



Imaging Islam in the Art of Arwa Abouon

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Since the events of September 11, 2001, there has been no shortage of literature and societal debate on the growing visibility of Islam in Europe and the United States, including on art from or related to the Muslim world. But despite the numerous exhibitions dedicated to “contemporary Islamic art,” little, if any, scholarship has directly addressed the meaning and effect of the increasing number of visual references to Islam *as a lived and living practice* in contemporary art.¹ Arwa Abouon (1982–) is a Libyan-Canadian Muslim artist whose work is openly informed by Islamic religious, cultural, and artistic traditions. In this essay I explore the imaging of Islam in her work and map how it relates to wider questions of taxonomy, gender, and self as well as to other dimensions of her practice. The approach I take to Abouon’s work may seem disarmingly straightforward: it is anchored in the practice and event of looking, as I, like Doris von Drathen, consider the act of spectatorship and the encounter with a work of art an attempt, and sometimes a successful means, to meet an or the other.²

In this article, my use of the qualifier “Muslim” is broad, similar to that of Munir Jiwa, who characterizes the term as “relational” and thus to be considered in relation to other identity markers such as race and nationality, and who argues that examining art through this particular lens, in addition to affording a supplementary reading, “allows us to see more clearly the relationship between art worlds and the field of forces in which they are embedded.”³ Artists of Muslim descent who have become visible on the Euro-American contemporary art scene often employ symbols and themes pertaining to Islam to address issues of identity, marginalization, and discrimination rather than religion or spirituality or to proffer feminist and political critiques directed at either East or West. And certainly an analysis of what gets shown where and why would expose the substructures of what Olu Oguibe calls “the culture game.”⁴ However, here the term possesses an additional critical dimension. Abouon is a self-identifying practicing Muslim

Detail, *Abouon Family*, 2007, digital print on photographic paper, 40.6 × 50.8 cm, limited edition of ten, all collection of the artist. (Photo: Arwa Abouon)

who makes contemporary art or, more to the point, a contemporary artist who simply happens to be a practicing Muslim, a combination that, even if only a statement of fact, is nonetheless radical in its implications. Her art not only challenges the continued antinomy posited between art and religion and modernity and religion but effectively depicts a prescriptive religion – Islam – in a positive light. That it garners success in the mainstream art world only confirms its singularity.

My definition of art is here willingly institutional. Like the American art historian James Elkins in his seminal text *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*, I am limiting art to “whatever is exhibited in galleries in major cities, bought by museums of contemporary art, shown in biennales and the Documenta, and written about in periodicals.”⁵ There is, of course, not only *the* art world: there are myriad art worlds, and one is much more likely to find artists claiming and owning their Muslim identity in alternative art communities and arenas such as the many Muslim artist associations or the increasing number of grass-roots Muslim art festivals sprouting up throughout North America and Europe. In addition, one must equally recognize that there are art milieus in which traditional – for some perennial – Islamic means of expression, from calligraphy through the whole gamut of Islamic decorative arts, are still practiced, exhibited, valued, and collected. There sometimes exists an overlap between these specific cultural modes of expression and those of Western modernism, as in the work of the Franco-Iraqi calligrapher Hassan Massoudy (1944–); those of street and hip hop culture, as in the calligraffiti of Britain’s Aerosol Arabic (1980–) or Canada’s eL-Seed (1981–); or those of contemporary art, as in the compelling work of two internationally recognized artists inspired by *tasawwuf* (Sufism), Franco-Algerian Rachid Koraïchi (1947–) and Anglo-Iranian Shirazeh Houshiary (1955–).

In order to facilitate discussion of the penetration of Islam into the field of contemporary art, I have deliberately chosen an artist who, like Koraïchi and Houshiary, sees herself as a contemporary artist and functions within what are considered the normative venues and visual modalities of the art world. Those artists who continue to work in artistic idioms rooted in Islamic art and whose aims are jointly aesthetic and spiritual raise complex interpretive questions that are beyond the scope of the present study, particularly the much debated issue of what constitutes a religious image in an essentially aniconic artistic tradition.⁶ Abouon’s art, which I am suggesting is transnational, cannot completely transcend the limits inherent in (cross-cultural) translation, particularly with regard to divergent culturally produced definitions of representation, religion, and their relationship. For example, beauty, which has always constituted a primary vehicle of meaning in Islamic

art, possesses a religious inflection in Islamic culture, as witnessed by the oft-cited *hadith* (saying of the Prophet Muhammad): “Verily, God is beautiful and loves beauty.” Abouon’s profound sensitivity to the visual is consciously indebted to this religious *cum* aesthetic principle and tradition. However, while her work produces and communicates meaning through the language of visuality, not all publics will necessarily qualify its resonance as religious or spiritual.

