

The Art of Engagement: Manal Al Dowayan

By Roberto Lopardo



I Am An Educator, I Am Series, 2008, Silver gelatin fibre print, 41x51cm - Courtesy of Cuadro fine art gallery.

I found myself at Katara Galleries in Doha, Qatar, a few weeks back. After spending some pleasant time with a collection of preeminently profound works by the American-French artist Louise Bourgeois, I walked into a gallery of artworks by a Saudi Arabian female artist, Manal Al Dowayan. The first series of crisply printed black and white silver gelatin photographs that I encountered were from a series entitled *I Am*. These images are close-up portraits of women's faces that are somewhat veiled by an object that they are wearing or holding, as they stare unabashedly into the camera, challenging the viewer's gaze. The objects these women stand behind in each case provide us with information about their profession. For Manal, the series responds to King Abdullah Al Saud's inaugural speech, in which he calls upon fellow women citizens to help build the nation of Saudi Arabia. The portraits are at once both minimalist in their attempt to eliminate all non-essential forms and concepts, and post-modern in their belief that apparent realities are only social constructs that are subject to change.

One of my favorite past times while attending university was to engage in impassioned debates over various philosophical tangents with a very dear and like-minded friend. One of our favorite topics for debate: Is it worth giving earnestly and aggressively of one's time to a cause? In other words, should a person spend their life trying to make right what they believe is wrong? Should a person try to bring justice to a situation of blatant injustice? Should a person try to find a solution to a terrifyingly complex problem?

In another set of black and white images, entitled *Landscapes of the Mind*, the viewer is confronted with barren dream-like desert landscapes. On the surface of these prints hover apparitions of veiled women, doves, eyes, palm trees, all puncturing the aura of the banal and distant physical spaces. The images speak at once to the surrealist tradition of emphasizing the ordinary in order to uncover the extraordinary. As we read through some of the didactic wall copy we are told that the apparitions of the veiled women are taken from stock footage commonly used by Saudi press sources. The Saudi media recycles images of females clad in abayas,

inserting their nameless, descriptionless figures where needed to emphasize a point or illustrate a narrative. Throughout the series, the artist attempts to reconcile the brutish nature of place with the much more fragile and fluid nature of her projections of self. The land is set in its ways. The self is fluid in its search.

We dutifully debated, in the spirit of true armchair intellectuals, each side of the argument. When in favor of engagement we maintained that, 'The world will never get better if people don't try to make it better... a problem won't fix itself... and change is possible.' When in favor of non-engagement we reasoned that, 'The world will never get better... there is no use in trying... there's no point in wasting one's life.' To bring a sense of accuracy and immediacy to our highbrow chatter we would conjure up dreadful contemporary situations that could require our time and attention: environmental catastrophes, economic injustices, political turmoil, death, mayhem, and destruction in all of its chaotic forms.

I continue walking through the exhibition and confront a larger than life size subha (Islamic prayer bead) that is suspended from the ceiling. For Muslims, the subha is used during prayer to recite the ninety-nine names for God in the hope of being able to come closer to God. For this project entitled Esmi (My Name), Manal put out a call out to women living in Saudi Arabia to partake in a workshop during which they inscribed their names onto the volleyball-sized prayer beads. Thirty-three of these beads were then strung together to form one strand. Nine strands were created. This project is meant to bring to light a disturbing and fairly new trend in Saudi society where it has become taboo for a man to utter a woman's name in public. In the artist's call out to Saudi women via Twitter she texts, "Our names will be preserved, and we will not allow the Saudi woman's name to be erased, replaced, nor become a source of shame." The work is nothing less than sublime.

This intellectual sparring seemed appropriate at the time; after all, college is when young adults are first truly indoctrinated into the logistical and philosophical folds of civilized society. But no matter the effort, at the time, these musings over the value of moral social engagement appeared quite distant. They remained hypothetical philosophical arguments, acutely separate from the comfortable reality of my prudently sheltered space. I had no real stake in which

side might be right. I wouldn't go so far as to say I was indifferent, but it would be fair to say that I was simply going through the motions.

This is not the first time I have seen and been affected by Ms. Al Dowayan's artworks. While visiting a collateral exhibition at the 54th Venice Biennale (2011), I spent time with an installation she created of two hundred life size doves, suspended from the ceiling, lying eerily motionless. The artwork entitled, Suspended Together, speaks of another peculiarity that defines gender relation norms in Saudi Arabia. The doves are emblazoned with travel documents of real women from Saudi. The law requires these travel documents for any woman or child that would like to travel outside the country. These documents are not issued by a government agency, but by a woman or child's appointed male guardian. I am once again struck by the profundity of the message and by the sheer weight of the problem. The artwork does what it can to address the issue at hand in the most elegant, insistent, and clear manner. Suspended Together makes no apologies for what it is and what it says. There is no mincing of words or ideas here. There is no armchair intellectual psychobabble.

About the writer

Roberto Lopardo was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1975. He carries a Masters of Fine Art from the Rhode Island School of Design, a teaching certificate from Brown University, and a Bachelor of Arts in Politics and Philosophy from Whitman College. Lopardo previously taught at the Arizona School for the Deaf and Blind, Dine College, Rhode Island School of Design, and the University of Arizona. He is the former Dean and Professor of Photography at the American University in Dubai. Lopardo has been exhibited in many prominent venues including the RISD Museum, the US Consulate in Dubai, the Tenri Institute in New York, Video-Appart in Paris, and Emerson Gallery in Berlin. Lopardo has curated several prominent emerging artist based exhibitions including No More [In]security, Basically Human, Rituals of Dinner, Sheep are Welcome, and Latent Discoveries. Roberto Lopardo is currently the Managing Director for Cuadro Gallery in Dubai, UAE with a focus on building sustainable and effective education and residency and outreach programs.

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