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The Absent Subversion, the Silent Transgression: The Voice and the Silence of the Body in Some Contemporary Iranian and Arab Artists

Youssef Cherem[*]

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> We talked in a language that we didn't understand
> Hiding things that were obscure while the people are searching
> Leaving our lives, staying in the same location
> Proving me to you, proving you to me
> Looking at pictures of people we do not know
> (Theatre of Tragedy, "Begin and End," 2006.)

Identity, censorship, and the international art market: the neglected connection in contemporary Iranian art

It is surprising how contemporary art from the Muslim world in general and from Iran in particular is interpreted through binary opposites, in an almost structuralist way. These binary conceptual pairs are variously and loosely defined as identity/exoticism, globalized/local, contemporary/traditional, East/West, etc. However, in structuralist analysis, difference is essential to meaning, which can only be assigned taking into account a system of symbols, whereas the context of contemporary Iranian artistic production is interpreted as ambiguous and dichotomous, because of a symbolic structure deemed inherently unstable and conflictual, which is embodied in and expressed through artistic production.

Hamid Keshmirshekan affirmed that "two primary concerns" in contemporary Iranian art are the questions of identity and exoticism, which are tied to artists' expectations about the reception of their works.[1] It is not clear, however, if those concerns on the part of the artists merely affect their works, or if their works are in great part derived from that basic tension. Fouad Torshizi has recently argued that it is possible for artists to circumvent pre-established notions of an "ethnic other" expressed through art. Analyzing Iranian artist Ghazaleh Hedayat's video "Eve's Apple" (2006), Torshizi argues that she removes any symbol of her belonging to a "different" (i.e. Iranian/Middle Eastern) ethnic background, "in order to partake in a broader dialog concerning femininity and phallocentrism."[2]

Keshmirshekan's "anxiety of identity" points out to a situation that Ghazaleh Hedayat is said to avoid. Yet, as Torshizi also notes, the struggle of the artist to induce an interpretation that as a whole is

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psychoanalytical and socio-historical, and grounded in the West (the concept of original sin does not exist in Islam, and it was both Adam and Eve who ate from the fruit, which is not mentioned as an apple in the Koran), does not prevent "bizarre readings" referring to the "silenced women of the Middle East." This "bizarre reading" is only possible because Hedayat exempts herself from clarifying her position. It is unpretentious in its simplicity of questioning male-gendered associations with the body while also referring to a Biblical tradition. It remains an open question why Hedayat herself seems to favor a psychoanalytical interpretation – a possible, but not evident, reading.

Censorship

Neither Keshmirshekan nor Torshizi consider the full implications of political and social restrictions for artists working in Iran. The media, on the other hand, portray a life fraught with hardships and uncertainty, sometimes arguing that censorship may boost creativity instead of repressing it.[3] However, although censorship and repression are sometimes mentioned in the media, there is an uncritical assumption that it is "natural" that Iranian artists working inside Iran would be "repressed," while those working from the outside would be "free" of similar constraints. Scholarly publications, instead, argue that artists devise strategies of "resistance" against stereotypical Western interpretations, but the shadow of the Iranian State is nowhere to be seen, except when pushing Iranian artists to represent their Irano-Islamic civilization in an "acceptable" way. The reflective and critical impetus is somehow lost between the flow of symbolic goods in the media, in art venues, and the market.

In the current literature about modern and contemporary art from Iran, the consequences of internal censorship are not thoroughly analyzed. After perusing the literature about contemporary art in Iran, an eerie silence about the conditions of art production in Iran seems to take place. Indeed, the Islamic Republic seeks to determine what can or should be produced and shown – but it is hard to grasp or to evaluate the pervasiveness of direct and indirect censorship. Although there are many practical difficulties in carrying out some sort of ethnographic research about the visual arts in Iran that may seem insurmountable in the present circumstances, it does not mean such factors should not be taken into account or "glossed over." However, how can we address this apparent neglect?

In this essay, I ask how body and gender are represented in contemporary social and political contexts, considering evidence against a clear-cut division between diasporic/local and throwing some doubt on the usefulness of employing conceptual opposites to understand contemporary art production in Iran and elsewhere. I also argue that the language employed by the regime – concealment and "control" (of the body), and a visceral concern with identity – has left a deep mark even in those artists who are sharply critical of its policies.

Art historians and critics have discussed the role the international art market has played in shaping an interpretation of Middle Eastern art that is deeply affected by "aesthetic stereotypes" marked by their ethnic alterity. Internal censorship and cultural policy and the global construction of art from the region as inherently non-Western (or quasi-Western) may have the effect of preventing a critical assessment of such an art.

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Western esthetic ideals have been deeply marked by the cult of the body, but its wide range of symbolic visual associations has barely been appropriated to any noticeable degree throughout the Muslim world. Artists from the first phase of Egyptian modernism, such as Mahmoud Moukhtar (1883–1934) and Mahmoud Said (1897–1964) have employed the nude and the female body as a metaphor for the nation and for modernity.[4] Kristen Scheid argued that, regarding Lebanon, "nudity, as a form of novelty and contemporaneity, became an index and instrument of modernizing."[5] However, the classical (nude) body was never elevated to the status of paragon of beauty as public art, as it has in the Western world since the Renaissance, proliferating in such diverse spaces as academic salons, museums, art galleries, streets and squares, war monuments, churches, and cemeteries.[6] Instead, judging from the recent wave of puritanism that has taken hold of Muslim societies since the thriving of the 1970s' Islamic movements, one would search in vain for an artistic portrayal of the body or a positive view of such an endeavor in the society at large – and even less one with a message of political, individual, religious, or female emancipation.[7] Although a tradition of systematic prohibition, degrading and devaluation of artworks representing human beings does exist in Islamic cultures, it has not impeded or altogether banished figurative artworks, which have flowered in various contexts. Therefore, even though social and political repression can stimulate certain artistic expressions and inhibit others, there are other factors at play. In the globalized, highly mobile, diasporic and multinational art scene from the last 30 years or so, neither mere repression nor compliance with local moral guidelines explain why the body has not become to any noticeable degree a privileged locus of esthetic concern, not to mention instrument of political contestation and socio-cultural critique.

I shall try to answer the questions why some current art from the Middle East, although featuring prominently in international exhibitions, and despite some interpretations on the contrary, does not critically deal with the body as a locus of individual and collective agency; it is not subversive: it does not shatter myths besides those *supposedly* held by "Westerners." Is it merely a form of eschewing censorship or of avoiding the hardships of an artist deprived of an art market and even of a public? Is it a reflection of expectations and (economic) demands from a Western audience and the (global, and increasingly Middle Eastern and diasporic) art market, or is it a strategy to avoid iconographic clichés? One of the sources of this situation is the burgeoning art market for "Middle Eastern" art in the Gulf countries, and another one, a certain notion of (marketable) authenticity linked to contemporary art production from the region, which privileges "traditional," abstract or non-figurative motifs.

Here I will focus mainly on female contemporary artists: Shadi Ghadirian, Ghazel, Shirin Neshat, and Lalla Essaydi. Their works will be contrasted with other artists, living either in their home countries or in the diaspora – Newsha Tavakolian, Hassan Hajjaj, and Majida Khattari – whose works can be regarded as portraying the body as a medium and a locus for contesting gender roles and pushing new boundaries against both official and Western expectations.

