

# **DeGreening**

An Installation of Photographic Works

by

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B.F.A Nova Scotia College of Art & Design, 2015

A thesis presented to Ryerson University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts, in the  
program of Documentary Media

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2017

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### **Abstract**

This thesis is a supporting paper for a photographic exhibition that explores contemporary social and political issues in the country of Iran, through the depiction of a changing landscape. The work consists of photographs of the northern province of Gilan, Iran. As a critical body of work, the installation engages audiences to experience the changing environment and asks viewers to question the causes of the environmental changes in agricultural areas.

A brief history of land use change in Iran during the White revolution is presented followed by a description of the current situation of farmlands in contemporary Iran. Goals for the project, methodology and issues of subjectivity are discussed. The shooting strategies, selection of the images, and presentation of the project is outlined. Finally, the essay discusses the project's documentary relevance.

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### **Acknowledgements**

Many thanks to my supervisor Katy McCormick, my advisor Don Snyder and my professors Vid Ingelevics and Elle Flanders for their support and encouragement to continually push my ideas further. They have made my MFA journey enjoyable and inspiring.

Finally, I owe great thanks to my parents who have always supported me in following my passions in life.

## Introduction

*“It is essential that the government, more than ever, assist the peasant and in pursuing this objective do whatever is necessary to avoid bureaucratic delays, for agriculture in our country is the most important issue and the economic foundation of our country.”*

—Ayatollah Khomeini, 1979

This project offers a response to the catastrophe that is taking place in the fields of Gilan province in northern Iran: land use change from food production to residential villas. This project aims to show the current situation of the region in 2016/2017, while it also explores the roots and reasons that led to farm lands, in one of the most fertile and crucial provinces in the country's agricultural industry, to increasingly undergo changes of use that started with the White Revolution in 1962. This photographic project aims to represent an ongoing destruction that started decades ago. Contradiction and contrast are the two main characteristics of this subject that I tried to keep as the main core of my project, *DeGreening*, both in its images and in the installation of the show. In order to emphasize this contradiction, I only kept contradictory elements and tried to represent them in the most minimal possible way

As a person who was born and grew up in the province of Gilan, the fertile and beautiful farmlands are part of my main memory from my homeland. While I started this project with a focus on farmers' social and economic situations, my attention shifted toward the fertile farming lands themselves that are being ravaged. I consider these agricultural regions, which are now slowly being destroyed, to be at the root of my identity. I migrated from my homeland to

Canada in 2009 in order to pursue my education at a Canadian university. While I have been living far from my homeland for the last eight years, I go back each year to visit. It is perhaps these prolonged absences with intermittent returns that have revealed more starkly to me the process of agricultural land use change. Each year I am confronted with another agricultural region in the process of transformation from green and fertile lands to grey and ugly bricks. Speculation, irregular imports, lack of support and many other causes over several decades have created the conditions for the agrarian population to leave their lands in search of a better life. On one hand, farmers do not have sufficient support from the government, either in terms of facilities or in terms of marketing. On the other hand, the tremendous quantity of irregular imports of farming products into Iran is pushing farmers and farming to the economic margins. In a situation like this, the government's and associated companies' interests become the priority over the national interests of its people. Thus, it is not a surprise that the existing conditions make the agrarian population weaker every year financially and discourage them to remain in their profession. The lack of support and lack of marketing for the agrarian population and the fact of bad economic conditions for agrarians, provides a good state for capitalism in the form of land speculation, where buyers make promises to farmers for a better life by offering them an amount of money that they have never dreamed of. Therefore, agrarians get a chance to sell their lands as a farewell to hardship and imagine a move toward an easier life and career.



Figure 1- Map of Iran/Gilan

## The Structure of this Paper

This paper is divided into three main sections. In the first section, I provide a brief description of the project in an historic context, situating it within the socio-economic conditions of agrarian life in Iran, specifically northern Iran. The second section provides a description of the methodology of the project, including a discussion of the techniques used and the artistic decisions made in light of the conceptual basis of the project. I specifically note how I came to work on this subject and discuss my decision to capture these images through the lens of minimalism. The final section situates the project in relation to the work of other photographers and artists who have adopted documentary practices to address issues caused by human intervention in the landscape.

## Chapter 1: Iran's Agriculture Sector in History

While in the visual project I focus on the current situation of Iranian farmlands, it is also important to look at the history of these lands in order to understand the root causes that led



farmers and farmlands to the current unpleasant situation. Visiting agricultural regions or even looking at images of these regions makes it clear that the current regime, the Islamic Republic of Iran, not only failed in supporting the agricultural sector but is pushing it aside. It is clear that the agricultural sector has not reached its potential since the inception of the Islamic Republic for a number of different reasons, but in fact serious issues arose even before the Islamic revolution in 1979, during Reza Shah Pahlavi's regime. According to Mehrdad Haghayeghi, "The late Shah's agrarian reform policies were designed to accomplish two objectives: One was to accelerate the dismantling of traditional agriculture, [and] the other was to facilitate, through active state intervention, the modernization and commercialization of agriculture."<sup>1</sup> They were meant to be a "push to employ mechanized means and modern farming, become a progressive society, strengthen and develop agriculture along with agriculturally related industries first then move to heavy industries who will need experienced workers that can be provided by the growing population in the villages."<sup>2</sup> But not only did these reform policies fail to achieve these goals, they also created further challenges for the agrarian sector, resulting in an increase in rural unemployment and a further marginalization of the peasantry:

[The] Shah let political motives dominate his reforms. Primarily interested in consolidating his regime (and in winning the support of reform-minded Iranians and Westerners), the Shah used land redistribution to weaken the power of absentee landlords and to increase Tehran's control over village affairs (e.g., local courts and markets).<sup>3</sup>

After the land reform was complete, the Shah was successful in terms of political goals, removal of the landed class and taking their economic and political power. But there was no improvement in the agricultural sector.<sup>4</sup> Thus the Shah's regime bequeathed a fragile and unsteady agricultural

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1 Mehrdad Haghayeghi, "Agrarian reform problems in post-revolutionary Iran." *Middle Eastern Studies* 26, no. 1(1990): 35.

