

A Moon For My Father

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79 minutes is all the time it takes for *A Moon For My Father* to say a thousand extraordinary things. Co-directed by Mania Akbari and Douglas White, the film is about exile and migration, isolation and family, trauma and recovery, censorship and childhood, about the fracture of Iranian society and the joy of human connection, surgery, sculpture, birth, death and everything in between.

Akbari will be familiar to European audiences both as an actor – her roles included starring in Abbas Kiarostami's landmark *Ten* – and a director. Behind the camera she carries with her like a diary, her best known work in the UK is *Life May Be*, the two-sided essay film she made with Mark Cousins after leaving Iran for London in 2012 – but that project is just part of a much wider body of work.

Like *Life May Be*, *A Moon For My Father* is built around 'letters' sent in the form of narrated short films. This time the other correspondent is sculptor White. Her film with Cousins was an exchange of ideas between two filmmakers from places of conflict – Northern Ireland for Mark, for Mania the Iran from which she was forced to flee under threat of persecution. *A Moon For My Father* is something subtly different, a project that began purely as two artists again trading ideas but then shifted shape.

Our conversation is presented in keeping with the structure of film:

Mania: When the film begins in December 2013, my camera was close to me all the time as it always is, like my child. I'm filming every day, not necessarily for a specific project, but filming the reality of life, the moments that aren't really present in the mise en scene of the cinema. My process is filming all the time. And most of the time, I'm making films from the 'rubbish' – the moments many people would think were nothing. I don't believe that the story is far from me. The story is here [points at herself]. You just put a camera on it.

Douglas: When we first met Mania came to my studio, and she hadn't been in Britain long at that time so her English was more basic. But there was an obviously a very strong connection that took place. Subsequently I came to understand that was obviously interpersonal too, but she also reacted very strongly to my work.

The film became a document of the years to come – years that included Mania's ongoing exile, her adjustment to life in the UK and decision to reconstruct her breasts after the double mastectomy she underwent in the early 2000s while being treated for cancer. For Douglas, the experience was stranger still, new ground for a sculptor who had essentially never picked up a

camera before meeting Mania, and who early in the process, used it to capture a moment of deep personal meaning – his father’s funeral.

As the film evolved, themes grew. Rhymes appeared between art and life, as with the earliest scenes of the sculpted “palm trees” Douglas made from the rubber of discarded tyres and the latex used in Mania’s reconstructive surgery.

Mania: For me, the palm trees were a reminder of Iran. Like all Douglas’ sculptures, they have a conversation with you, and the palm trees spoke to me very clearly.

Douglas: That whole piece of work existed before the film, but Mania seeing it and her response blew me away. Here was something I’d created as a Western artist as a comment on colonialism, coexisting with the memories of a seven year old girl in Iran. We both found that this very interesting little gem.

Mania: The sculptures connected deeply with my sense of myself in a way that was totally crazy. So the first letter just came out of me wanting to talk to him as an artist.

Douglas: I got the first letter within weeks of us meeting, and then a few emails in Mania’s poetic broken English. At that point you couldn’t communicate fully in English with her, but at the same time I got this incredible window into her actual voice, this beautiful, poetic Farsi that she made the first films in. So I received this edited, subtitled vimeo link and that was the beginning of it.

Mania: Language is never just language. It’s history, culture, connection. As I created the films, I wanted to find a new language, an art language between myself and Douglas. Art is not with me and not with you. Art is between us. And I like dialogue. I don’t like monologues.

Douglas: Making the films became this beautiful pressure. As a sculptor you spend your life dealing with very personal subjects, but always at a physical remove. And here I wanted to reply in keeping with what Mania was doing, with the camera, even though it was the first time I’d really used one properly.

On screen, political censorship overlaps with personal history. Mania shows us Iranian photographs where body parts have been blacked out in such a way as to inadvertently draw the eye to them – “the censored becomes the focal point.” In the UK, she made a connection with the scars of her previous surgery. But everything can be remade, the film says.

