

Jowhara AlSaud

By Nour Wali

“I’ve always been interested in how photography functions, and I try to undermine any documentary authority it may possess as a medium. I’ve always felt that a photograph functions more like a memory, in that it’s a singular perspective of a split second in time, entirely subjective and hence impressionable.”

Just as the Impressionists in the 19th century searched for novel ways to paint the spirit of fleeting sunlight in reaction to realist paintings, several prominent international contemporary photographers continue to revel in finding inventive techniques to distance the final image from photography’s roots and history of capturing a documented truth. Their fascination and craft lies in finding their own unique voice - to each find an idiosyncratic touch - in manipulating the photographic medium to an extent whereby the highly mesmerizing final images teasingly invite their viewers to wonder at the magic of their elusive process.

Brazilian artist Vic Muniz (collected by museums worldwide) has created such captivating photographs as a portrait of Audrey Hepburn made from a multitude of diamonds; Sigmund Freud and Jackson Pollock from chocolate syrup; and the Mona Lisa in peanut butter and jelly. The labour-intensive activity in creating the installations in these unconventional media to be photographed is only revealed after close scrutiny and many questions. Equally imaginative are British artist Catherine Yass’s lightboxes, created by focusing on a detail of a photograph superimposed by the negative of another photograph taken of the same scene, only a few seconds later. Then manipulated digitally on a computer, the results portray jewel like fluorescent colours and an impression of speed to create the aura of throbbing modern cities such as Tokyo and London. Equally established and experimental German photographer Wolfgang Tillmans’s abstract scenes in his

“Freischwimmer Series” were even produced without a camera at all, but rather by directly manipulating light on paper.

As with all the above cited artists, emerging talent Jowhara Al Saud has found her own personal touch to impact and tread new ground with the photographic medium. What render her photographic work so precious are the hand craftsmanship entailed throughout as well as the delicate, gradual transformative process that leads to the final completed image. She undertakes a lengthy process of calculated intervention on the negatives before they even reach their final compositions for printing. No digital intervention is undertaken. Instead, the artist relies on traditional techniques of etching and photography, layered with contemporary debates, to create unprecedented effects.

At first, AlSaud takes a spontaneous photograph of intimate social images of her family and friends in their private space: a young lady with a toddler on her lap, in the midst of a poignant heart-to-heart discussion with a mysterious elderly lady – intriguingly represented by a hand carrying the Islamic prayer beads and a floral gown; a boy endearingly snuggling his cheek next to his puppy; a couple secretly whispering in each other’s ears; and teenagers excitedly opening a large birthday present at a party. What’s remarkable about the images – is that despite the emotions conveyed; the drama and tension that their compositions betray; and the sensitive humanity that lures the viewers into their scenarios with the intensity of watching a theatrical performance – all the characters are represented without facial features. These anonymous yet somehow tangibly present figures have all their expressions wiped out – blank - censored! They end up looking more like playful cartoon sketches, ink drawings and collage than photographs of real people and events. AlSaud’s bold sweeping lines recall Matisse’s late drawings and prints using a few simple



Jowhara AlSaud. *Clowns & Jokers*, 2008. C-41 Print, 30x40"
image courtesy the artist and Athr Gallery, Jeddah



Jowhara AlSaud. *Sway*, 2008. C-41 Print, 30x40"
image courtesy the artist and Athr Gallery, Jeddah



Jowhara AlSaud. *Heart and Soul*, 2008. C-41 Print, 30x40"
image courtesy the artist and Athr Gallery, Jeddah



Jowhara AlSaud. *Connected*, 2008. C-41 Print, 30x40"
image courtesy the artist and Athr Gallery, Jeddah

fluid strokes to create portraits exuding presence and personality.

The tricks of the special effects combine a form of etching and drawing integrated into the actual medium of the negative: After the quick initial snap-shot to capture the immediacy of the dramatic moment, AlSaud takes an engraver with tiny burrs to fastidiously etch the outlines of her characters with the bare minimum of details (no skin pigment – nor eyes - nor lips) into the emulsion of another photograph. The result is at once playful, dramatic and intriguing. The graphic personages buoyant with life and zest, psychological and emotional energy, seem to be protected in a homely realm, flanked with glints of decorative details from surrounding crimson cushions, textiles dotted with daisy patterns, golden star-studded backdrops and recycled cardboard packaging. Although an aura of Japanese woodcut prints seeps into the works, the scenes unfold markedly Arab identities, gestures, costumes and settings represented by a bearded gentleman in his Saudi costume of the ‘thobe’, ‘ghutra’ and ‘agal’; young ladies with long shiny black hair relaxing at home in a casual ‘gallabiya’ dress or dancing with the Middle Eastern sway; or sipping soda beneath a row of vibrantly coloured exotic stamps.

All the above images represent views into Jowhara AlSaud’s most recent “Out of Line” series initiated since 2008. The artist explains that:

“this body of work began as an exploration of censorship in Saudi Arabia and its effects on visual communication...(such as) skirts lengthened with black markers in magazines or blurred out faces on billboards”.

Living between Jeddah and New York, where she studied film theory at Wellesley College, followed by a Master of Fine Arts at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts/ Tufts University – Jowhara AlSaud tackles the taboos associated with figurative representation in Islamic culture with an almost objective analysis, fused with wit and irony: At once mirroring the custom to censor the private, whilst simultaneously finding an appropriate art form to render it acceptable for public display. Thereby imbuing the aesthetic appeal of the

work with the piquant of conceptual questioning and the tension of how far to literally and symbolically “draw the line”. It is no wonder that this young artist (born in 1978) is capturing the interest and attention of critics, curators, collectors and awards: AlSaud was a runner-up for the 2008 Aperture Portfolio Prize. She has exhibited her work internationally in group and solo shows, most recently at art fairs including Paris Photo, the Aleppo 10th International Photo Festival in Syria, Art Rotterdam and Danziger Projects in New York. Her work is part of collections across Europe, the US and the Middle East.

Jowhara AlSaud’s works from the series *Out of Line*, will be featured at Athr Gallery’s exhibition *Be Sharp! See Flat*.

www.jowharaalsaud.com
www.athrart.com



Jowhara AlSaud. *Halos*, 2008. C-41 Print, 30x40"
 image courtesy the artist and Athr Gallery, Jeddah



Jowhara AlSaud. *Bed*, 2008. C-41 Print, 30x40"
image courtesy the artist and Athr Gallery, Jeddah



Jowhara AlSaud. *Golden*, 2009. C-41 Print, 30x40"
image courtesy the artist and Athr Gallery, Jeddah



Jowhara AlSaud. *The Harrowing Adevntures of*, 2008. C-41 Print, 30x40"
image courtesy the artist and Athr Gallery, Jeddah



Jowhara AlSaud. *Dancing*, 2008. C-41 Print, 30x40"
image courtesy the artist and Athr Gallery, Jeddah