2 Ministry of Agriculture 1962: 98.

3 *The Wilson Quarterly*, "Review: Land and revolution in Iran, 1960-1980 by Eric J. Hoogland," 7, no. 1(1983): 136

4 M.G. Majd, "Land reform policies in Iran." *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* 71 (7): 1050

sector to the subsequent government of Iran. While improving the agricultural sector has been one of the main pillars of the Islamic Republic, Iran is still experiencing fundamental difficulties in its agricultural sector, leading farmers to stop farming and farmlands to turn into residential villas. While there are many reasons that are leading the agricultural sector to fail, we can name speculation and lack of state support as two of the main factors.

### **Agrarian Reform in the Shah's Regime**

Between 1958 and 1963, which was simultaneous with the end of the Eisenhower administration and with John F. Kennedy's presidential period, the Iranian White Revolution was formulated.<sup>5</sup> With the rise of the White Revolution, the agricultural sector in Iran was subjected to land reform. This reform was both in the Shah's and Kennedy's interests. Before the reforms, Iran's agricultural system was based on the relationship between landlords and peasants. In other words, all of the agricultural lands were in the hands of big landlords and peasants were just workers. The Shah, who knew he had lots of opposition among the capitalist owners (who were therefore threats to his regime), decided to weaken them by giving these lands to peasants, by instituting reforms. According to Helmut Richards, "The successive stages of the land reform served to sever the big landlords from their rural power base, making them more dependent on their urban interests where cooperation with the government was essential to economic success."<sup>6</sup> By doing this, the Shah not only weakened a capitalist community of landlords, but

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<sup>5</sup> Ali M. Ansari, "The Myth of the White Revolution: Mohammad Reza Shah, 'Modernization' and the Consolidation of Power." *Middle Eastern Studies* 37, no. 3 (2001): 1-24. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4284172>.

<sup>6</sup> Helmut Richards. "Land Reform and Agribusiness in Iran." *MERIP Reports*, no. 43 (1975): 3-24.

also attracted the peasants' trust toward his regime, although this did not last for a long period of time. On the other hand, the American president at the time, John F. Kennedy, had his own political agenda: to prevent a communist influx into third world countries.

Thus it was an agreement between the Shah and Kennedy to prevent the infiltration of communism, which was a threat to American hegemony, and to cut the power of landowners, who were a serious threat for the Shah's regime.

Since the land reforms were not planned to improve the agricultural sector overall, but to benefit politics, fundamental economic and environmental problems took root.



*Figure 2 Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi hands out documents of ownership of land to new owners, White Revolution, land reform, 1963<sup>7</sup>*

The harmful consequences of land reform could be seen in the production of wheat and barley, which decreased tremendously in the following years. In fact, the new reform policies did not result in profit for Iranian farmers and rural residents but rather resulted in failing farms,

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<sup>7</sup> Catherine Legrand, Jacques Legrand: *Shah-i Iran*. (Minnetonka: Creative Publishing International (Farsi edition) 1999) S. 95 IR/RR.

which brought unemployment and forced migration to big cities. “In many cases the villagers and villages were not better off in any way and in many cases were worse off.”<sup>8</sup> Therefore, peasants couldn’t benefit from this reform, and their economic situation started to worsen. Thus, they had to either sell or abandon their lands and migrate to cities with the hope of finding a job.

Erick Hooglund, an American political scientist and an expert on contemporary Iran, came to Iran in 1971 to assess the results of land reform. He put his research results in this way: “Practical success in terms of real positive benefits for farmers subject to the law was practically zero. Iran’s land reform program was actually a conservative program that had limited positive benefits...in 1971 most villagers’ economic position performances were not better than the years before the reform.”<sup>9</sup> FARS News stated: “Millions of rural became poorer than ever, [due to] rising unemployment, low-wage work in the 1960s and insufficient irrigation. Only two percent growth in agricultural products occurred, while the country was experiencing three percent population increase and six percent increase of life expenses annually.”<sup>10</sup>

### **The Agricultural Sector After the Islamic Revolution in Iran**

Improving the agricultural sector has been one of the main pillars of the Islamic Republic of Iran, to regenerate and to increase agricultural production in order to achieve self-sufficiency. Compared to the Shah’s regime, Iran has had some success in agricultural output, but it still continues to be far from its initial goals to improve the socio-economic conditions of the agrarian population.<sup>11</sup> As Mehrdad Haghayeghi writes:

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<sup>8</sup> Afsaneh Najmabadi, “Land Reform and Social Change in Iran.” (*Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press*, 1987) 112.

<sup>9</sup> Erick J Hooglund, *Land And Revolution in Iran 1960-1980*, (Texas: University of Texas, 1982), 30.

<sup>10</sup> Fars News, <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13911214000293>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

As with all modern revolutions in their infancy, the Iranian revolution of 1979 espoused socio-economic justice and equality. As such, land reform became the center-piece of the political agenda for the leaders of the provisional Revolutionary Government who, among others, held the Pahlavi regime responsible for rural poverty and deteriorating agricultural conditions.<sup>12</sup>

During the last three decades, with a slight improvement in increasing the agricultural output, the Islamic Republic has so far failed to improve the agrarian social and economic situation. In order to understand Iran's post-revolutionary failure in the agricultural sector, it is important to know that the Islamic Republic's policies in general were affected by a major financial crisis due to a decline in oil revenues and mounting costs of the war with Iraq between 1980 and 1988, and to a lesser degree the general decline in trade with the west.<sup>13</sup> Clearly, such crises have had serious impacts on the state's development plans. But as an artist I was looking for other reasons for the impact on society and on the system that rules the country. It is clear that besides facts and figures that explain the failure of the Islamic Republic in actualizing their promises, there are other reasons beneath the injustice and the growth of capitalism in the country. After thirty-eight years of Islamic Republic rule, with the war having ended twenty-eight years ago and the country being one of the major oil exporters in the world, there is still no major improvement in the agricultural sector and the living conditions of agrarian population. The reason for this miserable condition might be something else beneath the social layers but it can't be easily read or perceived in society—there is no thread that connects the mystery of farmland destruction to political corruption by the government's operating system agencies. The Islamic Republic failed to support the agriculture sector and made farming an unaffordable profession for farmers because of number of different factors, but two in particular played a major role in the agriculture sector. One is the irregular imports of farming products that Iran

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<sup>12</sup> Haghayeghi, Agrarian reform problems, 36.

