

Gut Feelings, Katayoun Jalilipour, 2021

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Short statement:

Using speculative histories, Gut Feelings resurrects a series of artefacts and imagery from late 19th century Iran, through a queer and intersectional lens. Inspired by the lives of historical figures such as Qajar royalty and feminist activist Tāj al-Saltaneh, who are often misrepresented in the digital world via memes and misinformation. Gut Feelings questions the importance of truthful and accessible archival information, and what part oppressive systems play in this. Using moving image (3D animation and GIFs), it attempts to re-portray the women of this era in a positive light, and enquire as to how fragments of truth can reimagine queerness in pre-westernised Iran.

Extended:

Gut Feelings started as a frustration with racist and misogynistic information spread on the internet about Qajar women, combined with a love for the way gender representation was expressed during this era, and the need to explore what this all means for contemporary queer identities, specific those of people of colour.

The title Gut Feelings refers to the feeling of knowing the truth about something in your gut. Knowing queerness has always existed within the ancestry of your culture, but it feels like a secret that only you know, and you feel the need to share.

The life of Zahra Khanum Tāj al-Saltaneh (1884–1936), one of the daughters of Naser al-Din Shah, is an entry into the world of people who dared to be different in this era. Her experiences as an unconventional person, a rebel and a rule breaker, help to explore further into what might have been and what might become. When fragments of truth expose a potential for queerness.

Gut Feelings is not solely about Tāj al-Saltaneh, but it uses her documented life (more documented compared to many women in this time) to look in, with speculation, imagination, desperation and hope, at the Qajar era. The desperation for something to hold on to as proof for different lives having lived before us.

Tāj al-Saltaneh, being from a royal family, had access to a different kind of life, uncommon for many women in this era. Her privileges as a rich and educated woman helped her to be a change maker. I'd like to think about the lives of women who didn't have these privileges, and the intimate stories that were never recorded. Taj's writing and the writings about her allows me to imagine all the possibilities, and to consider the difference between fact and fiction, and if fiction helps us to create more hopeful futures.

This interest in the link between fact and fiction comes from the struggle to source truthful events that may be a proof for queerness. For example, the supposed affair between Taj and a seamstress, which has been mentioned in published writing, and that being the only evidence, perhaps not tangible enough.

In a way this isn't really about proving that this affair happened, or to prove queerness has always existed, but instead, it's about the struggle and need for such proof, and what it means to want to prove these things. How this desperation to prove the existence of women-loving-women relationships may force us to overlook the issues that existed in this era. Financial despair, the Shah's family's love for westernising and modernising Iran, and women's appearance becoming the symbol of backwards thinking. Their autonomy over how they dressed and practiced their religion being taken away from them, enforced by the state. To overlook even the power balance existing between a seamstress and a woman from the ruling class, an overused trope in mainstream lesbian period dramas, all because of this desperate need to know, and seek proof, to recreate this proof for comfort.

Tāj al-Saltaneh was involved in the start of the Iranian feminist movement, and planned a secret march to the parliament against her own father's government, however like her father she too was eager for more western ways of practicing feminism. In her memoir she wrote: "Persian women have been set aside from humankind and placed together with cattle and beasts. They live their entire lives of desperation in prison, crushed under the weight of bitter ordeals. At the same time, they see and hear from afar and read in the newspapers about the way in which suffragettes in Europe arise with determination to demand their rights."

I am interested in the idea of women being set aside from humankind, and placed together with the 'beasts'. Could being beastly be a radical virtue that should be celebrated? And could it open doors towards sexual freedom and freedom from binary gender expression, far away from western values? Which are one of the root causes of misogyny, homophobia,

inherent racism, classism and anti-blackness existing within Iranian culture. Through this research and series of art works, I question, what if westernisation wasn't pushed onto our culture, what would that world look like? The GIFs made up of Qajar paintings and images are an exploration of these questions.

Maria Anna's (1606-1646) image became a symbol of both misrepresentation, and whiteness as the 'antagonist'. Maria Anna lived in an era in which western colonialism was already underway, which made the western world come across as stronger and better. Iranian leaders looked up to this, Iran itself having a long history of colonialism, and also partaking in African and Caribbean slavery.

