

Review: The Body in Twilight: Representation of the Human Body, Sexuality and Struggle in Contemporary Arab Art

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Abstract

Art can be particularly an effective means of building transnational understanding across cultural divides. Specifically, the act of making art to express conflict, sexuality and identity is significant as Arab women have frequently been marginalised and excluded from such a site of visibility and meaning. Contemporary Arab women artists not only contribute to global feminist theory but also deal with their aesthetic, visual and personal concerns. The Body in Twilight: Representation of the Human Body, Sexuality and Struggle in Contemporary Arab Art is a book by the Syrian professor of visual art and design Fassih Keiso. In this book, Keiso explores the representation of the human body in contemporary Arab art and its relationship to issues of sexuality and struggle. He argues that the representation of the body in Arab art reflects broader societal changes and struggles and that the use of the body as a site of resistance and political commentary is a common theme in contemporary Arab art. Despite the lack of images of artworks by the artists discussed in this book, the book provides a compelling contribution to comparative gender and feminist art and the broader international art on the centrality of sexuality in politics and society.

Keywords: Contemporary Arab art; gender; sexuality; body; Arab world

This book (Keiso, 2008) is a well-crafted and necessary contribution to scholarship on contemporary Arab art.ⁱ Whereas researchers continue to investigate traditional Islamic art and the ancient monuments of the Arab world, art produced in the modern Arab world has fallen into utter oblivion. The importance of this book lies in its gendered exploration of whether expressions of sexual desire, displays of nudity and eroticism in Arab art are still taboos. It also investigates the extent to which contemporary Arab artists released themselves from such taboos. Keiso's book enables us to understand the central role of gender and sexuality in the construction of modern and contemporary Arab society in terms of not only norms of sexual behaviour but also of power relationships in general and political and military power struggles in particular.

This book is based on the work of five Arab female artists who live and work outside the Arab region and who use various media to reflect and represent the human body. The Egyptian Ghada Amer, the Iraqi Jannane Al-Ani, the Palestinians Mona Hatoum and Emily Jacir and the Algerian Zineb Sedira are brought together for the first time in a research context. Keiso addresses these visual artists' use of the human body as a subject or object as they attempt to create new forms within a contemporary international dialogue. The guest artist for this book is the Iranian Shirin Neshat, whose work explores issues of her native Islamic society, especially the status of women. Neshat concentrates on the complicated relations between the body and the veil. Although most, if not all, of these female artists do not consider themselves to be feminists, Keiso notes that their commentaries seem to suggest otherwise, and their artworks, in any case, express a radical sensibility. However, as acknowledged by Keiso in the introduction, given the limitations of data about the representation of sexuality in the Arab world, Akram Zaatari, who lives and works in Beirut, is introduced as a second guest. He is a video artist whose most of his themes reflect the issue of sexuality in Arab (Lebanese) society.

Keiso's primary source of data is the information he collected during his travels to New York, Europe, Lebanon and Syria, where he met most of the artists discussed in this book. Keiso has also drawn extensively on art and literary criticism in the periodical press to analyse the reception of the work of Arab artists in global culture, disregarding geographical locations and gender. In addition, he has made use of the network of contacts he established using Internet searches and the few English-language books dealing with modern Arab art that he purchased from England, again via the Internet. Most of his data was collected through direct contact with New York art galleries and art organisations. In both Lebanon and Syria, he relied on literature, social and political studies and other publications in Arabic, and he also attended some conferences there on Arab art practice.

The book is well-organized. It is comprised of four coherently ordered chapters, which are Chapter One: Introduction; Chapter Two: Ghada Amer; Chapter Three: Zineb Sedira and Jannane Al-Ani with Shirin Neshat; Chapter Four: Mona Hatoum and Emily Jacir; followed by a Conclusion. Each chapter in this book begins with an overview, stating the methodology that Keiso follows in order to define the topic under investigation. I was particularly struck by the aptness of the subtitles in each chapter, such as 'Welcome to Amer's "Private Rooms"', 'Power of the Gaze', 'Fortified Body' and 'Olive Branch...a Metaphor for Peace'. The brevity of the articles and the deft movement within the same chapter help the reader remain focused.

In order to cover the central theme, Keiso sets several secondary questions to be answered in each chapter besides the main questions that he raises: What is it to be an Arab artist expressing one's body freely in France, Britain or the United States? What is it to be an Arab woman? What does the experience of war mean to Australian, British or American artists from an Arab background? What are the effects of past and present colonialism on the image of the human body? What are the complexities of remotely witnessing the never-ending wars in the Arab world or the Palestinian Intifada far away from where these events are happening? To what extent does an Arab artist living in the West express their body and sexuality in art? Moreover, to what extent can Arab artists transcend the strict morality that has dominated the Arab psyche? Answering these questions is achieved partly through close and serious analysis of the work of the artists under study. Although the book focuses on the work of artists other than himself, one rarely finds images of their works as opposed to his own.