<sup>13</sup> Haghayeghi, Agrarian reform problems, 36.

cultivates itself, such as rice and tea; and the other is letting land speculation become a popular business in rural areas, which is making the farming areas smaller each year and turning them into residential areas.

### **Foreign Agricultural Products**

Foreign agricultural products, especially tea and rice, exist in abundance in the market, throughout the country and even in the northern provinces that are themselves the focus of rice and tea production in Iran. The importing of these products is happening even while the country has the full potential to supply them for Iranian consumption. Indiscriminate importation has strongly challenged domestic products. Importing products in great amounts causes local products to face severe problems. Now the question is how and when the agricultural sector is going to stop this process of irregular import, as it has a serious negative impact on the country's agriculture industry.

The irregular importing of Pakistani and Indian rice into Iran drops the local rice prices, and causes a downturn in the local market. During the past few years, the agricultural sector has been fighting with the ministry of industry to take control of the import volume for agricultural products. One of the members of the Ministry of Agriculture in Iran, Rahmatollah Norouzi, in one of his interviews with Radio Iran said, "by assigning the import department to the Ministry of Agriculture we could control the amount of importation and keep it just to the needed amount to compensate the deficit amount based on the deficiency of each year's local production."<sup>14</sup> He continues: "unfortunately I must admit that as long as the Ministry of Industry controls the

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<sup>14</sup> RadioIran, <http://webapp.iranseda.ir/EpgRecordArchive.aspx?VALID=TRUE&epgId=53222921&chid=11>

amount of agriculture products imported into the country, affiliated companies won't stop taking profits, while bribery is very common within the system.”<sup>15</sup>

### **Land Speculation in Northern Iran**

Speculation is a serious issue that is on the rise each year, which is turning farmlands into residential villas. It is not surprising that with farmers being forced to escape from farming due to agricultural sector infrastructure problems, and a high demand from buyers, (who would love to have a villa in one of the most pleasant provinces in the country), the platform for land use change has been provided. But the question comes to mind about how individuals could buy and build these villas, while there are number of official rules that are designed to stop these lands from going out of the farming cycle. One of the local news media in Rasht, the central city in Gilan, in an article that was released in the spring of 2017 mentioned that the most popular reason for land speculation is that the government bureaus look at these lands as revenue generators in terms of construction. The recent surveys show that land speculation is carried out by people who are supported by the government agencies, without whose support the violation would not be possible.<sup>16</sup>

In the country and in the province of Gilan, the need to combat land speculation has been emphasized but we are still witnessing residential villas taking the place of farms. From time to time, several buildings are destroyed but soon after another building rises up in the same location. The agricultural sector needs to be supported economically in order to survive, but unfortunately as I mentioned earlier in the paper, there are a number of major agencies that are

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Rasht Information Center News, <http://www.rashtpress.ir/index.php/business-2/item/8527-94>.

connected to the government that are taking benefit from the failure of agriculture in Iran, either because they could take benefit in terms of construction or importation of agricultural products. Gilan province is fertile, farming takes effort, but in the end speculators take the most advantage of farmers' efforts.

While the Islamic Republic failed to support the agrarian population either economically or politically, the general agricultural sector failure is not a surprise. As a result of this defective operating system and agricultural sector failure, the process of rural-urban migration is experiencing an increase, which itself constitutes a major problem.

### **Rural-urban Migration**

Migration from rural areas to urban areas is happening in the world for different reasons such as economic forces, housing, cost of living, income and education. Since the revolution, an ongoing migration of rural residents to urban areas is happening, which is not a healthy action for a society when it happens in huge numbers. The population of Iran has experienced a rising trend during the last decades from twenty million in 1960 to eighty million in 2015, which is five times more growth compared to its neighboring countries (figure 2). The ongoing process of rapid population growth in Iran over the past decades has led to a noticeable change in the structure of both rural and urban areas, as population growth demands urban area growth. "Between 1966 and 2006 the number of cities tripled and the urbanization level increased from 38% to 68%. One of the main characteristics of such growth has been the concentration of population in large cities."<sup>17</sup> Urbanization is one of the major driving forces contributing to land use change, and this requires an increasing amount of land and other resources.

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<sup>17</sup> Nooredin Azimi, Mojtaba Rafiean, and Saleh Pooyan, "Land Use Change and Its Implications on the Spatial Structure of City, the Case of Rasht, Iran," *Journal of Basic and Applied Scientific* (2012): 4861  
<[http://www.textroad.com/pdf/JBASR/J.%20Basic.%20Appl.%20Sci.%20Res.,%202\(5\)4861-4870,%202012.pdf](http://www.textroad.com/pdf/JBASR/J.%20Basic.%20Appl.%20Sci.%20Res.,%202(5)4861-4870,%202012.pdf)>.



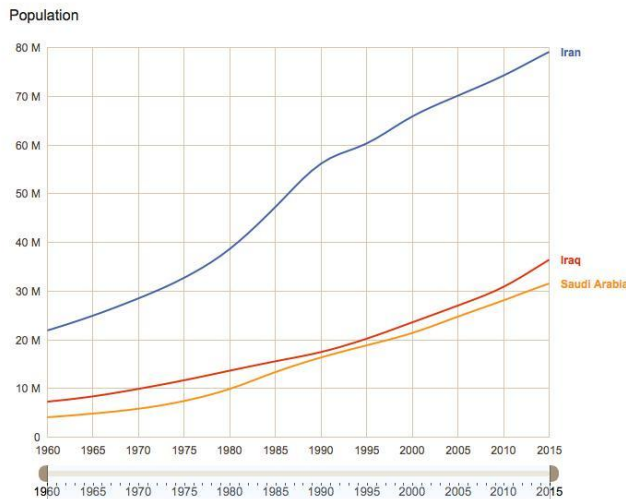


Figure 3 Data from World Bank, Oct 7, 2016

Rural migration and land use change have led to a remarkable phenomenon in terms of environmental, economic, social and cultural impacts. Once, the villages of our country were economically independent of cities, while the cities were dependent on rural products such as dairy products, cereals, wheat, etc. But because of the uncontrolled migration of villagers to the city, most villages have been abandoned and agrarian lands became ruined. As these rural migrants do not have any profession to practice in the cities, they mostly start to do small jobs, which does not help either their own economic condition or the country's economy. This high-volume migration also has a cultural impact, as many rural customs and even their dialects are threatened with extinction. Given the fact that young people are more likely to emigrate than any other age group, this will be important for rural communities in the long run, as their migration generates a decline in rural production, and reduction in the rural economy.

