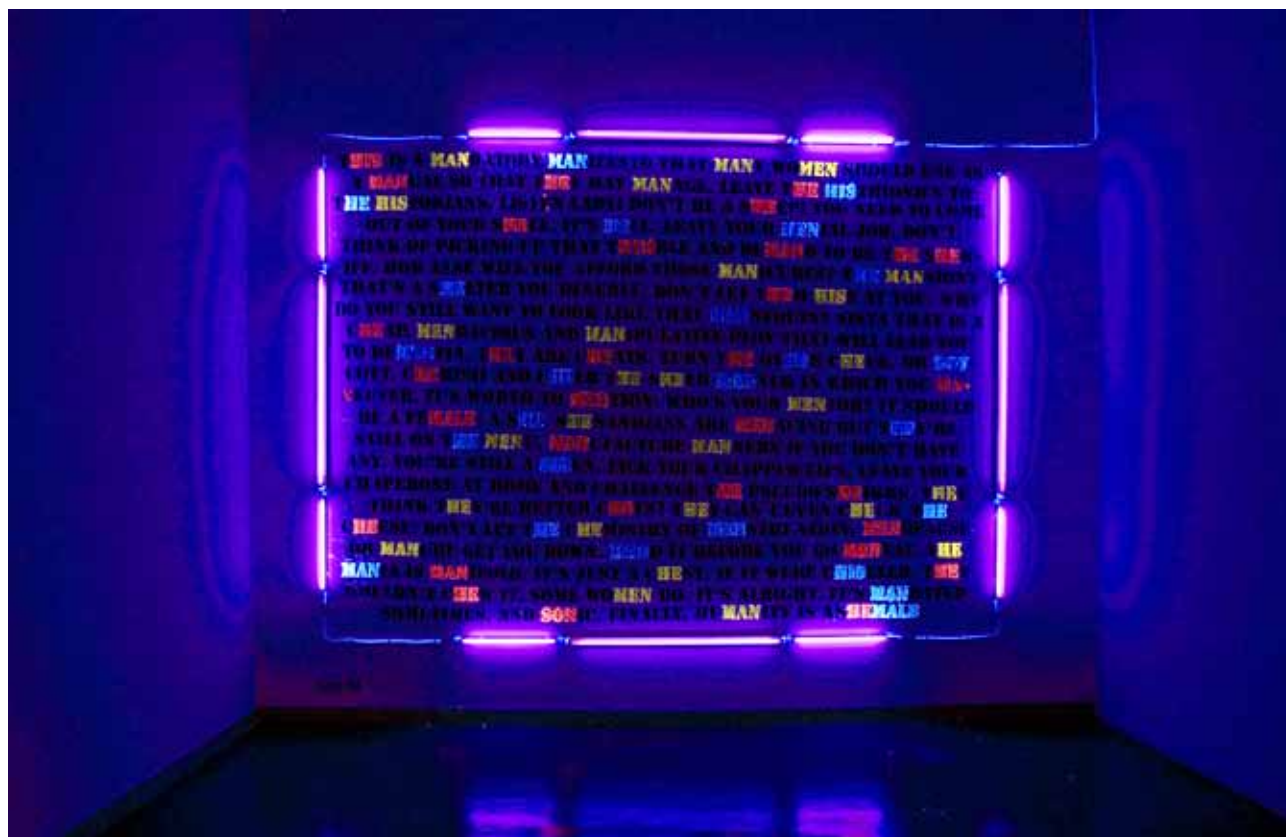


HALA ALI: ON MOULDING LANGUAGE

By Kate Busby

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Girls Room (at night), 2009, spray paint, invisible UV reactive paint, UV light, 200x300cm - Courtesy of the artist.

Hala Ali's work is an interruption. Her pieces, aesthetically bold and arresting, literally stamp their presence upon sterile and barren surfaces. At times overtly political, they examine the mechanism of language, its construction and reception, as well as its potential as a weapon that can transcend physical and temporal reality. Not content to merely explore and document, Ali's artwork also serves to challenge the so-called norms or established features of textual communication in order to expose its ultimate arbitrariness and dependence upon the sanction of a

collective. Early on in her career, Ali made a decision not to use her family name in association with her artwork, and the gesture raises a lot of questions about what it is to have a "persona" as an artist, as well as the status of the name in Middle Eastern society. She explains: "In a way, I am relinquishing a part of my social and cultural identity. But it is a double-edged sword, for in doing so I am also freeing myself to create". Not going so far as to dispossess herself as a creator from the work, the microcosmic example of not using her name functions as a signpost to the viewer, indicating that

though the temptation is there, interpreting her work predominantly through a cultural context is perhaps not the most helpful way of understanding it. For Ali, the mere suggestion of being “a struggling female Saudi artist” is incredibly problematic.

Her education and childhood took place outside of the country, and she has lived in the United Arab Emirates since the age of fifteen. “Saudi Arabia is not my every day experience but I am the first to admit that it is impossible to divorce my biography, and within that, my heritage, from the art I make. I am the person who produces it: it serves as a testament to my thoughts. However, I do not want the details of my life to become the paradigm for interpreting my work or for art-making to become an emotionally self-indulgent process”.

Her use of text as a source material stretches her practice beyond the scope of Saudi society, while simultaneously including it. Her preoccupation lies not in with one nation or one national language, but the linguistic norms and codes present in diverse forms of communication, in how language is packaged and consumed. In her practice, Ali explores the intensively self-reflexive process of transcribing the written into the visual. For her, the act of reading a passage of writing becomes the starting point for examining how a reader mentally engages with and reacts to that text, specifically the methods instinctively used to synthesis the material and how that process can be made manifest through a manipulation of materials. The artworks produced are almost by-products of that sustained exploration.

