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It may seem as if Jila Nikpay's portraiture work with women is just one more view of the female form. But it is not so simply summed up. The Minneapolis-based photographer and filmmaker explores the souls of her subjects by transforming their naked bodies with a veil—the same veil some consider a prison for the women of Nikpay's homeland, Iran. Turn the page for more about this woman's silent rebellion, and other news of the arts world.

Award-winning photographer and filmmaker Jila Nikpay lowers her eyes and her voice becomes a whisper when she speaks of Iran, her homeland. Even though she left at 18 to study in the United States, the 49-year-old is still haunted by her roots. She cannot understand the changes there, and hates the restrictions. Today's Iran is alien to her, and she is forever homesick for the place she once knew.

Framed black-and-white photos line the walls of her studio in Minneapolis' Warehouse District—telling stories of identity and displacement, and of finding wholeness again. The photos' scenes come from tiny sets built by Nikpay. "I'm always working with characters and people," she says. "My work is personal, though I always try to go beyond myself."

She is moving now in new directions, using real people for subjects, and not just building sets. She has created a seven-minute film called "Shroud and Torrent" that uses actors to explore the veil that covers and quiets women. She's also creating images of American women liberated by a veil—transformed by the same piece of cloth that represents prison for others. "I use the veil in a creative way rather than a restrictive way," Nikpay says. "People see themselves in a new way and see their bodies as art."

This philosophy informs a series of portraits that are among Nikpay's most striking work. The photos are of women from Minnesota and other U.S. states. In one, a gray-haired grandmother, covered completely by white linen cloth, stands proudly. In another, a young blonde attorney is profiled on a bench, her back arched and her nakedness softened and disguised by a loosely draped piece of silky tulle. In one of the most striking images, a brunette is hidden by a piece of satiny black cloth—yet her subtle smile and one naked shoulder seem to bare the most secret parts of her being. Nikpay spends hours with each woman, who chooses for herself how the veil-like piece of cloth will be draped.

These photos, says Nikpay, represent much that is forbidden in the Iran of today—a world where debate is unheard of, liberation and sexual freedom for women are opposed, and all women must cover up every time they leave the house. The photos say what Nikpay still does not dare to in a voice above a whisper. "All I want to do is create this image of women that comes from real women," she says. "You start with one woman at a time, and you make small changes."