Both perspectives are linked to the seemingly unavoidable *topos* of otherness and gender, and with the repercussions, on artistic production, of a fixation (both Western and local) on

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questions of the visibility of the female body, gender, and agency. The ambivalence of the visibility of the female body in Muslim contexts (be that from an official, state position or from the society at large) imposes a subject matter on artists that makes their works ambiguous and paradoxical, since they speak to two audiences that hold sharply divergent views on the status of what is being represented.

My particular choice of artists and works may require a justification. In a context in which, in Western media and popular imagination, Muslim women and/or women from Muslim countries are seldom visible as individuals and social agents, and much less self-represented, the very fact that women's art (re)presents women, is implicitly imbued with an aura of "heroism," tacitly associating "women's art," "feminist art," and the artists' national and religious identities. One can notice the celebratory undertones of curatorial choices and exhibition publications online and in print. Besides, the idea of analyzing Iranian and Arab (in this case, Moroccan) artists at the same time might not seem so far-fetched when we consider two factors. Firstly, when works of art of artists of Middle Eastern and North African origin are exhibited around the world, and consequently reported and commented on in printed, visual, or electronic media, they are often grouped together.[8] Secondly, artists and artworks considered here are not an exception to the fact that much of contemporary art production (and consumption) is global or diasporic. Local circumstances notwithstanding, the public and the market are not bound by national references.

Furthermore, if the notion of the emancipatory power of the exhibition and visibility of the female body in Western visual culture has been problematized for several decades now,[9] on the other hand, the visibility and invisibility of (Muslim) women as portrayed in some contemporary artworks have often been taken for granted as a stance toward emancipation and even empowerment – although the iconography often allows for a completely opposite reading. This position is seen in some interpretations of works by Shadi Ghadirian that locate women (and womanhood) within a delimitated domestic space; in Lalla Essaydi's recasting of iconic nineteenth-century Orientalist paintings; in interpretations of Ghazel's veiled performances as responding critically to a non-Muslim negative view of the chador or hijab (though failing to see it as well as a humorous indictment of the Islamist apology and propaganda of female body covering), and finally in the powerful, though ambiguous, women by Shirin Neshat.

On the other hand, works by Tavakolian, Hajjaj, and Khattari – though otherwise carrying very individual esthetic imprints, and revealing quite different choices, messages and sensibilities regarding the portrayal of the human figure – put forth a vision that is not only less submissive to cultural stereotypes, but also less ambiguously critical (rather than just grumbling) about the latter.

My reading of the works presented here (a preliminary and contextual reading, I must admit) is not to be interpreted as a criticism of an absence, but as an attempt to go beyond a purely phenomenological approach of the art object as it presents itself. It is both a critique and a genealogy of the process of their becoming "symbols." If the work is presented as a result of conscious and unconscious choices by its creator, then absences speak as much as presences. It is indeed the absence of expected features that imparts many a visual creation in whatever medium an element of surprise and zest, adding to the effect it causes on the viewer. Absence is the other face of presence.

As a whole, those artists' representation of the body fall short of an obvious iconography of transgression (of social, political, and moral norms), but at the same time do not conform to the esthetics promoted by State media or entirely acceptable to the regime. Their allegorical and non-individual or, rather, conceptual, treatment of the female body, while avoiding a sensual iconography of the exotic (veiled or unveiled) Muslim woman, does not entail the visual affirmation of female agency or empowerment. As such, these works are intrinsically ambiguous in their message: the body is taken for granted as being a site of political contention, but it is not explicitly acknowledged as such. Even when they at first seem to take a stand, they "speak the language of the regime," by their use of symbols or the visual vocabulary either of a "native modernism" or of Muslim identity markers. The absence of shock, subversion, and transgression, then, can be explained in part by what the Iranian artist and critic Barbad Golshiri defines as a regime of exoticism, promoted in different ways not only by the Western art market and public, but also by the Iranian and other Muslim regimes.

This situation is expressed through the dilemma faced by contemporary Iranian artists, as Hamid Keshmirshekan points out: they must reckon with a constant redefinition or reworking of national, religious, and cultural identity through their production, while also constantly struggling with stereotypical expectations of the global art market.

The contradictory determinants of late-twentieth-century Iranian art

The strategies of production of contemporary, post-revolutionary[10] Iranian artists shy away from the exotic but are obviously affected by the rules of artistic production, dissemination, and circulation inside and outside Iran. Inside Iran, they have to deal with the restrictive cultural and political policies of the Islamic Republic; outside Iran, they have to face the expectations of a public and an art market who labels them as the example of a modern "other," and also the question of a hybrid and diasporic identity.

We must also acknowledge that the appropriation and re-articulation of Western discourses on art and their hybridization by "indigenous culture" is an aspect of modern and contemporary art in other contexts as well. If there are "deep-rooted anxieties about national and cultural identity" in Iran, raising the question of the relation between an international artistic idiom and local identities, very similar questions seem to have been thought and acted upon by Latin-American artists and writers, for example, since the nineteenth century, and culminating in the *Manifesto Antropofágico* by the Brazilian modernist Oswald de Andrade in 1928.[11] The context of emergence of modern art in many developing nations owes a great deal to State or colonial institutions – be it in Latin America or the Middle East. As with the ideology of nationalism, so "modern art" came to be regarded as part of the project of national building. This situation persisted for more or less time and with more or less force in each case, always promoting art that reflected or helped build and project a national identity to the outside world.[12] But if, as Cuban critic and curator, Gerardo Mosquera admits, we have witnessed "the overcoming of identity neurosis among [Latin American] artists, critics and curators,"[13] it seems that, for a variety of reasons, the same has not taken place in the authoritarian contexts of Iran and much of the Arab world.

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In Iran, we can assume that, despite different directions and tendencies recognizable in the 1960s–1970s (neo-traditional modernism), 1980s (revolutionary art), and since the 1990s (nativist formalism), national and cultural identity is, as Keshmirshekan argues, "still an underlying precept with compelling force."[14] The issue of identity, defined as dichotomous pairs – identity/exoticism, globalized/local art, or in other terms, contemporary/specific – has shaped the debate of critics, curators, and artists about contemporary art in Iran. Although many artists have appeared since the 1990s who question the precept of expressing local identity, we must keep in mind that the so-called "New Art" in Iran was actively promoted by State institutions, particularly the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art. As Hamid Severi, a curator for the Museum, admits, "some organizers involved in [contemporary art exhibitions] […] believed that New Art should contain religious or spiritual subject matters," and that "cultural identity" was one of the criteria to select works for overseas exhibitions.[15]

Therefore, implicitly or explicitly, many of the artworks that have been exhibited inside or outside Iran that have a specific "contemporary" or "conceptual" mark[16] conform or respond to this urge for collective self-presentation. In fact, issues of identity, universalism, and dialogue were central to the cultural and diplomatic policies of the reformist government of Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005).

Nevertheless, there have been many criticisms in Iran toward those new artists precisely because they "do not reflect their lived reality" – despite the obvious fact that one cannot simply go on and do artwork about "local realities" and "social problems," and critical, political, ironic, and irreverent artwork. To cite one example, the brothers Ramin and Rokni Haerizadeh have lived in exile in Dubai since 2009.[17] It is this context and contradictory motivations that we must keep in mind, for it is often overlooked or considered self-evident.

If one assumes the polar opposition between "national" and "international" or "global" and "local" regarding both subject matter and formal approach, there seems to be no way out for an Iranian artist, either living inside or outside Iran, to escape from the kind of criticism that calls into question their whole works and artistic practices, judging them for their choice of subject matter, approach, medium, the existence or absence of references to a "Western" or "Iranian" heritage, success in the international art market or compliance (or irreverence) to the moral standards of the Islamic Republic, the absence of immediate reality of everyday life, and so on.

One consequence of this state of affairs is what Barbad Golshiri sees as a paradoxical subversion that does not question the status quo, and is indeed tolerated by the authorities:

> Shadi Ghadirian, Farhad Moshiri, Ghazel, and Shirin Ali-Abadi perpetuate the dominant image in a very direct way; no pentimenti or "curvatures" are there to be seen. They take advantage of doxa and hegemony and submit to it in the name of subversion.[18]

This creates an ironic situation in which the subversive does not shock; it is merely an attempt of keeping up-to-date with the most recent "fashion" in international art and thereby trying to refashion an identity for internal and external consumption. It follows the predicaments of the morally acceptable, sometimes pushing its limits, but never showing what would be utterly not acceptable. They are ironical toward what they are allowed to be ironical. They internalize not the

esthetics, but the esthetic limits and the formal reference elements of the visual culture of the Islamic Republic. In no other instance is this as clear as the body and gender. In this case, absences speak as much as presences.

Shadi Ghadirian

In Shadi Ghadirian's (b. 1974) *Like Everyday* photograph series (2000–2001), the artist renders woman as housewares covered by colorful printed scarves. In a word, what is shown is objects, not really women. They are not individuals or subjects; they are actions and forms, and their forms are pretty similar and their actions are restricted to conservative social roles expected from women. These symbolic and symbolized women (symbolized through and because of the veil) are presented to the public with their public face, namely, a face that does not exist because it does not matter in the end. If repetition may invoke crowds, and the crowd is the denial of individuality if seen from a distance, Ghadirian's women in *Like Everyday* recall social functions and role women can take, but do not present the women themselves. The social role (as a morally acceptable woman) and the functional role (household chores) are mixed and indistinguishable, and the "women" are presented as if they were performing such actions in public: house activities do not demand a woman to be veiled, as normally they would do so in the presence of only their family. The presence of the veil in private situations where it would not be required is also noticed in Iranian movies, billboards, advertisements, and illustrations because of the spectators: a private activity or event is transformed into a public presentation of the self not because the scene represented is public, but because the exhibition of the representation is necessarily public.

The publicly acceptable presentation of women in the Islamic Republic is tied to her role (expected by the official Islamic Republic) as a housewife (among other things, such as mother and a political subject and an Islamic and nationalist militant). Here Ghadirian reduces the subject and the individuality even more, by removing the last remaining visible traces of the woman's figure (the face and hands) and cloaking them behind gaudy, wallpaper-like veils. They are functions without form and without faces. Despite the Saatchi Gallery's[19] description of "crudely rendered women" that turn "sources of negative stereotyping" into "attributes of empowerment"; by her showing a "positive and holistic female identity," and "humanistic" metaphorical employment of everyday objects transforming subjects into "charismatic caricatures, embodying individual personalities," the metaphors, the charisma, the personalities, and the empowerment are almost impossible to visualize. It is the woman who performs object-like actions; she personifies the objects, and not the other way round.

Ghadirian affirms that the motivation of the work came from her own personal situation as a newlywed woman, having received kitchen utensils as wedding gifts. She arguably was not prepared for passively taking up the roles the broader society had expected from her. She ironically questions those expectations, but partakes in the common vocabulary of gender roles and segregation, instead of going against it. All one sees is a tamed and hidden body, anonymous, invisible, and voiceless. There is boredom, indifference, and a kind of ironical resignation (Fig. 1).

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Ghazel

The same sort of positive, one could say, wishful thinking about Ghadirian's "Like Everyday" is evidenced in some interpretations of Ghazel's works (and will also be present in many analyses about Shirin Neshat's work). Ghazel (b. 1966), an Iranian artist based in Paris, has exhibited widely in world venues. In her video series entitled "Me," she records herself performing a series of daily activities with the chador, and also impersonating allegories of her own life story. Once again, analysts portray the artist as playing with the expectations of the (mainly Western) viewers, and deconstructing stereotyped images by inverting usage, meaning, or extending the association of visual symbols. The ubiquitous, universal, and iconic symbol of Islam, at least in the past 40 years, has been the hijab and the chador.[20]

Fig. 1. Shadi Ghadirian, *Like Everyday*, 2000–2001, C-Print, 50 × 50 cm.

Begüm Özden Fırat says about Ghazel's "Me" series:

> the self-parody ridicules the Western obsession with the veil as the site of oppression and the marker of cultural difference. The work invites the viewer to laugh at the absurdity of the veiled woman as she sunbathes or ballet-dances, which is an inverted critique of what actually amuses the viewer: cultural difference understood through the employment of cultural stereotypes.[21]

On the contrary, Ghazel's absurd situations add fuel to the fire of the non-Muslim view of the veil as a symbol of cultural difference (which it actually is, also among pious Muslims), by pushing the use of the veil to unpredicted extremes. And, in so doing, Ghazel's chador ridicules the chador itself.

Other analysts might fail to acknowledge that because of a myopic (and overall "positive") understanding of practices of veiling and unveiling since the establishment of the Islamic Republic after the Iranian Revolution. So, Iraqi artist and curator Jananne Al-Ani comments that the omnipresence of the veil in Ghazel's videos makes them "banal and everyday," and Fırat concurs, affirming that it is only in the "West" "that this everyday banality is seen as paradoxical and troubled."[22] However, the omnipresence of the chador (rather than the hijab per se) is

not seen in the activities portrayed by Ghazel. The chador itself, though "omnipresent" and "everyday," is never banalized or has its significance reduced. On the contrary, it is imbued with a huge ideological significance by the regime. Portraying the chador in places and actions that would otherwise not demand it (or any other form of veiling) seems preposterous. What Ghazel does is to desacralize and ridicule the chador, but without the "shock" of showing the body. As she shows it, in those situations, the chador is ludicrous. The whole scenes seem faked and artificial. It is a testimony, instead, to the fact that the ideology of the chador of banning the appearance, sight, and evocation of the body must also come together with a close control of that body. Even then, there are moments in which the body takes center stage, when it does not have to feign its absence: the very private moments in which Ghazel performs from within the chador.

It is also a mistake to affirm that Ghazel's works "problematize cultural difference by challenging the viewer's complicity and embedded stereotypes," as Firat affirms.[23] The viewer's reaction and evaluation cannot be taken for granted, because the usage of such a powerful and widely available cliché as the chador, in this case, does not challenge stereotypes or the complicity of the viewer. (It is worth stressing that it is problematic to assume tacitly that there is something such as "general" reaction from "Western" viewers.) Both positive reactions ("a woman can perform those activities wearing a chador, it's good because now we know that Iranian women are just like 'our' women and respect their own culture") and negative ones ("women in Iran have to endure that") make a judgment of reality based on the very stereotype that is provided in the images.

Yet, Ghazel's work does not imply that swimming with the chador, for instance, is natural or common in Iran; nor does it suggest that literally "every woman" wants to be a Botticelli Venus (despite her assertion). One might argue that, from a point of view, Ghazal's performances might indeed extend the field of stereotypes by showing a fictive reality. We should acknowledge Ghazal's "Me" series for what it is: a satirical mockery on the ideologization of the chador and its concomitant attempts to remove women's bodies away from sight, with an ironical inversion of private and public, and also a more serious or rather black-humor depiction of the ways this same State forces people to literally withdraw from its sight and reach through flight and exile.

Despite Barbad Golshiri's assertion that Ghazel "perceives feminist activism as exerting 'manly qualities',"[24] many of the activities she performs cannot be easily assigned to predominantly masculine or feminine gender identities. Ghazel indeed "feminizes" those activities from the point of view of erasing the body; the individual is immaterial and, behind the mask and the curtain, acquires a dream-like aura. In the mind of a censor of the Islamic Republic, without the chador or the hijab, those activities, if hypothetically carried out in public, would titillate the (male) public to such a degree that the woman has two options: not performing those activities in public or performing them properly veiled (if either of the two options is ridiculous, it is up to the women to decide). The other side of the coin would be the male erotic imagery very common in the West, in which women do perform those activities, but naked, calling attention to,

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and highlighting the sexual nature of the act (performing those activities while being naked), with the purpose of arousing the (usually male) viewer. If the Islamic Republic and other political and ideological Islamist regimes and movements sexualize the female body by hiding it, Western popular erotica sexualizes the body by exhibiting it (instrumentalizing the nude in order to "fake" the scene and at least attempting to hide from the consciousness of the viewer the artificiality of his/her gaze). The irony is that the only thing in Ghazel's video that transforms it into a work of art is the use of the chador, the same symbol employed by the political propaganda of the Islamic Republic.

Newsha Tavakolian

We can contrast Ghazel's irreverent, sarcastic chador performances with the quiet, almost resigned, soundless video *Listen* (2010), by Newsha Tavakolian. Tavakolian's video is also a comment, on a personal level (she dreamed of becoming a singer) about the ban on women singing in Iran. She shows a video in which professional female singers perform for the camera in a studio. They use common, everyday hijabs in a more relaxed, natural way.

In the photographs from the same *Listen* series, we meet a dignified, serious, deep and defiant – but not exaggerated or affected – pose by Newsha herself in open-air scenes, in ironic (because useless) defiance with big red boxing gloves or dead chicken on her hands, her head covered with a glass cube or with a crown, or amid the sea waves. As she describes, "hearing, standing, facing days of tedium, facing a world that has adorned them with a false crown." All pictures show silence, and are afterward ironically composed as CD covers for "dream albums" (Figs. 2–5).

Shirin Neshat

The usage of common – one could also say "popular" – symbols of the Muslim "other" is extended in a complex way by Iranian-American artist Shirin Neshat in her photograph series "Unveiling" and "Women of Allah." Neshat's photographs have been the focus of many academic works and her work featured in countless exhibitions worldwide. According to critic Calvin Reid, the combination of opposing characteristics, what he labels "contradictions – seductive feminine beauty and religious circumspection, Western conceptual art practice and traditional Islamic craft, not to mention 'submissive' Islamic women with large guns – provide an irresistible intellectual frisson."[25] Nina Cichocki summed up Neshat's appeal as "veils, poems, guns, and martyrs."[26]

The ambiguous and hermetic quality of Neshat's women photographs (in which she herself is the model), compound with the conscious usage of decorative coverings for her subject's skin and background – henna (a practice arguably not common in Iran, but inspired by South Asian and North African cultures), calligraphy and abstract patterns – to create non-historical, non-narrative compositions. Minimalist and repetitive usages of stereotypical symbols (above all the chador, the scripture, and the "woman" herself), coupled with the overlay of calligraphy (written over the photograph, and not on the live model), contribute to the formation of an "affectless subject"[27] that is empty of personality and vigor, in which the claim to verisimilitude is weak: "Despite their apparent referencing of images of militant women in

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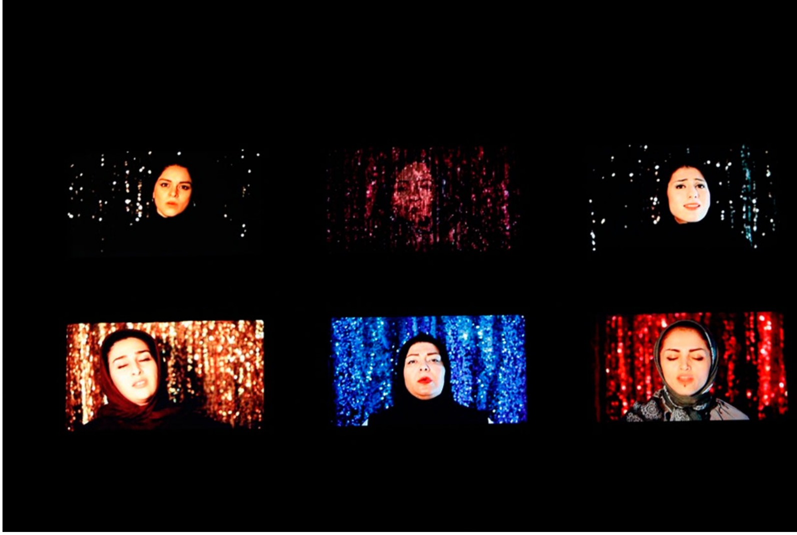

Fig. 2. Newsha Tavakolian, Listen. Production still.

the Iranian revolution, the overall effect of Neshat's photographs is as distant from revolutionary fervor as possible."[28]

The feeling of unreal assembly is enhanced, furthermore, by the lack of technical mastery of the arts of calligraphy, decoration, and henna painting.

Showing serious, almost fatigued faces, her personal allegories of an abstract "Muslim woman" have postures that waver between the hieratic, the languid and the indifferent, sad allegories of late-twentieth-century clichés that populate the Western imagination. Her bodies are silent and artificial, covered by adornment and almost impersonal. The contemporary Iranian poems that are supposed to give them a voice are unreadable to a Western public (Neshat's exhibitions rarely provide a translation), creating a distance between the image and its spectators.[29] It is hard to feel any empathy for an allegorical Muslim woman without feelings. Her women are neither passive nor active, her bodies are neither shown nor covered. Neshat's refusal to take a stand as an artist-subject gives the (mainly Western) viewer free rein to contradictory, yet plausible, interpretations. Muslim women are oppressed, but at the same time, they can participate in the making of "history" (albeit, ironically, in a passive manner …); "Muslim women are beautiful, yet dangerous; weak, yet violent";[30] they have a voice that paradoxically speaks through a written language we cannot understand.

It is worth noticing that the complex meanings of the veil in contemporary Muslim societies are not touched upon by Neshat. It is not the sign of a female liberation and empowerment that many women cite as their reason for taking up the veil.[31]

Contrary to Calvin Reid's affirmation that Shirin Neshat's women are "seductive,"[32] Neshat's subjects do not seem to engage with the viewer in a sensual way. Perhaps Neshat's intention, however explicitly she deals with it within her dichotomous (or

Fig. 3. Newsha Tavakolian, from the series Listen.

