

ART



Boushra Almutawakel's "Mother, Daughter, Doll" series shows its subjects' fade to black.

THE VEIL

Few questions are more fraught than those suggested by the veil. The Western, liberal position is often that women should have the freedom to wear it, or not wear it, as is their wont, uncoerced by social, political or family pressures, no matter how subtle. Yet even that laissez-faire approach can seem condescending, and the response comes back: The veil, which inspires so much vulgar anti-Islamic rhetoric, isn't a subject on which outsiders

should comment. So there is a philosophical standoff that precedes and preempts any visible. Yet it is the doll that makes the strongest impact. The black niqab reduces the doll to two unseeing, but terrified, glassy eyes — frozen, inert and helpless. The human figures register little or no discernible emotion, but the doll is undone. And thus agency — our power to make decisions — is dramatized. The doll has none, and she suffers most.

hair is uncovered. Later, all three figures are seen in full black covering, only their eyes visible. Yet it is the doll that makes the strongest impact. The black niqab reduces the doll to two unseeing, but terrified, glassy eyes — frozen, inert and helpless. The human figures register little or no discernible emotion, but the doll is undone. And thus agency — our power to make decisions — is dramatized. The doll has none, and she suffers most.

BY PHILIP KENNICOTT

The title of a new exhibition at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, "She Who Tells a Story," undersells the high quality of the work therein. The name is borrowed from an Arabic word, *rawiya*, which also refers to a group of female photographers working as a collective in the Middle East. But the title makes it sound as if this provocative show — devoted to photography by women from Iran and the Arab world — is just another exercise in narrative, just more storytelling, a needless addition to the overflowing swamp of narrative that drowns out critical thinking.

It's sadly typical of contemporary museums that they don't dare own the best of what they do, and titles such as this play down an exceptional show, which touches on politics, gender, sexuality, cultural identity and critical issues of war, colonialism and oppression. Women from this region are both exceptionally privileged and cursed to be at the nexus of so many fissures of modern life: Cursed because it is dangerous, exhausting and too often dehumanizing, and privileged because it gives them radical insight and destabilizing power. The photos in "She Who Tells a Story" use multiple strategies to undermine complacency, patriarchy, hierarchy and imperialism. Here are five noteworthy themes.

A ROSE BY ANOTHER NAME: WOMEN'S PHOTOS FROM THE MIDDLE EAST



An untitled work from the series "Listen" by Iranian photographer Newsha Tavakolian.

WRITING AND ERASURE

Among the most established female photographers to emerge from the region is Shirin Neshat, recently the subject of a retrospective at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden and represented in this show by selections from her 2012 "Book of Kings" series, in which black-and-white portraits are covered with a delicate, dense tracery of Persian poetry. The Iranian-born Neshat's iconic images have inspired other female photographers, who transcend Neshat's relatively simple gesture by raising deeper questions about the erasure of women's identities and testimony. Unlike Neshat's images, where the text is written on the surface of the image,

the images of Moroccan American Lalla Essaydi depict women whose skin is the canvas for the text. To "erase" the words hemmed onto the woman seen in Essaydi's 2012 "Bullets Revisited #3," you would have to scrub her skin — an intimacy that raises the stakes in any effort to silence the artist, the subject or the texts. Tehran's Newsha Tavakolian uses text in yet another way. Rather than superimpose it on female subjects, she represents it as deferential to the women in her images. In her "Listen" series, text isn't overlaid onto the body, but frames the woman, stands behind her or, in one case, curls around her arms and torso, respecting the body.



Nermin Hammam's series "Cairo Year One" puts soldiers into colorful landscapes.

