

She Who Tells a Story

Reviewed by ASMA NAEEM

In the heart of Washington, DC, in 2016, amid one of the most tumultuous presidential election campaigns in history, the National Museum of Women in the Arts displayed the work of twelve photographers—all women, all born or raised in the Middle East. The exhibit's title, *She Who Tells a Story*, is the translation from the Arabic, *Rawiya*, also the name of the collective of Middle East women photographers founded in 2009. Comprising more than eighty works from the 1990s to the present, the exhibition had originated in the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, where it was curated by Kristen Gresh. According to Gresh's (2013, 35) essay in the accompanying catalog, the show "is an invitation to discover new photography, to shift our perspective, and to open a cultural dialogue that is not centered on conflict and politics, but begins with the art and interwoven histories of a selection of extraordinary photographers from Iran and the Arab world."

In its gestalt, the show accomplishes these goals, with a few very powerful works and installations. Whether conversations veered away from politics, though, is another matter. As one visitor noted in the comments book at the exhibition, the show represented the viewpoint of the Middle East majority, with no depictions of Israeli Jews, Druze, or Middle Eastern Christians, for example. Similarly, how these artists depicted Islam or the "clash of civilizations," to use Samuel Huntington's deeply problematic term, seemed to be the main thrust of the works presented, nudging, if not forcing, the viewer to engage in the extensive controversies surrounding the Islamic faith and Middle Eastern cultures: the hijab, women's agency, the ravages of endless wars, and hyperaggressive paternalism.

The show is divided into two parts: "Constructing Identities" and "New Documentaries." In the first category were five artists, Shirin Neshat, Lalla Essaydi, Boushra Almutawakel, Rania Matar, and Newsha Tavakolian. The title of the second category, comprising the remaining seven artists—Nermine Hammam, Rula Halawani, Tanya Habjouqa, Shadi Ghadirian, Gohar Dashti, Jananne Al-Ani, and Rana El Namr—suggested that the appropriation of documentary photography was the expressive idiom of choice. As I wandered through the exhibition space, I found myself repeatedly asking

why these artists turned to photography, and why many manipulated the documentary motif. The catalog, wall text, and labels, while excellent in describing biography, technique, and imagery, did not address these questions.

Of the “Constructing Identities” group, several works seemed weaker than the rest. Moroccan-born Lalla Essaydi’s *Bullets Revisited #3* (2012), while glowing with golden bullets and replete with stunningly detailed henna markings, positioned an exotic female subject as a passive odalisque on a wedding blanket of arsenal. This conflation of two of the most pernicious — not to mention persistently Orientalist — stereotypes about the Islamic faith seemed to reinforce the denigrating perceptions of those in the West. Of course, sometimes presenting stereotypes initiates dialogue and debate, but in Essaydi’s case the work comes off with a capitalistic slickness, a lack of nuance, that I could not get past. Similarly, Yemeni artist Almutawakel’s *Mother Daughter Doll* series (2010), in which all three figures in the title are pictured initially in Western dress and headscarves and then progressively become swathed and eventually rendered invisible in black, presents a highly Westernized view of the function of the hijab or niqab. Do such images feed into the viewpoints that women are subjugated or erased as individuals once they don religious garments? Absolutely. While the artist certainly can express her opinion on the polemics of the veil, I felt that her inclusion in the show could not help but rouse political responses. Fortunately, the work of the three remaining artists, Lebanese-born Matar, Iranian-born Tavakolian, and the star of the show, Iranian-American Neshat, offered sophisticated, multivalent, and beautiful counterpoints to the more troubling concerns raised by Essaydi’s and Almutawakel’s photographs. Tavakolian’s *Listen* series (2010), in which hijab-clad women were individually pictured with their eyes closed and singing in front of a shimmering sequined backdrop, was not only visually stunning in its rich palette and dramatic lighting but also subtle in its probing of how women are prohibited from public singing yet still can have a voice in traditionally male-dominated societies. Tavakolian’s approach of using theatrical portraiture to show the complexities and the coexistence of contradiction in Middle Eastern culture was of course pioneered by the renowned Shirin Neshat. For this show, Neshat’s photographs were drawn mostly from three portrait groupings, *Masses*, *Patriots*, and *Villians*, from her *Book of King* series (2012). The impetus for the series was Neshat’s interest in the *Shahnameh*, an eponymous Persian poem by Ferdowsi from AD 1000, celebrated for its scope and breadth. In each of Neshat’s portraits, the individual’s face and hands are covered in calligraphy applied to the surface of the photograph. Here religion is not the focus, but rather its various dogmatic underpinnings: conviction, independence and its binary, submissiveness, and history.

Of the artists in the “New Documentaries” category, there were some wonderful surprises among the expected, even unimaginative juxtapositions of military and quotidian lives. Iranian-born Gohar Dashti’s arresting images of a newlywed couple trying to dine, do laundry, and watch television in the desert amid barbed wire, sandbags, and a tank are compositional tours de force. The series, *Today’s Life and War* (2008), draws on the artist’s recollections of growing up near the Iran-Iraq border while the two countries were

at war. In her *Women of Gaza* (2009) series, Tanja Habjouqa (b. Jordan) uses a similar aesthetic as Dashti's, though her works have less a sense of irony and bittersweetness and more a straightforward documentary approach. Her portrait of a Palestinian university student clad in a bright red niqab and using her hot pink smartphone to photograph Habjouqa is a memorable moment of colorful, lighthearted, yet powerful feminism in the show. More stark and bleak assessments of the various theaters of war throughout the Middle East are offered by Palestinian photojournalist Rula Halawani and Iraqi-born Janane Al-Ani. Halawani's *Negative Incursions* series (2002) features large-format photographs of the Israeli incursion into the West Bank that are printed as negatives. This reversal of black and white—particularly for the subject matter of strewn bodies, soldiers atop tanks, and buildings reduced to piles of rubble—is unnerving. Throughout one is aware of Halawani's presence, her position in these scenes of chaos and carnage, and her subjectivity as a Palestinian facing the Israeli presence and critiquing the coverage of such events by the Western media. Shifting from the viewpoint of a single individual to that of a military aircraft, Al-Ani shows in her *Shadow Sites I and II* (2011) the natural and constructed terrain of the Middle East. With no human in site, Al-Ani asks whether geopolitical conquest, with its attendant costs of genocide and human rights violations, is worth pursuing.

As these observations suggest, the show offered some of the best art emerging from Iran and the Arab world, all of which was deftly organized and interpreted. Hopefully, those stronger works challenged typical Western viewers, enabling them to walk away with new insights and discard old assumptions about how Middle Eastern women approach issues of selfhood, gender, faith, and human rights.

ASMA NAEEM is curator of prints, drawings, and media arts at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery. Contact: naeema@si.edu.

Reference

Gresh, Kristen. 2013. "Stories We Thought We Knew." In *She Who Tells a Story: Women Photographers from Iran and the Arab World*, 21–35. Boston: MFA Publications.