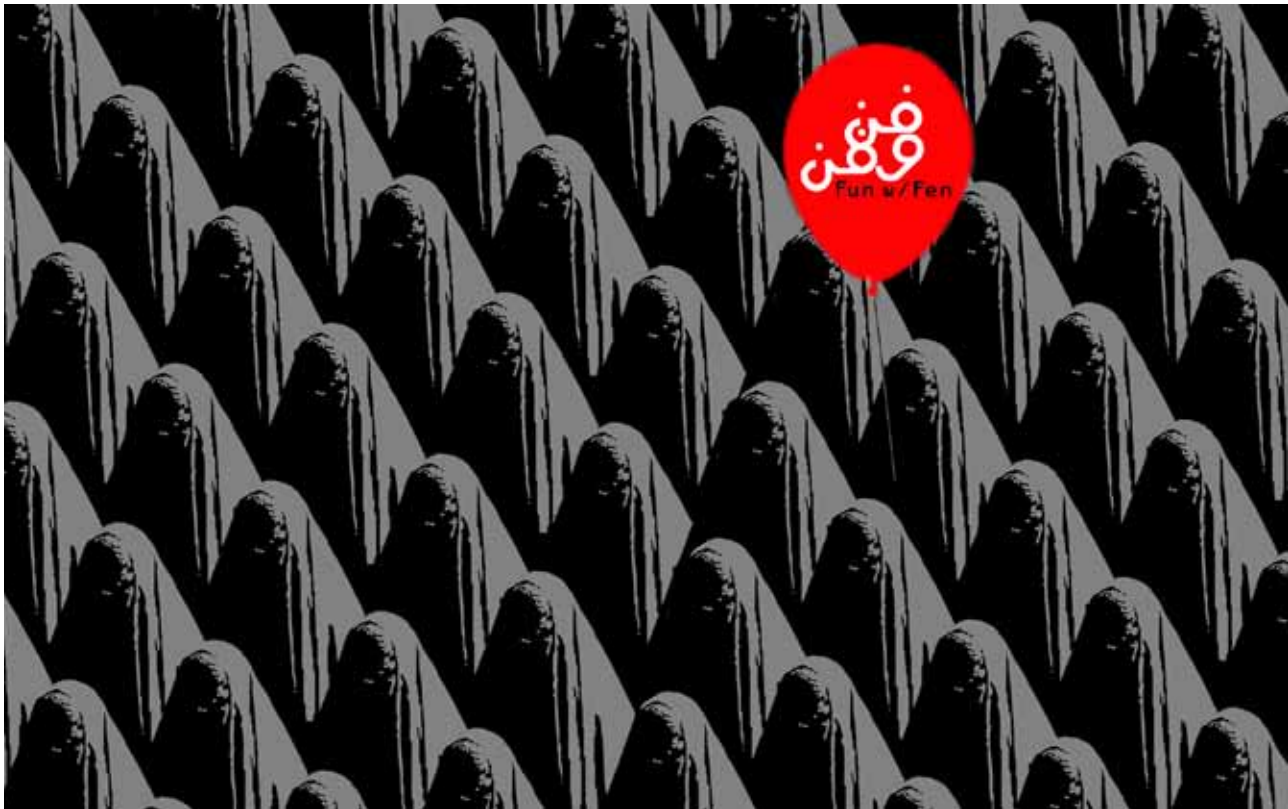


MAKING LIGHT OF ART: MOHAMED KANOO'S FUN W/FEN COLLECTION

By SAMAR FARUQI



Red Balloon and the Abayya Army, 2012, silkscreen print on canvas, 130x80cm. - Courtesy of the artist.

Mohamed Kanoo's recent work explores topical issues through humorous reinterpretations of popular and canonical cultural referents. Aptly titled *Fun w/Fen* (*Fun w/Art*, 2012), this collection presents a number of unexpected pairings: Darth Vader wears a shemagh helmet, while Andy Warhol's iconic image of Mao Tse Tung dons a ghutra (keffiyeh); Katsushika Hokusai's nineteenth-century popular print *The Great Wave* is set against the Dubai skyline; religious iconography is presented in a contemporary utilitarian context; and readymade objects are designed for display in an exhibition space. It is, in fact, this incongruity between viewer expectations of recognizable images and objects and the parody of cultural tropes that underpins the

humorous slant of the artist's work.¹

For Kanoo, humor is a "tool" with which he can communicate with a broader demographic and a way of generating greater public debate and interaction with contemporary art in the Gulf. As a particularly effective means of engaging audiences (including those who may not be seasoned visitors of art exhibitions) humor has for centuries played a significant role in art. William Hogarth used satire to critique the social ills of eighteenth-century Britain; the sixteenth-century Italian painter Giuseppe Arcimboldo cleverly constructed portraits out of fruits, vegetables, flowers and objects: works that are often seen as visual critiques of Renaissance high society. Hokusai (who Kanoo

references), and his contemporaries, drew from the comic tradition of Japan; Marcel Duchamp famously challenged perceptions of art and the art world when he exhibited *Fountain* (1917), a urinal signed with the pseudonym “R. Mutt.”