EMASCULATING VIOLENCE

To borrow a Western dichotomy, Mars and Venus are ever-present in this exhibition. But Mars isn't in control. One of the exhibition's most subversive and touching series of images is "Cairo Year One," by Egypt's Nermin Hammam. Several of the brightly colored photographs depict young Egyptian soldiers, photographed by Hammam during the 18-day Egyptian revolution of 2011, then digitally edited into picture-postcard landscapes full of flowers, green grass and tourist views of exotic places. They are feminized in the process, their youth becomes epicene and their boredom reads as sensual lassitude. Displaced from the site of a bloody, contentious clash of political wills, the young men live for a moment in a candy land of androgyny, their

guns merely props, the tanks they surmount reduced to a stage setting. Using even more saturated colors, Iran's Shadi Ghadirian performs a similar gesture with still life. In a 2008-2009 series called "Nil, Nil," she juxtaposes weapons and military garb with objects that are typically feminine or domestic: A woman's purse bristles with cosmetics and bullets; a bowl of fruit contains a hand grenade; red high heels rest next to a pair of blood-smeared army boots. The staging of these scenes, the careful lighting, the historically self-conscious references to still-life painting perform a similar act of emasculation as Hammam's "Cairo Year One" images, domesticating it and, for a moment, at least, taming it.



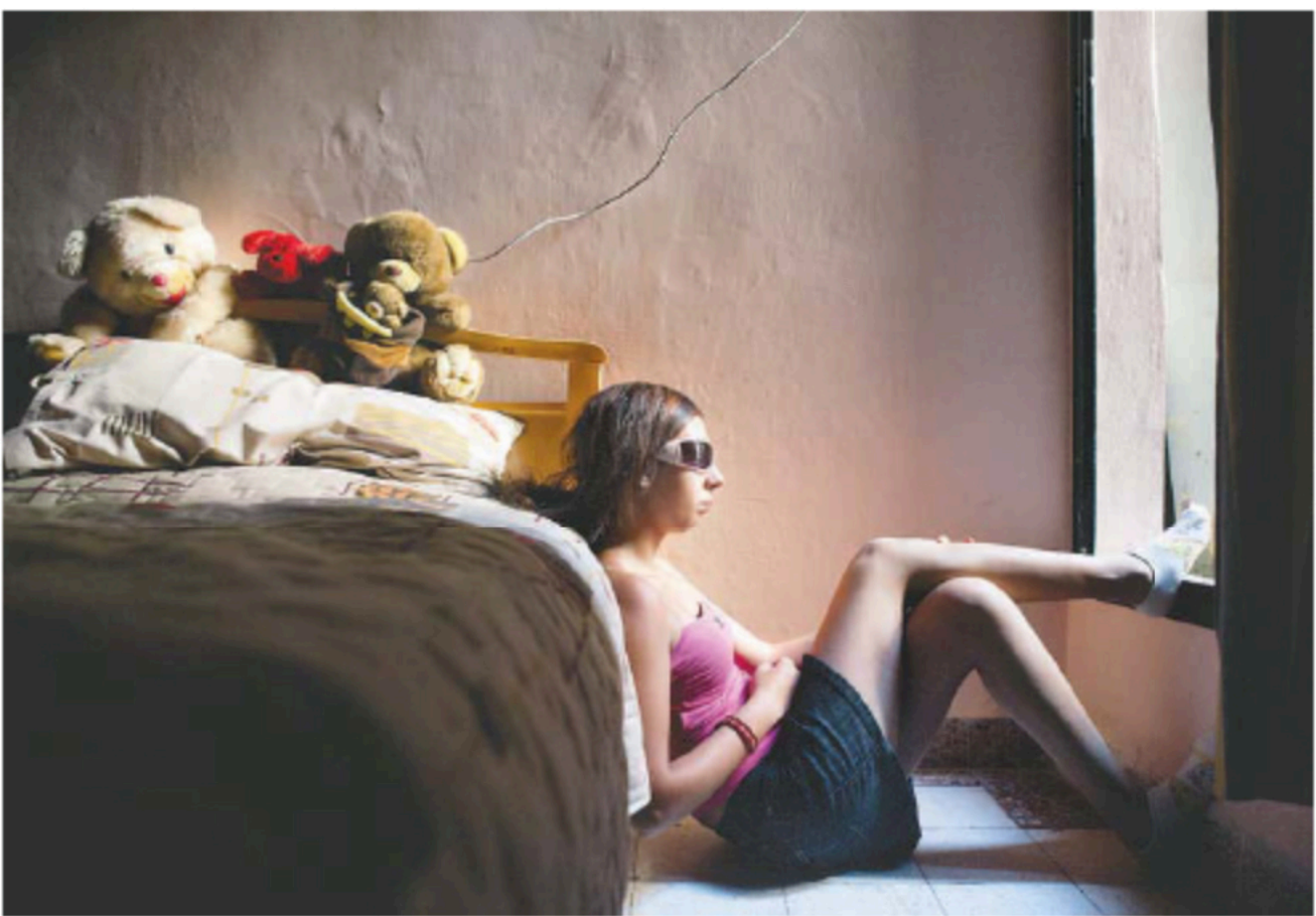
Gohar Dashti's series "Today's Life and War" depicts domestic scenes in war zones.

