

Sanaz Mazinani

Site, Sight, and Insight

MARCH 8 TO APRIL 13 2013

G44 CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY

Sanaz Mazinani

Site, Sight, and Insight

March 8 to April 13, 2013

Images © 2013 Sanaz Mazinani

ISBN 978-0-9877138-6-5

401 Richmond St W
Suite 120
Toronto, Ontario
Canada M5V 3A8

TEL 416.979.3941
FAX 416.979.1695
info@gallery44.org
www.gallery44.org

GALLERY HOURS
Tuesday to Saturday
11 am to 5 pm

GALLERY 44 CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY is a non-profit artist-run centre committed to photography as a multi-faceted and ever-changing artform. Founded in 1979 to establish a supportive environment for the development of photography, Gallery 44's mandate is to provide a context for reflection and dialogue on contemporary photography and its related practices. Gallery 44 offers exhibition and publication opportunities to national and international artists, award-winning education programs, and affordable production facilities for artists. Through its programs, Gallery 44 is engaged in changing conceptions of the photographic image and its modes of production.

GALLERY 44 acknowledges the Exhibition Programming Committee: Lise Beaudry, Elisa Coish, Alice Dixon, Colwyn Griffith, Surendra Lawoti, Helena Raposo, Amanda Rataj.

SANAZ MAZINANI thanks Stephen Bulger, Lise Beaudry and Alice Dixon and Rosemary Heather.

Registered Charity #11924 7310 RR0001

DIRECTOR
Lise Beaudry

**HEAD OF EXHIBITIONS
AND PUBLICATIONS**
Alice Dixon

HEAD OF EDUCATION
soJin Chun

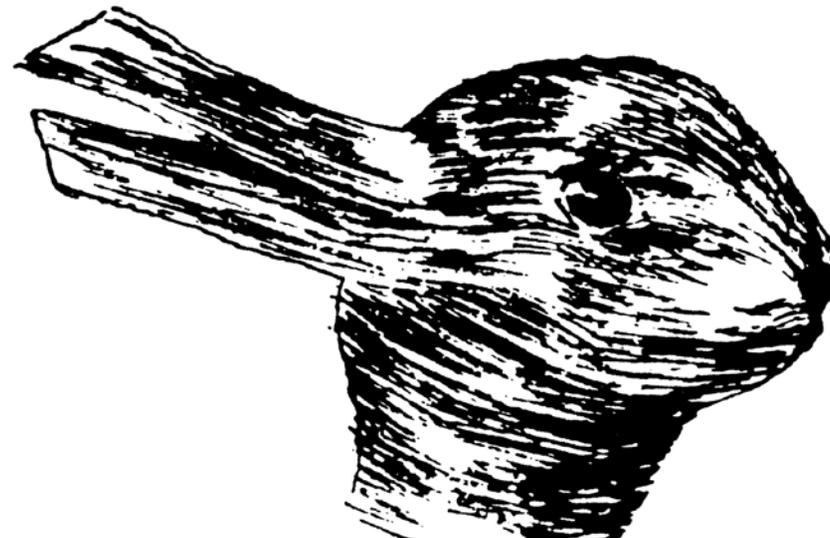
**HEAD OF FACILITIES
AND MEMBERSHIP**
Stuart Sakai