Fig. 4. Newsha Tavakolian, from the series Listen.

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Fig. 5. Newsha Tavakolian, from the series Listen.

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contradictory?) portrayals of Muslim women, the opposite of veiling is not shown to be seduction (as many conservative Muslims and a hypothetical erotic male gaze would have it so), but instead, the opposite of veiling is the female body itself – and this body is not necessarily defined by nakedness. This is shown in her close-ups of hands, face and eyes – eyes through the chador, with heavy make-up, play the part of the seductive, though inaccessible Muslim woman, enhanced by calligraphy (the "innovative" or "modern" touch) and clear in the hermetic title: "I am its secret" (from the series *The Women of Allah,* 1993, 48 × 32 cm). Even more suggestive, but now always shown or discussed, is a photograph entitled "Unveiling" (from the series *The Women of Allah*, 1993, 152 × 101 cm). In fact, she is still veiled, though revealing part of her upper chest. But the body, as an expression of femaleness, individuality, sensuality, or sexuality, is never more than hinted at, suggested, part veiling, part revealing. The desire of the female subject is contained; and the desire from the viewer's gaze is curtailed.

Neshat's women are not seductresses. They seem to be caught in the middle of their dual identity. This dual identity is generally not always the same "dual identity," Western women are most commonly represented as having (mother/woman, worker/mother, domestic work/paid work), but they call attention, for the general Western viewer, to the fact that Muslim women, too, can have multi-layered gender-related identities. The fact that she chooses a controversial depiction that may come as a shock (transgression of identity boundaries) may indeed relate to her own estrangement when coming back to Iran

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after witnessing the Revolution, and the deep changes it wrought in Iranian society, from afar. Her choice of representation is filled with some sense of calm and sad nostalgia; it recalls the themes it purports to represent only from afar: her women with guns call to mind the Revolution and the Iran–Iraq war without being an explicit reference to it. She does not represent the actual women she saw when she returned to Iran; rather, the women she portrays are her own feelings, represented and transposed. Moreover, her words and images are not rebellious in any way. They may show female agency in the abstract, but not female empowerment; the body is set aside in favor of the screen (a textual screen).

Lalla Essaydi

While the preceding artists adopt a strategy of dealing with stereotypical images of Muslim women or of facing the limits of expression in Iran by avoiding a discourse of the "exotic," both Shirin Neshat and Moroccan-American artist Lalla Essaydi (b. 1956) engage with the discourse of "otherness" – Neshat by creating dream-like personal landscapes, thus coming to terms with an imagined past and a present that is not fully experienced, and Lalla Essaydi by reworking the esthetics of nineteenth-century French Orientalist painters.

Essaydi uses "iconic," easily recognizable images from Orientalist paintings to transform their meanings, in a dangerous game of cliché vs. cliché. In this sense, there is a parallel with the "chador art" of Ghazel and Neshat.

Essaydi, who is both attracted and repulsed by Orientalist art, refashions Orientalist themes, providing a "virtual," "veiled" criticism, a stillborn criticism of sorts: "Orientalism is dead, long live Orientalism." Her Orientalist tableaux are disinfected from political implications. In her series entitled *Moroccan Women*, she transposes classic Orientalist paintings by Ingres and Jean-Léon Gérôme among others, to pastel-color, sometimes calligraphy-covered, women-only compositions. Her women reenact the scenes, but are desexualized and covered. The Arabic texts also create a decorative pattern and flow, but they are less prominent and less "dark" than Neshat's (Figs. 6–9).

In *Les Femmes du Maroc*, one might ask how much desexualization, stripping of color and the overt denial of the gaze are some sort of inability to represent feminine sexuality in other (non-sexist, non-male-gaze-based) terms. Critic Benjamin Genocchio also questions the affirmation on the catalog that Essaydi's women are "empowered," arguing instead: "I don't see how there can be anything empowering about images of women as sex slaves."[33]

In her "Harem" series (2009), Essaydi touches the erotic through languorous and Orientalist (or one might call "classic" nude?) poses. Beautiful, multicolored Moroccan wall tiles in a void, light-hearted, palace-like ambiance combine with the die-pressed patterns to obfuscate the difference between flesh and the glazed tiles; like a dream, flesh almost materializes itself, but is always on the verge. One can sense the stillness of the scene. It is this "almost" that calls attention; the cloth patterns hold back what would otherwise be curves, suggesting the body, or even some kind of nudity.

It is only the absence of nudity that keeps us from calling it a "traditional" Orientalist work of art or, from another point of view, a glamor Playboy-like centerfold. It is an architectural camouflage that cleanses the figure from nudity associations with Orientalism, but at

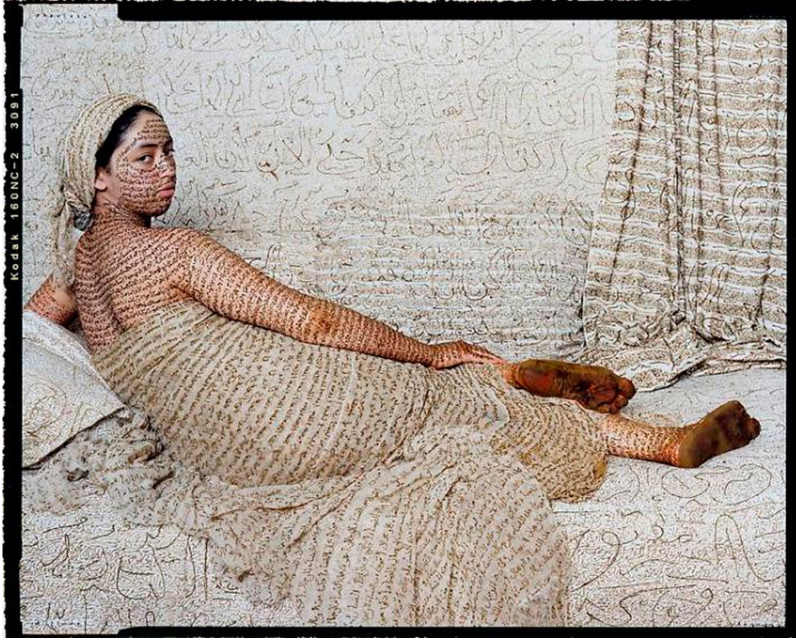

Fig. 6. Lalla Essaydi, *La Grande Odalisque*, from the series *Les Femmes du Maroc*, 2006.

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the same time distances the subject and the scene from the real, giving a first impression of a romanticized historicity. Flesh blends with tile work and patterned fabrics, faces sometimes obscured by unrecognizable scribblings (Fig. 10).