I am interested in how information about historical figures, specifically women, exists on the internet: The memes made about Tāj-al Saltaneh and the women in her family, and the misinformation spread about them. What is left out of our identity once we only exist on the web? Images and texts which don't speak for the full lived experience of a person, and can be easily manipulated. In a way I use this manipulation in 3D format to explore if existing in more dimensions gives us a fuller scope of a person's life, and altering products of male artists, from or inspired by the Qajar era (Figure 1, 2).

Ultimately, Gut Feelings aims to question, and not glorify or justify history. *The fragments of truth spread around, looking for stories that are not told, reading between the lines and through altered imagery. Gut Feelings brings what is missed out of history into light, in a performative and lively way, creating space for those who did not have their stories told, or access to documentation.* Gut Feelings comes from a queer need for visualising queer desires, outside of the male heterosexual gaze, and envisioning a world outside of the desire for western values.

Reference and credit list:

• Gif references in order of appearance:

- 1- Collage GIF made from a series of paintings from the Qajar era.
- 2- A queering edit of 'Persian Couple Copulating' from a Persian Erotic Manuscript, found at the Wellcome Collection online archive.
- 3,4,5- Portraits of Katayoun Jalilipour, Taj al-Saltaneh and Maria Anna of Spain. 3D animation design by Sharif Elsabagh.
- 6- GIF of 'Two Qajar Women' photographed by Antoin Sevruguin.
- 7- GIF of Esmat Od-Dowleh (1855/6-1905) and her daughter posing by a river.

• Gut Feelings: Fragments of Fiction

3D animation design by Sharif Elsabagh

Music by Coral Rose Kindred-Boothby, created from a sample of Qamar-ol-Moluk Vaziri's song Nagese Mast

• Gut Feelings: Fragments of Truth

Credits:

3D animation design by Sharif Elsabagh

Historical figures in order of appearance:

- 1-Photographs of Princess Zahra Khanum "Taj al-Saltaneh" (1884–1936). The 12th daughter of Naser al-Din Shah Qajar, and half-sister of 'Esmat. Dated 1909 or 1910, by Ivanov (Roussie-Khan). Courtesy Women's Worlds in Qajar Iran.
- 2-Photographs of Esmat Od-Dowleh also spelt Ismat al-Dawlah (1855/6-1905) Half sister to Taj al-Saltaneh, and daughter of Naser Al-Din Shah.
- 3- Paintings of Maria Anna of Spain (1606-1646)
- 4- Drawing of Ziba Khanum, one of Naser al-Din Shah's wives, dates unknown.
- 5- Painting of Anis al-Dawla

\*The three memes used have been all downloaded from the internet and social media.

Film references in order of appearance:

- 1-Jooje Fokoli (1974), Dir. Reza Safai, actresses: Shahnaz Tehrani and Mastaneh Jazaei
- 2-Moorche Dare (1976), Dir. Bijan Fiaid
- 3-Hasan Kachal (1970), Dir. Ali Hatami

Text references:

'Ay Dokhtare' Blog. (2016) The Qajar Era Beauty Standards, Available at:<http://ask-iran.tumblr.com/post/36560331707/the-qajar-era-1796-1925-beauty-standard-sure>

Growing Anquish: memoirs of a Persian Princess, Taj al-Saltaneh, 1884-1914

"Princess Qajar" and the Problem with Junk History Memes, Victoria Martínez, 2017

Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards, Afsaneh Najmabadi, 2005

Zahra Khanom Tadj es-Saltaneh, Wikipedia entry

Sexual politics in modern Iran, Janet Afary, 2009

Taj al-Saltaneh: An Unveiled Princess, History of Royal Women, Available at: [www.historyofroyalwomen.com/taj-al-saltana/taj-al-saltana-an-unveiled-princess/](http://www.historyofroyalwomen.com/taj-al-saltana/taj-al-saltana-an-unveiled-princess/)