Arwa Abouon’s work is figurative, even narrative, and intimately rooted in her personal story. It is in fact autobiographical. However, if rooted in daily life, her art is not premised on the banal, the spontaneous, or a Brechtian-style realism, all strategies some contemporary artists have used very successfully. Abouon is gifted with an unparalleled sense of the image and a consummate fluency in its specific mode of communication. She constructs every image very deliberately, and each image, even when predicated on humour, is an artfully composed re-presentation and re-enactment of various aspects of her life. Much of her work consciously involves the portrayal of the bicultural experience. Abouon emigrated from Libya with her family at the age of just over one year and grew up in Canada, in Quebec. The artist, who refers to herself as living proof of the success of Bill 101, is equally at home in English and French language contexts, and one might therefore speak of a tricultural identity. However, the artist gives precedence to her religious rather than her national identity. When I asked Abouon how she sees herself, she unhesitatingly responded, “First of all I am Muslim. When I describe myself, I put it in order, Muslim, Libyan, Canadian,” adding, “Here I’m Libyan but when I go to Libya, I’m Canadian.”⁷ The sentiment of being always displaced, of being “neither from here nor from there,” constitutes the shared fundamental experience of all bicultural or polycultural subjects and often makes its way into art produced by diasporic artists or artists minoritized in other ways. However, as Abouon’s work attests, or, more accurately, emphasizes, the phenomenon of dislocation is not only about loss but equally about creative gain.

Family is a recurrent subject in the Canadian artist’s work. However, while the artist always deploys it in a manner that renders its Arab Muslim roots evident, usually through dress, the pieces vary in style and mood. The black and white images from the *Generation Series* (2004) are undoubtedly the most poetic among Abouon’s representations of her family, and those that best demonstrate her consistent use of pure visuality as the principal vehicle of meaning. The photographic diptych depicting the artist’s father and one of her brothers consists of two full-length portraits affixed to the wall side by side that are near-perfect mirror images (Fig. 1). Both men strike the same frontal pose: standing with one foot forward, they are not quite parallel to the



1 | Arwa Abouon, *Untitled, Generation Series (Father and Son)*, 2004, digital prints, 182.9 × 81.3 cm each, limited edition of ten, five in private collections. (Photo: Arwa Abouon)

picture plane. Upright with impeccable posture, their heads held high crown their shoulders as they look steadfastly at the viewer. Wearing crisp white *jilbabs*, both the young man on the right and the older man on the left are set against an all white background, a hint of shadow around the men's bare feet constituting the only indicator of space. The stark composition recalls the work of twentieth-century photographer Irving Penn, who first made the use of bare white backdrops as a method of enshrining subjects popular decades ago in his documentary work, but the visual effect is transformed in Abouon's piece because of the overall whiteness of the images: dissolving figure and ground, space becomes as important as what is more palpably visible. The figures' bodies, or rather the white *jilbabs* clothing them, seem to merge with

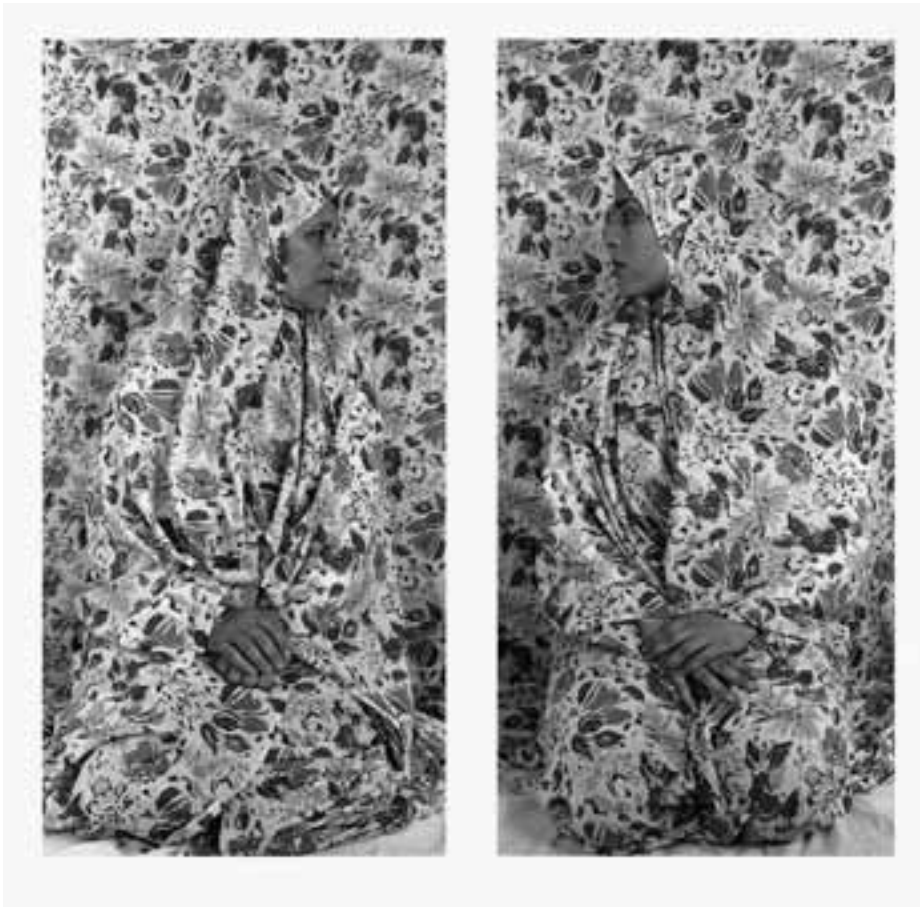
and emerge from the backdrop and the space around them. The sense of ethereality produced by the nebulous whiteness is transferred to the figures, who appear to issue forth from it like very alive apparitions as if to underline the importance or mystery of being and human life. Conveying in visual terms that a noumenal quality underwrites the phenomenal world, the white space in fact somewhat paradoxically accentuates the intimated physicality and embodied presence of the two men and draws the viewer's attention to the subjects' hands, faces, and inescapable gazes to scrutinize these visual signs for possible meaning. The notion that the world and being possess a theophanic aspect or at least exist as signs pointing to an unknowable reality constitutes a central premise of both Islamic theology and aesthetics, although one must note that this idea is found in other spiritual traditions, including the two other Abrahamic faiths, Judaism and Christianity.

The hieratic sculptural poses, as well as the minimalist but carefully constructed composition in which each fold and shadow count, are reminiscent of the long tradition of European art, in particular the formal restraint of classicism rooted in – often later interpretations of – Greco-Roman ideals. The use of this particular aesthetic premised on the idealization of the human being and form makes the images fully readable across cultural contexts and further emphasizes each man's dignity, individuality, and, for lack of a better term, knowingness. The long elegant robes, while quintessentially Arab and evocative of the Muslim world, equally call to mind the history of Western painting but are here used to bring forward and ennoble subjects that the art world has generally left out, namely Arab Muslim men, who continue to be portrayed, particularly post 9/11, in a poor light in both European and North American visual culture. Abouon's use of the garment as a site of cross-cultural translation constitutes a perfect example of the capacity of biculturalism and the double vision it procures to add supplementary meaning and to build bridges *through* difference. The artist has reconfigured the Middle Eastern *jilbab*, a sign of the culturally impoverished and fanatical desert dweller, now terrorist, by evoking the positive connotations identical garments hold in the Western imaginary and art. Acknowledging difference, Abouon foregrounds the interrelatedness or commonality of the East and the West, increasingly posited as antithetical, but she does so in purely aesthetic terms, devoid of moralism, self-righteousness, or pedantry.

Father and Son rewrites the figure of the Arab Muslim male. The two men are portrayed as fully fledged subjects and not as objects of fear or loathing, confirming the thesis that the representation of minoritized subjects as agents offers an effective means of overriding stereotypes and the process of objectification or de-subjectification on which they are based. The two men

invite the viewer to meet them as equals by means of the gaze, to engage in an intersubjective experience with the other or, as Kaja Silverman so aptly puts it, “to identify with bodies we would otherwise repudiate.”⁸ In addition, Abouon, by representing the Arab man as part of a family, also displaces the customary portrayal in which, often decontextualized, he constitutes the perfect screen for collective projections and/or the site of sometimes unfortunate realities. Her representation of the father-son relationship is particularly poignant. Both men are interacting with the viewer and not with each other, yet the visual correspondences in dress and stance, denoting the power of the invisible bond, make it impossible for the viewer not to compare them. While the father stands as proudly as his son, the full-bodied vitality of youth embodied by his son has given way to a slight weakening. The *jilbab*, ever slightly too big, seems to indicate the subtle shrinking that often accompanies aging. His hair is grey, his face wrinkled, displaying the subtle, inevitable pull of gravity that comes with middle age and the realities of life. The universal nature of the theme and the concomitant cycle of life stages it implies transcends cultural borders. The diptych is an affirmation of life and individuality, but also a moving reminder of the inescapability of time and mortality. The classical aesthetic, the *jilbab*, and the power of the human gaze and human relationships all, through the artist’s lens, coalesce into powerful transcultural elements that bind rather than divide.

The piece’s female counterpart showing mother and daughter is equally powerful and cognizant of the continued communicative possibilities of visuality (Fig. 2). Echoing *Father and Son*, the images of *Mother and Daughter* mirror each other. However, the women are kneeling and not standing, and they look at one another and not at the viewer. Both the artist and her mother are wearing all encompassing over-garments that cover the hair and the entire body, the floral print material of which they are made also constituting the sole backdrop of both photographs. The piece, visually structured and produced through the veiling effect of cloth and the aesthetics of veiling so central to an Islam-inflected regime of visuality, lays claim to a different conception of vision and representation.⁹ In the context of the present study, I want to focus, however, on *Mother and Daughter*’s more overt references to Islam. Similar to *Father and Son*, the large-scale photographs are visually striking and are produced using two competing modes of representation, the planar and the perspectival. The textile, with its repeat floral pattern, composing almost the entire image surface, flattens the image. The optical effect of continuous pattern that constantly leads the viewer’s gaze beyond the borders of the image further emphasizes the surface plane and its implied continuity, as in historical Islamic art.¹⁰ The sense of visual endlessness the pattern creates renders it difficult to see and focus on what is visible of the