**HEAD OF COMMUNICATIONS
AND DEVELOPMENT**
Robyn York

EDITING
Alice Dixon and
Gaye Jackson

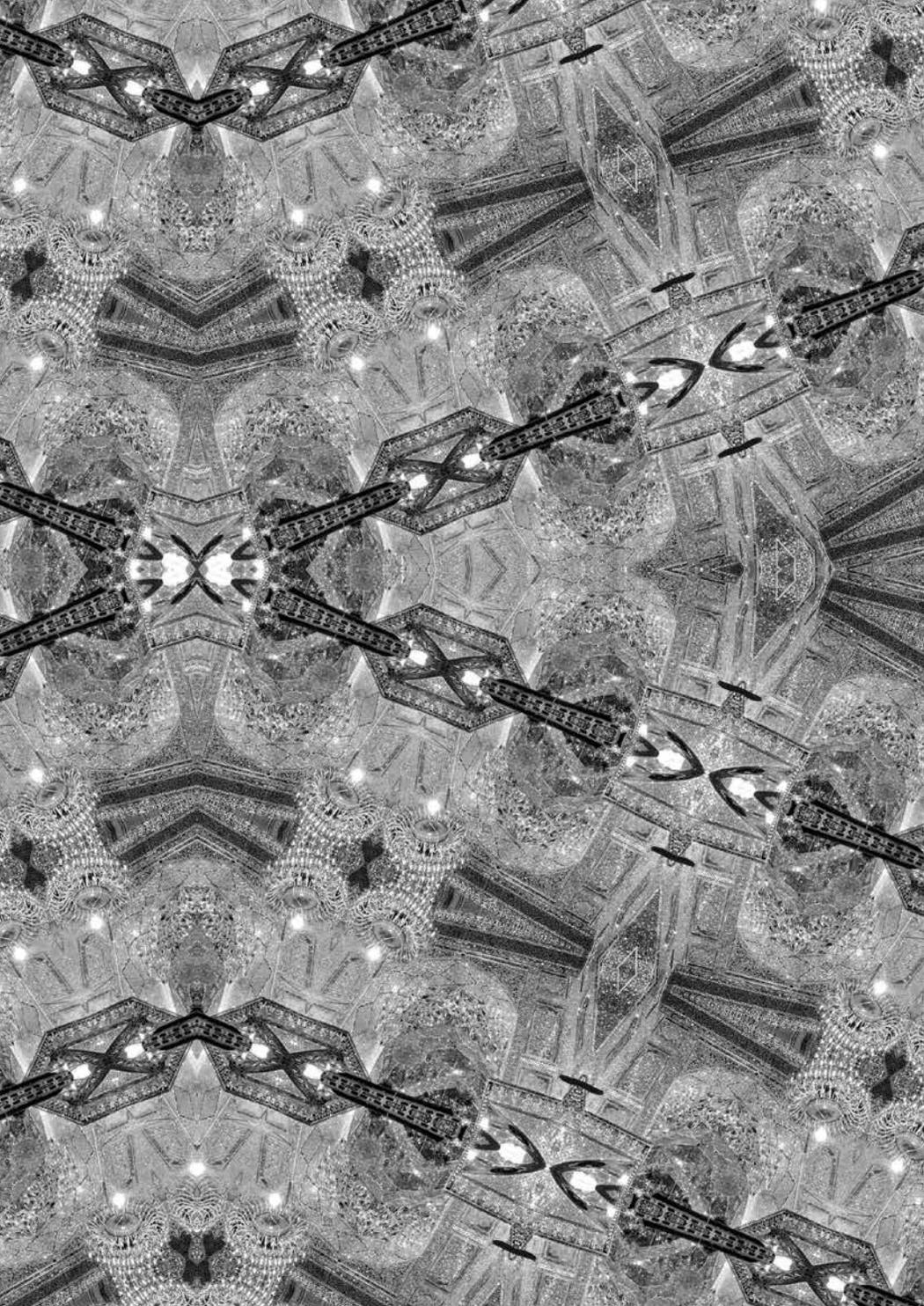
DESIGN
Zab Design & Typography

BOARD OF DIRECTORS
Marvin Antonio
Kim Atkins
Sarah Beatty-Russell
Morris Lum
Jack Martin
Anne Maureen McKeating
Taimaz Moslemian
Jeff Rozdeba
Laurence Siegel



cover
SANAZ MAZINANI, *Rainbow Ground*
(CMY), 2012

right
SANAZ MAZINANI, "Kaninchen und Ente"
("Rabbit and Duck") from the 23 October 1892
issue of *Fliegende Blätter*.



SANAZ MAZINANI,
Wallpaper, 2011-2012

A photograph can hold a reality within its frame, be quickly read and easily disseminated. This makes it an information tool, which makes it a political tool. Consider for a moment how much your own perception of an event that you did not experience, or a person you have never met, has been informed by photographs. In our globalized world public perception can make governments and economies falter. A photograph has power.

I think that most people who consume visual media on a daily basis are able to read visual content with a degree of conscious criticality, discerning the intent of the imagery at which they are looking. But what about the meanings we are not conscious of absorbing, or the images we are not being shown? Further, if spoken language carries cultural bias within it, so too must visual language.

These are some of the considerations brought to light by Sanaz Mazinani's exhibition *Site, Sight and Insight*, which asks us to consider how we read photography. Mazinani's works in this show are carefully constructed to make us see explicit aspects inherent in photography's technical construction and visual language. Aspects such as duplication, cropping, the colour of light, or the variance between what the eye sees versus what a camera can record. Arts writer Rosemary Heather astutely engages the implications of Mazinani's artworks in her finely crafted essay entitled *Articulated Looking*.

Gallery 44 thanks Mazinani and Heather for sharing their work with us in the exhibition and the catalogue. We also thank The Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, and the City of Toronto through the Toronto Arts Council for their significant contributions to our operations.

ALICE DIXON | *Head of Exhibitions and Publications*

ARTICULATED LOOKING

by Rosemary Heather

I am talking to Sanaz Mazinani on Skype, and she tells me about something that she discovered on Google image search. Input the word *Iraq* and the resulting images give off an overall impression of earth tones, a range of browns, reds and greens. Try *USA*, on the other hand, and the results are candy-coloured synthetic hues, think “shocking” pink and “electric” blue. Click on the thumbnails and you see that Iraq’s earth tones come from images of tanks, fatigue-wearing soldiers and, distressingly, injured children smeared with blood, while the *USA* thumbnails present images of the country as a map, the American flag, and a Bald Eagle or two. Iraq is symbolized by the conflicts in which it has been mired internally, and with the United States for the last decade (today’s problems, in part, the result of the latter’s Coalition of the Willing intervention), and the United States is symbolized as an entity that enjoys a high degree of coincidence with its national symbols. While the former implodes on itself, the latter projects confidently outward into the world.

The contrasting portraits, Mazinani discovers, come from looking at the thumbnails as an overall pattern, a grid composed of splotches of colour. Take a macro view of the whole, look at it as a kind of picture, and two different patterns emerge, each pointing to something embedded in the representation of the two cultures in question.

Revelations that come from shifts in perspective are central to Mazinani’s art practice. The Google image search led to a work by the artist called *Digital Screens* (2012). Taking results from each search, Mazinani reduced thirteen individual images (eight from the United States and five from Iraq) back into a selection of the 256 colours that appear when each image is represented in a crude, pixelated state. She then animated each image, and, presented on thirteen individual monitors, each animation cycles through the colour gradations from which it is composed. The animations ask us to look at the visual language of photography as a process, one that is ideologically informed and susceptible to undoing.

Mazinani’s choice to compare the United States with Iraq is of course no accident. Recent history aside, *Digital Screens* was made by an artist whose first experience of public life came from working as a political activist. Mazinani tells me that she spent her teenage years with various political groups (The North York Youth Committee, Rock the Vote); at university, the artist participated in anti-globalism protests, including those at the 2001 Summit of the Americas free trade talks in Quebec City. Today, she is active with the Occupy Movement in San Francisco and Oakland, California. I recount this history because of the way it informs Mazinani’s practice, and because it brings with it an anecdote that helps explain why the artist makes the work she does. In conversation, Mazinani told me that in her life as a teenage activist she would speak to the media and then find the subsequent representations of herself and what she said to be “distorted and one-dimensional.” She also found representations of Iran, the country of her birth, and from where she immigrated to Canada when she was eleven years old, to be vastly different from her own experience.

