ARTNEWS
The Women of the Arab Art World|
By Lily Wei | ArtNews | 4 November 2014

THE WOMEN OF THE ARAB ART WORLD

BY ***Lilly Wei*** POSTED **11/04/14**

Women in the Middle East and North Africa find themselves welcome in the world of art, because most men ignore its power

Remarkable in its breadth and depth, the recent exhibition "Here and Elsewhere" at the New Museum offered New York its first comprehensive survey of contemporary art from the Middle East and North Africa. This diverse, historically rich, and complex part of the world is still not as familiar to Westerners as it should be. It is also an area that we have too often stereotyped, viewed as homogeneous, and indiscriminately demonized—but, at least, no longer dismiss. Even more remarkable, of the 45-plus artists on view, many shown for the first time in the United States (although they've often appeared in international exhibitions and biennials, including Documenta, Venice, São Paulo, and Sharjah)—almost half were women. It's a percentage, still rarely mustered in major exhibitions in the United States or elsewhere, that raises a number of questions.

We might wonder, for example: Does the presence of so many talented Arab women mean that the culture is changing in the Middle East? Do women there now have a greater public presence and greater independence of movement—freedom to travel and pursue a profession, and freedom from patriarchal and familial authority? Is perceived gender discrimination in some instances simply due to cultural differences?

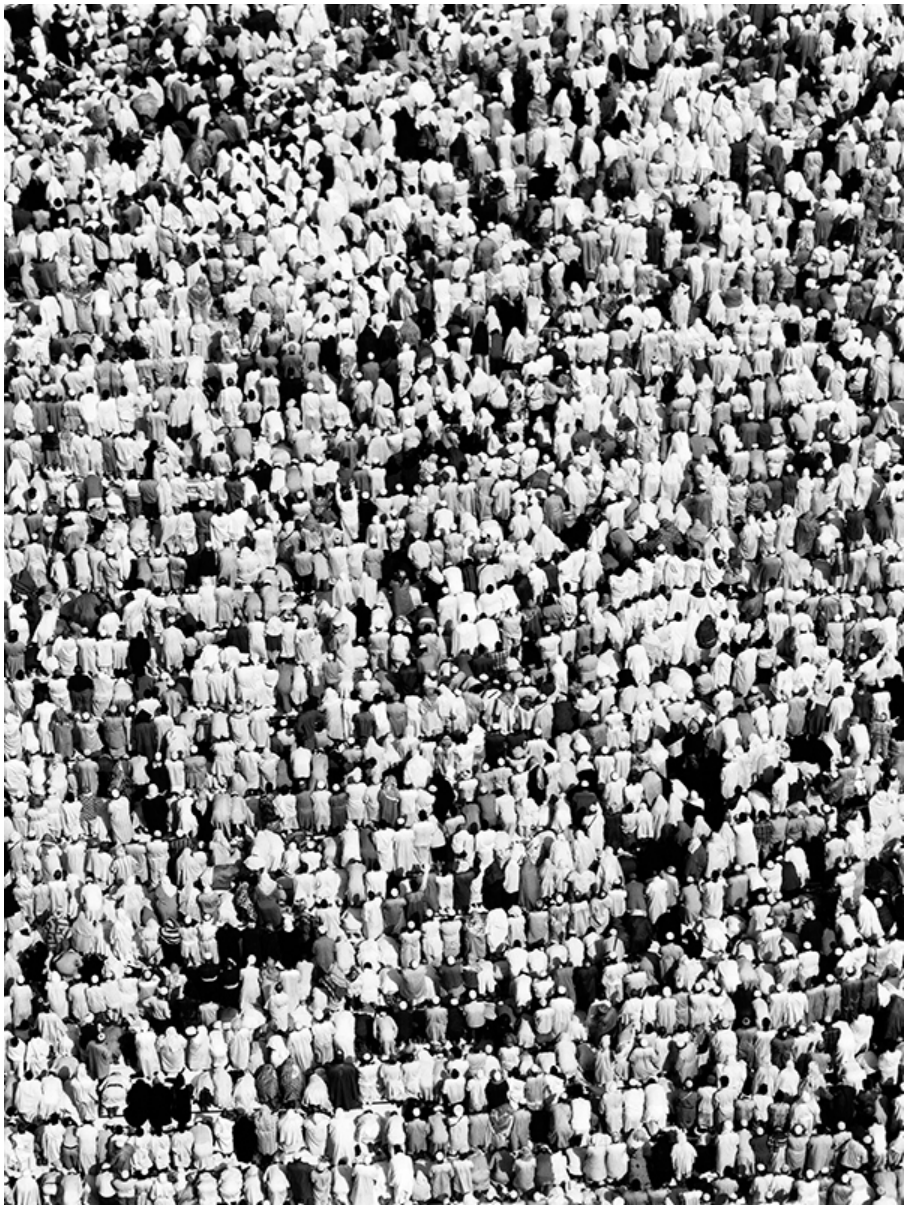
Boushra Almutawakel, who was born in Yemen in 1969 and was the country's first female photographer, discusses the fraught subject of covering women from a non-Western, more nuanced perspective. Her photographs were in the recent show "The Middle East Revealed: A Female Perspective" at Howard Greenberg Gallery in New York. Sarah Abu Abdallah, born in Saudi Arabia in 1990, addresses the same issue. In a statement accompanying her video *Saudi Automobile*(2012), she says that "painting a wrecked car [is] like icing a cake, as if beautifying the exterior would help fix the lack of functionality within…" Among questions that come to mind are: Do the women whose work is being shown live in London, Amsterdam, Berlin, and New York, as did Middle Eastern artists from an earlier period (Shirin Neshat, Mona Hatoum, Ghada Amer), or can they thrive in Beirut, Cairo, Amman, Ramallah, and other centers of

the Arab world? Has the aftermath of the so-called Arab Spring given women a greater voice? Are women from the Middle East willing to talk about gender more openly now? How do generational differences factor in? And, as the market for contemporary Arab art rises and the region becomes part of the international art circuit and a hub for collectors, will works by women have the same monetary value as those by men?

When asked if the surprisingly large number of women in "Here and Elsewhere" was intentional, New Museum curator and artistic director Massimiliano Gioni said, "It is one of the many stereotypes the exhibition tries to question. A certain Western view assumes that women in Arab countries are oppressed and left out of any cultural debate. We found instead that women artists were doing great works. We didn't set out to show more of them or to use women and their work as some kind of example. It simply turned out that many of the works we found to be compelling were being made by women. So, in a way, it was a welcome surprise for ourselves as well."

Similarly, Vienna-based Karin Adrian von Roques, the lead curator of "The View from Inside"for the 2014 FotoFest biennial in Houston, which also focused on artists from the Arab world, invited quite a few women photographers to participate. She says that, while she was pleased there were so many women in her show, gender was not a criterion. When asked about women's current status, she warned against stereotyping, echoing Gioni. "The Western world has a tendency to take their values as a benchmark for judging other cultures. There is the widespread idea that women in the Arab world are all oppressed, with no opportunity for self-expression, to hold public positions, or have social status—and that's not true. It's much more complicated, although many things do need to be changed," she says, adding that some already have been. "I have met so many powerful Arab women artists over the years, especially in the Gulf region, and as Arab art becomes increasingly in demand globally, they will also benefit from that demand." Von Roques also emphasizes the intensive development of a strong cultural infrastructure across the region: new museums, galleries, biennials, art fairs, and auctions, and with them, the rising number of Arab women in prominent positions in the arts.

One of those influential women is Sheikha Hoor Al-Qasimi, president of the Sharjah Art Foundation and director of the Sharjah Biennial. She points out that women have always had an important presence at the Sharjah Biennial. "We don't really differentiate on the basis of gender," she says. "Rather we look at the artist's practice and the artwork itself. It wouldn't surprise me if the numbers had increased, though, since the last five biennials have been curated predominately by women." She explains that both the Sharjah Art Foundation and the Biennial have tried to provide for women artists "not only an international platform for their work and exposure, but also opportunities for residencies and production support." When asked if there were many women in positions of influence such as hers, she responded that in the Middle East, "woman are in some of the most visible and powerful roles within the art world—perhaps surprisingly so, given Western stereotypes."



Reem Al Faisal's untitled gelatin silver print from her series "Hajj," 1999–2003.
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND FOTOFEST, HOUSTON

Reem Al Faisal is another multi-dimensional, high-profile Arab woman. A photographer from Saudi Arabia who also works as a journalist, heads an NGO, and co-owns two galleries in Dubai, she is perhaps best known for her images of the pilgrims of the hajj. She says that being a female artist in Saudi Arabia is not difficult, noting that "male artists are more likely to be socially rejected since art is not considered a masculine activity. Being a photographer, however, whether female or male, is still not easy since Saudi society in general dislikes being photographed," she adds. "And being a Saudi royal doesn't help in any way. I face the same prejudice as any other photographer, perhaps even more since my interest in photography is geared toward public urban places, not nature or interiors. A few pilgrims were very disturbed by my taking their picture and I suppose being a woman made it more disturbing."
Three women artists, from different generations, voice similar opinions. Etel Adnan, born in 1925 in Beirut, Lebanon, and educated at the Sorbonne, has spent much of her life between Beirut, Paris, and Sausalito, California, and is now residing in Paris. A celebrated poet, novelist, and translator, whose writing examines war and its human toll, she is also a professor of philosophy and an accomplished artist.

