

Meera Huraiz: Heritage in Metamorphosis

By Madeline Yale



Gladiator, 2011, Lambda print, Edition of 3 plus 2 AP, 100x150cm - Courtesy of the artist.

Within the realm of cultural theory and the visual, intersections between gender, heritage, memory, and belonging in a globalized world are recent sites of critical negotiation and contestation, raising a diversity of questions about historical translations and the contemporary mapping of such junctions. Artist Meera Huraiz works around and within these discursive spaces. Her personal explorations of dress, including the heavily contested concept of the veil and veiling, present her perceptions about evolving identities and contemporary conversations on heritage from within her geographic locale.

Using heritage as her raw material, Huraiz examines objects that she considers mundane – textiles placed on the skin that are part of rituals performed by the artist, her

sisters, her mother, or her grandmother. These gendered props are part of the young Emirati artist's everyday life. She bridges the historical and contemporary by building new pieces inspired by heritage garments, presenting varied, intervening representations – female as producer, female as subject, visual displays of heritage, and the impact of relatively new economies on the artist's culture. This 'post-productive imagination' describes Huraiz's process of weaving together pre-existing products to create new works, which form a string of signs for which the art objects are continually interpreted and reinterpreted. Meera Huraiz is keen to challenge the reductionist viewpoint that her own culture has a unified national identity consisting of an isolated, sovereign center operating with a series of

visual and oral codes exempt from a globally shared ethos. Emirati culture often perceived as closed to the dominantly expatriate community that surrounds it (today, approximately 80% of the UAE consists of foreign-born nationals and it has one of the highest net-migration rates in the world), and some might find Huraiz's work to be a tribalistic response to the forces of globalization or even Westernization on her home country. However, Huraiz states that her work is not a reactionary or reductive reply to her country's recent growth. Instead, she perceives culture as fluid. Her work takes a self-reflexive approach to questioning ideas currently explored in the UAE – for the consumption of those from it and those relatively unfamiliar with it. To cite Bourriard, "...artistic activity does not involve obeying a tradition or belonging to a cultural community, but rather learning to detach oneself, at will, to reveal something that has never been displayed." Huraiz is aware of the consequences of divergent audiences; the temporalities are likely to be somewhat different for those who are unfamiliar with Emirati life. Divergent meanings are likely to take place not only of the props Huraiz employs in her work, but the norms that define relationships between bodies and textiles. Huraiz's photographic series *Metamorphic* presents such a conundrum for those wishing to firmly situate her work within codes of Islamic Law or normative cultural boundaries. She deconstructs and modifies feminine garments from her heritage to rethink intersections between fashion and traditional Emirati symbols – be they perceived as gendered, religious, cultural or even political. She draws inspiration from the traditional textile known as a *badleh*, a white body stocking worn underneath an *abaya* to cover a woman's legs and ankles, and the heavily embroidered cuffs found on an everyday *kandora*. Like a *badleh*, Huraiz's construction 'veils' her subjects' bodies to their ankles, but confines their movements to a crouched state. The shimmering hot pink fabric is at first a cultural anomaly, yet its 'bling' locates Dubai as a recently built destination for commerce in the Middle East. Set amidst stark backgrounds, the models squat in fashionable heels. The series title, costumes, and stance imply a transformation from one thing to another, suggesting an embryonic form captured just prior to the explosive, transitory moment. The artist

sees this body of work as a proactive call to reflect on the process of 'becoming'. She states, "I am showing Emiratis that there are new ways of doing things. I believe the whole world is collapsing into itself, and we are becoming more alike. But we do not need to forget where we come from, we cannot lose our identity." Artist Sabiha Khemir describes a similar response to this phenomenon: "...One's sense of identity has to reach back to the seed to assure the continuum of a growth faithful to the nature of one's being. When there is a conflict between the cultural identity and the individual identity which has often been the case for Arab women, the journey takes a route of metamorphosis and transcendence...[This] seems essential for individual growth." The photographic series *Gladiator* manifests similar performative explorations. Images of singular females are set on a stage, which serves as a site for the projection of fantasies and imaginations. Each wears a *burqa*, a traditional Emirati garment that is becoming an antiquated object. While it is still worn by the artist's grandmother on a daily basis, recent generations rarely wear it. This 'mask' is one of the most heavily contested forms of veiling within Western hegemonic discourse, where the veil is sometimes seen as the refusal of women's agency and is used as a weapon on all sides of political and cultural debates. Huraiz describes her ideas about this disputed object:

"... Some associate the veil with oppression. That is not how I see it. Some cultural associations with veiling bothers me, [but] not the actual act of veiling. I am covered with things the people impose upon me as a [veiled] woman. We are actors. Culture is scripted, and we are born to act out scripts that are written for us. These are not necessarily written by religion, [they] are made by people." In the series *Gladiator*, the exaggeratedly styled green *burqa* and the curtain dually function as metaphorical barriers with loaded social, cultural, and gendered meanings. The artist builds two worlds through which translation take place – one's inner being and the outward, social construct. The English title references entertainers who perform combat for audiences, likening the visual referent to that of a warrior's shield. Thus, the theatrical prop of the *burqa* serves as a divide, or what Alloua describes as, "... the closure of private space. [The veil] signifies



Metamorphic, 2010, Lambda print, Edition of 3 plus 2 AP, 100x70cm – Courtesy of the artist.

an injunction of no trespassing upon this space and it extends to another space, (sic) the one in which the photographer is to be found: public space.” Huraiz further constructs the barrier by situating her actors in front of the stage curtain. The photographic moment is once again shifted to either side of the ‘decisive’; she creates anticipation for an event about to take place behind the curtain or unrequited desire for something that has already transpired. In these series, and in the artist’s newer embroidered works that feature human hearts attached to historically inspired garments, Meera Huraiz maps her personal relationship Emirati culture past and present. She desires to memorialize and enliven these feminine objects, which she believes are fleeting, so they serve as points for future storytelling and recollection of cultural identity. At the same time, she critiques these objects from within the UAE, cognizant of the subjectivities and identities imposed on the works by a diversity of viewers. The textiles and the photographic records of them are hybrids. This process describes the construction of identity as that of ‘becoming’ which is, in today’s post-colonial conditions, a never-ending exercise in reflexive identification.

About The Writer

Madeline Yale is a photography specialist based in Dubai and London. She has curated over 30 exhibitions on photography and related media in the UAE, UK, and USA since 2001. Previously she served as executive director and later adjunct curator (2006-10) for the Houston Center for Photography, an organization for which she now serves on the advisory board. She is a regular contributor and editorial board member for spot magazine and writes on photography and contemporary art for Contemporary Practices, Art Dubai Journal, and Benefactor. She also serves as a photography consultant to auction houses in Dubai and London, a curatorial advisor to XVA Gallery in Dubai, and is a visiting lecturer for MA Photography at Sotheby’s Institute of Art London (2008-present). Madeline holds an MA in Photographic Studies and is a PhD candidate at the Chelsea College of Art and Design, University of the Arts London. She is a member of Chelsea’s Research Centre TrAIN (Transnational Art, Identity and Nation) where she is conducting doctoral research on emerging photographic art histories in the Middle East.

i See for example: Boer, I. 2006. *Uncertain Territories: Boundaries in Cultural Analysis*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi; Foster, H. 1996. *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*. Cambridge: MIT Press; and Schneider A. and Wright, C., eds. 2006. *Contemporary Art and Anthropology*. Oxford: Berg.

ii Bourriard, N. ‘Notes on Globalisation, National Identities, and the Production of Signs’ in Boullata, K., ed. 2008. *Belonging and Globalisation: Critical Essays in Contemporary Art & Culture*. London: SAQI, p. 106.

iii Bourriard, N. as cited in *Ibid.*, p. 19.

iv All quotes from the artist are taken from an interview with the author on 29 September, 2011.

v Khemir, S. ‘Mobile Identity and the Focal Distance of Memory’ in Lloyd, F. 2001. *Displacement and Difference: Contemporary Arab Culture in the Diaspora*, London: Saffron, p. 46.

vi Lewis, R. in Bailey, D., and Tawadros, G., eds. 2003. *Veil: Veiling, Representation and Contemporary Art*. Cambridge: MIT Press. For further reference, see also *Ibid.*, Lewis, R. 1996. *Gendering Orientalism*. London: Routledge, and Lloyd, F., ed. 1999. *Contemporary Arab Women’s Art: Dialogues of the Present*. London: Women’s Art Library.

vii Alloua, M. in Bailey, D., and Tawadros, G., eds. 2003. *Veil: Veiling, Representation and Contemporary Art*. Cambridge: MIT Press, p. 23.

viii This is in reference to the phrase ‘decisive moment’ that was popularized by French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson in his book of the same name in 1952. The ‘decisive moment’ describes a photographic technique of capturing a subject at the height of action taking place.

ix Hall, S. ‘Cultural Identity in Diaspora’ in Williams, P. and Chrisman, L., eds. 1993. *Colonial Discourse and Colonial Theory: A Reader*. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf.