MELANCHOLY LIVES

RELIGION, IDENTITY AND ART FROM ARAB/MUSLIM ARTISTS IN THE ANTIPODES

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When I was exiled
I went to farewell my mother
My mother asked me to forget
My father asked me to return…
I did not hear them
And I kept on saying
I will return, I will return
I asked them, be patient and I will return
But I lied
I forgot
And they died
And I died.
Lamia, 2010

Lamia had been avoiding being interviewed for a couple of years and kept referring me to her husband Firas instead, or other Iraqi artists she knew personally. An engineer by training, she had attended Baghdad University and matriculated in chemical engineering, where she met her husband who has been practising in Australia as an environmental engineer for the past fifteen years. When I arrived at her office, she was hesitant about recording and explained that being recorded made her feel unsafe and reminded her of information during the Baathist reign of Iraq being used in clandestine ways. We moved to a quieter room from the constant interruptions at her office. Every inch of her office walls at the busy community development organisation where she worked, seemed to be covered with either Arabic calligraphic inscriptions, pictures of her daughter winning Miss Iraq Australia and various clippings and flags of Iraq. These visual displays were warming and immediately hospitable.

It is with this ethnographic vignette that I would like to start an interrogation of the practices of art made by Muslim artists in the Australian public sphere. The increased reception and visuality of technically gifted artists such as Lamia, who happen to be Muslim fits within larger socio-political dynamics of the concentrated discursive media landscape in cultural productions from the Muslim world in a post-September 11 environment. It is perhaps fitting to write this essay after the elimination of the "world's most wanted terrorist" Osama Bin Laden —according to the American government—where almost ten years after the events of September 11 the racialised climate and scrutiny of Arab/Muslim people is still apparent. It is also important at the outset to recognise that labels such as "Arab/Muslim" are furiously contested and complicated by artists who happen to (dis)identify with them.

My doctoral research concentrates on the cultural production of loss and trauma amongst exiled Iraqi artists in Sydney, of whom Laila is one and whose words, ironically not her art, I will use throughout this essay. Inevitably, the coalescing of religion, identity and migration are laid bare in beautiful and vulnerable art works that are politically and visually potent in their messages. In my discussions with art institutions and the artists themselves, it has become increasingly apparent that operations of cultural commodification still operate based on ethnic/religious descriptors; however a new space has emerged of critical work that is cognisant of these dynamics and that seeks to create "insurrectionary knowledges"—to use Michel Foucault's term.

Khaled Sabsabi, a close collaborator of mine, a visual artist, prolific sound producer and community cultural engagement producer at Casula Powerhouse, Sydney typifies the nexus of religious, cultural and artistic identities within a seamless web of complex art works that have garnered him most recently the prestigious Helen Lempriere Travelling Art Scholarship from the NSW Government. He is part of a team, including longtime community cultural producer Alissar Chidiac at Casula Powerhouse that is embarking on a year-long project—funded by the Human Rights Commission and the Australia Council of the Arts—entitled 'Australian Muslim Women's Project'. These initiatives, which are not of themselves new, are important in forging a new space for creativity and innovation in a rapidly globalised art scene that combines elements of the local within a transnational framework of collaboration and information sharing.

I return to ethnographic excerpts from my interview with Lamia to demonstrate how artworks created by Muslim artists are not created in a cultural or political vacuum but emanate from an engagement with tangible issues, such as the recent uprisings across the Arab world. Yet, it is vital to note that they are not restricted by these concerns.

Lamia said she finally agreed to let me talk to her, because she trusted me in my academic interests and wanted to help me out, since I was like a younger brother to her. When we moved to a quieter and less colourful meeting room, she was still hesitant about shutting doors. I asked her where that almost phobic discomfort stemmed from. She answered in an almost startlingly casual manner after the initial nervousness.

