Reflections on Middle Eastern and North African Portraiture, Photography, Art, Documentary, Illustration and Fashion Today
by Malu Halasa

Alternative Histories

National Portrait Gallery

مطارة

chasing mirrors
Chasing Mirrors is a season that focuses on contemporary visual art and culture inspired by connections with the greater Middle East. It offers no single unifying viewpoint but presents a global mix of voices and perspectives from artists, writers, historians, poets and storytellers. Malu Halasa has been invited to contribute to the season and reflect on contemporary visual culture and notions of identity in the Middle East.

Malu is an editor and journalist covering the culture and politics of the region. She has co-edited Creating Spaces of Freedom: Culture in Defiance (2002), Kaveh Golestan: Recording the Truth in Iran (2007) and The Secret Life of Syrian Lingerie: Intimacy and Design (2008). She is also Series Editor of Transit, an occasional book series showcasing new writing and images from Middle Eastern cities, with Transit Beirut (2004) and Transit Tehran: Young Iran and Its Inspirations (2009). Former Managing Editor of the Prince Claus Fund Library and a founding editor of Tank magazine, she is Editor at Large for a new biannual journal, Portal 9: Literature and Critical Writing about the City, from Beirut. Malu lives in London and writes for the British press.
Yemen is convulsing. With the World Service switched on all night, my dreams are of student activists in hiding and doctors treating the wounded. This Arab awakening – the ‘Arab Spring’ – has already been filled with so much bloodshed. In some countries the jails are full, and in Libya and Syria mass graves have been discovered. Yet it remains a time of great hope.

Photographs, blogs and videos uploaded onto social networking sites show what’s happening in the streets, sometimes moment by moment. The wealth and immediacy of this material, with its many layers of meaning, communication and shared community, contrast sharply with the mainstream, pre-internet news images documenting the political trends that brought these countries to where they are today. This former, official pictorial history wove a narrative bonded to war, terrorism and, more often, a corrupt ruling elite. The lives and concerns of ordinary people were obscured. Yet every time I went to the Middle East for work or to visit family, the sheer vibrancy of the “Arab street” was an eye-opener, such was the gap between here and there. Rising levels of misunderstanding manipulated by neoconservatives, warmongers and religious-hate merchants, particularly after 9/11, threatened to turn the places I loved into no-man’s land. My books, articles and lectures documenting Middle Eastern visual culture have constituted my attempt to hold back the surging tide of negativity.

By telling stories through pictures, Arab and Iranian artists, photographers, illustrators and publishers explore a secret terrain. They reveal their own lives as well as unpack the complexity of their societies at a time when Western governments, media and institutions display a tendency to reduce a region composed of many different countries, languages, cultures, ethnicities and religions into a single entity: the ‘Islamic Middle East’.

Cover:
Yasser Alwan, Protestor, Tahrir Square, Cairo, 2011. In Arabic, the date the revolution started, 25th January, appears on his forehead and the words “I love Egypt” on his arm.
‘When Obama went to Cairo and addressed the “Muslim world”, he was silly,” says Nadim Shehadi, an associate fellow at the foreign-affairs think tank Chatham House. “He was adopting Osama bin Laden’s definition.’

Shehadi uses photographs when giving lectures to foreign government officials about the region. ‘Take the major shocks of the twentieth century and think of their effect ten or fifteen years later ... in Cairo, Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut and Tehran in the 1930s and 1940s, they were trying to imitate the West. You can get a picture that presents that mood – even [photographs] from Kabul. Think of the second shock, which is 1948. After 1948, liberals like King Farouk [of Egypt] were blamed for the loss of Palestine because they were pro-Western; so you have Gamal Abdel Nasser, and fifteen years later Nasser’s model was replicated all over – in Sudan, in Iraq and in Syria.

‘Contrast a picture of King Farouk with [his sister Princess] Fawzia, or one of his wives, sitting in court, drinking champagne, having a party, everyone looking glamorous, with a picture of Nasser sitting with generals and colonels in sombre attire. The ideas were military, socialist and anti-Western.’