The book studies the impact of Arabic classical erotic literature on Arab art and artists, and focuses on the exploitation of Arab and Islamic culture for the benefit of Western ideologies. At its heart, it presents a critical and historical analysis of the issue of the veil, demonstrating its importance and place within Islamic societies. It also focuses on colonial theories in its discussions of stereotypes, examining the term Orientalism and the impact of the media on gender and on stereotyping and marginalising Arabs as well as Islam. Investigating the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and looking into the issues of war and dispersion that have affected Arabs physically and spiritually, the book deals with the way Arab visual artists reflect struggle, confrontation and the resistance of the human body to war and death. Keiso concludes his book with a critical evaluation, showing the relation of his work to the issues addressed by the book. Like Keiso, the artists covered in this study produce political art that articulates resistance to the conflict and exposes stereotypes advanced by the West and other dominant global powers.

In many ways, most of the issues explored in the book remain highly relevant in today's social and political context. While the controversial, complex issues of identity, representation, power and clash of civilisations continue to be debated in some circles, I argue for a more nuanced and intersectional understanding of cultural differences, one that recognises the complex ways in which different forms of oppression intersect and reinforce one another. The issue of objectification of women's bodies also continues to be deeply relevant in contemporary Arab societies and beyond. This is because the #MeToo movement and other feminist movements continue to raise awareness of gender-based violence and inequality around the world. Similarly, the book's analysis of the ways in which art can be used as a means of resistance and empowerment in the face of political and social oppression maintains its importance in today's context of ongoing political conflicts, as there are many social and political upheavals in many parts of the world, such as the Arab Spring.ⁱⁱ

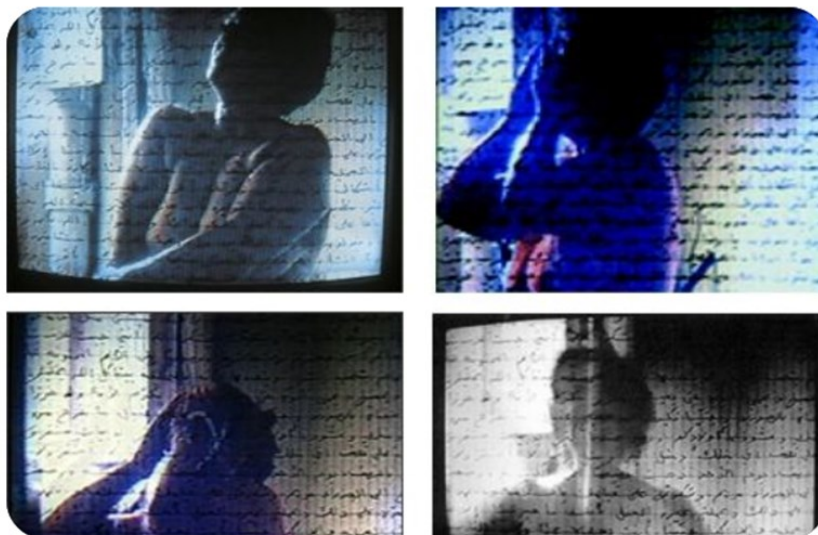
Nonetheless, there are also aspects of the book that may not be as relevant in today's context. For example, the book was published in 2008, and some specific cultural and political references may be somewhat dated or less relevant to contemporary readers. Since the early 2000s, there have been significant changes in the global social and political landscape, including the rise of social media and the emergence of new political movements and conflicts. The book's focus on contemporary Arab art was ground-breaking at its publication. However, the global art world has become more diverse and inclusive in recent years, and there are now many more opportunities for artists from the Arab world to exhibit their work and participate in international art events. The art world is constantly evolving, and there are now many more Arab artists who are gaining international recognition and contributing to global conversations about art and culture.

The issues discussed in this book seem at first glance to be different, but they are connected by the notion of revolution. In his book, the visual artist Keiso argues that the human body is a site of struggle in Arab society, where traditional values, religious beliefs, and political forces often clash with more progressive and liberal ideas. He contends that contemporary Arab artists use the body to explore issues such as gender, sexuality, identity, and power and that their artworks challenge dominant cultural norms and offer alternative narratives and visions of the future. He also discusses how the use of the body in contemporary Arab art is influenced by the long and rich tradition of Islamic art, which has always celebrated the human form but also placed certain restrictions on its representation. He shows how contemporary Arab artists have negotiated these restrictions and developed new culturally rooted and socially engaged forms of expression. In this way, the book offers a fascinating insight into

the complex and diverse world of contemporary Arab art and the ways in which it reflects and responds to the challenges and opportunities of the modern world.