L: "It came from the war time *habibi* (darling), because during war time you have to shut the doors and turn off the lights, if there is electricity anyway."
F: "You mean during the days of Iran Iraq War?"
L: "During the days of Iran we didn't feel it that much because we had to shut…"
F: "So during the Gulf War?"
L: "The days of Iran were only for a few days, we could see the phantom planes circling our city, only the first few days. The best thing was the Iran War, we never felt anything... don't be surprised, don't look at me this way!"
F: "Ok..."
L: "As in Baghdad, we were never affected; only the first days when we had the sirens going, phantom planes coming and going, that was the pinnacle of fear, with all the practices and trials of sirens of… The second war (silence), there were airstrikes and fear and windows broken and darkness, darkness anyway is depression... That's why I refuse to save the environment for Earth Hour by turning off the light. I leave Iraq and come here to live without electricity? I refuse." (laughs).

Page 129: Ali Abbas Hamadi, *The Vow,* 2008
Opposite: Ali Abbas Hamadi, The *Visit,* 2008
Photos courtesy the artist
Page 130: Khaled Sabsabi, *Naqshbandi Greenacre engagement,* 2010 (installation view)
Photo courtesy the artist

In this extract, Lamia intimates several points of discussion that fuse the complicated relationship between memory, material culture and exile. In the first part, she physicalises the door as an object of entry and exit. At first glance, this might seem a pedestrian observation, where the feeling of entrapment is a natural aversion to an interviewer. However, this was not the case, as she deflected my question about the myths of Iraqi society being a totalitarian regime and revealed the physical actions undertaken by her family during the Gulf War siege. Her perfunctory usage of the word "*habibi*" alludes to a certain level of comfort and intimacy she felt, as I had known Lamia through various Iraqi cultural circles in Sydney and had met her at several events with mutual friends. Paul Tabar, in his research with young Lebanese men and their usage of the vernacular endearment "*habiib*", explains that:

> *In Arabic, the word "habiib" [or its derivative of* habibi*] means "darling" or "a beloved person", whereas "*habiibah*" refers to its female counterpart. Both words, however, derive from the noun "*hubb*" meaning "love". In addition, in Lebanon (and many Arab countries), [including Iraq in this case] the word "*habiib*" can be used to express a special liking to a second person that could be a friend or a close relative.*[1]

But much more than that it points to what Anthony Giddens terms "ontological security", which can be loosely defined as "the confidence or trust we have in the world around us, both in terms of the *things* and the people with which we share our lives, and hence which provide stability and a continuity to our identity".[2] I italicise "things" in order to underscore that objects are imbued with phenomenological power that trigger certain memories of security or insecurity, depending on their physical location. So in this interaction, the doors and lights in Baghdad function as objects of ontological security and physical safety from the real threat of late night raids. However, in Sydney they work in an antithetical manner, where closed doors reanimate the same memories of fear and waiting. Greg Noble explains via Anthony Giddens—in his research with Australian migrants of different backgrounds—that ontological security is more affective (rather than cognitive) in its manifestations and that the formation of identity hinges on feelings of comfort and stability.

From his ethnographic material, he deduced that "techniques of composure, which aimed at achieving a sense of stability to the immediate lifeworld, a settled feeling, particularly in contrast to a conflictual or chaotic world" were present with most of his interviewees.[3] These techniques were visible in Lamia's body language and what she expressed, when we moved to the meeting room from her office. She said she would sit on the other side of the desk, in order to feel a sense of power, especially when the door was shut. This physical sense of agency activated her social sense of agency, by resisting the conventional dynamics of an interviewer and interviewee through a corporeal enactment.

Lamia then moved on to distinguish between the wars she had mentioned. The nine-year span of the Iran-Iraq war is described in a block of time as "the days", where she revealed to me that her husband (then fiancé) served several years in the army, but she felt "unaffected". War here becomes synonymous with distance, where a normal life can still be led even though the country was technically at war; these thoughts are materialised in her artworks that are regularly exhibited at local galleries in Sydney, such as Peacock Gallery and Mori Gallery.

The circling of phantom planes above houses and buildings is dismissed as something trivial in the scheme of mounting deaths on the border with Iran. For proud Baghdadis like herself, the Iran war did not disturb the peaceful continuity of urban life. At this instance, she senses the expressions of my surprised face and continues uninterrupted in her narrative to talk about the Gulf War with one word descriptors that capture the vacillating emotions associated with such a harrowing event. Lamia touches on the architecture of war by contrasting it with the architecture of destroyed property. It is perhaps not coincidental she focuses on these objects, as she expressed her desire to graduate as an architect (rather than an engineer), but could not bear to disappoint her father. She explains that is why in her poem—the first she had written in fourteen years after leaving Baghdad—her mother is portrayed as a stoic woman and her father is a more melancholic and broken figure. The poem succinctly mediates the loaded meanings of death with an exilic context for a cultural producer.