WAR AND THE SURREAL

One of the first war photographs ever made, Roger Fenton's 1856 "The Valley of the Shadow of Death" shows a road in the Crimea, littered with Russian cannonballs. An image by Iranian photographer Gohar Dashti explicitly echoes that iconic image, except that the battleground seems to be somewhere in the Middle East; the cannonballs are instead overturned soldier's helmets; and, most strikingly, a young couple sits in the war-strewn field enjoying a book, a drink and plate of fruit. Dashti's "Today's Life and War" series extends the surreal emptiness of Fenton's historic work by peopling it with a young couple going about their everyday lives. They eat a meal and talk on a cellphone as a tank looms in the near distance; they dress for a wedding and sit impassively in a destroyed car on a field littered with other wreckage; they light sparklers on a festive cake while sitting behind

sandbags. One can't resolve these images: Do they dramatize the ferociously persistent power of life and love in the face of destruction, or do they represent the psychological scars of the young man and woman, never to escape the scars of man-made destruction?

Rula Halawani uses the nature of film itself to create an equally surreal landscape of war. In March 2002, the Palestinian artist photographed the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and then printed the images as negatives. What is black reads as white; what is white is seen as black. The destruction and suffering are horrific; the mode of representation even more unsettling. But Western colonialism also is satirized: We see what are probably young Palestinian men amid the ruins of their land. The inversion of black and white gives them light-colored hair. They are luminous figures — spectral, blond, brutalized.



"Stephanie, Beirut, Lebanon," from Rania Matar's series "A Girl and Her Room."

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SELVES

In a male-dominated world, women's lives are like the proverbial iceberg: A small bit rises up into view while the majority of the feminine self is unseen, submerged and secret. The photographers in this exhibition often invert that, making the private life full, rich and open, while the public self is murky and out of focus. Rana El Nemr's 2003 "The Metro" series captures women, unawares, on the Cairo subway. They pass by in a blur, stare impassively into the distance, sink into the background. The photographs eschew clarity and focus. Lebanese American photographer Rania Matar's 2010 "A Girl and Her Room" series takes the opposite approach, revealing with great clarity the details of the private space inhabited by young women. Christilla, from Lebanon, slouches crosswise in a chair, with long blond hair that echoes a voluptuous image of Marilyn Monroe behind her. Make-

up, lotions, emollients and perfume bottles clutter a table in front of Alia, from Beirut, who clutches a white cat against a pink background. But most striking is Reem, who lies on a bed in a sheer white shirt and black skirt, an art book next to her and a copy of Nabakov's "Invitation of a Friend" on the nightstand. Everything about the image suggests that she is relatively privileged. But that doesn't diminish the multiple, powerful acts of self-assertion in the photograph, about sexuality, about the construction of one's identity, about the books one reads. "Lolita" has never seemed so radical.

philip.kennicott@washpost.com

She Who Tells a Story On view through July 31 at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1250 New York Ave. NW. Admission: \$10. 202-783-5000. nmwa.org.