

Multi-bodies

From very early on in her artistic career, Mona Hakimi-Schüler has been fascinated by questions of identity. She grew up in a time of extreme turmoil. The Iranian revolution of 1979 with its unique ideology of political Islam¹ presented a radical change that influenced every aspect of society.² In her new series, *Multi-Bodies* (2012-2013), which consists of three individual installations of female figures, the artist portrays the changes Iranian society is still going through today, by focusing on the use of clothes in her art works. As she explained, clothing can function as a metaphor for socio-cultural identity. The dresses and accessories of the three installations were all specifically made for each art work; they are innovative and unique.

The use of fabric in artistic expression is by no means a novelty – one only needs to think of Yoko Ono (“Cut Piece”), Salvador Dalí (“veston aphrodisiaque”), and Annette Messager (“Ma collection des proverbes”). In her analysis *Kunstkleider* on the use of textiles as art objects Cora von Pape argues that artists’ interest in this form of art has increased since the beginning of the 20th century. Dealing with clothing both as a theme and as a material in art reflects a thorough preoccupation on the part of the artist with concepts of identity. According to her, more and more artists began dealing with questions of human identity in relation to the body through performance and body art at the end of the 1960s. As artists increasingly turned their attention to the individual, the personal, and to themselves in the 1970s, many began to reflect upon a changing society through the observation of their own body. And with the body, the attire of everyday life came to the fore, as an indicator of the wearer’s identity.³

Garments, as a metaphor for the body, serve as vocabulary to express various identities; they “serve as reification and communication of personal, social and collective identity.”⁴ Clothing not only expresses a physical feeling upon the wearer (in the way that one moves differently in high-heels than in sneakers). It can have a profound influence on their mindset, nurturing feelings of safety, a heightened sense of presence, or even the sensation of power. Dress is often a first language in our interaction with the outside world; a wearer communicates gender, age, status, etc. Clothing as a semiotic system (following specific cultural codes) assists in the presentation of different affirmations of identity.⁵ In that sense garments do not consequently represent a wearer’s identity, but rather stand for a consciously maneuvered *mise-en-scène*.

The artist works with deep-rooted motifs of Iranian tradition and cultural heritage, as well as with themes that have more universal implications. Even a viewer less entrenched in Iranian cultural production is struck immediately with common, pan-national associations (depiction of a wedding dress/ Installation I). Yet in seeing these elements contrasted with a more complex, culturally delineated system of implied meanings (for instance, shrouds were worn in an act of resistance during demonstrations/ sketch for Installation I), the viewers are forced to re-consider their initial judgment and to not only reflect upon the ‘outside’ (appearance) but also the ‘inside’ (history, culture, gender specific issues). Thereby, the exhibited women do not represent timeless objects without a past or future – rather, they are highly contextualized and serve as a poignant commentary on contemporary Iranian society.

The first installation is entitled *going to the lucky house with white dress, leaving it with white shroud* and depicts a woman wearing a wedding dress made out of Islamic shrouds from Iran. She is wearing antlers, or headwear which is visually akin to tree branches. The figure is facing a tiled corner of a room. On each side the tiles form the image of an arch under which a tree or bush with flowers grows.

¹ Wright 2008: 264.

² Girgis 1996: 3.

³ von Pape 2008: 9-10; 125.

⁴ Carlo Michael Sommer quoted in von Pape 2008: 49.

⁵ von Pape 2008: 50-51; 54.

The second installation *a short path between holy shrine and bazaar*, consists of a figure dressed in armor worn as a coat over a long sleeve dress. The face is covered with fine chains that are attached to the helmet, which is adorned by a pike on its top. The armor is covered in golden metal Chanel logos; the helmet carries the golden Dior logo. The figure stands on a mirrored square-shaped underlayment on which also stands a white terrier. The dog is wearing a small dress, and is holding several bills of Iranian rial in its mouth. Next to the figure on the floor, we see a purse stuffed with paper money, and a pair of golden knee-high boots with heels that are decorated with Chanel logos.

The third installation, *not all heroes are registered*, recreates the inside of the *zurkhana* ("house of strength"), i.e. the gym for *varzesh-e-bastani* ("ancient sport"). There is a mirror hanging on the wall alongside framed original photographs of athletes. The background of the female figure looks similar in style to a wall within a *zurkhana*. The figure is positioned in front of the wall and is wearing a combination of the traditional pants and a long skirt crafted out of those colorful pants as well as the belt that is part of the sportswear that athletes wear. Under the skirt one can just about see a number of *mil* (wooden "clubs" used for exercise).

