

The Unseen City

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Mitra Tabrizian's photographs unsettle. Taking subjects in an everyday scene, she creates an atmosphere of the unreal. The power of her work lies in how she separates the daily life happening around her subjects into a sublime image that speaks to the emotional interior. This disconnection, this jarring, returns power to the subject. Her work communicates there is more going on around us than necessarily meets the eye. Whilst Tabrizian focuses on the small and the everyday, the impact of her work is broad; what is the role of the individual in wider society; can we challenge our perceptions of unseen or overlooked aspects of our contemporary world? To this end, Tabrizian was well placed to consider the social changes we see in London, of the way the city and its functions keep running. 'You don't know what nights are like?' initiates with a straightforward question; what is the experience of people who regularly work through the night? There is not a simple answer to this and Tabrizian does not seek one. The pair of photographs created by Tabrizian are linked by a sense of a transition, of crossing over by those that work through the night. In these two photographic works, we see an expression of the variety of emotional responses; of loneliness, resilience, strength.

In one image, we see a figure walking through a wild landscape, almost rural with overgrown vegetation. And yet, there are street lights, a rubbish bin, and through the background the trace of a train line. The location, so central to Tabrizian's work, is in Tower Hamlets, on the edge of the cemetery and the streetscape. This combination of rural and urban is a key signifier in the image. The large sky, with the light fading away as the street lamps glint has deep consequence. The gloaming sky is an allegory of transition, of crossing over. The boundary of rural and urban, of day and night, creates a landscape of opposites. This landscape encapsulates our figure, walking, perhaps from work, and raises interesting, unsettling questions. What of her thoughts in making this unremarkable daily journey? This constructed landscape surrounding our figure takes her out of normal time, catches her between day and night.

In Tabrizian's second image the air of constructed detachment remains, through a markedly different composition. A building sits alone, almost as if on the edge of the sky. The building is at first glance anonymous and unremarkable and yet traces of life within are picked up with yellow light glowing from a scattering of windows. There is an urge to wonder; who lives there? Anyone, everyone. It is anonymous and yet personal. The choice of location, painstakingly chosen, is again within London. A street in Haringey with its familiar bus stop for the everyday journey to work, and back home. The quality of light is central. The soft blue glow of the sky has an air of dawn, emphasised by the illumination of the bus stop lamp, and the handful of glinting windows. Without a physical subject, the building acts as a character, it personifies the scene. It stands strong against the expanse of sky. It resists.

Tabrizian ties these two works with a series of extracts from a collection of interviews made with people working at night. In doing so, Tabrizian more directly addresses the importance of the internal voice. Tabrizian carefully selected extracts, as she would describe them, fragments, that capture something of the interior. Sometimes surreal, often talking of lost moments with friends and family, the fragments come together to express the sense of being on the 'other side'.

The use of written excerpts could be seen as a more typical social documentary approach, but, to Tabrizian, the fragments are a gesture at an incomplete response to the experience of working at night. Sitting alongside the panoramic photographs, the texts add a complexity of experience, but do not attempt to give an authoritative or didactic answer. The balance of opposites is emphasised in the location of display. By installing the works at Southwark station, both metaphorically and physically, the subject is brought from the edge of the city to the centre. The images are staring down at a busy streetscape, glanced from passing buses and watched by passer-bys. With 'you don't know what nights are like?' inhabiting the billboards, it is a work that will be seen again and again by those on their commute; a work that bears repetition through its emotional complexity.

Tabrizian's work has often aimed to challenge simple answers to complex questions, whether that be through 'Young Unemployed' (2013), a meditation on the concept of a 'lost' generation, to a photographic response to the financial crisis, in 'Bankers' (2008), where a number of young male bankers stand together, isolated, in a grand lobby. Tabrizian's depiction of the Muslim community in London 'Another Country' (2010), explores communities long settled in the UK, yet with an otherness, perceived or internalised. Through these projects, as with 'you don't know what nights are like?', there is a repeated notion of resistance, that the individual can act to resist a scenario through actions that may appear passive.

What can be traced is a desire to open up a question by engaging audiences emotionally. The poetics of Tabrizian's images, their staged, still aesthetic, call on us to question our own responses, and provides the distance to do so. Tabrizian has taken an aspect of London life and developed a complex emotional study. 'You don't know what nights are like?' takes us out of normal time, to an in-between place where we are allowed to consider questions of the personal. Rather than dismissing the questions as too big to worry about, we are drawn into an expressive study of contemporary life. The interior is brought to the outside, and the work stares out in the centre of the city.



'City, London', 2008, Mitra Tabrizian



'Another Country', 2010, Mitra Tabrizian