Her fascination with the cut-up technique as popularized through the experimental work of American author William S. Burroughs prompted the creation of a collages entitled “On the Cut-Up (2010)” in which an article full of art jargon is literally cut up and rearranged in an attempt to both physically and symbolically dissect the apparently impenetrable dialectic of art criticism. Developing this idea, Ali went on to produce “The Construction of Meaning (2010)” in which her written proposal for a new piece of artwork is cut into evenly-sized pieces and organized into a large-scale paper lattice of vertical and horizontal strips on an interior corridor wall. Her understanding of hermeneutics as a process of weaving is a quintessentially Structuralist notion that she has committed to conveying as a visual expression.



Brainwash, 2010, steel & newspapers, 120x50x50cm - Courtesy of the artist.

She explains: “When I say or read the phrase the boy kissed a girl, it is a linear, horizontal statement that is to say, the direction in which I perceive language as travelling. But the inter-changeability of the verbs that I could have used, to highlight the meaning of the words I did use, is an example of language travelling vertically. I wanted to show this discovery through an installation piece, as a weave of intersecting vertical and horizontal flow”. Ali’s practice is manifestly interdisciplinary, and deliberately so during her years at the College of Fine Arts and Design in Sharjah, her interest lay less in perfecting a medium than seeking a form that would serve the concept. Happily, her experimentation has led to works that are not only conceptually rich but also aesthetically striking. The piece for which Ali is best known is arguably “Girls’ Room (2009)”, shown first



Construction of Meaning, 4.5 x 3.5 m, 2010, Not part of a series but exhibited in College of Fine Arts & Design, University of Sharjah, Gum Tape, Images courtesy of Hala Ali

at the Sharjah Museum of Contemporary Arab Art then as part of Edge of Arabia's touring exhibition in Berlin in 2010. The piece, one of Ali's first large-scale installations, saw the artist stencil a passage of her writing with spray paint and invisible ink onto a wall, with the result that only certain elements of the passage were visible under short bursts of UV light. For Ali, it marked another evolution in her practice: "Girls' Room was produced at the beginning of my degree when I was becoming increasingly interested in street art, its rawness, honesty and also its mystery, for even in spite of a wall drawing's apparent immediacy and transparency, a marked layer of subtext can often be sensed, hinted at by various symbols though remaining obscure to all but the initiated few. I wanted to see if I could turn the idea on its head, to reveal the loaded potential of language to create subtext. To begin, I wrote a text, a rambling stream of consciousness about girl power, loose to the

point of absurdity, as a device to explore the binary opposites within words. I think some people who read the text might have thought I was a radical feminist, though I am certain that Emma Goldman would have turned in her grave to read it! I simply wanted to create something that had a type of opposition within itself. The mad woman dynamic seemed apropos at the time". The only location in the university that was dark enough to best present the work was the girls' prayer room or "girls' room. The piece's title anchors the work in its locality yet the manipulation of materials transcends its context of production. Language is not transparent. It is not simple; we can choose how to use it. Our choice of words alludes to who we are and what we think. I want to visual represent hidden meanings: for a 'true' meaning, you have to deconstruct. This artwork was a kind of linguistic exercise."

While "Girls' Room" is a very literal intervention and

dissection of language, a later piece entitled “Brain Wash (2011)” that Ali exhibited in Dubai at Edge of Arabia’s exhibition “The Terminal” is more abstract. “Brain Wash” represents the removal of literal, inscribed language as a medium, toying with the idea of the visual pun. Here, written physical text serves as a visual symbol that represents an abstract concept that is intangible, but the idea that is attached to this image or shape then becomes part of a language. In addition to being a linguistic exercise of translation, “Brain Wash” goes one step further, openly ensconcing political intent and a latent distrust of information: the imitation car wash brushes, composed of found newspapers compressed between two flat metal clamps, reveal the column inches as texts which are contained, obscured, washed away. The same visual irony crops up again in another of Ali’s works, “Hilary Clinton’s Travel Documents (2010)” a showcase of official papers in Arabic that allegedly demand Bill Clinton’s permission for his wife Hilary to travel abroad unaccompanied. Ali has found it important to enact this exploration of language in the context of working as a contemporary artist in the gallery space, exploiting the apparent sanctioning quality of the space in order to further draw attention to the conventions of language. For a series of untitled installation works made this year and exhibited at Traffic in Dubai, she deliberately used the exhibition label as a visual trope to install vast degrees of value in apparently worthless objects. A shoe found on the street was transformed into the one that former USSR president Nikita Khrushchev banged on a table defiantly during a meeting, simply for the fact that it was presented as such on the exhibition label, and the tattered shoe placed in a museum case. Here, text and the curating process become overt devices in the process of re-appropriating and redefining the status of objects, beyond their physical reality. In exposing how tropes function, Ali offers viewers a certain liberation from being passive, influenced consumers: by tearing away the veil of mystery and exposing the linguistics at play, her work is arguably empowering in its aim to encourage questioning and exploration rather than simply being dogmatic.



Construction of Meaning, 4.5 x 3.5 m, 2010, Not part of a series but exhibited in College of Fine Arts & Design, University of Sharjah, Gum Tape, Images courtesy of Hala Ali

About the writer

Kate Busby is an artist and writer based between London, Barcelona and Kuwait. Formerly part of the Edge of Arabia team and its educational wing, Offscreen, she has also written for several art publications including artNEWS, JAMM Art and Contemporary Arts Platform, Kuwait.