What is surprising, though, are the interpretations given to this reworking of Orientalist themes and esthetics. Even though the scenes, the colors, and the overall composition are attractive and alluring, an intriguing interaction between form and color, we cannot deduce the "official" interpretation, by Essaydi and her curators or agents, from the visual cue alone. Essaydi has affirmed that her work "questions the spaces to which women are traditionally confined."[34] Essaydi argues in her "Feminist Artist Statement" at the Brooklyn Museum web page[35] that women in her series are confined to their "proper" place in traditional Islamic societies, the private architectural setting of the home, secluded from the public life of men. She explains that the house in her photographs (*Les Femmes du Maroc*) belongs to her extended family, and was the place whither women who "disobeyed" or "stepped outside the permissible space" were sent as punishment, for 30 days, in silence, accompanied only by servants. In this space, "their confinement is a decorative one," affirms Essaydi. According to Essaydi, she "subvert[s] the silence of confinement," because "these women 'speak' visually to the house and to each other," and because, being an art form which according to her was (or is) "inaccessible to women,"[36] calligraphy "constitutes an act of rebellion," especially if written in henna, a women's art. A women writing on women in Arabic in a space that

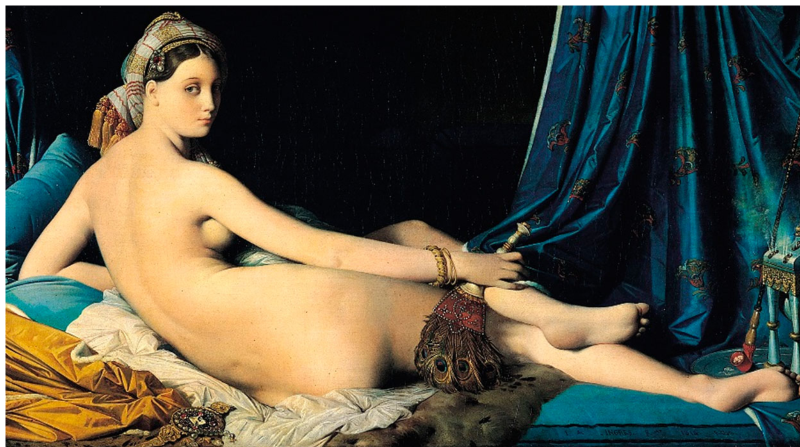

Fig. 7. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *La Grande Odalisque*, 1814, oil on canvas, 88.9 cm × 162.56 cm, Louvre, Paris.

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symbolized personally imprisonment and punishment is an act of rebellion, and writing in henna is "subversive."

This personal experience is extrapolated to Moroccan, Arab, and Muslim women in general, similar to Neshat's affirmation that she speaks from the point of view of a "general" Muslim or Iranian woman. Both claim to act as a bridge between cultures. Essaydi affirms that she is trying to "show another facet of the real Arab woman to the Western world and to the world in general,"[37] that Arabic women "are very strong" and "have our own personality, on our own."[38] Yet, it is counterproductive that she drapes her subjects in closed spaces, like a golden cage, and that she does not historicize her compositions.[39] She seems to be playing with traditional themes, forms, and colors, instead of questioning patriarchal institutions. There is no sight of modern life, in a twentieth century in which women acquired both the right and the duty to an education, although Morocco, regarding women's education and total literacy, lags far behind other countries in the region.[40] For a woman brought up in Morocco, daughter of a father who had 4 wives and 11 children, it is surprising to know that it was in this seemingly "oppressive" ambience that she was allowed to move to Paris when she was 16 to attend high school, after which she returned to Morocco, married a civil servant, moved to Saudi Arabia, where she lived six years married and 13 more years divorced with her children. Then, in the 1990s, she returns to Paris to study at the École des Beaux-Arts, where she became acquainted with Orientalist painters. She finally moved to Boston in 1996 "to seek school for [her] children."[41]

It seems that she finds analogies and similitudes between the colonialist male European sensual and visual fantasies about "Oriental" women, on the one hand, and twentieth-century societies that are still deeply patriarchal (and from which she has somehow escaped), all interwoven in a personal narrative. But an elite, cosmopolitan,

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Fig. 8. Lalla Essaydi. *Les Femmes du Maroc 4*, 2006.

New York-based artist who reworks long-gone clichés to fight present stereotypes speaks from a difficult position to make her message heard the way she intends to. And this reflects in her work, which, presented without her life story and her personal interpretation, does not convince the spectators of any confrontation with a male-dominated world view. There is no positive alternative, just the reenactment of an ambiguous submission, in which no resistance is shown.

Hassan Hajjaj

We can contrast Essaydi and Neshat with the work of Moroccan artist and designer, Hassan Hajjaj (b. 1961), whose irreverent, colorful, and wholly contemporary depictions of a hybrid daily life are full of humor and

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Fig. 9. Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Le Marché aux Esclaves*, 1867, oil on canvas, 84.3 × 63 cm. Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown.

verve. Hassan plays with pop culture, sports, and feminine esthetics. Whereas Essaydi's and Neshat's women are contained, Hassan's models adopt a pose that is neither sad, nor serious, nor exactly defiant either, but affirmative anyway. He unravels the supposed sacrality of the veil and reworks traditional *jellaba* dress by inscribing them in the context of pop culture, consumerism, and a modern lifestyle.

We see Nike and Puma outfits worn as veils and dresses, together with football tennis, and motorcycles, sometimes framed with cans or packages of local brand supermarket products.

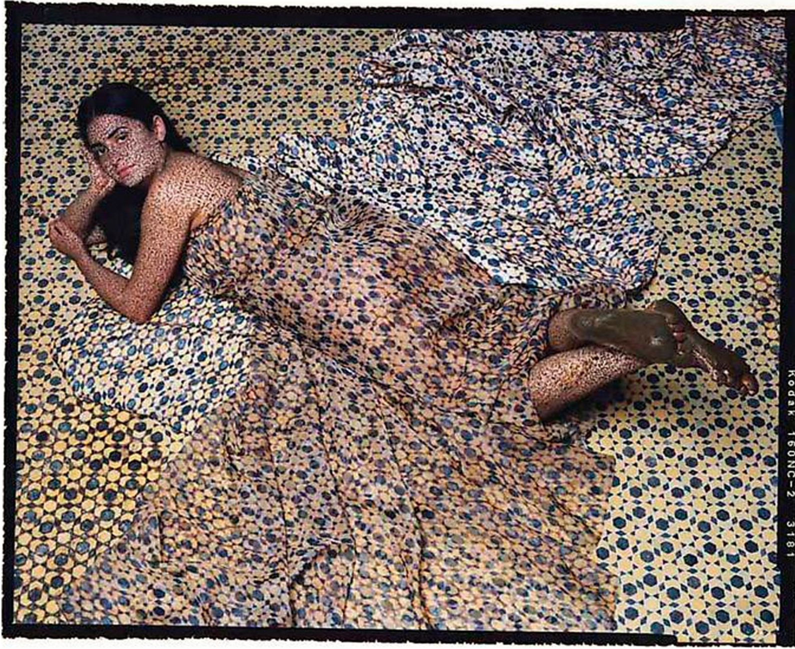

Fig. 10. Lalla Essaydi, *Harem no. 5*.

Contrary to Essaydi, Hassan is ironical about classical odalisque poses, which he transcribes to a popular and contemporary context (see his *Odalisque Monochrome* and *Rubbish Odalisque*). His female subjects face the viewer with an urban attitude and carefree smiles (*Wink* and *Rider*), overlooking and bypassing "big issues" of gender inequality, authoritarianism, and political Islam with a humorous look at the hybrid, local and global, by placing "icons" of consumer culture side by side with "icons" of Muslim and Moroccan culture (*Keshmara*).