2 | Arwa Abouon, *Untitled, Generation Series (Mother and Daughter)*, 2004, digital prints, 182.9 × 81.3 cm each, limited edition of ten, all in private and public collections. (Photo: Arwa Abouon)

two women, while simultaneously, analogous to *Father and Son*, accentuating the three-dimensionality of their faces and hands, the power and dignity of personhood, and the parent-child bond. Also comparable is the rewriting of stereotypes, in this case that of the veiled Arab Muslim woman, whether in contemporary visual culture or Orientalist art. Abouon has again done this through the coupling of visual beauty with the representation of agency communicated by way of intersubjectivity, although here the depicted intersubjective relationship takes place between mother and daughter, and not between the women and the viewer.

If the photographic diptych can be appreciated as a work of art treating the theme of matrilineal filiation – its beauty, power, and constitutive nature – being able to decode the references to Islam obviously provides critical additional meanings. The visible sign or object of difference in

Father and Son, the *jilbab*, is essentially a cultural symbol generally worn out of custom rather than in imitation of the Prophet Muhammad (*sunnah*).¹¹ However, in *Mother and Daughter* both the women's kneeling position and the type of floor-length veil they are wearing unquestionably evoke Muslim prayer or *salat* and thus constitute religious symbols. The mother-daughter bond is, in fact, apart from the gaze, wholly imaged and performed through the metaphor of veiling and prayer. Islam is generally posited as a profoundly misogynistic tradition in global dominant discourse (a bias that is unfortunately sometimes corroborated by actions carried out by Muslims), but the artist has recast and engendered the faith, including the *hijab*, placing it squarely within the realm of womanhood and matrilineal transmission. That the piece is truly autobiographical and rooted in the artist's experience in that Arwa considers her mother her spiritual teacher both adds another textured stratum of content to the work and provides insight into the artist's process of producing images and constructing meaning. In addition to repositioning Islam in a female-centric perspective and claiming it as a central part of her self-identity, *Mother and Daughter* also declares, through the language of aesthetics, Islam to be beautiful, countering by proposition rather than opposition its image in Western media, as well as popular and political culture. On the topic of beauty and its relationship to Islam, the young Abouon states with utmost simplicity, "I like to use beauty and have nice aesthetics ... I find my religion beautiful *tout simplement*." It is important however to underscore that these are not naïve images. Abouon is fully aware of the context in which they are produced and exhibited, but instinctively moves beyond deconstruction and the binarism contestation inexorably upholds. Rather, her biculturalism, allowing her to perceive the world as both a Westerner and its Muslim other, enables the artist to create images that can resonate with all audiences, and she does so knowingly. Discussing the representation of Islam in her work, she stresses that she wants to portray it in a manner that "makes me and others feel comfortable," adding, "That is important to me, I want people to feel comfortable with the work, not threatened by it."¹² That she succeeds in *Generation Series* is evident by its exhibition history: the mother and daughter diptych, all ten of which have been sold, has been exhibited in Canada, England, Germany, Belgium, Libya, the United Arab Emirates, and Mali.

Not all of Abouon's images of her family openly display such an admittedly staged orchestration, nor are they all black and white. *Abouon Family* is a small colour photograph of a family that might even go unnoticed were it not for the simple but flawless manner of its execution, which displays a full awareness of the potential of the image to draw in and even transform the viewer (Fig. 3). The colour photograph shows the whole family sitting



3 | Arwa Abouon, *Abouon Family*, 2007, digital print on photographic paper, 40.6 × 50.8 cm, limited edition of ten, all collection of the artist. (Photo: Arwa Abouon)

outdoors in tall grass in a characteristically Canadian outdoor setting that I associate with the country's national tradition of landscape painting. The mother is sitting just slightly below and to the right of the centre of the image. To the right of her is her husband. The only one standing, he looks out and off beyond the right border of the photograph. Surrounding the mother are her four children. To her left, a son sits with one knee up, staring out into

the distance beyond the left edge of the image. Next is Arwa. Lying down, her head in her mother's lap, she is staring up at the sky. Beside her, another brother, who has donned a white prayer cap, or *taqiya*, is also lying down and dreamily or sleepily gazing out at something afar. Seated behind him, seen only in profile, is the last Abouon son, his back leaning against his mother, his head resting on her shoulder. He is also glancing up, although it is difficult to tell whether his gaze is directed at his father or simply upward, again beyond the confines of the image. The children and the father are all looking in different directions and away from the camera. Only the mother, wearing a plain white long *hijab*, looks squarely at the viewer. Like all the figures in this drama, her gaze is deep. Her face is graced with the particular humility and frankness that come with maturity. Her central position and direct gaze, as well as the shining whiteness of her headscarf and the magnetic pull she exerts on all the members of the family, drawing them in close around her, put forth in unambiguous visual terms that she forms the heart and core of both the family and image. If the father standing on guard is portrayed as the *pater familias*, pillar and provider of the family, the mother is represented as its real foundation. Holding a Muslim rosary or *misbaha* out and up for the viewer to see, she is also depicted as the family's spiritual head or *sheikha*, the necessary centre that affords each family member his or her own individual direction.

