

She who can speak for herself

OF ALL THE ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE ARAB WORLD, “maybe the most insulting is the idea that women from our region are oppressed, and therefore weak, backwards and cannot think for themselves,” Yemeni photographer Boushra Almutawakel says. “Yes, there are cases of oppression for sure, yet in spite of it all I feel women from our part of the world are strong and resilient, and we are intelligent, and can speak for ourselves.” Ten of Almutawakel’s works — among them a series of portraits of a mother, her young daughter and her daughter’s doll increasingly veiled until they fade into the black background — appear as part of the National Museum of Women in the Arts’ newest exhibition, “She Who Tells a Story: Women Photographers from Iran and the Arab World.” Running through the end of July, the show features 83 photographs and one video installation by a dozen contemporary female artists, each exploring stereotypes in her own way. ELENA GOUKASSIAN (FOR EXPRESS)

► National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1250 New York Ave. NW; through July 31, \$8-\$10.

1 'Untitled #5'

Gohar Dashti, from the series “Today’s Life and War,” 2008 “Today’s Life and War” is a series of staged photographs depicting a fictional couple doing mundane activities — eating breakfast, watching TV — in the middle of a battlefield. “The man and woman embody the power of perseverance, determination and survival,” Iranian photographer Gohar Dashti says. The concept “emerged from my experiences during the eight-year Iran-Iraq War, [which] has had a strong symbolic influence on the emotional life of my generation,” she says. “The body of work represents war and its legacy, the ways in which it permeates all aspects of contemporary society.”

2 'Reem, Doha, Lebanon'

Rania Matar, from the series “A Girl and Her Room,” 2010 Born and raised in Beirut and now based in Boston, Rania Matar became a photographer after 9/11, “to show the humanity of people,” she says. “A Girl and Her Room” is a series of photographs of teenage girls, both American and Middle Eastern, in their bedrooms. Seeking to “throw away stereotypes people have of young Muslim women,” Matar points out that you often can’t tell the difference between the American girls and their Middle Eastern counterparts. When Matar first visited Reem, she noticed that the girl’s room was “very bare, but Reem was such an interesting girl. She said

‘I express myself in my sketchbook, not in my room,’” which is why Matar chose to include the girl’s drawings in her photograph. The copy of “Lolita” on the bedside table was just a happy coincidence, Matar says.

3 Untitled

Boushra Almutawakel, from the series “The Hijab,” 2001 Yemeni photographer Boushra Almutawakel created this image right after 9/11, while she was studying photography at the Portfolio Center in Atlanta. It launched a whole series exploring the complexities behind when and why women wear the hijab. “I personally wear the hijab in Yemen, but not when I am in the West,” she says. “It is a personal



GOHAR DASHTI

1



RANIA MATAR

2



BOUSHRA ALMUTAWAKEL

3



NERMINE HAMAM

4

choice, one I feel every woman should have the choice to make.” And who is the woman in the photograph? “Well, the piece is a conceptual one,” Almutawakel says. “All I can say is she was a fellow student at the Portfolio Center. She was neither Arab or a Muslim.”

4 'The Break'

Nermine Hammam,
from the series 'Cairo Year One:
Upekkha,' 2011

In the aftermath of the Egyptian uprising of 2011, Nermine Hammam took to the streets of her native Cairo, snapping photographs of the people she found most fascinating — the soldiers. She was particularly taken with their casual demeanor and vulnerability. “Sometimes we idealize the idea of the soldier, but they’re



5

just people,” she says. “They’re just young Egyptian boys, and they’re scared themselves.” Using her photographs of soldiers doing everyday things, like eating ice cream and drinking tea, Hammam created postcards, the

kind you’d send a friend from a historic place. (Hammam remembers a tour bus full of people taking photos and visiting sites important to the revolution in its immediate aftermath.) “Egypt has a complicated relationship

with its army,” she says. “The army is deified.” With the current regime cracking down on civil rights, she can’t show her postcards or shoot photos in her home nation. “If I show up with a camera, I go to jail,” she says.

5 'Bullets Revisited #3'

Lalla Essaydi, 2012

“Actively avoiding offensive stereotypes is pretty much one of the most important things I could do,” Moroccan-born, New York-based photographer Lalla Essaydi says. “I take on art history writ large, undermining European artists’ objectifying and exoticizing representations of North African women.” Essaydi used thousands of bullet casings to create “Bullets Revisited #3.” The triptych turns “the domestic space into a psychological one, charged with contemporary realities,” she says. The text on the woman’s skin is deliberately indecipherable, Essaydi says, to challenge “the European assumption that text constitutes the best access to reality.”