arwa abouon
unseen and unheard
Originally from Libya, Arwa Abouon grew up in Canada. Through her playful photographs she questions her own place within a so-called Western culture on the one hand and her upbringing in a Muslim household on the other. A blend of subverted ideas of nostalgia and the diasporic longing for home, Abouon pays homage to the transgenerational transmission of traditional values.
here has been a crescendo of voices from the female artists of the Middle East over the last few years. While a great many continue to produce multifaceted and theoretically complex works that deal with issues of representational and identity politics, these very terms have already become tired, to some degree. Eyes have begun to roll at forced dichotomies of hijabi girls chomping away on Big Macs and at the feigned surprise of veiled women holding cans of American soda.

Compared to others, Arwa Abouon is a fledgling talent, and unlike the monolithic nature of the images she creates, her visual language originates from a non-didactic, poetic and directly autobiographical place. With the loaded iconography of her work, along with statements often citing Islamic references, Abouon's "political" work is recently horrible, I just have a strong sense of colours, textures and shapes.”

My photos are technically horrible. It is interesting to discuss these works from the point of view of the artist’s rhythmic and compositional decisions - facing in versus looking out, kneeling versus standing up.

While the viewer may be enthralled by the powerful symbolism of the work, with regards to a negotiation of culture and heritage, 'The Generation Series' is the basis for all of Abouon's work for reasons rarely, if ever, discussed. As a continuation of this work, Abouon also produced a video entitled 'Al-Fatiha'. The video begins with the artist's mother wearing the same patterned veil and in the same context as in the photographs, reciting the opening Surah (chapter) of the Qur'an - also informally referred to as Umm Al-Kitab (the Mother of the Book). After completing Salaam, her image freezes and the artist appears repeating her mother's words and gestures. A third, younger girl enters the frame next and clumsily attempts to recite the same Surah. This work is significant as it deals with a verbal transmission of the Qur'an, as opposed to a reading of it.

Distrusting the Senses
In a piece from 'The Generation Series', Abouon and her mother wear identical veils that blend into a background of the same pattern. Likewise, the images of her father and brother have also lost their contours; the men's white garments becoming one with their surroundings. With this deliberate merging of the figure and the ground, Abouon executes an attack on meaning itself, thus rendering knowledge illegible. "The first book I ever read was in the third grade," says Abouon. "It took me
the whole year to finish it." She claims to be the odd one out in a family of bookworms and says that her self-proclaimed learning disability as a child affected her relationship with her young peers. "My parents got me glasses to fix the problem," she recalls. "But they did not help." At the age of 24, Abouon diagnosed herself with dyslexia. "I have been looking at a range of sources about different approaches to learning," she says. "I think I am what is called a spatial learner." Abouon does not use her glasses when she takes pictures. "My photos are technically horrible," she jokes. "I just have a strong sense of colours, textures and shapes."

Abouon's entire practice has therefore been inherently shaped by the way she learns. Since her self-diagnosis, she has been exploring alternative ways of acquiring information and questioning whether words have to be seen in order to be understood. She recently produced a body of typographic works including an eye test light-box entitled 'Allah Eye Doctor Chart' which was made up of the word 'Allah' repeated in decreasing sizes. She has also been working on a series of embossed Braille sentences on paper, as well as blurred fragments of quotes written against a blue sky by the Sufi philosopher Al-Ghazali, among other scholars.

Trajectory of a Young Artist

Abouon has not been herself lately; conscious that she stands at the polar ends of the 99 qualities attributed to God. In one work, a man partially veils his face with an open palm and a closed fist. The words 'Hands are holy only' are typed across both hands. Al-Muntaqim (The Avenger) on the one hand, is represented by the fist in the image, while Al-'Afuuw (The Pardoner) is represented by the open palm. In her life and in her art, Abouon has increasingly turned towards religion for inspiration. Her images, as emblematic as they may seem, always come from a deeply personal experience and do not seek to make grandiose statements about Islam. Yet she is constantly asked to do exactly that; to speak in essentialist terms, as a woman, as a Muslim, as a Canadian, as a Libyan, for or against the veil, for or against the West.

A few years ago, Abouon would have taken playful jabs at these questions with disarming humour. Her earlier works include a self-portrait of the artist wearing a glittery hijab, rolling her eyes up to look at a shiny disco ball. Another self-portrait shows the artist wearing a lumberjack's vest over her veil while holding a plastic moose figurine. More recently Abouon - who has just returned to Montreal from an extended retreat in Libya - has become increasingly introverted. "I don't know if I should be making money off of this," she says. Gone are the days of 'Bursting Bubbles' (a video of Abouon's friends arranged in a grid, all chewing gum and blowing pink bubbles). The video was shown at the 2007 DIFC Gulf Art Fair in Dubai as well as in a group show in New York. In it, the women are dressed in conventional Western clothing. At the moment the bubbles burst in their faces, they are suddenly clad in pink chadors.
Hands are holy only.
“Hardships are blessings,” says Abouon, whose recent works are more earnest in tone. In her most ambitious project to date, she produced a giant billboard installation called ‘Al-Matar Rahma’ (Rain is a Blessing). Upon entering the space, the viewer finds himself sandwiched between a giant image of a blue sky and a vibrant self-portrait of the artist in various instances of prostration. In this work, Abouon depicts herself wearing a different colour burqa (enveloping outer garment for women) in each instance of her Raq’a (unit of prayer), thus forming a multicoloured arc that mimics a rainbow.

Gradually, Abouon has been stepping out of her self-imposed exile. As she comes to terms with herself, she is set to produce some of her most subtle and diverse work yet. Abouon is currently working on a series of dishdasha quilts that have been dissected and opened up to look like snow-angels which she will then stick on panels painted like blue skies.

Her family continues to be a major source of inspiration. Abouon recently claimed that she found the origins of Hip-Hop on an old tape in her parents’ house in Libya. “It is my grandmother free-styling!” she says, referring to a recording of her grandmother mumbling a song to her brother who was a toddler at the time. “I cannot understand a word she is saying, but there is so much love and so much joy in that voice.”

Arwa Abouon will be exhibiting at The Third Line, Dubai UAE, from 11 September to 2 October. For information on her other projects this year, check Canvas for details.