

Extract from the speech by Prof. Dr. Udo Steinbach, German Institute for Middle East Studies, at the opening of the exhibition of photographer Ulla Kimmig's work on February 13, 2005 in the Museum of Ethnology in Hamburg.

### **„Iran. Standstill or Awakening“**

Iran is becoming more and more the focus of attention as a result of America's current foreign policies. And yet relatively little is known in Europe about life under the leadership of clerics. State ideology and repressive machinery, contradiction and strained relations form the subject of images by Ulla Kimmig. She touches the nerve of modern westernization in a state that is especially proud to be Islamic. Her artistic photographs express both drama and lyricism, intensity and feeling in the way they bring into the foreground people caught in the contradictions of the State. They depict boundaries between men and women as a symbol of the Islamic dimension of the revolution. Large-format colour images help the drama and lyricism to merge together. Poetic Persian writing appears as a political slogan on the walls of a prison, while soldiers stand in the foreground, keeping watch over the women inside the prison.

It is the young people, the women, the acts of discrimination, the violent creation of barriers that form the focal point of the images. The black chador acquires a peculiar intensity behind the mass of white candy floss. Mullahs begin to look beautiful, sitting in the clerical schools on the carpets that make them seem so innocent. Young women in front of gigantic posters that underline the contrast between demands of State and Joy of Life. Westernization as a form of protest, a provocation for revolution. The dynamics of the present are reflected in Ulla Kimmig's photographs. The individual in the foreground, his development hindered, with consequences that are all too modern. A couple of lovers in a café just as you might see here, women in the aerobics studio, although it is forbidden to look at them, beauty parlours as a protest against the rigid regime, colourful headscarves blowing loosely-tied around the hair of young women like flags of freedom.

Drug abuse is escalating, the State is trying to counter this, but without dealing with the conditions that are causing people to become addicted in the first place. Ulla Kimmig was allowed into the prisons to speak to the women, she is aware of the problem, and to a certain extent gives it public exposure. The photographs are not only documentary, but have their own force of expression.

The chador has a special place in U.K.'s images: on the one hand it enhances the beauty and sensuousness of the Iranian woman, while at the same time outwardly isolating her. In U.K.'s photographs it has become a highly polarizing symbol.

The Iranian people are looking for their own place against the backdrop of an older culture and against a backdrop for revolution. They have not found this place yet. The images depict this struggle as an individual event, whether that of a man or a woman.

All these facets of Iran are given a face by Ulla Kimmig in her images. At the same time, the photographer allows all social groups depicted to express their thoughts in suitably chosen statements. The visible image is given verbal expression, expanding the dimensions of the exhibition.