In response, the artist took up the project of



8

investigating photography as a cultural construct. Seemingly objective, capable of straightforward picturing, photographs are presumed to be self-evident in the meaning they convey. This is a cultural bias with deep historical roots. Art historian Jonathan Crary notes that even pre-photographic technologies, such as the camera obscura, were credited to be truthful. By Crary's account, in the 18th century the camera "stood as a model of how observation leads to true inferences about the world."¹ Described in semiological terms as having an indexical (one-to-one) relationship to the things they represent, photographs are both bearers of a (photographic) truth and inherently deceptive entities. Deception is implicit to each photo's framing, due to what is left out and the biases innate to the person who took the photograph. The truth value accorded to the photographic object tends to be habitual and unnoticed. As Jeremiah Barber notes in an essay

¹ Jonathan Crary, "Techniques of the Observer," *OCTOBER*, Vol. 45 (Summer, 1988) (Cambridge: The MIT Press), 3-35.

about Mazinani, "the world understands itself through photographs."² To fight against this, in her practice, Mazinani finds ingenious ways to articulate the process of looking at photographs.

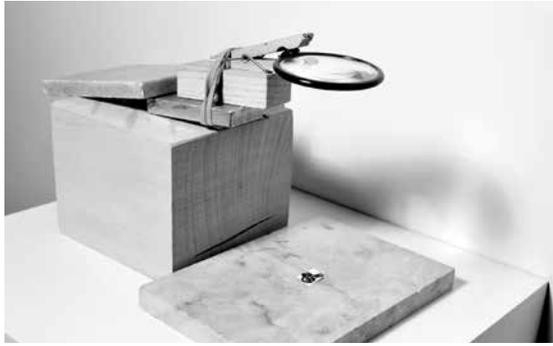
Perception/Perspective (2012) first greets gallery visitors entering the show with a simple dilemma. Two pictures from the same negative hang side-by-side. In each one, two women look back at the viewer, each of them dressed in matching white summer attire. The doubling works to undermine the verity one might attribute, however unconsciously, to a photo when seen on its own. In her notes to the exhibition, Mazinani eloquently characterizes the problem innate to photography that this work embodies: "the sisters, or twins, are a referent for the binary dichotomy of representation: a uniquely rich perspective that simultaneously excludes other vantage points or interpretations of events." The powerful presence of the photograph—its persuasiveness as a representation—blinds us to the reality of what we don't see. With this work, each photo implies that the other could be its copy and as a result both become less "true." This piece sets the tone for the show, Mazinani devising various ways to orchestrate critical encounters with the act of looking.

In *Optical Object #3* (2012), a simple wall-mounted assemblage invites viewers to look through a magnifying glass down onto an illustration that looks like either the head of a rabbit or the head of a duck. A famous optical illusion, the duck-rabbit conundrum demonstrates the instability of perception and its tendency to abhor ambiguities. The mind will flip from duck to rabbit, but it will not tolerate a less than coherent perception of the picture. Mazinani inserts this "trick of the eye" into the general mise en scène of the exhibition as a further cautionary note.

SANAZ MAZINANI,
Perception/Perspective,
Set of Two 5 x 7.6 cm
vintage photographs

9

² It is important to note that with this sentence the writer is responding to a statement made by the artist about herself: "I understand the world through photographs." Jeremiah Barber, "Smoke and Mirrors," *Sanaz Mazinani: Unfolding Images* (Toronto: Bulger Gallery Press, 2012), 9.