After spending two months in Gilan in the summer of 2016, my local research, characterized by interviews with locals, indicates that there has been no major improvement in agrarian population living conditions since the land reform during the 1960s. Officials left the

farmers without providing needed facilities and support, which led the agriculture industry to experience economic depression and forced the agrarian population to leave their villages and farmlands in the hopes of a better life. Thus financial difficulty is the major reason that leads farmers to sell their land, when farming becomes unaffordable for them. During my interviews with locals, I asked a middle-aged man to explain the situation from his point of view, and he stated: “Everyone in my family used to be a farmer, but we couldn’t afford farming anymore and so we sold our lands, put the money in the bank and now we are mostly living from the interest of the money. We are not happy that we lost our farmlands, and I don’t like it when I see those beautiful green regions turning into residential areas, but farming is not affordable in this country...”

## **Chapter 2: Methodological Considerations**

This photographic project responds to the discourses noted in the preceding chapter: an essential representation of the current situation of the farmlands in Northern Iran, as well as an attempt to show the contrast between lands which are fertile and ruined. In responding to these elements, I chose to create a photographic installation that invites you to walk along the fertile farmlands as a metaphoric representation of my childhood memory of the area; at the same time the order of the photographs leads the audience to the space where the growing walls on the farmlands are revealed. I chose to create a body of work that pictures the process of changing from green and fertile to ruined and barren; hence the title of my work, *DeGreening*.

In developing my project’s methodology, I struggled with two key tensions, my responses to which have eventually shaped the work; these tensions and the corresponding

methodological responses are discussed in the remainder of this section. The first tension was to find a way to reflect the image which I have in my memory from my home province. My response to this was to frame the scenes in a way to keep construction signs out of the image, to make pleasant and peaceful photographs of the landscape. The second tension was a desire to produce a body of work that makes you feel the changing process just by looking at the series. My response to this was to create a body of work that gives viewers a conversation between two opposite sides of the area: peaceful landscape and rough construction. Although this contrast is obvious in the photographs themselves, I aimed to maximize the contrast in the fields through installation strategies that I will describe in detail further in this chapter.

### **Project Formation: from Farmer to Farmland**

Initially, I wanted to create a body of work that covers farming difficulties in Iran. In other words, the unfair lives of farmers were my initial subject. As a person who grew up in a city that is surrounded by farmlands, I have always been exposed to the image of farmers' poor living conditions. In the spring of 2016 when I was reading an article about the foundation of fair trade, I started to question the conditions of the agricultural sector in Iran. Knowing there is no fair trade for farmers in Iran, the objective of the project was to raise issues around products produced by agrarians in the hope of advocating for fair trade in the future.

As this project has its roots in my memory I started with my home province, popular for its immense tea and rice farms. I left Canada in early June of 2016 to get to the region right at the time of tea harvesting. My plan was to stay in the region for three months to cover tea and rice harvesting, capture the process of harvesting and most importantly, capture farmers' stories in order to reflect upon them further in the project. I started to do daily short trips within the

province by car. On average I traveled 60 km per day, to cover most distinct farming areas in the province (Figure 4). I made a stop on most of the farmlands, and tried to talk with agrarians to take their unfiltered, first-hand stories.