In contrast with both Essaydi and Neshat, Hajjaj's women are not alone or in solitary confinement, they engage in the public space in a very assertive way. Although assertiveness can also be found in Tavakolian's photographs, in Hajjaj we do not find the solitary melancholy of Newsha Tavakolian's framing of herself in empty cityscapes. In Hajjaj we can almost hear the noise of lively city life outside the frame (Figs. 11–15).

Majida Khattari

Many of Moroccan artist Majida Khattari's (b. 1968) works are a re-reading of Western representations of Muslim women.

If the burqa is the denial of sexuality, then Majda Khattari's burqa is the denial of the burqa. However, the burqa denies sexuality by paradoxically affirming its ever-looming, haunting, virtual hidden presence. In *Les Parisiennes,* the presence of the unveiled non-nude and veiled nude questions both concepts and forces the assumption of corporeality where once there was only the suggestion of a body (in the case of the burqa-clad woman) and vice versa for the other woman.

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Fig. 11. Hassan Hajjaj, *Keshmara*, from *Spring-Summer collection 2018* (2010).

As Neshat and Ghazel, Khattari also deals with allegories of the veil and the role of the woman, but from a diametrically opposed, harsh and direct, but visually sophisticated way. Meticulously composed, Khattari's photographs are openly political allegories, and they do not have a personal narrative behind them. Her use of the body is crude

Fig. 12. Hassan Hajjaj, *Odalisque monochrome*, ca. 2000–2007, digital print inset with cartons and glass jars mounted on board.

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Fig. 13. Hassan Hajjaj, *Rubbish Odalisque,* 2011, 400 × 50 cm.

Fig. 14. Hassan Hajjaj. *Kesh Angels – Wink*, 2010, metallic Lambda print, 72.4 × 48.4 cm.

and for some, shocking, because for her the dialectic between veiled and unveiled work out as a stark statement against the hegemonic policy of veiling. She inverts and confuses the usage of the veil to confront social norms and cause a strong reaction from the viewer.

Her series *Le Louvre Abu Dhabi* (2009) is a sarcastic comment on the establishment of a branch of the Parisian institution in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi in the UAE. Taking into account that the selection of the art that will be on display is done by a committee including Abu Dhabi's rulers,[42] it is highly doubtful that the museum will host anything that is offensive to the overall sensitivities of the local and regional public. The same is valid for the Guggenheim branch in the same city, in which case it has been clear that the hosts will not allow nudity or gay content, although it has not been defined as "censorship," but as an "understanding," and according to Rita Aoun Abdo, cultural director of the Saadiyat Island where the museum

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Fig. 15. **Hassan Hajjaj, *Rider*, 2010. From the Kesh Angels series Edition of 10, metallic lambda print, wooden frame with Knorr stock packaging 48.4 × 72.5 cm (print size); 60.7 × 89.2 cm (frame size).**

Fig. 16. **Majida Khattari, *Le Louvre Abu Dhabi*, 2009, 80 × 120 cm.**

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will be located, museums are "based on real dialogue not on shock or controversy."[43] But if shock and controversy (political, social, esthetic) are the stock and trade of much of modern and contemporary art, then there is a dilemma for Abu Dhabi, which Khattari captures in a double image: nude women paintings – ironically, one of which is the Turkish Bath by Ingres – covering nude women, and finally an overall silver covering, an allusion both to the architecture of the museum and to the empty space of cultural life in Abu Dhabi as she sees it (Fig. 16).

Khattari's *Les Parisiennes* (2008–2009) explores a series of dual oppositions that frame much of the discussion about visual representation of women from Muslim countries. As also happens with Ghazel and other Iranian artists, the women are represented veiled in a private space, something that would not be required. Khattari, on the contrary, breaks away with a well-behaved, officially sanctioned esthetic for the artistic representation of the veil. They are inside the house, in a place where they should not need to be veiled – but they also are offering themselves as image for "consumption" inside the house. There is an interplay between veiled/unveiled, private/public, internal/external, forbidden/allowed. This is not about individuality per se, a personal or allegorical narrative, or expression of subjective feelings, but the figure acts on the middle ground between nature and culture, between desire and the social construction of desire, between consciousness and dream, past and present, reality and imagination. One more transgression in this carefully composed scene of exuberant textiles and furniture is the presence of what is possibly *araq* (an alcoholic beverage) in the glasses. This ambiguity and blurring of distinctions lead the viewer to invert the question and begin asking if what is artificial and shocking is not the nude women, but the veils, instead – but then one might suddenly realize that it is not about "Oriental" women: as the title tells us, they are "Parisian" women in an ironic stance facing the viewer (Fig. 17).

Conclusion: the absent rebellion?

The works considered here show a need to move beyond an either–or polar opposition between conceptual pairs, treating them as useful but limited methodological tools, in order to assess the place of the body and of the individual in contemporary artistic production of Iran and the Arab world. Critical considerations of the now old-fashioned concept of "globalization," of political and social contexts, of the conditions of life for exiled, diasporic, or "local" artists are still lacking. It is commonplace to affirm that in the interconnectedness of cultural and social life in the late-twentieth century, there is no clear division between the local and the global, the national and the international. But the consequences of this state of affairs have not yet affected the analysis of art from the Middle East in particular. Even if Keshmirshekan[44] explicitly dismisses any theoretical framework for such controversial concepts as "identity" and "exoticism," moving on to Iranian artists' "native" conceptions of such terms, and accepting them at face value, there is a lot of work to do in that direction, since the whole issue of "identity," in a multiplicity of levels, is a hotly contested subject in the Iranian public sphere.[45]

If there is a danger of claiming to speak on behalf of "Muslim women" in favor of their "liberation," there is also the danger of benignly brushing aside questions of power. The disciplines of the body, in terms of both

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Fig. 17. Majida Khattari, *Les Parisiennes*, 2008–2009.

behavior[46] and control,[47] are not commented upon. There seems to be a comment on "romanticized, homogenized and departicularized cultural identities."[48] And if power is the great absent, so representations of the body lack any possible manifestation of the body as a site of resistance against domination. The body is not the place of individual freedom and fulfillment (even in a utopian vision). Its absence, in the works of Ghadirian and Ghazel, or its silence, in the works of Essaydi and Khattari, point to allegorical or metaphorical readings in which the defiance is made in conformity with a given visual language, and this conformity undermines the persuasion of their critique.

It is ironic that this conformity is received in the West as some sort of cultural authenticity, giving more voice to the artists who use fashionable or marketable ethnic markers – most notably calligraphy, the chador, the "situation" of women, and other references to Islamic or Persian identities. Other artists who do not deal with those themes or transgress the "red lines" of the regime face persecution and a life of hardship or exile. This is the case of Golnar Tabibzadeh, who gets very little attention from the media but "satirizes the hypocrisy of an outwardly Islamic society wracked by sexual promiscuity and heroin and opium addiction."[49]

There have been, so far, few analyses of the place of the body in contemporary Iranian and Arabic contexts. In many works considered here, and for very different reasons, there is an esthetic, or a legal, conformity to either a loose set of approved norms of artistic expression (namely, what is acceptable or tolerable to the Iranian regime) or to a supposed identity (visual, social, national). Even when women break away from prescribed norms and take a visual stance that is oppositional to the social and political status quo, they fall short of addressing the social and political institutions they reflect upon, and instead address the "other" – namely, the (mostly Western) public. And they address this public from an ambiguously passive perspective, a lament and a complaint that hides itself behind the curtains of a silent resistance. In this sense, Moore's remarks about Neshat's video works may be illuminating:

> Neshat's women display behavior that could be termed unconstrained (Rapture), out-of-law (Turbulent) or desiring and non-conforming (Fervor), *yet such rebellions are both tactical and compromised.*[50]

In other words, there is no sustained attempt at an engaging critique of the establishment, or an alternative proposition. There is no visual or thematic rupture, no shock or full-fledged subversion. This is no clearer when we notice the omnipresence of the veil. It is as if the feminine body could only be symbolized by the veil; and this symbolization is an absence. Being feminine in public space is being itself an absent space, a space filled with no visible physical form. The body is presented in a paradoxical embodiment of presence and absence, with a silence that is broken only when no one is there to see, as in Neshat's video *Turbulent* (1998).