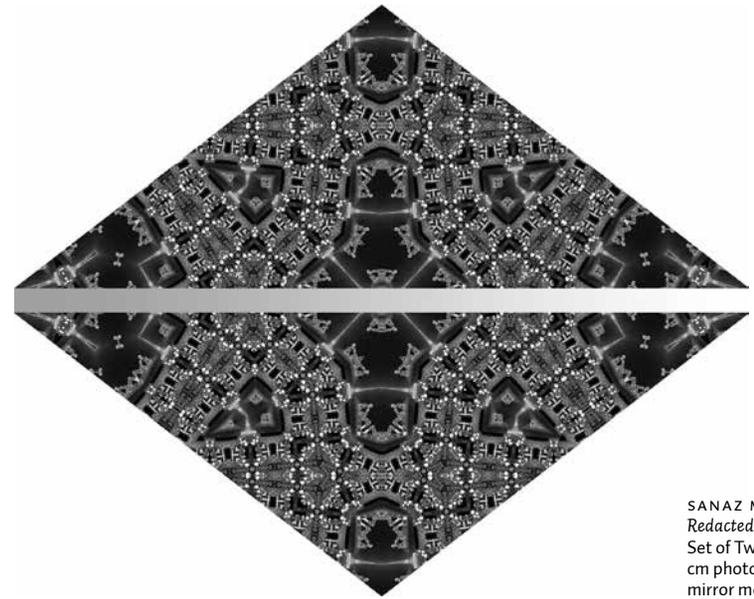
SANAZ MAZINANI,
Optical Object #3, 30.4
x 25.4 x 22.8 cm mixed
media object with lens
and image, 2012

Consider, carefully, what you are seeing, and be aware of the role your own desire for coherence plays when surmising the truth of what you are looking at.

To reinforce this point, the artist presents a number of other works that share the aim of theatricalising the experience of looking. *Rainbow Ground Portrait* (2010) groups three images, each one manipulated to foreground the optical construction of a photograph. For instance, one of the images makes visible the “cyan-magenta-yellow” colour scale that makes up the photograph’s basic compositional palette. Figuratively collapsing photography back into an anti-illusionistic two dimensions, the piece, at the same time, highlights the medium’s inherently pictorial qualities. The complementary work *Colour Field Test* (2011), presents a pixelated depiction of the photographic colour scale. Its large size and presentation within a white frame suggests human scale, as if the *Test* was almost a portrait of one constituent element of the technology.

Discussing her work, Mazinani quotes Barthes: “it is not impossible to perceive the photographic signifier (certain professionals do so), but it requires a secondary action of knowledge or of reflection.”³ It is this secondary action that the artist strives to bring to the fore. Mazinani’s *Redacted March #3* and *Wall Paper* (2011–2012) are epic, kaleidoscopic-looking artworks that result

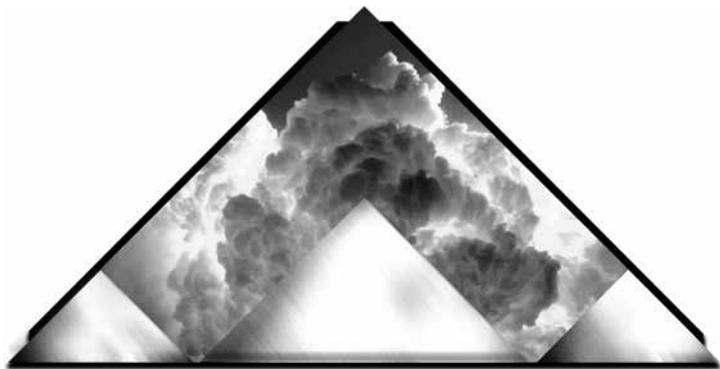
³ Roland Barthes,
*Camera Lucida: Reflections
on Photography* (New
York: Hill and Wang), 5.



SANAZ MAZINANI,
Redacted March #3,
Set of Two 43 x 106.6
cm photographs with
mirror mounted on
wood, 2012

from the artist’s refracting and multiplying of source images to create an overall pattern, one that hinges on a mirroring effect. Dazzling to the eye, the visual rhetoric of ornamentation may be the first frame of reference one uses to understand the work. It quickly becomes apparent, however, that this is a tactic used by Mazinani to choreograph viewer engagement with the image, an engagement within which she builds a process of critical reassessment. The source images used in *Redacted March #3* are: 1) a self-portrait of a soldier wearing army fatigues, and 2) American soldiers carrying a coffin draped by the American flag. That there may be no direct relationship (no causality) between the two images is part of the point. Seemingly arbitrary juxtaposition is a characteristic of collage, one that mimics the happenstance combination of disparate elements, communications that media effortlessly tend to produce. That the artist constructs this relationship is also the point, the story is one we infer as a result of the work.