The third shock came in 1967, after Israel’s victory in the Six-Day War. Shehadi points out: ‘That’s when you start getting that ‘Islam is the answer because we tried liberalism and socialism and they didn’t “work”. So if you pick up a random magazine from the 1980s, the most famous pictures from ... that period are of the guy who shot Sadat, the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria and Iraq, [the Islamic Revolution] in
Iran and the *mujahideen* in Afghanistan. The images of the region become turbans, *dishdashas* and beards. If you fast-forward from that, what is the [next] shock that triggered a mood change? It is either the fall of Saddam Hussein or September 11.’

One response to 9/11 has been a profusion of work by Middle Eastern image-makers. For Nadine Touma, a Lebanese artist, writer and founder of the publishing house Dar Onboz (www.daronboz.com), the boom has been the result of a new generation of ‘not consumers but producers’ who have studied abroad, returned home and been prolific, coupled with the interest shown in their work regionally and internationally. Touma observes: ‘Unfortunately, when we do produce work we are immediately put into a particular religious, geopolitical, gender framework, and this became aggravated by 9/11.’

The lavishly illustrated books for children and young adults that Dar Onboz publishes are in Arabic, a language that is actually on the decline in Lebanon. In 2011 a puppet play based on a Dar Onboz’s title, *Saba’a w 7* (“Seven Plus Seven”), was performed in public parks at night, the first time the Lebanese government has given permission for such events. Overwhelmed by the magical storytelling, the audience was reminded of a language, culture and sense of coming together that has been lost since the civil war.

Dar Onboz is part of a contemporary movement I’ve coined ‘The New Arab’; along with the IT architects, bloggers and activists involved in the mass demonstrations across the region, Arab creatives (such as the Palestinian fashion designer OmarJoseph Nasser-Khoury and Lebanese fashion photographer Tarek Moukaddem) have been instrumental in changing perceptions of Arab-ness. Middle Eastern artists are ‘coming home’, as it were, remaking their world through stories and images as well as revolution.

Following spread:

*Silk Thread Martyrs*
MMXVI by OMARIVS
JOSEPH FILIVS DINÆE.
Photographs: Tarek Moukaddem.
After an interview I conducted with Shehadi this summer, he sent me four photographs of Cairo University graduating classes. The 1959 and 1978 images are in black and white. The 1978 graduates appear more relaxed and less posed compared to the formal body language of their 1959 counterparts. The men have longer hair and sit cross-legged; some are dressed in flared trousers; everyone is smiling, sitting closer together. The 1995 class shot includes approximately twenty or so observant Muslim women wearing the hijab (Islamic headscarf), in a mixed class of over 100, whereas nearly all the women in the class of 2004 wear hijabs.

These photographs, Shehadi believes, demonstrate ‘a cycle, and the cycle can be reversed. It has already started changing.’ He cites the thousand and one ways in which women use the headscarf, including outright funky styles and high-end designer wear: it is a lesson in fashion as social transformation. However, while researching these graduation photographs from Cairo University on the Internet, I kept encountering them on Islamophobic websites as spectres of Egypt’s rising religious militancy.

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A photograph by itself is neutral; it is the prism through which it is viewed, and the motivations of its maker – why it was taken and for whom – that adds the veneer of value.

Photographer and artist Yasser Alwan has been taking iconic black and white portraits of Egypt’s working poor since the late 1990s. Yet these same images before the 25 January revolution, he writes in an email from Cairo, ‘often made [Egyptians] recoil and react unpleasantly’ In April, Alwan posted Sura, an eleven-minute YouTube video (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K_4uyRZu4TQ) titled after a popular 1967 song by the poet Salah Jaheen
that was sung several times a day by the demonstrators in Tahrir Square. The combination of Alwan’s portraits with Nasser’s speeches and Jaheen’s quatrains gives the video an unmistakable emotional charge.

‘The post-revolution period has allowed for all kinds of imagery to be recontextualized,’ he continues. ‘Instead of reacting to my portraits as images of poor people who make us ashamed of being Egyptian, there is now room to see these as portraits of people who persevere in all kinds of ways despite their poor environment, their vulnerability … I had [put together] a unique collective portrait … about the people who made this revolution happen.’

Portraiture adds depth and detail to Middle Eastern experience, proving that it is not so dissimilar from our own. In her essay ‘Digressions on the Portrait’, the Tunisian curator Michket Krifa writes: ‘These variations on the portrait and self-portrait accompany a debate that highlights where Arab photographers focus on their world, their culture, and their identity and how profound, diverse, and dynamic they are. Their work is anchored in realities that they witness, denounce, or disrupt – with distance and often with humour.’