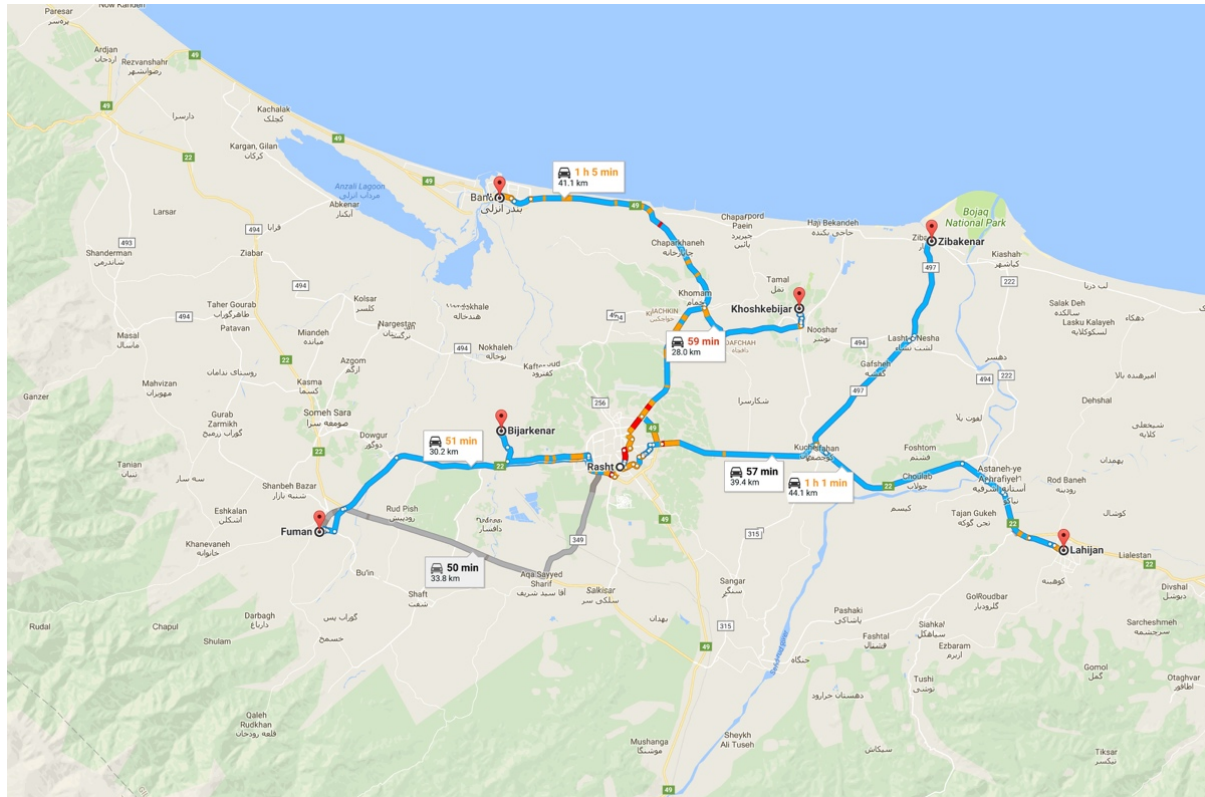


Figure 4

As I wanted my subjects to feel comfortable, I did not carry any professional equipment either for shooting or for sound recording. In fact, I decided to photograph with a small point and shoot camera, as I wanted to be as neutral as possible while on their private properties. I also recorded their sound with my cellphone just to have a record of our conversation, and then I transcribed that on paper. At the time, when I was doing my local research about farmers' difficulties and photographing their living conditions, I realized this bad situation of farmers caused a further disaster, land speculation and land use change.



*Figure 5 A farmhouse of an old farmer in Gilan, 2016*

The eventual idea took shape by the time that I realized that agricultural regions are shrinking tremendously at a very fast rate. I started to look at these ruined lands as a proper platform to bring up the contemporary political, social and cultural forces that are leading Iran's agriculture to fail. Looking for the roots of the bad economic situation of farmers, I noticed that all the problems that brought the bad economic situation for farmers are now leading the whole country to even bigger problems, with land use change and land speculation bringing many other problems. At this point I considered landscapes turning into residential properties a good project through which to discuss Iran's contemporary politics, culture and social issues. In fact, I decided to show that the condition of these lands is a result of poor social infrastructure and bad political decisions. This photographic project tries to show the connections between past and present problems, as well as future threats.

Eventually, I started to capture imagery that presents abandoned, ruined and wrecked images of the area. Working in the fields, I was experiencing a very complex atmosphere, in

demolished yet fertile lands. It seemed like a half-living field, which is not alive, yet not dead. I really wanted to take that surreal spirit of the region and use it in the creation of the project. As an artist, I always search for the main characteristics of my subject in order to form my artwork around those attributes. Here, the characteristics of the project were in contrast with each other. On one hand, the land is chaotic and ruined, while on the other it was still peaceful and fertile. Therefore, I decided to use this contrast in the region in my project to take viewers on a journey where they find themselves somewhere between a peaceful atmosphere of farmlands and an uneasy atmosphere of construction in the farming fields. Gigantic metal gates and cement blocks in the middle of the fields are human signs of ownership of the land, which inform us that the land is going to disappear forever.



*Figure 6 Abandoned farmland, Gilan, Iran, 2016*

I believe it is very important to remind people who are looking only for their own profit that the land they are building on is not just any land, but it is the land that could guarantee the food



supply of future generations. Hoping to stimulate critical reflection in my audience, I decided to take them on my own journey in the hopes of giving them the same experience.

### **Shooting strategies: Concept and Visual Elements**

Developing shooting strategies for the project was an important step, as I needed to find a way to represent the changing process as well as create visual elements to connect my photographs, in order to construct a sense of the journey discussed above.

As the inherent characteristics of the changing area, I had to deal with elements of both ruined and intact features of the landscape. Although I did not have any clear idea of how I was going to work with the contrary spirit of the region, I was sure that I needed to cover both the fertile and the degraded agricultural lands. Therefore, from the beginning of this project I divided it into two different groups: abundant and barren images, in order to follow the conceptual level of the project.

Creating a visual presentation of the vast agricultural area was one of my initial thoughts while I was shooting. It is true that regardless of any specific visual strategy, these photographs would stay together as a group, but I was looking for a strategy to introduce all the photographs as a united image of the area. Therefore, I made some rules during my shooting to connect them visually and make a bigger image. The horizon line was the key element of this connection.

All the photographs consist of two major elements: the sky and the land. I insisted on keeping the whole project together both visually and conceptually, by keeping the horizon line at the same level in the middle of images. While I was not carrying a tripod, which was beneficial to staying neutral in the fields, I used my camera's guidelines to keep the horizon line at the same level.

While the line, as a visual element, is keeping the photographs connected, it also suggests inherent vastness, generosity and calmness of the land. As the project goes further, the line becomes disturbed as cement walls and gates break the perfect lines in the background. These elements of construction alter the view, and the perfection of the land, pushing it to the back and covering it. These construction elements make it hard, if not impossible, to see the horizon anymore. By moving from the ideal image to the corrupted one, I pictured destruction and transformation in the region, metaphorically.

### **Content of the Images: Refusal to Picture People**

As I discussed earlier, I spent much time with farmers and photographed them before I turned my camera toward the land. I photographed farmers in the fields and in their houses, as well as in tea factories (Figure 7). But I decided to keep those images out of this body of work, at least at this stage of the project. While the stories of farmers and their farmlands are interconnected, I believe by not seeing the actual figures of the farmers in the images, we think more about their stories and I can speak about a broader range of issues within the society. I wanted to picture the human footprint on the land, while the land is empty of human presence. By doing this, I intended to suggest that mindless development continues to destroy the farmlands, bringing us closer to the annihilation of humanity as fertile lands go out of our reach. I preferred to create a surreal view of the future, when there are structures on farmlands, making them impossible to cultivate anymore, and there are no human beings anymore.