“Gender discussions are long and complicated and, I think, less theoretical in the Middle East than in the West,” she notes. “Women are concerned with divorce and violence, mainly. They appreciate the value of family but fear its authority in cases of conflict. But the number of women working in all fields is increasing, and accordingly, their visibility. Women are finding in art, as opposed to politics, a world that is open to them. And they are welcome in that field partly because most men ignore the power of art, considering it harmless,” she says, reiterating Al Faisal’s observation.

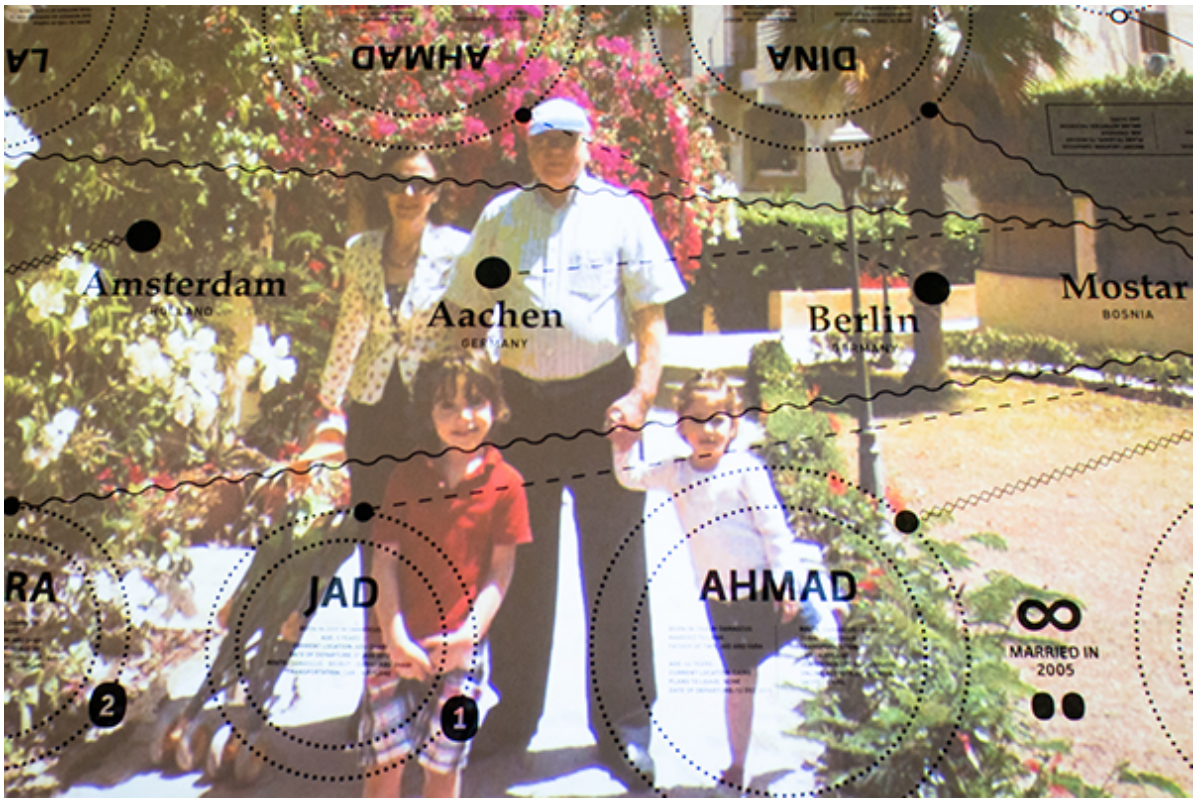
Upheavals (like the civil war in Lebanon and the Arab Spring), Adnan observes, have expanded the realm of artists’ activities all over the Arab world—women included. “It stimulates their imagination, and the pain they go through witnessing so much horror pushes them to express it forcefully, openly,” Adnan says. “I have been one of the very first Arab women to concern myself with contemporary history and politics in my writings; I did it spontaneously, not thinking about whether I was breaking rules or not. I can say that it encouraged many younger writers to do so. For art, it’s a bit different, because for many years I was an artist working in the U.S., while, little by little, many women artists in Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, and elsewhere were starting to work and to make their work known all over Arab capitals. It is heartwarming.”