Kanoo’s incorporation of humor, however, is more in the spirit of Pop art and the work of Jeff Koons². Modern and contemporary art—particularly the work and techniques of Roy Lichtenstein and Warhol—played an integral role in Kanoo’s development as an artist and contribute to the overall aesthetic he brings to his work. A self-taught artist, Kanoo, born in Manama in 1963 and a resident of Abu Dhabi since the 1980s, started painting in 1989. His passion for art is informed by both his interest in experimenting with a range of media (including painting, printmaking, installation, photography and the readymade) and the ideological potential of visual culture. His artistic approach has been described as “being in transition”³ as Kanoo emphasizes the need to continually reassess his work technically and conceptually, often revisiting subjects and motifs explored in earlier works such as with his *Shemaghart* and *Henna Hand Stop Signs*. He also uses his art to challenge stereotypes of the Arab and Islamic world, with the aim of building a bridge between the ostensibly opposing cultures of East and West.

In this vein, Kanoo’s exploration of humor is particularly relevant, most notably in the way in which the images he presents disrupt viewer expectations. In his study of the subject, Simon Critchley comments on how humor can “tear holes in our usual predictions about the empirical world. We might say that humor is produced by a disjunction between the way things are and the way they are represented between expectation and actuality”⁴. This disjunction is particularly apparent in Kanoo’s work *Abayya Army* and the *Red Balloon* (2012), which juxtaposes the repetitive pattern of figures uniformly dressed in black abayyas with a rather comical red balloon. Presented as a militant procession of female figures, the inclusion of the balloon disrupts viewer perceptions of Islamic extremism and its association with veiling by lifting the mood of the scene. Indeed, this disjunction also demonstrates the artist’s efforts to “demystify the militant perception of Islam from ourselves as well as perhaps the Western perception



Fatima Henna Hand Stop Sign 2012, silkscreen print on wood, 50x50cm.
- Courtesy of the artist.

of the hijab or niqab. Those signs of extremism are greatly softened by the presence of the red balloon. This particular work took me two years to complete because I had the Abayya Army marching along without the red balloon, but I was uncomfortable in that the message might come across rather too forcefully, so, I finally added a sense of levity by including the red balloon.”⁵ He also references the Leni Riefenstahl’s 1934 Nazi propaganda film *Triumph of the Will*, probing into the rigid structuring of society that limits the possibility for self-expression and individuality. Viewed in this context, the red balloon also underscores the autonomy of the individual and the importance of alterity within seemingly organized social, cultural and gendered groups. Veiling, particularly the figure of the veiled Muslim woman, pervades the work of many contemporary artists of the Middle East;⁶ Kanoo, however, extends this further by examining both male and female sartorial identity. His series *A Question of Identity* (2012) presents a range of recognizable international public figures -political leaders and celebrities - dressed in the traditional kandoorah and ghutra for the men, and for the ladies in the abayya and hijab, once again using disjunction as a means of engaging viewers. Using Photoshop, Kanoo gives us an



Stormtrooper Shemagh, 2011, plastic & cloths, 40x30x25cm - Courtesy of the artist.

idea of what politicians such as Barack Obama, George Bush and Margaret Thatcher, and celebrities like George Clooney, Oprah Winfrey and Paris Hilton, would look like “out of their comfort zone,”⁷ that is, if they adopted an Arab sartorial identity.

The series is an outgrowth of Kanoo’s reinterpretation of Warhol’s iconic image Mao Tse Tung⁸ (1972). He explains that “[Warhol] took the image of a leader of a communist country, anti-capitalist, and transformed it into an icon of capitalism, because he turned around and sold it for a lot of money. It was in that spirit that I felt inspired to create my own Mao Tse Tung.” Visually altering Mao’s cultural identity, he created AraMao (2012)⁹. The work also creates a dialogue between contemporary art of the Gulf and the art historical canon. For some artists, direct referencing or reinterpretation of iconic imagery (such as Sapeck and Duchamp’s 1883 and 1919 parodies of the Mona Lisa) is a way of challenging the sacrosanctity associated



Don's Use Consumer Tree, 2012, Metal installation, 300x100cm - - Courtesy of the artist

with certain canonical art works,¹⁰ while with others, and this appears to be the case with Kanoo, these visual quotations function more as a homage or point of departure from which artists and viewers can reexamine contemporary society.

The political allusions of Warhol’s work are continued in Kanoo’s A Question of Identity series, raising questions about how we see our past and present world leaders, the role of culture in international politics, and whether ultimately “are we really all that different?”¹¹ Kanoo explains: “What I am trying to challenge is the identity of the individual. Someone like Margaret Thatcher for example, was an astute politician, she would have made it anywhere if she was in the Arab world she would probably have made it here as well.”¹²

The series also reflects the artist’s interest in interacting with his audience, which is evidenced in the size of the images (each is the size of a postcard, making it more fun for viewers to engage with the various personalities

on display) and in his inclusion of celebrities (from the golden age of Hollywood actors to media-savvy reality stars), faces that can be recognized by different generations¹³. “I don’t want to limit my audience to a specific group,” Kanoo states. “I would like anyone who has an interest or a love of art to come and interact with my work ... Again, it also comes down to the individual, each individual has a history that includes their own experience with art but this also includes where the person is from, their background ... And all these things in each individual contain different elements within that person and I aim to create works that talk to everyone and so each work then ultimately talks to everyone differently.”¹⁴

Fatima Henna Hand Stop Signs (2012) is another series in the collection that demonstrates Kanoo’s efforts to communicate with a diverse audience. This is the third in his Henna Hand Stop Sign series—the first collection was created for non-Arabic and non-English speakers, and was exhibited by Sotheby’s in London in 2011, during Shubbak, a festival focused on the visual arts and culture of the Arab world, organized by the city of London.

The third series see the use of the open hand of Fatima, a symbol commonly used as an amulet that memorializes “Fatima Al Zahra,” the daughter of the Prophet Mohammed. Also called the *khamisa* (meaning “five” in Arabic, alluding to the hand’s five fingers), the hand of Fatima is readily visible throughout the Arab world and would be instantly recognizable to a local or regional viewer. The *khamisa* is traditionally represented as a right hand, however, in Kanoo’s work it is rendered as ambidextrous.

The various motifs decorating each hand represent the cultural tradition of decorating the palms with henna designs, a customary celebratory practice throughout the Middle East and Indian subcontinent. The gradation of color found in henna is reflected in the background colour of each stop sign: starting out as dark brown, fading into chestnut followed by orange. That the command “stop” is rendered in three different ways - in Arabic at the top, as a visual symbol in the centre, and in English at the bottom - indicates the artist’s awareness that his audience is likely to be culturally diverse. With the growing ex-pat community in the

United Arab Emirates, local viewers are comprised of various cultures and backgrounds.

His interest in communicating with his audience is also reflected in his approach to religion - as demonstrated by the pairing of the *khamisa* with a functional object like the stop sign - and its integration into his recent works (such as in *Kaaba Motion* and *Allah Maze*). Kanoo notes: “I think religion is taken by the media to its extremes. For a person to interact with religion it has to become something which is easily accessible. If it becomes too extreme, then people shy away from it.”¹⁵

The *Fun w/Fen* collection was also created by the artist as a way of integrating contemporary art into Gulf culture while also targeting an international audience. This can be seen in the range of media he explores. His installations and ready made, for example, do not necessarily contain an explicit humorous narrative but make for a fun viewing experience. To a certain extent, incongruity also underpins these works, mainly because he has taken everyday objects and resituated them in an irregular context. Such is the case with *Catching Fish* (2012) where Kanoo takes the traditional Gulf fish trap and illuminates it with red lights which read *Sayd al Semak* (catch fish). The work, which is partly inspired by the contemporary work, *Smooth Criminal* (2012) by Nadia Kaabi-Linke, is an example of how Kanoo is actively integrating Gulf culture into contemporary art - simultaneously drawing in Gulf viewers unfamiliar with contemporary art and installation but familiar with the object on display, and international audiences who may not necessarily recognize the fish trap but can appreciate the formal qualities of the work. “What I wanted to do was to show something from here [the Gulf]. This is the traditional way of catching fish in the region and many people don’t know what it is so I thought, let me make something contemporary that people can interact with.”¹⁶

Another installation is *Consumer Tree* (2012), a work designed and created by the artist. Standing three meters high, this stainless-steel spiral is Kanoo’s interpretation of a contemporary alternative to a Christmas tree. The apex of the “tree” is deliberately unadorned “so that a multitude of faiths could place whatever ornamentation they wished to commemorate whatever occasion they so desired.”¹⁷ Centered on the idea of providing a



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more environmentally friendly alternative to cutting down a living tree for the holiday season, the artist also links this work to consumer culture, the spiraling bars representing how society is consumed and almost imprisoned by consumerism. “You’re bound by, in this case, the stainless-steel rings that go around it, so although the intention is to be humorous I am also trying to send a message.”¹⁸

A work that combines Kanoo’s knack for eliciting humor through disjunction and interest in integrating the Gulf, particularly the United Arab Emirates, into the aesthetic of his art, is *Great Wave of Dubai* (2012). The digital print takes the composition of Hokusai’s popular print *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* (1820s) and re-situates it in Dubai, with the Burj Al Arab replacing Mount Fuji and the region’s dhow boat replacing the traditional Japanese fishing boats. Kanoo also commemorates Abu Dhabi in his *Seen Over the Capital* series a collection which combines his interest in photography with his experiments with Photoshop. Once again, incongruity acts as the focal point of the series since in each image

he has added an aircraft that would be otherwise be impossible to view over the Abu Dhabi skyline (these include aircraft from the first World War, such as the Red Baron’s Triplane Fokker, through to flying objects such as spacecraft). Like *Catching Fish*, this series is inspired by the work of a contemporary artist: the photographer Cédric Delsaux’s images of Dubai, which include characters and spaceships from the *Star Wars* film series.

The diversity found in Kanoo’s *Fun w/Fen* collection, namely through his exploration of a range of media and subject matter, is unified by the artist’s ability to make light of the traditionally highbrow arena of fine art. “My art works are full of fun, full of life and I hope I continue to create works in this spirit,” he notes. However, beneath Kanoo’s seemingly lighthearted approach lie greater messages (social, political, religious and environmental); his work shows that humor can act as a subversive tool, a way of challenging the norms and stereotypes embedded in his culture.

Endnotes

1-Studies of humor suggest 3 main theoretical frameworks: superiority theory, relief theory and incongruity theory. See Simon Critchley, *On Humor* (NY: Routledge, 2002); John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1983) and *Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (Albany, NY: SUNY PRESS, 1987); Mahadev L. Apte, *Humor & Laughter: An Anthropological Approach* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 1985); Nilsen & Nilsen, *Encyclopedia of 20th. Century American Humor* (2000); and Sheri Klein, *Art & Laughter*.

2-“I like to place this [collection] firmly in the tradition of Jeff Koons’ work, which is filled and instilled with a tremendous sense of humor. He is quite an inspirational character” Interview with the author, Dubai, 20 June 2012.

3-Fun w/Fen, exhibition catalogue, Meem Gallery, Dubai, 15 May – 5 July 2012, (Dubai: Meem Editions, 2012): 15.

4-Simon Critchley, *On Humor*: 1.

5-Interview with the author.

6-This includes Shirin Neshat, Lalla Essaydi and Jananne Al Ani. On the subject of Middle Eastern women in art Kanoo states: “The woman’s role in the Arab and Islamic world is always changing; it is one extreme or another extreme. How do you get comfortable with that? These are questions that I hope this art raises to the viewer.” Interview with author.

7-Ibid.

8-Ibid.

9-When exhibited at Meem Gallery, AraMao was placed at the center of the A Question of Identity series. The image of Mao is significantly larger, measuring 80x111cm, while other images are postcard sized. Regarding the use of Photoshop, Kanoo says: “Photoshop is a part of the creative process, it’s in effect a 21st. artistic tool. I think it is very important to consider it as a tool for the visual arts.” Interview with author.

10-See Sapeck, *Le Rire* (The Laugh, 1883) and Marcel Duchamp, *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919); Warhol also created multiple prints of the Mona Lisa, similar to his Marilyn Monroe series, titled *Thirty Are Better Than One* (1963). For more on the subject of parody and artistic reinterpretations see Sheri Klein, *Art & Laughter*: 1316-.

11-Mohamed Kanoo, interview with author.

12-Ibid.

13-Warhol also used images of celebrities such as his famous Marilyn Monroe and Elizabeth Taylor series—A Question of Identity also contains an image of Monroe and Taylor, among others.

14-Ibid.

15-Ibid.

16-Ibid. Another work which plays on the idea of the

readymade is *Vintage Travel Stickers* (2012), which presents travel stickers designed by Kanoo on vintage luggage.

17-Fun w/Fen, exhibition catalogue: 9.

18-Interview with the author. Kanoo is also considering the idea of exploring performance art through this work—by hiring actors to perform in the center of the spiral.

About the Writer

Samar Faruqi is Director of Research at Meem Gallery, Dubai. Faruqi has edited the gallery’s publications including Dia Al-Azzawi: Retrospective, Parviz Tanavoli: Monograph and Art in Iraq Today. She is a PhD candidate at the University of Cambridge. Her research interests include modern and contemporary Middle Eastern art and nineteenth-century British Orientalist art.



A Question of Identity (2012), A series of postcard sized digital portraits of contemporary and historical figures.