Ali Abbas Hamadi, another visual artist whom I interviewed—and who participated in a 2007 exhibition at Blacktown Arts Centre entitled *Songs of Travelling Birds: Iraqi Artists in Exile*—shared similar feelings to Lamia. In his translated artist statement, he touches on the same inanimate objects saying; "I am gripped by a fleeting dream that has stayed with me from the memory of the land I came from; the years of war, the sounds of cannons and the killing of all that is beautiful and innocent. In my memory, I see and feel the daily details and their effect on me. Every single snag has a story, the fabric of the doors and windows... the old keys that gave us happiness (and sometime sadness)... All these elements, the symbols and souls, are what live within my paintings."[4] In invoking an almost spiritual dimension to his works, Ali is asserting how his paintings are imbued with a sense of depth. He has been recognised for his artwork, most recently winning the

Liverpool Art Prize (Sydney). Other artists such as Mazin Ahmad have represented their new 'homeland' Australia at the *International Biennale* in Florence in 2005. This year Egyptian-Australian artist Hany Armanious will represent Australia at the 54th *Venice Biennale* for his sculptural work. Although not Muslim, he is part of movement of artists that are deepening the parochial nature of the Australian art scene.

The Gulf War can be literally characterised as a dark period in Lamia's life and that is why she intersperses her honest personal testimony with her always wicked humour. Yet again the notion of distance is brought up where Iraq is cast in a quasi-theological terminology as mired in darkness and her refusal to participate in a pithy exercise of environmental awareness in Australia is seen as a desire of not returning to such dark memories.

For Lamia and the artists mentioned in this essay her sense of temporality is tested through a series of physical and psychic displacement—physical in the sense of travelling around Iraq to find temporary safe houses in her escape with her husband to Jordan and eventually to Australia, but psychic in the way she illustrates here at length; "When I was there it was my honeymoon; the memories are horrible but I will talk about them nonetheless... We were married when they called up my husband for military service again... Anyway, it was one of the first weddings in Baghdad (during that time) with my friends, just us and our friends; then we went up North; then the threat from America came about hitting Iraq if there was no withdrawal from Kuwait, on the 15th (July). Too far these memories, we have erased them with the new war, you appreciate that, when you have a new thing some of the memories will get erased unless you think about them, so I have to think hard... (prolonged silence). One of the things they say: Our sorrows are small, O big master for we are God's creations and are not concerned with the extraordinary, but we know when a murderer grips us that we wipe the wound to receive the wounds. You know what it means, if a murderer grabs us today, we have to wipe the old wound so we can receive the new wound, so that's why the memories of the first war are not that clear. I mean it was much easier than the second war because the second war I was here, it would be much easier for me to be there, with my family, when the bombs are happening and things are going on, instead of me watching over the satellite, over things to see if this is my area or this is my sister's, you appreciate that."

As Paul Ricoeur argues, "to speak of memory is not only to evoke a psycho-physiological faculty, which has something to do with the preservation and recollection of traces of the past; it is to put forward the 'narrative' function... Even at the individual level, it is through stories revolving around others and ourselves that we articulate and shape our own temporality".[5] It is hoped that such stories told in the artists' voices keep on circulating within the economy of cultural production that is sought after in an art market obsessed with commodifying the 'other'.

Notes

[1] Paul Tabar, '"Habiibs" in Australia: Language, Identity and Masculinity', *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, Vol 28 No 2, 2007: 157-172

[2] Greg Noble, 'The Discomfort of Strangers: Racism, Incivility and Ontological Security in a Relaxed and Comfortable Nation', *Journal of Intercultural Studies,* Vol 26 No 2, 2005: 107-120

[3] ibid: 113

[4] Interview with the author, 13 October, 2008

[5] Paul Ricoeur cited in Richard Kearney (ed.), *Paul Ricoeur: The Hermeneutics of Action*, London: Sage, 1996