Mazinani applies her collage technique to *Wall Paper*, using as source material an image she found



SANAZ MAZINANI,
Untitled #3, 66 x 132 cm
photograph with
mirror and wood, 2012

online of an Iranian mosque's mirrored interior. By scaling up the collage works, she makes good on their implied potential to be elaborated into infinity, or at least beyond the frame of the photograph. In effect, *Wall Paper* presents the artist's mirroring technique in the expanded field, as if offering commentary on the origins of this body of work as a whole in the specific characteristics of the digital image (i.e., an image that has a tendency to proliferate and which is highly susceptible to manipulation).

Finally, *Untitled #3* (2012) represents some kind of resolution to the exhibition in the way it tempts the viewer to forget about everything the rest of the exhibition seeks to teach. Mazinani uses the shape of a chevron to graphically reframe the image of an explosion. At the baseline of the image, three mirrors with their apexes facing upwards work to define the bottom half of the chevron. Depriving her audience of any knowledge of the context within which the explosion took place, Mazinani produces a thoroughly seductive art object. By aestheticizing violence as a product for our consumption, she makes a concession to the power of the photograph that also functions as a cautionary tale.

SANAZ MAZINANI is a visual artist, curator, and educator based in Toronto and San Francisco. She holds her undergraduate degree from Ontario College of Art & Design University and her MFA from Stanford University. Mazinani's work explores the relationship between perception and representation. Working primarily in photography and large-scale installations, her practice intersects conceptual and formal boundaries of the photographic image in response to site, sight, and insight, especially in relation to digital culture. Her work has been exhibited in galleries such as Art & Architecture Library at Stanford University; Stephen Bulger Gallery, Toronto; University of Toronto Art Centre; and Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco. Mazinani's artwork has been written about in *Border Crossings*, *Nueva Luz*, *NOW Magazine*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *Dide*. Most recently, Mazinani was named a 2012/2013 Fellow at the Kala Art Institute, short listed for the Magic of Persia Contemporary Art Prize, and was awarded the San Francisco Arts Commission Art on Market Street for 2013/2014. www.sanazmazinani.net

ROSEMARY HEATHER writes about art, the moving image and digital culture for numerous publications, artist monographs and related projects internationally, including *Canadian Art*, Toronto; *Border Crossings*, Winnipeg; *Art Papers*, Atlanta; *Flash Art*, Milan; *Experimental Conversations* at www.experimentalconversations.com, Cork; *CACTU*, Toronto; *Hunter and Cook*, Toronto; *APENGINE* at www.apengine.org, London, UK; *Von Hundert*, Berlin; *Daddy*, Los Angeles; *Neue Review*, Berlin; *The Senses and Society*, Oxford; *Art News*, New York; *BE*, Berlin; and *tema celeste*, Milan. Her ongoing project *The Real and How to Find It* interviews artists about the subject of The Real. Recent interviewees include Ken Lum, Kerry Tribe, Hito Steyerl, Phil Collins and Candice Breitz. She is a co-author of the collectively written novel *Philip*, Project Arts Centre, Dublin, 2006. Exhibitions she has curated include: *Ron Giii: Hegel's Salt Man*, Doris McCarthy Gallery, Toronto; Art Gallery of Carlton University, Ottawa, 2006-2007; *Serial Killers: Elements of Painting Multiplied by Six Artists*, Christopher Cutts, Toronto; Platform, London, UK; and *I Beg to Differ*, Milch, London, UK. From 2003-2009, Rosemary Heather was the editor of *C Magazine*, Toronto. An online archive of her writing can be found at: rosemheather.com.