

Multilayered and Multicultural, Creative Views of the Muslim Head Scarf

The hijab, or Muslim head scarf, is supposed to deflect attention. So what should we make of the model wearing a leopard-print version and an eye patch?

ART REVIEW

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She's the creation of Princess Hijab, an anonymous Parisian street artist, who adorns women in advertisements with impromptu black-marker "veils" and papers public spaces with her own hipsterish "Hijab Ads."

The princess is the Shepard Fairey of the French Muslim world or maybe the Naomi Klein. Is she a "hijabist"? Or even a Muslim? We don't know. But you can see some of her work in "The Seen and the Hidden: [Dis]covering the Veil," at the Austrian Cultural Forum in Midtown Manhattan. The exhibition, which includes artists from Europe and the Middle East as well as American artists of diverse backgrounds, reminds New Yorkers that debates about the veil are heating up in many communities overseas.

It is hardly the first show on this subject, but the humor in many of the works is refreshing. The artists are overwhelmingly young and Internet-savvy. They speak in the acerbic and autobiographical tone perfected by Marjane Satrapi, the Iranian expatriate who has recounted her experiences with the veil in "Persepolis," her graphic-novel series, now an animated movie.

A selection of prints from "Persepolis" (Volumes I and II) opens the exhibition. In an early sequence a young Ms. Satrapi, attending school in the wake of the Iranian revolution, chafes at the enforced wearing of the chador. Later in the story she learns

"The Seen and the Hidden: [Dis]covering the Veil" continues through Aug. 29 at the Austrian Cultural Forum, 11 East 52nd Street, Manhattan; (212) 319-5300, acfn.org.

Inside Art

The Inside Art column will return next month.



A scene from "Undressing/Soyunma" (2006), a video by Nilbar Güres, in which she emerges from layers of colorful scarves.

that her veiled classmates can still send subtle cues to their personalities and styles.

"With practice, even though they were covered from head to foot, you got to the point where you could guess their shape, the way they wore their hair and even their political opinions," Ms. Satrapi writes in a text above a drawing that illustrates her thought process.

Another Iranian-born artist, Sara Rahbar, expresses a similarly complex attitude toward the veil. Her color photographs show a beautiful woman in Qajar dynasty costume peering through glittering curtains and examining her reflection in ornate, mirror-tiled walls. There's a sense that Ms. Rahbar, who fled Iran during the war with Iraq but has since returned there to live, doesn't feel at home in either the idealized past or the un-

certain present.

Using the veil as a physical object rather than a symbol in short video performances proves to be a winning strategy. One standout is "Undressing/Soyunma" (2006), by the Turkish-Austrian

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artist Nilbar Güres. In the six-minute piece Ms. Güres emerges from beneath many suffocating layers of colorful scarves, unwrapping them one at a time as she recites the names of the friends and family members who provided them. Her act is suspenseful and more than a little

seductive, with a dramatic pause before the final piece of fabric is shed.

In Fahreen Haq's "Endless Tether" (2005), a three-channel video, this South Asian Muslim artist and a mysterious white male play a mesmerizing game of tug of war with a length of billowy red fabric. Ms. Haq rotates her torso in one direction and then the other, wrapping and revealing, or being swaddled and stripped, depending on who is in control.

Not everything in the show is as tasteful as these works would suggest. Katrina Daschner's sprawling video installation "Cartographies of Sex" manages to be both puerile and preachy. Ms. Daschner, a German-born, Vienna-based artist, performs a gender-bending burlesque routine inspired by the 1940s Egyptian belly dancer Naima Akef,

The Seen and the Hidden [Dis]covering the Veil Austrian Cultural Forum

Meisel have clearly made an effort to include artists, like Ms. Daschner and Ms. Haring, who don't have Muslim or Middle Eastern backgrounds. That's admirable, but the most compelling art about the veil comes from women who have some personal experience with it. (Ayad Alkadhi, an Iraqi painter, is the token male in the exhibition.)

And for all its sensitivities, the show doesn't distinguish between the different kinds of veils in the Muslim world: the head scarf, the chador and the burka, to name a few. The wall texts treat these garments more or less interchangeably, as most Westerners see them. To his credit, the Austrian Cultural Forum's director, Andreas Stadler, acknowledges this issue and others in an essay titled "It's Not About the Veil, It's About Us."

In more than a few places you can sense artists grappling with the veil's place in contemporary Western life. It happens in a work by Asma Ahmed Shikoh, a New Yorker of Pakistani descent, who collected hijabs from 100 Muslim-American women. Her sculptural installation takes the form of a honeycomb and refers to Chapter 16 of the Koran, which praises bees as a model for human healing, sustenance and spirituality.

The collaborative format of Ms. Shikoh's sculpture hews closely to classic feminist art like Judy Chicago's "Dinner Party." Each hijab is nestled in its own hexagonal cell and accompanied by the wearer's name, occupation and place of residence. It's a straightforward celebration of diversity and plurality.

At the same time, Western attitudes about clothing (conformity versus self-expression) come face to face with the Islamic world's sartorial proscriptions. Among the many different colored and patterned veils in the honeycomb is a striking red-and-black zebra print. You can picture it on one of Princess Hijab's poster girls.

ONLINE: SLIDE SHOW

Additional images from the "The Seen and the Hidden" at the Austrian Cultural Forum: nytimes.com/design

but her awkward gyrations bring to mind "Brüno," the fictional fashion-crazed Austrian.

Marlene Haring, another Austrian, fares only slightly better. Her works hinge on "veils" made of long blond hair. In the photograph "Because every Hair is different" (2007) a seated woman is completely covered, like a Sasquatch. The sculpture "False Friend (Long Chair)" (2009) turns a Corbusier chaise longue into an exaggerated version of Meret Oppenheim's fur-lined teacup.

The curators David Harper, Martha Kirszenbaum and Karin