Abouon Family functions on several levels. As in all her work, Abouon has stripped the theme *cum* image down to its simplest human expression, which is always situated beyond cultural or religious specificity and difference. The photograph is an archetypal portrait of a family, including the traditional gender roles that continue to be maintained to varying degrees in most societies, including Western ones, despite the societal changes brought about by the women's movement in the last century. But it is equally a portrait of an Arab Muslim-Canadian family, the Arab Muslim part rewritten by the Group of Seven type background, and the Canadian part by the three small references to Islam, the *hijab*, the *misbaha*, and the *taqiya*. As a depiction of a contemporary Canadian family, one might qualify it as "accented," to use the term Hamid Naficy coined in his work on immigrant or diasporic cinema in the United States.¹³ All are dressed in Western clothes. It is only the veil, prayer cap, and beads that expose its particular accent; because the physiognomies of the family members appear more Mediterranean than specifically 'Arab,' the family is not overtly otherized through race. While the photograph can be considered to be and in effect constitutes a documentary image of the Abouon family, it also bears witness to the deterritorialization of contemporary identities and to the plural nature of belonging evident in an increasingly globalized world.



4 | Arwa Abouon, *Al Matar Rahma*, 2007, digital print on photographic paper, 91.4 × 189.6 cm, limited edition of ten, five in private and public collections. Please note that for the Culture Village site discussed in the text, the images were much larger, the image of sky measured 3 × 216 m, the one of the artist praying 3 × 284 m. (Photo: Arwa Abouon)

The photograph unquestionably serves as an ode to the mother and motherhood, a theme that, like fatherhood, translates across cultures regardless of the artist's mother's *hijab*. However, for a viewer looking at the image through a filter shaped at least in part by Islam, it is not only the few details noted above that evoke Islam: the whole picture appears as an enactment of the oft-cited *hadith*, "Paradise lies under the feet of mothers," and, more generally, of the centrality of the mother in Islam and Islamic discourse. Family and motherhood are not usually subjects in contemporary art, although they do appear in feminist art, including the practice of feminist bicultural artists. However, Abouon's (and her acquiescent family's) performances of the ordinary and her inimitable sensitivity to the language and thus signification of visuality place her work in a category of its own.

Abouon considers her art a means of exploring and learning about her religious tradition, an interest that has grown over the last few years, and as such she broaches decidedly religious themes in her work. If the act of prayer is referenced in *Mother and Daughter* and to a lesser degree in *Abouon Family* through the *misbaha*, it forms the central premise of *Al Matar Rahma*, a public art piece commissioned by and for Culture Village in Dubai (Fig. 4). The two immense colour photographs appeared on two billboards, each over 200 metres long, on either side of the highway leading into Culture Village, one side presenting a panoramic strip of gorgeous clear blue sky streaked with white clouds and the other showing the artist enacting all the positions involved in each of the five Muslim daily prayers. The work, whose

title literally means “Rain Is Mercy” was inspired by the idea that “after hard times, there is light,” a theme Abouon states “echoes throughout many different faiths.”¹⁴ However, in the same way that mercy is a feminine noun in Arabic, the woman seems to embody not only the ease that follows adversity but also the feminine aspects of spirituality. The dimension of gender inherent in Abouon’s work is impossible to underestimate in light of current widespread Islamophobic discourse premised on Islam’s alleged misogyny as well as the patriarchy that still often underwrites Muslim interpretations of Islamic religious texts. Donning traditional prayer clothes in various intense colours that cover the colour spectrum, Abouon is simultaneously enacting a rainbow and therefore the piece, while incontestably taking prayer as its predominant metaphor, visually communicates hope and joy through the globally translatable premises of sky and rainbow as well as pure colour. Through the latter, *Al Matar Rahma* concurrently re-presents prayer not as dry obligation and hardship but as a joyous beautiful event or performance, thus displacing, visually and not dogmatically, various assumptions, such as the divides between art and religion, modernity and religion, religion and freedom or happiness, as well as between the West and Islam.¹⁵

Other works focus on Muslim rituals of private prayer and invocation (*du’ā*), and again Abouon manages to produce works that, while treating a specifically Islamic theme, are neither culturally nor religiously constrained. *Duaa* (2008) is a vertical sequence of three close-up shots of a hand shown almost in totality and, in the background, what appear to be bed sheets, intimating that the scene captures one of the artist’s meditative or prayerful moments in her room. In each image the thumb touches a part of the baby finger, referring to *tasbeih*, short recitations made after prayer in sequences of thirty-three, counted over the fingers. However, if the piece references Islamic practice directly, its aesthetic, its sequential and performative nature, its focus on the body, and its use of synecdoche – the hand standing in for the subject – parallel the visual codes of international conceptual art. Here again Abouon employs a contemporary and globally understood language – at least within the art world – to reference Islam, which is usually portrayed as antagonistic toward both modernity and contemporary art. Moreover, the quiet reflective nature of the work can be appreciated regardless of whether or not one is aware of the allusion to meditative invocation. The work is not about (re)claiming an identity or challenging prevalent dominant discourses but rather about simply witnessing life, albeit a life informed by Islam, as it is lived. Because *Duaa* adheres to current global means and forms of representation and both its image and performance have been pared down to the barest minimum, it moves beyond, or at least widens, the concept of Islam, the focus on the body and the intimacy of the everyday, pointing instead to our common humanity.



5 | Arwa Abouon, *Hands Are Holy*, 2008, digital print on Duratrans, 121.9 × 81.3 cm, collection of the artist. (Photo: Arwa Abouon)

Hands Are Holy consists of a white light box bearing an x-ray image of two long hands stretched out side by side (Fig. 5). The x-ray is positioned on an angle, reminiscent of the way they are often hung in medical settings. The position of the hands reenact another type of personal prayer Muslims perform after their daily *salat*; the hands held together and forming a receptacle are brought up to the level of the chest or face in order to give thanks and/or to ask for forgiveness or help for oneself and others. Here the cupped hands are seen from above. Like all the works discussed here, the piece is no less visually effective for viewers unaware of the religious reference. The image of the hands, their large scale, the presence of light,

the strong contrast between the blue-black and white, and the title are all eloquent. The hand is here, as in the previous work, a visual shorthand for the human being and for being, or stated differently, for the subject and subjecthood. However, unlike *Duaa*, *Hands Are Holy* images a physical reality that is normally hidden and escapes physiological vision. The sight of bones, while it might be construed as a reminder of human mortality, here seems to evoke a shared human sameness by proclaiming the relative nature of both sight and visible difference. Abouon has poeticized a clinical image and its myriad associations to expose race as a discursive construction and demonstrate that, as the artist says, “no matter who we are, no matter our race or our differences, we are all the same underneath.”¹⁶

Abouon’s art confirms the continued power of both subjects and images, despite recent theorizations suggesting the opposite. Recognizing that “cultural-particular norms define who is recognizable as a subject capable of living a life that counts” and who is not, it affirms with grace the subjecthood of selves who have been and remain unrecognized in Euro-American contexts, including art institutions.¹⁷ But these selves are marginalized not only by culture, ethnicity, and/or race but also by religion, a dimension often overlooked in postcolonial critique. Visual signs related to Islam in contemporary art underscore many things, not least of which is the continued lack of knowledge about Islam and Muslims in Euro-America that goes beyond deeply engrained (neo)colonial attitudes, despite the growing Muslim presence in the West. Because it recognizes the salience of ideas, objects, and practices associated with Islam, Abouon’s work encourages viewers in non-Muslim majority contexts to see these things in a new light and, unlike media and other Western representations of Islam, from a Muslim’s perspective. The artist’s bicultural vision, understanding of the language of visuality, and capacity to distil the essence of each theme give the work a heteroglossic and communicative beauty, enabling it to speak across cultural, geographical, and religious borders. All of Abouon’s overt references to Islam are themselves plural: moving from the particular and denominational to a wider and more global frame of reference, they reveal both the difficulties of qualifiers such as Muslim and their usefulness. Abouon produces art that is clearly cognizant of Islam’s role as “the other of Western secular modernity,” but the bicultural vision underwriting it dissipates any East-West or religion-secularism antagonism precisely because it cannot be contained within the binarism of inclusion/exclusion inherent in every culture.¹⁸ Moving beyond postcolonial critique and simply affirming what is, it maps new transnational ways of seeing (and being). From this perspective, the importance of Abouon’s work transcends questions of Islam and the contentious issues surrounding it worldwide, although admittedly its recasting of the West and Islam as neither

incompatible nor mutually exclusive is obviously consequential. Images are powerful tools in shaping cultural notions of subjectivity, belonging, and citizenship; Abouon's visual enactments of workable plural subjectivities redefine the assumed ethnic, racial, and religious characteristics of the modern Western – in this case Canadian or Québécois – subject and citizen. Over and above their strong aesthetic appeal and original engagement with Islam, they plot a way forward. Having developed a cogent language capable of cross-cultural translation in its recognition of the necessary negotiation of competing self-identities, her works propose models of pluralism that eschew conflict without abolishing difference.