Keiso supports this argument through a detailed analysis of the artworks of several contemporary Arab artists and their use of the body as a means of expression. For example, he features Mona Hatoum's autobiographic artwork *Measures of Distance* (1988), which speaks of displacement, disorientation, estrangement and a tremendous sense of loss due to the separation caused by the bloody Lebanese civil war (1975-1990). I concur with Keiso that this work is a deeply powerful critique of the ways in which women's bodies are often objectified and commodified in Arab society and a testament to the resilience and strength of women in the face of oppression and violence. Through Hatoum's use of personal and intimate images and texts, Hatoum creates a powerful sense of connection and empathy with her mother, sharing this experience of longing and loss with the viewer. The work reflects the experiences of many Arab women displaced or separated from their families due to conflict, political oppression, or economic hardship. It also, as Keiso argues, challenges the traditional norms and expectations around the representation of Arab women's bodies in art. Furthermore, by overlaying the images with handwritten Arabic letters, Hatoum creates a sense of intimacy often absent from traditional representations of Arab women's bodies. This also highlights the cultural specificity of the work, emphasising the importance of language and cultural identity in the representation of the body.

Figure 1: Captured images from 'Measures of Distance' (Daily Motion, 2007).



One potential weakness regarding Keiso's argument could be the lack of consideration of the broader socio-political context in which Hatoum's work was created. While Keiso does discuss the personal and emotional aspects of the work, he does not delve deeply into the historical or political

context that informed Hatoum's artistic choices. The work was created during the height of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and Hatoum's family was forced to flee their home in Beirut due to the conflict. This broader context undoubtedly played a significant role in shaping the themes and imagery of this work, and a more in-depth analysis of this context could provide a deeper understanding of the work's meaning and significance. Additionally, although Keiso does discuss the ways in which the work challenges traditional societal norms and expectations around women's bodies and sexuality, he has not benefited from a more intersectional analysis that takes into account the ways in which these issues intersect with other forms of oppression, such as race, class, and nationality.

Furthermore, Keiso's argument focuses primarily on the personal and emotional aspects of the work and neglects the formal and aesthetic qualities of the installation. While Keiso briefly mentions the use of video and sound in the work, he does not delve deeply into the formal elements of the installation, such as the composition, lighting, and camera angles. A more thorough analysis of these formal elements could provide a deeper understanding of how the work functions aesthetically and creates meaning beyond the personal and emotional themes that Keiso focuses on. Finally, a more comparative analysis of the work of other contemporary Arab artists working with similar themes and techniques could have been beneficial. This could have given a more in-depth analysis of how Hatoum's work fits within the larger context of contemporary Arab art, providing a more nuanced understanding of the work's significance and impact.

Keiso's use of precise language, an empathetic tone, and a dynamic style contributes to the overall effectiveness of his argument by making complex ideas and arguments more approachable and relatable for a general audience. The academic rigour, personal connection, and engaging style make the book compelling and thought-provoking. Numerous images of artworks illustrate and illuminate the ideas presented in the text. Personal anecdotes and stories also add a humanising and relatable dimension to the book, making it more accessible and engaging for the reader.

Despite its few limitations, *The Body in Twilight* offers a nuanced and thought-provoking look at the role of contemporary Arab art in addressing some of the most pressing social and political issues of our time. This appears to be written in the hope that Arab and international scholars will take greater account of contemporary Arab art in their future research and publications.

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ⁱ Fassih Keiso is known for his video, photographic, installation and performances. He was born in Syria, migrated to Australia in 1993, currently lives between Damascus and Melbourne. Having dual citizenship and dual culture, Keiso developed a dual perspective in his artworks and themes. As an interdisciplinary artist, his work spans cross cultural genres, employing a variety of materials and techniques. He focuses on cultural polarity, the diaspora, migration, dislocation and global political warfare. In the past few years, Keiso's inspiration has derived from the cultural contexts of his home country of Syria, largely shaped by issues relating to colonialism, war and post-colonial trauma. His most recent subject matter spans the destruction of archaeological heritage as an outcome of the ongoing conflict in Syria.

ⁱⁱ The Arab Spring was a series of protests and uprisings that began in Tunisia in December 2010 and quickly spread to other countries in the Middle East and North Africa, including Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Yemen. The protests were largely driven by a desire for political and economic reform, as well as greater social justice and democratic participation.