Also born in Beirut, but in 1972, almost half a century later, Lamia Joreige lives and works in this culturally active city, which is at the heart of her imagery. She has a B.F.A. in painting and filmmaking from the Rhode Island School of Design. Her videos and installations explore the divide between subjective memory and collective history—in particular, Lebanon’s long and punishing civil war (1975–90) that pitted Christians against Muslims, and the war between Israel and Hezbollah in 2006—and consider how fact and fiction are often difficult to distinguish. Joreige is also a founder of the Beirut Art Center, an important nonprofit space for international contemporary art.

Lamia Joreige, still from *A Journey*, 2006.
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND TAYMOUR GRAHNE GALLERY, NEW YORK

Like several of the other women interviewed, Joreige believes that, contrary to Western stereotypes, there is "no major difference" in her country in the way female and male artists are treated. In general, however, she thinks that, in the art world, women often have less visibility and recognition than men. As she observes, "While a lot of effort has gone into trying to be open and to understand non-Western art in recent years by the West, it can lead to categorizations and simplifications about a region or a culture, and to market speculation, which could be perceived as a new Orientalism. In general," she says, "I dislike categorizations, so I rarely put myself forward as a woman artist—or an Arab artist—although I am both. While my work is not militant and doesn't manifest any straightforward political statement regarding feminist issues, it would be hard to dissociate it from the fact that I am a woman. I often portray women as strong, influential figures, such as in my film, *A Journey*, in which my mother and I circle around the main character/figure of my grandmother."

Nevertheless, she says, "away from the realm of art, in everyday life, women in Lebanon are not treated equally. I hope that attitudes and laws will evolve together in order to improve the situation," she says. "It is very difficult for us since our personal lives are strictly regulated in terms of marriage, inheritance, child care, and so on by Christian and Muslim laws, which seldom favor women. As a woman, this is an extremely important issue for me. The revolutions in Egypt, Tunisia, and Syria made me very hopeful in their early stages, but later, like many, I became disillusioned. It is very sad to see men and women who so courageously rose up against oppression find themselves so soon afterward in a country at war or oppressed in other ways. It is very sad that these unprecedented freedom movements failed to translate politically into a real democratic change. I was hoping that these movements would affect all of us in a positive way. My latest feature film, *And the living is easy*, expresses the situation in Beirut in 2011, where things were 'suspended' while all around us revolutionary movements were erupting."



Friday Table, 2013–14, by Ghalia Elsrakbi and Lauren Alexander's two-person collective, Foundland, in their show "Escape Routes and Waiting Rooms."

JULIE JAMORA/COURTESY THE ARTISTS, EDGE OF ARABIA, AND THE INTERNATIONAL STUDIO & CURATORIAL PROGRAM, NEW YORK

Ghalia Elsrakbi, the youngest of these three women, was born in 1978 in Damascus. She calls herself a researcher, writer, artist, designer, and part of Foundland, a collective she established in 2009 in Amsterdam with Lauren Alexander. Elsrakbi lived in Syria until 2000, when she left for the Netherlands to study. In 2007, she returned to Damascus for the first time, thereafter visiting on a regular basis until it became too dangerous. Since 2012, she has been staying in Cairo for substantial periods of time and has since relocated there. “Before 2011 and the revolution, I hadn’t thought seriously of moving back to the Middle East but afterward, that changed. We had a lot of hope, but it didn’t happen the way we hoped. Nonetheless, I felt I needed to be close. I felt an engagement with the society of the region I hadn’t felt before.”

Elsrakbi says that the position of women in general is especially problematic in Cairo. Women in Beirut had a certain freedom, Syria was in-between, but Cairo has always been more difficult—the society very masculine. But now women are speaking up. “Their voices are louder, and there is room for them because they are needed.” She is guardedly optimistic. Things are changing, she believes. “In the past three years, there has been greater acceptance. Women have gained much more confidence in themselves; they feel equal to the men they have fought next to.

“I see positive things,” Elsrakbi continues. “The younger generation expects more. By staying in the Middle East, Foundland can be a bridge between two cultures, and for that, we need to stay close to events. We also have the tools to translate this information for Western audiences so that it’s not just something happening far away. Our lives will be harder but it is worth it.”

Lilly Wei is a critic and independent curator and a contributing editor of ARTnews.

A version of this story originally appeared in the November 2014 issue of *ARTnews* on page 76 under the title “New Women of Arabia.”