

More Than Dresses

Dresses are not simply dresses. They convey issues of identity, of power, and endless stories. Mona Hakimi-Schüler body of work stems from impressions and anecdotes collected in Tehran, where she grew up and where she regularly travels to visit her family; from the clash between norms, stereotypes and “real” life in contemporary Iran. She observes the way people behave and dress in public, and the idiosyncrasies of a place where on the one hand it is difficult to claim or display one's own individual identity though looks, on the other consumerism rules besides religion. In Iran, laws and regulations affect just about every aspect of the display of the body in public, for women and for men as well.

Mona Hakimi-Schüler grew up in post-revolutionary Teheran. Born at the end of the Seventies, she remembers growing up in a rather oppressive context, where appearances were accountable for severe punishment. In the public space the women had to be covered according to the norms of the new ruling system: that means fully covered, showing as little flesh as possible. Dress to express: and being back then Iran a country pretty much isolated from the rest of the world, clothing had to be tailor-made according to the fashion of the time, based on the information and some smuggled western fashion magazines... Hakimi-Schüler's mother, a dressmaker and costume designer, worked for plenty of female clients who very aware of the current fashion styles and longed for western style dresses – even though they could not wear them in public. As a child, Mona Hakimi-Schüler witnessed countless try ons and encountered the most interesting and diverse clientele; in her teens she also modelled for the fashion creations of her mother, trying on dresses for the clients. A funny parallel universe, that made her sceptic of appearances and aware of the double standards of the Iranian society.

Thirty and plus years after Hakimi-Schüler works with dresses and with their multi-layered meanings. The collages and installations of the series “Multi-bodies” stem from her impressions and observations of Teheran over the years until the present. Her creations are full of hints and details to be deciphered. And they are beautiful, suggestive and enigmatic ensembles. The female figures are anonymous, without features, without faces. They are heroes, as Hakimi-Schüler calls them. Fearless they wear unconventional gear and pose hieratic and almost sacral against the sceneries behind. Defiant of the people in the background and of the context, the faceless women wear clothing and a wedding dress made of Islamic shrouds – echoing an Iranian proverb stating that women only leave the husband's house dead, wrapped in a shroud. Or they are dressed like urban warriors, wearing armours made of metal and golden filigree material embroidered with logos of Western brands such as Dior or Chanel. Heroes in dysfunctional clothing, these women seems sort of survivors in a dystopia, wearing for instance garments and accessories taken from the *Pahlevani*, the male heroes of a traditional Iranian wrestling style called *Varzesh-e bastani*. By developing this iconography, the artist reinvents the codes and the function of the clothing and challenges the stereotypical representation of women in Islamic culture, providing powerful counter-images.

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