If Neshat, an artist who is well established in the contemporary art circuit, working without the restrictions she would find in Iran, opts for a nostalgic, exoticist discourse, with a visual language that is as clean as it is repetitive, emphasizing each moment a country that is no longer hers; and if she cannot articulate a visual language that might clearly reflect her political position (which is sometimes not defined); if Shadi Ghadirian, living in Iran, produces works that reflect the traditional vision of woman more than propose or give voice to non-hegemonic alternatives (possible or already existent) of women's (or men's?) empowerment as social agents, whereas other artists – also working with the same limitations, such as Rokni and Ramin Haerizadeh (today in exile), Golnar Tabibzadeh, or, more subtly, Newsha Tavakolian, among others – give birth to a more ironic and disturbing view of their social, political, and personal reality – then dichotomies such as traditional/modern; local/global, etc. can obsfuscate rather than illuminate particular aspects of their works or their universal features.

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Endnotes

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6. For a classical work on the significance of the nude for Western art, see Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form. Princeton University Press, 1972*. For the appropriation of classical nude forms in nineteenth century France, see, for example, Athena S. Leoussi, "From Civic to Ethnic Classicism: The Cult of the Greek Body in Late Nineteenth Century French Society and Art", *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, 16, No 3/4, 2009, pp. 393–442.
7. In an exhibition entitled "Olympics – Past and Present" in Doha in 2013, the Qatar Museums Authority wanted to cover two statues with black cloth. After a reaction of the Greek Culture Minister, the pieces were shipped back to Greece. Rob Williams, "Qatar Returns Statues to Greece After Row Over Nudity", *The Independent*, 29 April 2013. http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/qatar-returns-statues-to-greece-after-row-over-nudity-8594642.html
8. Such is the case, for instance, the exhibitions *Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East* (British Museum, 2006); *Breaking News* (Paris, 2008); *Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East* (Saatchi Gallery, 2009); *Miragens* (2011) – Instituto Tomie Ohtake (São Paulo) and CCBB (Rio de Janeiro); *Light from the Middle East: New Photography* (Victoria and Albert Museum, 2012–2013); and *Islamic Art Now* (Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA, 2015–2016).
9. For an overview of the field, see, for example, Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (eds), *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*, New York, Harper and Row, 1982; and Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (eds), *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism And Art History*, New York, NY, Westview Press, 1992.
10. Here I use the term post-revolutionary as in French socio-historical literature, in the sense of the period after the revolutionary decade of the 1980s.
11. Oswald de Andrade, "Manifesto Antropofágico", *Revista de Antropofagia*, São Paulo, 1928.
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32. Reid, 1996.

33. Benjamin Genocchio, “Reviving the Exotic to Critique Exoticism”, *The New York Times*, 5 March 2010. http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/07/nyregion/07artsnj.html?_r=0

34. http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/arts-post/post/lalla-essaydi-at-the-smithsonians-national-museum-of-african-art-my-work-is-really-my-history/2012/05/09/gIQAAxVrDU_blog.html

35. http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/feminist_art_base/gallery/lalla_essaydi.php

36. Her general statement is not valid to all times and places throughout Islamic history. For the case of Muslim Spain, see R. Hillenbrand, “The Ornament of the World: Medieval Córdoba as a Cultural Center”, in S. K. Jayyusi and M. Marín (eds), *The Legacy of Muslim Spain*, Leiden, New York, E.J. Brill, 1992.

37. http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/arts-post/post/lalla-essaydi-at-the-smithsonians-national-museum-of-african-art-my-work-is-really-my-history/2012/05/09/gIQAAxVrDU_blog.html

38. http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/arts-post/post/lalla-essaydi-at-the-smithsonians-national-museum-of-african-art-my-work-is-really-my-history/2012/05/09/gIQAAxVrDU_blog.html

39. Compare her approach with, for instance, *The Two Prisoners* by Moustafa Farroukh (1929), which shows a semi-clad woman holding a narghileh looking at a caged canary. In a modernizing and forward-looking approach, Farroukh hoped that “his oil painting would incite broad support among his fellow Lebanese for a revolution in conventional gender relations and women’s participation in the urban social order.” (Scheid, 2010, p. 203).

40. The total adult literacy rate for 2005–2010 in Morocco was still 56%, according to UNICEF, although for youth these rates increase significantly, despite a gap between boys and girls (http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/morocco_statistics.html). Literacy rate for girls in Morocco in 1971 was an appalling approximately 10%, only reaching almost 40% by 1990 http://www.census.gov/population/international/files/ppt/Morocco93.pdf). For a comparative chart, see http://looklex.com/e.o/index.education.literacy.htm.

41. DeNeen Brown, “Artist Lalla Essaydi challenges stereotypes of women in Islamic cultures”, *The Washington Post*, 3 May 2012.

42. USA Today, “Louvre museum to build branch in UAE”, 3 March 2007. http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2007-03-06-louvre-abu-dhabi_N.htm

43. David Batty, “Guggenheim Delay Raises Big Question: Is Abu Dhabi Ready for Modern Art?” *The Guardian*, 17 April 2012.

44. Keshmirshekan, 2010.

45. Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, Stanford University Press, 2009; Asef Bayat, *Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the Post-Islamist Turn*, Stanford University Press, 2007; and Roxanne Varzi, *Warring Souls: Youth, Media, and Martyrdom in Post-Revolution Iran*, Duke University Press Books, 2006.

46. Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*, Oxford, Blackwell, [1939] 2000.

47. Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir: la naissance de la prison*, Paris, Gallimard, 1975.

48. Lindsey Moore, “Frayed Connections, Fraught Projections: The Troubling Work of Shirin Neshat”, *Women: A Cultural Review*, 13, No 1, 2002, pp. 1–17, 11.

49. Iason Athanasiadis, “Irans’s Unseen Art: An Iranian Painter Creates Works that can Never be Seen in her Own Country”, *The Toronto Star*, 8 August 2006.

50. Moore, 2002, p. 11, my emphasis.

Summary

The subject of the representation of the body is a privileged locus to engage critically the concepts we use to make sense of much of the contemporary art in the Middle East. The absence, in the work of some internationally renowned artists, of representations of the body that contest dominant narratives is intriguing. How do we account for the many cases of effacement of the body and absence of an individual voice? I argue that many cases of contemporary art from the Middle East do not

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critically deal with the body as a locus of individual and collective agency; however, an analysis of works from Iran and the Arab world shows the body as a medium and a locus for contesting gender roles and pushing new boundaries against both official and Western expectations.

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