

**Gut Feelings, Katayoun Jalilipour, 2021**

**Available online at: [www.archivalaffections.com](http://www.archivalaffections.com)**

**Commissioned by Trinity Square Video and supported by EQ Bank.**

About Gut Feelings:

Gut Feelings is inspired by the lives of historical figures during the Qajar era in Iran (1785-1925), such as Tāj al-Saltaneh, a member of Qajar dynasty and feminist activist; as well other Qajar women who are often misrepresented in the digital world and the subject of memes. Gut Feelings asserts the importance of truthful and accessible archival information and examines the part oppressive systems play in spreading misinformation. Using moving image, 3D animation, GIFs and image alteration, it attempts to re-portray the women of this era in a positive light, and enquires how fragments of truth can reimagine queerness in pre-westernised Iran.



*“Gut Feelings is not solely about Tāj al-Saltaneh but it uses her unusually well-documented life to look with speculation, imagination, desperation and hope at the Qajar era.”*

Extended Artist Statement:

Gut Feelings began with a frustration at the racist and misogynistic information spread on the internet about women of the Qajar era (1785-1925), and a long-term inspiration by the great variety of gender expression during this era. The title of Afsaneh Najmabadi’s book ‘Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards’ best describes the now controversial ways in which people used to express their gender identity in the Qajar era. Gut Feelings explores what the dissemination of false information in regards to women in this era might mean for contemporary Iranian queer identities.

My interest lies in the link between fact and fiction which comes from the struggle to source truthful information about queer histories. For example, the supposed affair between Taj and a seamstress, the only possible evidence of her queerness, which is mentioned in her memoir ‘Growing Anguish: memoirs of a Persian Princess’.

I am not strictly interested in proving that this affair happened, or even proving that queerness has always existed in Iran, but instead, I'm interested in the feelings of struggle and the need for such proof.

The title *Gut Feelings* refers to knowing that queerness has always existed within the ancestry of your own culture but simultaneously feeling that this truth has been concealed. As someone with that 'gut feeling' I am compelled to share it.

Zahra Khanum Tāj al-Saltaneh (1884–1936), one of the daughters of Naser al-Din Shah, dared to be different in an era where women did not have many fundamental rights. Her documented experiences as an unconventional person, a rebel and a rule breaker, helped me speculate about what might have been and what might become. These fragments of truth and fiction expose the potentials for queerness during this time. I use the word 'fragments' because often these archival documentations are not the whole truth due to a variety of reasons, the main one being censorship. *Gut Feelings* is not solely about Tāj al-Saltaneh but it uses her unusually well-documented life to look with speculation, imagination, desperation and hope at the Qajar era. The desperation for something to hold on to as proof of different lives lived before us is an important step to begin with in reconstructing queer histories.

Archives are supposed to hold historical accuracy, but only certain histories have been documented and the histories deemed unimportant have fallen through the cracks of erasure. Therefore we feel the need to recreate fictional histories that we know must have existed, but have not much proof for. This becomes queer fiction-making. And it begs the question, what lengths do we go to, to create the fictional queer histories we want to see and believe in. This is often done through a utopian and fantasy approach. In the case of the Qajar era, there were many political issues that cannot be ignored; financial despair, legalisation of slavery, westernisation of the country and taking away women's right to religious clothing. To overlook the class issues, and in the case of Tāj al-Saltaneh, her supposed affair with a seamstress, there are power balances that cannot not be ignored for the sake of queer fiction making. These tropes are very often used in mainstream queer period dramas (e.g. *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, 2019; *The Handmaid*, 2016). Ultimately, if we want to create new fictional archives, we cannot borrow from the same oppressive archiving methods of the past.

Tāj al-Saltaneh had access to a different kind of life due to her position in the royal family. Her privileges as a rich and educated woman helped her to enact change. I like to think about the lives of women who didn't have such privileges. The queer intimacies behind closed doors that were never documented. Taj's writing and the writings about her life has allowed me to imagine all the unwritten possibilities for queerness for these forgotten women.

Tāj al-Saltaneh was involved in the start of the Iranian feminist movement, she was a founding member of '*Anjoman Horriyyat Nsevan*' or 'the Society of Women's Freedom'. In secret, she planned a women's march to the parliament, against her own father's government. However, like her father, she was eager for more western ways to govern the country, and modern practices of 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 grouped with 'beasts'. In today's internet meme culture, Taj al Saltaneh and other Qajar women are ridiculed for their gender expressions, for example their facial hair (e.g. moustache, unibrow, sideburns). Hair is something that is often equated to un-civilisation or looking 'beastly', something historically used against women of colour, to measure their cleanliness

and even sanity. Maybe, being beastly can be a radical virtue that is celebrated, and it could open doors towards freedom from the binary gender expression, created by western colonisation and imperialism.

Through this research and the series of works created as part of Gut Feelings, I explore what it would look like if westernisation wasn't pushed into Iranian culture. The GIFs showing queer intimacies, made up of Qajar paintings and photographs are an exploration of these ideas.

Racialisation and archival inaccuracy is also explored through the mix-up of Tāj al-Saltaneh and Maria Anna's (1606-1646) images on the internet, which represents 'whiteness' as the 'antagonist'. This is about unethical archiving as a product of systematic oppressions. This digital misrepresentation symbolises the Iranian obsession with whiteness. Not only to look white, but to act 'whiteness', and to live out the fantasy of whiteness. Maria Anna's facial features represent everything Tāj al-Saltaneh and I myself are not, and everything Tāj al-Saltaneh and the women in her family have been ridiculed for lacking, on the internet.

Gut Feelings explores how these historical figures, specifically gender non-conforming women, exist on the internet, where they have no power or influence. The memes made about Tāj-al Saltaneh, Esmat od-Dowleh and the other women in their family, plus the misinformation spread about them, all bring to light the ugly truth about how systematic oppression operates in today's meme culture.

What is left out of our identity once we only exist on the web, are images and texts that don't speak for the full lived experience of a person and can be easily manipulated. In a way I use this manipulation in the digital 3D format (Figures 3, 4, 5) to explore if existing in more dimensions provides a fuller scope of a person's life. I attempt to alter and queer artworks that are products of the male gaze, from or inspired by the Qajar era (Figures 1 and 2), Images of women, partially nude with pale skin and drawings of straight couples copulating, are all manipulated, altered and queered.

The fragments of truth are spread throughout the works in Gut Feelings, looking for stories that have not been told, reading between the lines and through manipulated imagery. Gut Feelings brings what is missed out of Iran's archives into light, in a performative and lively manner. It creates space for those who have fallen through the cracks of archiving, those who did not have their stories documented.

Gut Feelings comes from a deep need for visualising queer desires, outside of the heterosexual and male gaze, and envisioning a world outside of the desire for western values where queerness can become mundane.

Reference and credit list:

- Gif references in order of appearance on the web page:

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

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:

Jooje Fokoli (1974), Dir. Reza Safai, actresses: Shahnaz Tehrani and Mastaneh Jazaei 2

Moorche Dare (1976), Dir. Bijan Fard 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 Anguish: 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/)

The Face of African Slavery in Qajar Iran, Denise Hassanzade Ajiri for Tehran Bureau, The Guardian, 2016, Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2016/jan/14/african-slavery-in-qajar-iran-in-photos>

The Atlantic, The Casualties of Women's War on Body Hair, Nadine Ajaka, 2017, Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2017/02/the-casualties-of-womens-war-on-body-hair/514983/>