

**HANNAH DARABI.**  
**WHY DON'T YOU DANCE?**  
**26.06 – 01.11.2026**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Iranian artist Hannah Darabi (b. 1981) was selected as the winner of the 2025 Prix Elysée, a prize that supports artistic creation in the field of photography, for her project *Why Don't You Dance?* The work invites us to take a fresh look at the artist's native country – one in the throes of profound upheaval – through the lens of popular dance, which she frames as a form of activism and joyful resistance.

*Why Don't You Dance?* focuses on three iconic figures of the Iranian popular dance scene: Mahvash, Jamileh and Mohammad Khordadian. Darabi brings them together in an imaginary cabaret where dance becomes an act of protest, carried across time and place through the power of the body. Moving between Tehran, Los Angeles and Berlin, the project explores dance as a form of cultural expression whose meaning and value shift according to the prevailing social and political contexts of the day.

The first figure is Mahvash, a leading cabaret singer and dancer in 1950s Iran who is particularly associated with her fictional autobiography *The Secrets of Sexual Fulfillment* (1957), a work rarely seen today due to censorship. The book is among the archival materials referenced in Darabi's collages, serving as a cultural record of a shift in Iranian society from traditional gender norms toward a more modernist, heteronormative discourse.

The second is Jamileh, a cabaret performer, actress and renowned exponent of belly dance – a form practiced across several Middle Eastern cultures – and “Jaheli dance,” a style rooted in Iranian culture. Originally performed by men, Jaheli dance celebrated an exaggerated form of masculinity. Jamileh reclaimed it for female performers, turning the genre into a vehicle for women's emancipation.

The third figure is Mohammad Khordadian, an acclaimed dancer and choreographer associated with the Iranian diaspora pop scene. After fleeing Iran following the 1979 Revolution, he settled in Los Angeles, where he recorded workout videos built around Iranian dance routines. The tapes became hugely popular both inside Iran and across the diaspora. In the 1980s and 1990s, Khordadian played a key role in bringing dance styles previously associated mainly with women to a male audience.

In the final section of the exhibition, Darabi turns to Cabaret Tehran in Los Angeles, documenting how these popular traditions continue to live on and evolve today in a contemporary space far from Iran.

Today, dance itself has become an act of protest in Iran, not least in the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement, which eschews the culture of mourning deeply embedded in Shiism and promoted by the Islamic regime in favor of a culture of joy. Yet the movement is shaped by more than ideology alone: as its slogan insists, freedom must go hand in hand with life itself. Through Darabi’s work, Iranian popular dance becomes a force for joy and an affirmation of vitality.

## 2. TEHRAN-LOS ANGELES, RETURN JOURNEY

Rapid urban growth transformed Tehran and other major Iranian cities in the 1960s and 1970s. New housing complexes, commercial developments and large-scale planning projects spread across the country, some of them entrusted to foreign architects. One proposed master plan for Tehran looked explicitly to Los Angeles as a model. Developed by two architects – one Iranian, the other Austrian-American – it was only partially realized, although traces of it, including the city’s highways, are still visible today.

In this series, Hannah Darabi juxtaposes photographs taken in Los Angeles in the summer of 2025 and postcards of 1970s Tehran from her personal collection, creating visual parallels that blur boundaries of time and place.

Vintage postcards, Tehran, 1970s

Photographs, Los Angeles, 2025

Wallpapers

## 3. MAHVASH’S BOOK OF PLEASURES

Mahvash’s fictional autobiography *The Secrets of Sexual Fulfillment* (1957) forms the starting point for Hannah Darabi’s project. In her collages, the artist assembles pages from the book alongside excerpts from women’s magazines from the 1960s and 1970s, as well as fragments of texts, archival materials from different sources, and her own photographs.

Ink jet pigment prints on paper

#### 4. FOLLOW THE BEAT

In the fall of 2025, Hannah Darabi returned to Berlin to work with Iranian-born dancers and choreographers on three new pieces. Entitled *Saeed*, *Sina* and *Sepideh*, the works revisit Iranian popular dance forms, drawing in particular on the performances of Jamileh and the energetic workout routines developed by Mohammad Khordadian. By connecting contemporary dance practices with the history of these genres, the project emphasizes the role of dance as a tool of emancipation and political expression.

Saeed  
Video, 4'22"

Sina  
Video, 4'22"

Sepideh  
Video, 8'18"

#### 5. CABARET TEHRAN, HOUSE OF LEGENDS

Cabaret Tehran opened in 1976 on the outskirts of Los Angeles. After the 1979 Revolution, it became an important gathering place for major figures from the Iranian popular music scene and for the wider diaspora in Southern California. The venue's Wednesday karaoke nights remain a fixture to this day, uniting Iranians from different generations and social backgrounds around a shared nostalgia for the "glorious past" of their homeland and for political ideals that have since been eroded by history.

Ink jet pigment prints on paper and wallpapers

**Who are you?**

Mahvash

I am the author of this book. My name is “Mahvash”, and my surname is “Rezaei Fard”. I have burned like a candle all my life, illuminating my surroundings. I have loved deeply many times; I have been both a lover and a beloved countless times.

Jamileh

Who am I, who am I?

The one whose every inch is full of desire.

Go away... then come back,

Hold me close as long as your body can breathe.

My body's crystal belongs to everyone,

My warm embrace belongs to everyone,

I let anyone I want feel my fire,

My heart's up for grabs wherever I roam.

Mohammad Khordadian

Hello, dear viewers. For those who don't know me, my name is Mohammad Khordadian. I've been dancing professionally for about fifteen years now, and for the past five years I've been teaching.