NOTES

- 1 The difficulties created because the expression “Islamic contemporary art” only further entrenches the notion of the traditionalism, religiosity, and homogeneity of the Muslim world have been addressed elsewhere and remain beyond the parameters of the present study. Although the expression was no doubt coined for the sake of communicability and usually conveniently means from or related to the Muslim world, I am not here working on consolidating the notion of contemporary Islamic art, at least not with regard to much of the art generally classified as such. See Farhat's critique of Daftari's interrogation of the set of terms in the catalogue text of the 2006 MOMA show *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking* curated by Fereshteh Daftari; Maymanah FARHAT, “Contemporary ‘Islamic’ Art in Context: The Discourse Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking,” *ArteEast Quarterly* (1 Apr. 2006). Accessed 24 Aug. 2011, <http://www.arteeast.org/pages/artenews/article/39/>
- 2 Doris VON DRATHEN, *Vortex of Silence: Proposition for an Art Criticism Beyond Aesthetic Categories* (Milan: Charta, 2004), 24–25. This methodological perspective, if it needs a name, is best described as aesthetic phenomenology. See Valérie GONZALEZ, *Beauty and Islam: Aesthetics in Islamic Art and Architecture* (London: I.B. Tauris, in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2001). While it leaves certain critical questions unaddressed – for example, the difficulties and underrepresentation of so-called minority artists in the Euro-American art world, and specifically in Canada – it is no less political. The act of seeing, largely fashioned and produced by culture, is itself political and I am here addressing the problem by helping to bring to visibility Abouon's work across different cultural regimes of vision and visuality rather than by addressing the systemic problems of the Canadian art world and institutions.
- 3 Munir JIWA, “Imaging, Imagining and Representation: Muslim Visual Artists in NYC,” *Contemporary Islam* 4, no. 1 (April 2010): 79–80.
- 4 Olu OGUIBE, *The Culture Game* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004). See particularly “Double Dutch and the Culture Game,” 33–44.
- 5 James ELKINS, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1.

- 6 The interpretative question of whether Islamic art is or is not a religious or sacred art that has effectively formed a substantial matter of debate in Islamic art historical scholarship throughout the last decades rests, in my opinion, on culturally divergent conceptions of representation and perhaps religion. The discipline of Islamic art history, having originated in nineteenth-century Europe, may be considered a Western discipline based on Western art historical concepts, criteria, and methodologies that are often inapplicable to non-Western art traditions.
- 7 Personal communication with the artist, 1 Aug. 2010.
- 8 Kaja SILVERMAN, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 2.
- 9 See also Valerie BEHIERY, “Discours alternatifs du voile dans l’art contemporain” (trans. C. Lavarenne), *Sociologie et Sociétés* 41, no. 2 (2009): 299–326.
- 10 See Titus BURCKHARDT, *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning* (London: World of Islam Festival, 1976) or, for a somewhat different perspective, Oleg GRABAR, *The Mediation of Ornament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).
- 11 The long robe known as *jilbab* or *thobe* or myriad other names across the Muslim world is considered *sunnah* in Islamic theology, which means that while it is commendable to wear it, it is not a religious requirement (*fard*). The point is here that it is a customary, not to mention comfortable in hot climates, garment. The small minority of Muslim men who wear *jilbabs* in Euro-American societies do so for several reasons: tradition, practicality, and/or because they seek to emulate the Prophet in every aspect of his life. Sometimes, *jilbab*-wearing can indicate that the wearer follows a literalist non-mainstream school of Islam such as Salafism or Wahhabism.
- 12 Personal communication with the artist, 1 Aug. 2010.
- 13 Hamid NAFICY, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), see especially the introduction, 3–9.
- 14 Haig AIVAZIAN, “Al Matar Rahma: Rain Is a Blessing,” in *Flashback/Forward: A Visual Timeline of Cultural Practices in the Middle East* (Dubai: Dubai Properties-Culture Village, 2006), n.p.
- 15 Ibid. In the Dubai art catalogue, she is quoted as saying, “Prayer for me is sacred, personal, and full of love ... It warms my heart and cools me down.”
- 16 Personal communication with the artist, 1 Aug. 2010.
- 17 Moya LLOYD, *Judith Butler: From Norms to Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 134.
- 18 José CASANOVA, “Public Religions Revisited,” in *Religion: Beyond a Concept*, ed. Hent de Vries (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 108.

