* (2008), diptych, oil on canvas, 200 x 300 cm

happy were actually then dubbed motrebi and banned. The Islamic Republic labelled all dance, art, and music motrebi, and the word motreb became an insult.

RoH Back to Siah-Bazi. He is one of the figures in the motreb troupe, trusted by the people for his honesty, and for he speaks his mind, and is a champion of the underdog who never follows rules or obeys figures of authority. Like the Siah, Khordadian could be thought of as the trusted playful character of the people. Through his dance, he created a space for freedom, bringing with him not only tarab, but also bypassing established cultural patterns, especially gender roles. His dances really inspired happiness and joy. We think that the way Siah is the symbol of rebirth, Khordadian is also for us a symbol of revival and spring.

DB What about Khordadian's dance today? Do Iranians still dance his movements?

RoH Yes, very much so. Social media really has continued to promote him; his dances actually function like a meme, like an unfaithful replication and powerful multiplier, often

mocking authority in the process. His dances literally went viral, pre-internet, first through Betamax, and then everyone caught the bug. It was a simple and fun way to enjoy yourself, to move your body, and to embrace humour, to break rules. At parties they still say, "Let's dance up a storm like Khordadian!"

DB Was there a moment where you thought that this dance was connected to gay culture, to cross-dressing, and "cross-dancing"? Khordadian came out around 2006.

RoH You know, in Iran, there was no San Francisco, no Harvey Milk, and so forth. It is a very different situation. Gay people were called Eva Khahar. It's slang, it's a name, it comes from two women gossiping, like when they would say, "Oh, sis!"

RaH Khordadian's dance was a breath of fresh air for queer and gay culture. All of a sudden, you could dance like a girl without being bullied. Because you took the role of the funny guy, just like Siah or motreb, yet remained in, or protected by, the closet.

HR We also should add yet another level to all of

this. Let's talk about Jamileh, a famous Iranian actress, dancer, and cabaret performer, who danced the Baba Karam, a dance originally performed by men only. Baba Karam is a tough guy in a white shirt, with a black hat, moustache, and a knife. He relates to motreb culture and motreb troupes, so you could hire him the same way. Jamileh dressed in a men's suit and a white button-down shirt, and danced with a fedora and a neckerchief, emulating macho masculine dance movements to the song "Baba Karam". She made Baba Karam popular among women, feminising the moves while retaining the tough-guy attitude. This dance is still popular with women today.

RaH Again, all this happened before 1978. Jamileh was one generation older than Khordadian and was married to Mohammed Arbâb, the owner of the very famous Bakara-Moulin Rouge cabaret in Tehran.

RoH Jamileh and Khordadian both come out of the cabaret culture that originated with the motreb street troupes. With the modernisation of Iran from the 20s on, the motreb performers

moved from the streets to the cabarets. This is the context and the culture from which Khordadian also comes, and it goes a long way towards explaining a big part of his popularity. He knew how to seduce and captivate an audience.

RaH* As the fourteenth-century poet and satirist

RoH* Obayd Zakani said: "Make mockery and

HR mischief your full time job if you want to claim your rights from those in charge and those they sit upon."

*RAMIN HAERIZADEH (*1975, Tebran), ROKNI HAERIZADEH (*1978, Tebran), and HESAM RAHMANIAN (*1980, Knoxville) are artists working together and independently. They live in Dubai. An exhibition of the collective's work is due to open at the Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt in September.*

DANIEL BAUMANN is the director of Kunsthalle Zürich and lives in Basel.

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