Krifa’s essay appears in Arab Photography Now, a book she co-edited with the Iranian-Lebanese curator Rose Issa, whose art monographs and anthologies (including Iranian Photography Now) provide much-needed documentation of Middle Eastern artists and their work, visionaries who, Issa insists, have always been in touch with ‘the real concerns of the people. The word ‘adl (“justice”) has been in every exhibition I’ve done for the past twenty years.’

Opposite:

Following spreads right:
Newsha Tavakolian, Imaginary CD Cover for Azita Akhavan, from the exhibition “Listen”, Tehran, 2010. The CD’s title, This Is Not the Dream of Eastern Women, appears in Farsi.

Following spreads (top and bottom-left):
Still, shadow puppet performance of Saba’a w 7 by Dar Onboz and Collectif Kahraba, directed by Eric Deniaud, storytelling by Nadine Touma (pictured) and sound by Sivine Ariss, Beirut, 2011.

خداوند اصغر فرجان

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Across the Middle East, the ‘truest’ interpreter of the street – photography – has become increasingly dangerous. In Syria, Issa Touma’s Le Pont Gallery, the country’s only space for contemporary photography, was harassed for many years by the mukhabarat (secret police), which has now turned its attentions to protestors in Homs and Hama taking pictures on their mobile phones of violent government retaliation. In Iran, during the mass protests following the disputed 2009 presidential elections, the camera was considered ‘a spy’ by the authorities (as one photojournalist characterised it to me).

In response to the latter, a fraternity of internationally published Iranian photographers retreated from the streets into the studio. Newsha Tavakolian tackles controversial
subjects such as the silencing of women singers in her country; Peyman Hooshmanzadeh’s loving portrait of his wife, the artist Shadi Ghadirian, on a rial banknote was banned (a woman’s image replacing that of an ayatollah could not be tolerated).

In Saudi Arabia, artist Jowhara AlSaud circumvents censorship by tracing the contours of her photographs of illegal partygoers, thereby securing their anonymity and hence safety.

Documentary portrayals of reality can threaten the preferred narratives of authoritarian religious regimes – witness Tahmineh Monzavi’s portraits of transvestite drug addicts in Tehran. They can also thwart Western misconceptions, as with Reine Mahfouz’s series depicting the paradoxes of veiled women and racy lingerie inside Damascus’s Angel Lady factory. Documentary can also be put to other uses, such as in the protest art of Palestinian artist Raeda Saadeh (Jerusalem’s answer to Cindy Sherman), who in one photograph impersonates Leonardo Da Vinci’s Mona Lisa using the encroaching West Bank settlements as background landscape.

There was a time when you could walk from southern Lebanon to Haifa without encountering a single checkpoint; as a young man, the renowned studio photographer Hashem El Madani made just such a journey, to learn his craft from...
a Jewish photographer in Haifa. However, as he set out to return home in 1948, new borders were suddenly erected, and El Madani was forced to make detours via Tulkarm, Nablus, Amman and Damascus. Back in his hometown of Saida (Sidon), Lebanon, he photographed people from all social strata in his Studio Shehrazade. The groundbreaking book *Hashem El Madani: Studio Practices*, curated by the artist Akram Zaatari of the Arab Image Foundation, collects El Madani’s portraits from the 1950s through the 1980s – which are breathtaking. Girls learn how to kiss by kissing other girls; men appear in bridal veils; families pose, dressed in their finery; young men play guitars; *fedayeen* sport guns; women model the new technology of the day, the radio; a naked baby boy wearing a ribbon stands like Apollo. Their playfulness, respect for others and confidence in themselves shine through, much like the people portrayed in the modern-day studio portraiture by Omid Salehi and Reine Mahfouz’s Nomadic Studio, the documentary photography of Abbas Kowsari and Nadia Benchallal and the art by Fathi Hassan and Hassan Hajjaj (all reproduced here).

The people of the Middle East are not invisible after all, and they are patently not all the same. Their pictures and stories attest to the healing power of culture.
Bibliography


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Opposite:


Back cover:


Editing: Mitch Albert
Design: MakeMeBelieve.com
Printing: Technique Printing Group