L'image de l'islam dans l'art d'Arwa Abouon

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La visibilité croissante de signes reliés à l'islam, aux musulmans ou au monde musulman dans l'art contemporain mondial est dû à deux facteurs : l'intégration du Golfe Persique dans le marché de l'art international et le nombre croissant d'artistes de descendance musulmane qui vivent, travaillent et exposent en Europe et en Amérique. Ce phénomène explique l'émergence et l'utilisation devenue commune de l'expression « art islamique contemporain ». Cette expression, cependant, est impropre la plupart du temps. Référent géographique plutôt que stylistique, elle est utilisée pour désigner l'art produit par des artistes demeurant dans des pays à majorité musulmane – ou originaires de ces pays –, plutôt que pour délimiter la nature du contenu artistique. Et, effectivement, l'art ainsi classifié démontre une variété d'attitudes envers l'islam et les traditions culturelles islamiques, y compris la dérision. Les artistes d'origine musulmane vivant en Europe et en Amérique et travaillant à l'intérieur des paramètres établis, des modalités visuelles et des institutions de l'art contemporain, utilisent des thèmes islamiques ou reliés à l'islam généralement pour aborder des questions postcoloniales ou identitaires. Il y a, naturellement, des exceptions, particulièrement ces artistes qui doivent beaucoup à la tradition à la fois esthétique et spirituelle de la calligraphie, comme Hassan Massoudy (n. 1944), ou à la rhétorique soufie, comme Rachid Koraïchi (n. 1947) ou Shirazeh Houshiary (n. 1955), deux traditions appréciées en Occident. Plus rares encore sont les artistes qui opèrent simultanément dans le monde courant de l'art, tout en abordant l'islam comme une pratique vécue et vivante d'une manière figurative et narrative, comme la jeune artiste canadienne-libyenne Arwa Abouon (n. 1982).

« L'image de l'islam dans l'art d'Arwa Abouon » analyse les représentations visuelles de l'islam dans l'œuvre d'Abouon et définit les questions plus larges qu'elles posent sur la taxonomie, le genre et le soi. La méthodologie utilisée, basée sur la pratique et l'acte de regarder, est délibérément simple et directe, mieux adaptée, semble-t-il, à l'œuvre et sensible au langage visuel ainsi qu'à mon but premier de favoriser sa lisibilité. Cet essai examine six œuvres,

chacune traitant d'une dimension différente des pratiques culturelles ou religieuses musulmanes. La *Generation Series* (2004) aborde le thème de la filiation patrilinéaire ou matrilinéaire. *Father and Son* et *Mother and Daughter* sont tous deux de frappants diptyques photographiques grandeur nature, en noir et blanc, représentant respectivement le père et le frère d'Abouon et Abouon et sa mère. Les deux hommes, vêtus du *jilbab*, regardent le spectateur, alors que les femmes, toutes deux voilées du même tissu imprimé, se regardent l'une l'autre. Les deux œuvres interpellent les stéréotypes, en représentant les Arabes musulmans en tant que sujets et signifiants islamiques sous une lumière favorable. Alors que le thème de la prière est implicite dans *Mother and Daughter*, les deux femmes étant voilées et agenouillées, des références plus explicites à la prière se retrouvent dans *Abouon Family* (2007), *Al Matar Rahma* (2007) et *Duaa* (2008). La première photographie montre la famille Abouon entourant la mère qui tient à la main un chapelet musulman ou *misbaha* ; l'image de la mère, représentée comme le chef spirituel de la famille, peut être lue comme une traduction visuelle du *hadith* souvent cité du Prophète Muhammad : « Le Paradis se trouve sous les pieds des mères ». *Al Matar Rahma* engendre aussi l'islam. Cette image monumentale représentant l'artiste revêtue de différents vêtements de prière monochromes et de couleurs vives, adoptant les différentes positions de la prière rituelle musulmane au-dessus de près de 300 mètres d'un magnifique ciel bleu, donne à l'islam une image nouvelle, constitutive plutôt que répressive de la femme musulmane. Rappelant aussi un arc-en-ciel, elle reformule la religion prescriptive comme désir plutôt que contrainte et rend un objet en mal de traduction – l'islam – intelligible. *Duaa*, pièce plus intimiste, est aussi « bilingue » : la représentation d'invocations récitées sur les doigts, en séries de 33, évoque également des notions d'agentivité et du corps performatif. La dernière œuvre examinée, *Hands Are Holy* (2008), qui consiste en une radiographie des mains de l'artiste à l'intérieur d'un caisson lumineux, est délibérément moins spécifique au plan religieux, car des mains levées, communes à plusieurs traditions religieuses, sont vues comme un signe de notre commune humanité au-delà des frontières raciales et religieuses.

L'art d'Abouon, en combinant la beauté visuelle avec la représentation de l'islam, redéfinit ce dernier en tant que tradition viable et même bienveillante à l'égard des femmes, alors que la vision biculturelle qui l'informe le rend lisible au-delà des cultures, ce qui n'est pas un mince exploit à la lumière du discours dominant euro-américain sur l'islam. Je soutiens qu'au-delà de son indéniable attrait esthétique et thématique, sa formulation d'une subjectivité contemporaine plurielle, où ni l'Occident et l'islam, ni la religion et la modernité ne sont incompatibles, possède une puissante dimension

politique, fournit un modèle pour restructurer les débats actuels sur la visibilité croissante du religieux, spécifiquement de l'islam, dans les sociétés euro-américaines et reconceptualise un monde de plus en plus complexe, transnational et diversifié.

Traduction : Élise Bonnette