*Figure 7 Farmers working in the fields/factory, Gilan, 2016*

### **Presentation Format: Image and Installation**

At the second step of the project where I wanted to shape my ideas and put photographs in a uniform body of work, I struggled through three different possibilities. My first attempt was to make stitched images that represent the stitched and chaotic character of the region. I put together images of ideal farmlands and lands that are going under construction to make triptychs and diptychs (Figure 8). By doing this, I was seeking to reconstruct the abstract look of the region, with unexpected constructions in the middle of the farmlands. Although the stitched images came close to representing the unexpected image of the region, this approach did not give me the opportunity to take my audience on a journey, and it was just a reconstructed image of the region. In the process of creating a body of work that mimics my own first-person experience of the area, I started to look for another way of presentation.



*Figure 8*

My second attempt was to do a photo essay in a book format. My strategy was to start with the images that are representative of my childhood memory of the farmlands, lands that are peaceful and green, and move to the farmlands that are being destroyed by being taken and changed to construction sites. In other words, the photos show the land going from being peaceful and fertile to being wrecked and ruined. I put them in an order to convey a feeling of the walls growing. As the viewer goes further, walls take over the land and the green belt disappears (Figure 9).



Figure 9

Even though the photo essay in the book format shaped the main axis of the project, I was still missing one thing, and that was a physical experience in the space. Therefore, my third attempt was to find a way to make an installation out of this project, so my audience can feel and experience this evolution in the exhibition space, and I can create a chaotic environment and position my audience in the middle of this chaos as a way of following the spirit of the region. Starting from images that are close to my memory from the region, as fertile and beautiful farmlands, I slowly lead them to dreadful images that indicate destruction and transformation of

farmlands. I want the audience to find themselves somewhere between the peacefulness of land and disturbed areas, and make the audience rethink the use of land.

### **Exhibition Installation Strategies**

At this step, the original shape of the project in terms of selection and arrangement was determined, as I was using the same strategy in the order of photographs. I had this chance to apply my ideas around the horizon line and I could take the project to a new level in terms of kinetic experience, as the audience could walk along the images. I also developed my ideas to use the shape and concept of the cement walls in the gallery space.

After playing around the idea of horizon line from the beginning of the project, by putting my works up in a gallery space, I have had this opportunity to make a big panoramic view of the region. I knew that I wanted the two categories of abundant and barren on two separate walls facing each other. By putting these two different faces of the region in opposite each other, I was looking for a conceptual conversation between the walls. By doing this, I could also position viewers in the middle of the field, which is still fertile on one hand but ruined on the other hand.

As the cement walls are one of the main characteristics of this project, I really wanted to somehow use the idea of a cement wall in the gallery space alongside the photographs. I really struggled with this idea, to find what I consider the best solution. For instance, I had an idea to build an actual cement wall in the gallery space, to divide the space between fertile and green farmlands and demolished lands. Another thought was to frame the photographs inside of cement frames, while the frames go tighter as the cement walls take more space in the photographs. But these ideas were not adding to the project. Therefore, I decided to bring the shape of the walls out of the frame as an element of the installation by laying out the photographs to mimic the

shape of cement walls. This wall constructed by photographs is facing what we see as farmlands. By doing this, I also found a way to bring my ideas about the deformation of the horizon line, as a visual element, to the gallery space. On one wall, there are a number of photographs sitting next to each other: they not only represent the great view with a perfect line in the middle, but they also form a line on the wall (Figure 10). On the other side, photographs are creating the shape of the brick walls, where the audience is confronted with a constructed shape that is in contrast with the facing wall (Figure 11).



Figure 10



Figure 11

I also struggled with whether to have the photographs in the constructed wall color or black and white. I had no doubt that I want my landscape photographs to be in color, as my main intention with those photographs was to depict the difference between the greenness of the land and the greyish look of the bricks. But when I decided to make a wall with photographs to mimic the existing cement walls in the photographs, I thought having those photographs as black and white could help both the concept of the project and the installation. After doing some sketches, I realized the black and white helps the general look of the image wall, but it reduces individual

images, as it takes the existing contrasts between greenness and cement and it makes them flat (Figure 12).



*Figure 12*

Now having two walls conceptually in contrast with each other, I wanted to make a connection between them. In order to have this turning point, from beauty of the land to destruction of it, I decided to include a diptych. At this turning point, half of the image is still showing usual farmland, but in its second half it is showing signs and elements of construction. Therefore, after passing this image you enter to the second part of the project, where you see a number of images, sitting next to each other in a form of the brick walls, and the horizon line is out of your reach.

By installing and presenting my work in the way that I discussed, I aimed to present the very rough subject of land alteration, especially farming land, which is the source of our survival, in a more poetic way. Instead of simple presentation of the images, I intended to create a body of work that demands more contemplation. I did not want this project to have a journalistic approach, but I tried to keep it as a documentation of the current situation. I aimed for a documentation that includes the oppressed peasant's voice, the fear of the future, and the criticism of the contemporary political and cultural situation.

### Chapter 3: Visual Representation of Changing Environments in documentary

This project is situated within documentary practices that bring up issues around the environment. While this project focuses on the subject of land use change, my initial inspiration to look at my changing environment started years ago when I saw Berenice Abbott's *Changing New York*.<sup>18</sup> The general concept of "changing environments" became my main interest in the last few years. In terms of living environments, I always think about the stories that happened in these specific places; people who lived there and walked there; but also knowing that it is going to change and will not be the same, ever. "Places where we live, walk or drive are important to us, as are our life experiences and the ways in which we make sense of them."<sup>19</sup> This concept of deformation and change in human living environments played a major role in my subconscious mind. As result, I believe I could bring all the stories behind politics, culture and society to the surface through picturing the change. "Photography is an evolving visual language. In reportage, it delivers comedy and satire as well as tragedy."<sup>20</sup>

In this chapter, I begin with a discussion of the role of documentary in mirroring the familiar but unknown issues around the changing environment. I illustrate this discussion with examples from the works of two artists: Stuart Franklin and John Ganis. The emphasis of the discussion is on the specific ways in which their works challenge and contribute to our changing environment and changing landscape. The chapter ends with a discussion of how I have used

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<sup>18</sup> Berenice Abbott, *Changing New York*, 1935-1939. This project consists of the images of the New York city's changing face. Abbott's ideas about New York were highly influenced by Lewis Mumford's historical writings from the early 1930s, which divided American history into a series of technological eras.

<sup>19</sup> Liz Wells, *Land Matters: Landscape Photography, culture and identity*, A NORTH AMERICAN PLACE: LAND AND SETTLEMENT, 22.

<sup>20</sup> Stuart Franklin, "In a world of words, pictures still matter | Stuart Franklin," *The Guardian*, December 05, 2015, accessed July 21, 2017.

photography and installation possibilities as tools to bring up issues around land use change, especially with fertile farmlands.

### **Changing Landscape in Documentary:**

Documentary photographers reveal an unlimited number of situations, actions, and outcomes over a period of time; in short, they introduce life to their audiences.<sup>21</sup> The theme of land destruction after wars or natural disasters has been a focus of photography since the invention of the medium, in order to record events for scientific purposes, document situations, or record images in history. But in recent decades, many photographers have turned their camera lenses towards topics that are less visible to the public or less important to a majority of the world's population. In a time when the wave of modernity involves most communities from villages to metropolises, while the population of the world is experiencing a fast-rising trend, the need to alter the surface of the planet is obvious. As change is one of the main factors affecting living beings, it is not surprising that a living community demands change in its living environment. Land use is one of the biggest drivers of change on the planet, from agriculture to urbanization, to deforestation and to reforestation. The more we learn, the more we see that changes in soil are affecting us in more ways than we thought possible. Human activity is affecting the earth's systems in two major ways—one is by changing the atmosphere's chemistry, and the other is by transforming the earth's surface via deforestation, mining, and expansion of cities.<sup>22</sup> But how much we as communities think about the long-term effects of our alteration of this planet is a serious question. As noted landscape photographer Edward

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<sup>21</sup> Antonin Kratochvil, "Photojournalism and Documentary Photography." *Nieman Reports* 55, no. 3 (Fall, 2001): 27-31.

<sup>22</sup> Eric F. Lambin, and Helmut J. Geist, eds. 2006. *Land-Use and Land-Cover Change*. Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer Berlin Heidelberg. Accessed June 22, 2017. ProQuest Ebook Central.

Burtynsky states: “While trying to accommodate the growing needs of an expanding and very thirsty civilization, we are reshaping the earth in colossal ways. In this new and powerful role over the planet, we are also capable of engineering our own demise. We have to learn to think more long term about the consequences of what we are doing, while we are doing it...”<sup>23</sup>

The altered landscape provides a very rich platform from which to look at the needs and issues around a society. As Britt Salvesen writes, “...all human landscape has cultural meaning, no matter how ordinary that landscape may be ... our human landscape is our unwitting autobiography, reflecting our tastes, our values, our aspirations, and even our fears, in tangible, visible form.”<sup>24</sup>

### **Documentation of Altered Landscapes: Stuart Franklin’s “Footprint: Our Landscape in Flux”**

Stuart Franklin spent several years documenting climate change across Europe. He worked on number of different projects, considering the relationship between human beings and their environment.<sup>25</sup> His project, *Footprint: Our Landscape in Flux*, consists of a series of photographs that depicts environmental crisis throughout Europe, from desertification in Andalucía to flooding in Germany.<sup>26</sup> In this project, Franklin, as a photojournalist and a geologist, is depicting human beings’ footprint on the planet. “I started to engage with topical issues such as climate change, deforestation, habitat loss and glacial retreat. And now the world is changing very quickly—for example, this is the first year when there are as many people living in urban areas as there are in the countryside—and geography is able to understand those

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<sup>23</sup> Edward Burtynsky PHOTOGRAPHIC PROJECTS. Web. 20 July 2017

<sup>24</sup> B Salvesen and Alison Nordstrom, *New Topographics* (New York: Steidl, 2010), 52.

<sup>25</sup> Olivia Edward, “Stuart Franklin.” *Geographical*, October 2008, 114.

<sup>26</sup> Eric Hilaire, "Highlights From Photographer Stuart Franklin's Footprint: Our Landscape In Flux". *The Guardian*. (2008).



changes and transitions.”<sup>27</sup> Franklin’s work, and the way he looked at the changing landscape, are relevant to my own project not only because of the subject matter (land alteration and the human footprint on the planet), but also because of his use of this medium to make a body of work that at the same time is related to a specific region as well as to the entire world. Franklin made all the photographs in this series from a distance, suggesting a sense of detachment and alienation.<sup>28</sup>

An example of Franklin’s *Footprint* project is his photograph of *The Santa Maria church*, the last building left in the village of Anthochori in Greece- see figure 5.<sup>29</sup>



Figure 13 Stuart Franklin, *Greece. Megalopolis*, 2007.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Edward, “Stuart Franklin.”

<sup>28</sup> Raymond Bial, "Franklin, Stuart. Footprint: Our Landscape in Flux." *Library Journal*, 15 Mar. 2009, p. 103.

<sup>29</sup> <https://pro.magnumphotos.com/C.aspx?VP3=SearchResult&ALID=29YL530YDN4J>

<sup>30</sup> Stuart Franklin, *Greece. Megalopolis*. The Santa Maria church. The last building left in the village of Anthochori. Picture taken in 2007.

To the ancient Greeks, Arcadia was a rural idyll. Instead of a lush, bucolic landscape, I found one devastated by the hunt for fossil fuels. Sixty percent of Greece's electricity is derived from lignite (brown coal). This involves bulldozing the whole landscapes to feed the nearby power station. In Megalopolis, I found Greece's second largest lignite mine. The village of Anthohori in Acadia was wiped off the map—the church of Santa Maria was all that remained.<sup>31</sup>

Stuart Franklin's work is particularly relevant to my project for two reasons. First, his subject matter (the human footprint on the planet and the altered landscape) is important in my own work, as my project's purpose is to represent how our developing society is changing the use of the land, particularly in Iran. Second, Franklin produces a body of work that geographically covers Europe, but the concept of his project is not limited to any specific geographical location, as the comment he is making about land alteration is beyond the border of a specific locality; the whole planet is undergoing the same circumstance of land alteration. I will argue that while his work is covering flux in European landscapes, the popularity and familiarity of his subject enables him to make a broader conversation with the world about the same topic. In this sense, Franklin's work can be seen as global in its ability to engage with its audience from all over the world, as he is working on a subject that is at once about specific locations and also about larger environmental situations everywhere.

### **Reflection on Contemporary political, Social and Cultural Attitudes Through Landscape: John Ganis, "Consuming the American Landscape"**

Similar to the work of Stuart Franklin, John Ganis's portrayal of the relation between human society and the use of land initiates a critical conversation about human incursions into landscape. An example of this work is a project named *Consuming the American Landscape*.

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<sup>31</sup> Hilaire,. "Highlights From Stuart Franklin's Footprint".

During a nineteen-year period, Ganis captured the effects of industries and development on the lands of the United States. His work is of particular relevance to my project, not only because he is undertaking a contemporary political and social investigation of our era through human construction on the landscape, but also because of the minimal poetic visual language he uses to make his photographs.

He captured *Consuming The American Landscape* during the 1980s and 1990s, dealing with the use and abuse of the American landscape.<sup>32</sup> He argues that, “the American approach towards the land is often characterized by mindless development and exploitation of both public and private land for corporate profit [and] we are now aggressively exporting this consumerist attitude to the rest of the world.”<sup>33</sup> The controversial issue of housing development in the southwestern American desert, Sonora, is one of his subjects in this series (see figure 6).



Figure 14 Housing development in Cholla forest, Sonora desert, Arizona, 1999

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<sup>32</sup> Claude Baillargeon, *Imaging A Shattering Earth: Contemporary Photography and The Environmental Debate* (Rochester: Meadowbrook Art Gallery, 2006), 69.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

These photographs suggest an influx of residential construction into the natural land of the Arizona desert. In order to introduce his subject visually, he moves against the violent and destructive identity of his subject. In a highly artistic way, he uses the minimal signs of the construction marks of the industrial machinery wheels to guide his audience's eyes to the background of the image, which shows a growing residential area that is moving forward over the desert. From this point of view, the viewer sees herself/himself in the position of the photographer, where the developing residential area is coming forward to take away nature from him/her. In Ganis's own words: "The metaphors inherent in my photographs expand their scope beyond their immediate subject matter referring to the larger context of today's environmental crisis and may also initiate in the audience the process of discovering a deeper level of empathy with the earth."<sup>34</sup>

Ganis's project is of particular relevance to my own work for two reasons. First, like Ganis, I also attempt to investigate political and social issues in my own country through depicting the current situation of land use and the effects of development. Through the lens of our cameras, we both aimed to investigate and criticize the politics of our country, which are leading the landscape, and our own lives, towards a critical future. In other words, by capturing the images of a changing landscape, we both tried to go beyond the mainstream meaning and representations of development to achieve a realization of the interconnection between mindless development and landscape, which will leave us on a dry and dying planet. Second, he uses poetic visual language to make this series, and present the ugly subject of mindless construction and landscape destruction in the most aesthetically pleasing way. In order to guide audiences to

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<sup>34</sup> John Ganis, "Consuming The American Landscape", *John Ganis Photography*, accessed June 19, 2017, <http://johnganisphotography.com/galleries/consuming-the-american-landscape/>.

think about the disappearing land, he leaves viewers with the calm of nature, while highlighting the expanding destruction of nature through development and construction signs on the site.

### **Concluding Thoughts: Using Landscape as a Platform to Critique the Contemporary Political and Social Situations**

In this chapter, I discussed the attempts of photographers who are depicting and criticizing the threatening role of industry and development on the landscape. Relying on the work of Stuart Franklin and John Ganis, I argued that through photography, photographers could create works that investigate contemporary political and social issues. The work of both these photographers proves Well's statement that representing landscape as a social product, whether in romantic or topographic modes, tells us about cultural history and contemporary social behavior.<sup>35</sup> By representing very familiar yet bizarre scenes of the current situation of landscape, photography can invite audiences to rethink the use of landscape.

Moreover, the use of poetic visual language in both Franklin's and Ganis's works allows them to begin a civilized conversation with their audiences. "It articulates subjective memory and cultural currencies not only in relation to literal readings of images but also in terms of emotive affects."<sup>36</sup> In other words, the poetic and nostalgic language of their photographs persuades viewer to look at the images with compassion and to rethink the use of landscape more thoughtfully. As the crisis of landscape destruction, either from urban development or for the benefit of industries, is relevant to the whole planet and not specific to a geographical location, both artists communicate with broader audiences all around the world.

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<sup>35</sup> Wells, introduction to *Land Matters*, 1.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

In my own work, I rely on the presentation of agricultural regions that are being destroyed to look at contemporary Iran's cultural and social issues, as well as questioning the loyalty of the government's bureau to the agrarian population. I persisted in exploring the region's farmlands in terms of history, politics, culture and social issues. The strategy I used both in my photography and in my installation is coherent with the formal and conceptual aspects of my work, as the images and the way I presented them are representative of the turbulent conditions that are governing the country.

On the personal level, the creation of *DeGreening* reflects my own fears about the land that is being altered by human beings. Being a witness to mindless urban development and industrialization all around the world makes me fear and question not only the future of the earth, but also the future of our survival on the land. As I strongly believe that any project needs to start where the artist has experienced the situation, I started with my home country, Iran, where bribery is very common within the system. The profits of the importing companies on the one hand, and the increasing trend of bribery on the other hand are making farming unaffordable in Iran. Just to mention some of the effects of this defective system, we can name poverty, unemployment, endangering the food supply for future generations, and environmental degradation. As a local artist to this project, I am borrowing from my childhood memories to make a comparison between the past (my memory), which was close to an ideal agricultural region, and the present, which is a representative of altered land. I truly believe doing a project that is related to the human-altered landscape crisis is not related to one specific region, as the whole world is dealing with this issue. In this regard, my work primarily seeks to connect with a broader audience in order to invite them to rethink the use of the land, and secondarily it is a body of work that criticizes the internal issues of politics and society in Iran.

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