Concrete electricity boxes in the streets of Tehran were stood on by protestors until the government built angled metal barriers on top – over which the protestors duly put wooden viewing platforms. “A collaborative sculpture project,” Mania drily calls it in the film.

Mania: I saw there was a connection between the way the Iranian government censors photographs, making us so aware of what is missing and the surgery I experienced. I came to the UK from a country where the government took control over the bodies of women. Now I could change my own body and make a new body.

Douglas: I was learning more and more from Mania about the film history and cultural history of Iran, which could feel intimidating. I think sometimes I felt that I needed to reply in what now seems this quite earnest manner, but it came from a sincere desire to communicate with her. There's a Farsi expression that Mania uses, which is 'what comes from the heart goes to the heart', and that was what was happening.

Mania: There is a sequence in the film where I talk about my family and childhood in Iran while on screen you are seeing people on the London Underground. The Underground is a fascinating location to me. It brings to one place different people with different passports, languages, ideas, from different classes, of different ages, and they're moving together. And some of them are reading, or kissing, some talking, fighting, touching, some alone and quiet. But everyone is living at once in the present and in their memory. And I find that when I'm on the Underground I can't control my memory, and finally there is this incredible moment when past and present can run together.

Douglas: There is always such nervousness about portraits of dying, so to just straightforwardly put some of my dad's funeral on camera felt pretty revelatory to me. And then of course there's this connection between dying and birth that comes organically in the film.

Changing physical reality can be an act of resistance – and a taking hold of fate. Off-camera, Mania and Douglas became a couple in the course of making the film. And then another transformation began – Mania undergoing IVF treatment, having previously been told her cancer treatment would make it impossible to have a child.

So it felt fitting that when the three of us met on a cold London afternoon to discuss the film, there were actually four of us – Mania and Douglas' son Robin with us too, every bit as intelligent, likeable and endlessly curious as his parents.

Mania: Part of why I wanted to have a baby was because I didn't have a root in this country. And when I was 28, the doctors in Iran cut my breasts and told me I couldn't get pregnant again and then I made the breasts and there was a pregnancy. It was a dialogue between science, technology and art, involving my acceptance that I change my identity. Every injection changed my body and I accepted that transformation.

Douglas: That was obviously a very hard period for Mania with the IVF and the surgery, so the period between the films at that point was also the longest. But once Robin was born, there was a real desire to pull this material together. Also by then she hadn't made a film for four or five years, which for her is challenging in itself.

Mania: In hospitals you always see the divide between private and personal collapse. Some women I know didn't even want their partners to see them having their IVF injections, let alone filming it. They said Oh God Mania, you're so brave. I'm not brave. My government tried to hide so many aspects of people's lives, and so my intention is that all of these things should be seen. I never felt that there was anything in the film that was too personal. I don't believe that we have a personal life! Because everything connects us to other people – and everything is recorded. Everything is data. I think we like to believe we have a private or personal life but we do not.

Douglas: The level of intimacy in the film could make me hugely uncomfortable! But having seen Mania's work I knew from the beginning that if I was going to do this, it was the nature of it. And as an artist, what I've learned is that when you feel the ground is really unsteady beneath you, that's a sign you're on the right path.

Mania: What is really painful to me is that people in Iran cannot see the film. Iranians outside Iran can see it, but otherwise in Iran itself it is banned. But the film reflects myself too because in many ways I've come to enjoy the dance that comes with having one leg here in the UK and another forever in Iran. The response to the film from British people has been really interesting. Iranian people move very quickly to sharing aspects of their lives, and I know in the UK that isn't so popular!

Douglas: Showing the film to audiences has been this whole other fascinating part of the process. It often seems to provoke really intense reactions – so you're not just seeing the breadth of the response but the depth of it too.

Mania: Which is what cinema is.