**Where are you from?**

Mahvash

I was born in Paris. Paris is a free environment; these kinds of restrictions that exist in Iran don't exist there at all.

Jamileh

Tehran, District 6, the southern part of the city.

Mohammad Khordadian

I was born on Gorgan Street, at the Golchin intersection, in the Nezamabad area of Tehran. I am an Iranian. From the government's perspective (in Iran), they say I'm not Iranian, but I am.

**What do you do?**

Mahvash

I am an experienced woman. Oh, boys and girls, young women and men, especially my dear sisters and my gentle fellow women, I am now sharing the results of ten years of my experience with you. I will tell you how to behave with men, and I will also teach men how they can win the heart of the gentle sex.

Jamileh

I'm a gypsy, a heart stealer, playful and wild.  
Look at this body, see the fire inside,  
Check my waist, don't try to hide.  
If you want my lips, leave your fears behind,  
You wanna hold me, I can see it in your eyes.  
Every move you make, I read between the lines,  
I'm a spark, I'm a flame, can't you feel it burn?

Mohammad Khordadian

So what do I do? I'm always dancing! I was born on 22 February 1957. I say it proudly, because I feel like I'm in my twenties, about twenty-five.

### **What is love?**

Mahvash

As we see, usually a short woman naturally loves a tall man, and vice versa. Why this natural inclination? It is because nature wants a child from a pairing that is proportionate – not too tall, not too short.

Jamileh

Whoever has a friend, has a time,  
Through the four seasons of life,  
There's autumn and spring... ahhh!  
My spring, my love, my promise is only you,  
You came and broke the gate of my heart,  
I adore you, I'm in love with you.

Mohammad Khordadian

I love Iranians, and I want my future life partner to be an Iranian man.

### **How to remain a lover?**

Mahvash

First, it should be understood that today we live in an era where a man alone cannot – and should not – bear the full burden of a family. For this reason, girls must be raised in a way that they have work, a profession, a career, so that they can earn their own living and achieve economic independence.

Jamileh

Hey, open up your eyes, call everyone around,  
Lift your head up high, I'm dancing just for you now!  
I'm sweet and fair, with a teasing little charm,  
Sit back, relax, let me spin and sway in your arms.

My eyes are dark, mischievous and bright,  
My eyebrows dance, moving left and right.  
Oh, what can I do, my body's looking fine,  
Whoever sees me falls in line.

Mohammad Khordadian

I'm very attracted to athletic types because I'm an athlete myself. I don't like overweight people and I want someone who takes care of their appearance – in general, someone who thinks like me.

### **How to be a woman or a man?**

Mahvash

A woman should never, not even for a moment, neglect her beauty. In her appearance, she should consider the tastes and preferences of the people she wishes to please, rather than blindly following the latest fashion.

Jamileh

Thirty-five years ago, I used to see men performing “Jaheli” dance, but no women did it. I liked this dance, and exactly thirty-five years ago I performed it on stage. I know it is loved by each and every one of you, my fellow countrymen and women.

Mohammad Khordadian

These steps, as Americans would say, are unisex, meaning both men and women can dance them. Usually, this style has a more masculine feel, but women can add extra flair by running their hands through their hair. I've included both women and men in my dance videos to show that this dance isn't just for women. Of course, it's more common among women, but men can do it too.

### **Why should I dance?**

Mahvash

Lovemaking is the ultimate and most pleasurable culmination of the “dance” between a woman and a man; it should not be taken lightly. Fundamentally, this is a matter of artistry – here, a woman's elevated emotions must manifest in a magical way. Just as in dance, where quicker rhythms, more dynamic movements, and rises and falls create intensity, in this – what can be called the final point of the dance – these elements should exist at their highest level.

Jamileh

By sundown, we're turning up again,  
Yeah, that's just how we play.

Music loud, just like every night,  
Our spot where the wild ones stay.

Mohammad Khordadian

The secret to staying young is dancing. People often tell me that, compared to my first video, which I recorded four years ago, I look ten years younger. The reason is that I dance a lot. Get angry less, and dance more.

### **Where are you now?**

Mahvash

I have spent ten years of my youth in France and ten years in Iran. It's now been more than five years I've been without a husband. Before that, I have had two husbands – living with one for three years and with the other for two years – and the rest of the time I lived as a free woman, without many restrictions.

Jamileh

Los Angeles. I went to America in 1977... At that time, I was in New York. I went to Tehran two or three times and came back, but towards the end it coincided with the unrest. When I was in Tehran, they kept saying the southern part of the city was chaotic. I didn't pay it any attention, but eventually I came and couldn't go back, and after that I came to Los Angeles alongside dear artists.

Mohammad Khordadian

I don't consider myself a resident of Dubai, Istanbul or Los Angeles. We see ourselves as displaced for as long as we don't return to our own Iran and live there. In a way, we always feel like travelers.

### **What do you hope for in the future?**

Mahvash

I hope the dear readers make the most of this book, and if any teachers, specialists or psychologists find errors in my writings, I would be grateful for their guidance so that they can be corrected in future editions. I entrust all readers to God, wish for the well-being of families, and hope that everyone has learned the path to sexual fulfilment.

Jamileh

I wish success for all the people of Iran, and that one day we may return to our homeland.

Mohammad Khordadian

My wish is for the people in Iran to have all the freedoms that others enjoy. Of course, I have an even bigger, seemingly impossible wish – and that is for there to be no borders at all. That everyone can live wherever their heart desires.

Translated by Christopher Scala