Hakimi-Schüler noted that she believes that much of society can be understood through analysis of the status of its women: What roles are open to women? What rights do they have? Must they adhere to strict dress codes? The women in the art work reflect a conflicted cultural and historic background, one with which Hakimi-Schüler counters existing one-dimensional depictions of women from Islamic countries that are still apparent within Western discourse. Since Edward Said published his work *Orientalism* in 1978, many argue that not much has changed within the mainstream portrayal of 'Oriental' societies as threatening, as backward, as extremist and of women in particular as passive, and suppressed.⁶

In the hegemonic discourse on the 'Orient', as described by Said, one of the essential topoi is the idea of "backwardness."⁷ Backwardness implies that a region is 'stuck in time,' unable to move forward and become 'modern.'⁸ The *Multi-Bodies* series depicts the dilemmas of moving in between globalization, commercialism, tradition, patriarchy and emancipation, as well as religion and secularism. The works are not nostalgic, rather they represent her observations of the various personal, social and collective identities women take on in today's Iran.⁹ In 2007 already, the artist reflected upon issues of self-identity and social identity in her work *Selbstbildnisse* – a series of self-portraits. Here, too, she focused on clothing to playfully depict herself taking on different roles in each of her paintings.

In *Multi-Bodies*, Hakimi-Schüler refrains from an overly positive anti-stereotype of Iranian women, contending through her art that the negation of stereotype does nothing towards its elimination. Her woman is more comprehensive and ambivalent, striving to change her situation by means of working within the system, in provoking the status quo. In Installation I she resists a misogynistic mentality: According to the proverb which inspires the title of the installation, a wife both enters and exits the marital home in shrouds – from wedding shroud to the burial shroud. Hakimi-Schüler reverses the paradigm by letting her bride enter in the funeral linens; her woman is an agent of her own destiny, unafraid of death. Quiet resistance of women is also central in Installation II, where the Western haute-couture brands represent an act of political defiance against the regime, while in Installation III, Hakimi-Schüler places her woman in the primarily male space of the *zurkhana*. By depicting subtle acts of defiance, the artist

⁶ Scholars such as Sardar (1999), Karim (2000), and Little (2002) argue that *Orientalism* still is the dominant narrative within Western relations with Islamic countries (Izadi and Saghaye-Biria 2007: 143).

⁷ Said 2003: 205.

⁸ This controversial teleological view of history implies that the West has already 'arrived' in a time of modernity compared to the 'Orient,' which is 'lagging' behind.

⁹ As Sadjadpour observes, "Visitors to Iran are often struck by the society's many dichotomies: Female education and literacy rates have increased dramatically since 1979, but women's rights have been curtailed" (Sadjadpour 2012: 1).

opens a multi-faceted visual discourse on the subjects of feminism, contemporary Islam and a woman's right to choose her own path in life.

As integral part of the three installations, clothing does not function as an indicator of concrete roles but rather demonstrates the possibilities of hybrid female identity in Iranian society. In an attempt to unfold the communicative function of dress, the artist lays bare traditional social constructs and gender roles – an approach that shows how society's codes are subtly woven in the texture of clothing.

Installation I

going to the lucky house in white dress, leaving it with white shroud

Till death do us part. The title of Installation I is inspired by an Iranian proverb: A wife enters her marital home in a white dress, and exits it wearing a white shroud. The proverb cautions the woman to stay with her husband until she dies. Taking this as a starting point, Mona Hakimi-Schüler crafted a wedding dress made out of burial shrouds. The series opens with a work which contrasts the symbolic new beginning a wedding entails with the end of life that the shrouds represent. The artist conflates the birth of a new union and its anticipated demise.

This work addresses concerns of Iranian women by exploring the maneuvering room they are left with when faced with social expectations of how they should build their own future. The space in between her and the corner she faces as part of this installation represents the path she may choose in life. The question of facing social constraints is raised poetically, working with only a few symbols – the growing of the hair into branches akin to antlers, the seven meter long white wedding dress, and the adorned corner. This work communicates universal concerns and aspirations without compromising their cultural specificity.

The figure faces a corner, turning away from the spectator in a set-up that directs the viewer's glance to that same corner: a dead-end. This feeling of claustrophobia is implied in the proverb. Yet in her upright posture this woman seems to pause for a moment to look inward, contemplating her next steps. The wedding dress, "traditionally a symbol of pureness, femininity, and a form of social identity" is a ritual vestment that stands for the passage of girl to wife, a shift of personal status and social identity.¹⁰ But similar expectations apply to men, who are also assumed to aspire to the societal ideal of yearning for an eternal bond with a woman: "On the death of a young man, the bereaved create an ornate display of lights and color called *hejleh*, representing the marriage chamber the young man never saw."¹¹

The tiled corner boasts a beautifully vivid and colorful flower pattern, with an arch-shaped door or window frame to the left and to the right. Patterns – such as the floral shapes that cover Iranian mosques – are designed to both focus the mind and free it.¹² Here, the flowers blossom on branches, which seem to grow in a formation analogous to the antlers on the woman's head. The antlers are powerful, they add a magical element and their upturned form lends grandeur to the female body presented. Her thoughts, ever determined, grow outward into branches – an inner strength that is made visible.

The composition of this installation exudes calmness and steadiness. The many layers of the wedding dress remind one of a wavy assemblage of bed sheets or curtains – sentiments of coziness and domesticity are evoked. The artist, however, plays with the misogynistic undertone of the proverb by designing a wedding dress which is completely made out of original burial shrouds she brought from Iran. In a rebellious act of defiance the figure posits that she is not afraid of death. This stands in

¹⁰ von Pape 2008: 129.

¹¹ Limbert 1987: 36.

¹² Curiel 2013: 1.

unexpected contrast to the otherwise perceived gracefulness – a re-contextualization that speaks of growth and decay.

There are other instances in which Islamic shrouds have been worn in an act of protest which might have served as an inspiration for the artist. During the Muharram mourning processions, many men wear white shrouds “in order to show their willingness to die. Some smear dirt on their foreheads, indicating their eagerness to be buried for Hussein.”¹³ Further, in the prelude to the Islamic Revolution, December 11, 1978, the tenth day of the mourning processions of Muharram (Ashura), turned into a political demonstration. Over a million people took part throughout Iran. Those in the forefront wore burial shrouds “to show their willingness to sacrifice their lives.”¹⁴ By showing how familiar symbols can be placed in a completely re-imagined setting, the artist changes their significance, inviting us to think about how old-fashioned ideas can be stitched and layered into contemporary meanings.

Hakimi-Schüler’s composition possesses an unassuming elegance. The marriage proverb, a source of negative stereotyping, is cleverly turned on its head and used as a source of empowerment, opening up new constructions of one’s own making.

Installation II

a short path between holy shrine and bazaar

The installation II is a commentary on the current state of urban life in Iran. For decades women and men on the street have engaged in a process one could call urban hacking. Comparable to street art, they invade the public space with surprising imagery by refashioning their personal style, “hacking” the norm. In their silent struggle they stay within the boundaries of Islamic guidelines, fighting uniformity, engaging in a visual protest against rules that infringe on their personal freedom. Since in Iran modest apparel is the law, dressing becomes a tricky and brave game of negotiation. Mona Hakimi-Schüler’s work playfully takes this idea of negotiating with power to an extreme. She is caricaturing women whose strategies are subtle and thereby perhaps even more provocative. Dressed in beautifully designed outfits that still abide by the Islamic laws, they stroll around the streets. In societies where the rules of what to wear and what not to wear are so clearly defined, every effort to blur that line is a political act of resistance. But as represented by the artwork, this constant battle with the ‘morality police’ or ‘fashion police’ is fought on terms of extravagance and gracefulness – an act of defiance that turns the streets into a red carpet.

As opposed to capturing and occupying a space that they are not welcome in, as is the case in installation III, the women as presented in this artwork are altering the public space – not in changing it, but in remodeling their own appearance within it. The artist lays bare the inequalities of the sexes by comically exaggerating the inadequacies of the dress code. Hakimi-Schüler is inspired by the fashion photography she came across in Western magazines in Iran, but adds her own style to her collages, creating lavish juxtapositions between global brand names and local motifs. The result is an exuberant collision of the stereotypical symbols of Western consumerism and Islamic tradition.

In today’s Iran, religious beliefs in modesty clash with trends of consumerism and of extreme forms of self-display. Iranian cultural values merge with Western ones. Dress functions as one of the symbols of the ideological battleground between East and West. Jalal Al-e-Ahmad, a thought leader of the Islamic revolution, coined the term Westoxification, with which he warned of a ‘poisoning’ Western imperialist influence. Paradox and convoluted identity politics ensue: A currency which depicts Khomeini’s

¹³ Afary 2005: 47.

¹⁴ Chelkowski and Dabashi quoted in Afary 2005: 103.

portraiture is now being spent in the bustling shopping malls of Tehran and in the bazaars where one can find all kinds of Western brands being sold not far from important holy shrines.

The figure that faces the viewer as part of this installation evokes, on the one hand, a typical image of commercialism and superficiality – one need only to look at the flamboyantly decorated armor, helmet and accessories. On the other hand, this image clashes with the podium on which the figure stands, which consists of a maze of small mirrors, reminiscent of the interior design of a holy shrine. In Persian culture, the mirror is used frequently in art, architecture, and religious settings to signify a connection to the divine.¹⁵ Usually part of the ceiling within a holy shrine, the mirror is placed on the floor here in a reversal: it reflects the ceiling, upending perhaps a perceived primacy of religiosity in Iranian cultural identity.

The obligatory dress code in Iran – most famously the chador – has become a common theme in Iranian contemporary art. Shortly after the revolution in Iran the black chador was a very visible and overly present piece of clothing in the public space. “Chador art” as it is sometimes called, is highly sought-after in the West as it feeds pre-existing images of the ‘Other’. Hakimi-Schüler breaks the stereotype in creating an aesthetic armor for women, a fashionable alternative to other garments. Within reach, this outfit is displayed as if in a shop window. This could also be understood as a response to the pressures of daily public life. Asserting yourself in public is a universal concern, a constant bowing to the pressure of being scrutinized by strangers simply due to your appearance. The eye-catching shiny armor stands as a woman’s call to battle. She is prepared to stand her ground in the streets of Tehran or any Iranian city where the moral police are hard at work. The installation conveys a sense of tension as the feeling of safety that the armor conveys is simultaneously questioned by the fact that wearing it is deemed necessary. Symbolically, as a costume that can be taken off the mannequin and is ready to be worn, it also stands for the many roles one takes on in the public spheres – the identities amongst which each member of society can switch, making use of the codes embedded in different clothes.

The suit of armor also reminds one of queens and kings with their jewel-laden crowns and cloaks. The dress under the armor seems to be made out of silk, a prevalent textile in ancient Persia. In *Thousand and One Nights*, the story of princess Zubaidah, the wife of the caliph Harun al-Rashid is told, who could barely walk under the weight of her clothes and jewelry.¹⁶ Yet even though the dress code is a burden rife with limitations, the women in Hakimi-Schüler’s sketches reinvent themselves through their clothing. They are the self-confident and self-expressive women of Tehran. Here, sidewalks have become catwalks in an ongoing confrontation with the morality police.

Installation III not all heroes are registered

They fascinate us with their exercises. They flaunt the physical prowess of their bodies. Juggling with wooden clubs, holding up iron chains – their performance, attire, and equipment stem from another time.¹⁷ These wrestlers are more than sportsmen – for millennia spectators have devoured them as

¹⁵ Curiel 2013: 1.

¹⁶ Walther 1983: 173.

¹⁷ “Of the various instruments known to have existed, four are currently in use. These are the *mil*, always used in pairs and made of wood and weighing between two and twenty kilograms; the *kabbadah*, a heavy iron bow, whose weight has been fixed at between twelve and sixteen kilograms and which athletes swing from one side to the other over their heads; the *sang*, heavy wooden boards of about forty kilograms each that an athlete lifts, one in each hand, as he lies on his back; and the *takht-i shina*, a small wooden plank used as a base for various types of push-ups. The origin and evolution of these instruments are complex and difficult to trace; the *mil* and the *kabbadah* probably originate in ancient weaponry” (Rochard 2002: 317).

heroes. However, theirs is an elusive sanctity for many. The spectacle inside the *zurkhana* (the house of strength) is for men's eyes only – women are normally not allowed inside.

Installation III breaks with this tradition. A woman stands within the walls of this sacred space. The presence of her female body is provocative; it creates a feeling of tension. In a clever set-up Mona Hakimi-Schüler manages not only to capture the space. She lays claim to it.

Within the walls of the dome-shaped building of the *zurkhana* lies the gymnasium where the traditional style of wrestling is performed.¹⁸ At its center, a little less than one meter below ground level, there is the hexagon- or octagon shaped field, called a *gowd*, which accommodates the athletes. After a series of set hierarchical steps,¹⁹ a young man joining the *zurkhana* can dream of eventual local or even national stardom. Physical ability, moral qualities, a strong faith in the Shi'a religion, and involvement in the community determine his path to attain the honorary title of *pahlavan*.²⁰ Symbolically, the *zurkhana* is strongly associated with the ethic of *javanmardi* (literally: young-manliness, or translated as chivalry). It is a place where men come to strive for physical, moral, and spiritual perfection. The ideal of *javanmardi* encompasses bravery, humility and justice, and to this day, these heroic ideals are integral to mainstream iterations of Iranian identity. Yet women are excluded; they are often less prominently represented in the historical narratives of epic heroes of a nation which help form collective identities. One only needs to think of Rostam, Hercules, or Knight Lancelot.

The artist reframes a scene that looks familiar to most Iranians. She creates a comfort zone by recreating the inside of the *zurkhana*, with original images, as well as a mirror on the wall, and by including original sportswear. Athletes usually wear these trousers to exercise, here however, 10 pairs of pants, including the one the figure is wearing, are delicately remodeled into a skirt. The traditional outfit also consists of a belt, the *long*, usually a red cloth worn around the hip. There is a Persian proverb in which throwing down the *long* is similar in meaning to giving up. By changing some important elements in this scene, Hakimi-Schüler reinvents a common image and challenges the status quo: The insertion of a female body, the carefully crafted skirt covering the *mil*. In being misplaced these tools suddenly become mysterious objects, and add to the feeling that the presence of a woman within the walls of the *zurkhana* should not be uncovered. Seen from certain angles, however, her being there is reaffirmed by the reflection in the mirror on the wall. Furthermore, through the mirror, each spectator instantaneously becomes part of the scene her/himself, creating a participatory moment of reflection.

Here, the tension between different modes of representation becomes evident. Even though her picture is not hung up on the wall, the representation of the woman in the artist's work is that of usurper, resisting exclusion, entering and occupying a space. She is declaring herself an active member of society in the face of an Iranian society, which chooses to celebrate the men as literally the performers of tradition.²¹ Men personify historicity, sacrifice, and resilience – they attract spectators and their photographs are put on display on the wall, whereas women must fight to be recognized as acclaimed athletes.

¹⁸ Similar forms of the sport are also performed in other countries of the region and of the world. Tehran alone has over fifty gymnasia. There is hardly a village in Iran that does not have a house of strength, with the exception of those situated in the littoral regions of the Persian Gulf (Rochard 2002: 318).

¹⁹ Beginner (*taze-kar*), regular member (*nowkhaste*), junior *pahlavan* (*now-che-Pahlavan*). Only respected community leaders, or heads of other *zurkhanas* might attain honorary title of *Pahlavan*. The best wrestler, is the king's wrestler (*pahlavan-e-shah*) (Arasteh 1962: 10).

²⁰ Arasteh 1962: 9-10. "The word *pahlavan* has four meanings: hero, courageous, champion, and athlete. The first three apply directly to the mythological heroes of the *Shahnameh*, as seen in the title of the most important of these, Rostam, which is *jahan-pahlavian* (*pahlavan of the world*)" (Rochard 2002: 331)

²¹ There exist also negative associations in regard to the institution of the *zurkhana*, such as nationalist pride, male chauvinism, and an excessive praise of the Shi'ite imams. "Collective Iranian memory has preserved a certain Manichean image of the *zurkhanah* as either a locus of noble chivalry or an abode of vice and thuggery (Rochard 2002: 339).

The invisible pain of this injustice, the burdensome fight for public encouragement and acknowledgement – is this embodied by the 24 *mil* covered by the skirt? Or are the sporting tools hidden weapons to fight back with? The woman apparently sneaking her way into the *zurkhana* suggests she has smuggled goods under a *manteau* or a *ghaba*. She acts in an atmosphere of secrecy, in stark contrast to the public glorification of the *pahlavan*.

This artwork generates a sense of power. However, given the reality of the exclusivity of the *zurkhana*, its aura is fleeting. The medium of art installation is crucial: it engages a feeling of space and surroundings, of mobility and fragility. The gallery space becomes the *gowd*, the fighting arena. Forbidden sacred spaces can be entered, pictures can be taken off the wall, and pants can be cut apart and re-tailored to fit a new era.

Sophia Ayda Schultz

School of Oriental and African Studies,
University of London

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