

Everyday poetics:

# THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ART OF ARWA ABOUON

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Arwa Abouon's work oscillates between solemnity and quirky humour, and yet either way the artist never sheds her uncannily innate signature sense of beauty. The idea that beauty can provide a powerful vehicle of expression in the realm of contemporary art often holding it in disrepute, is encouraging; all the more so as Abouon's work is grounded in the equally often overlooked domain of everyday life.

**A**utobiographical, but never self-indulgent, Abouon's art narrates her unique personal narrative; of Libyan origin, the artist grew up in Canada and exhibits mainly, but not exclusively, in the Middle East. Negotiating these various identities from both the perspective of being and being seen constitutes the central themes of her disarmingly unselfconscious photo-based art.



(fig.1): *Untitled, Generation Series (Father and Son)*, 76x36 inches, digital print, 2004.

Family is a recurring leitmotif of Abouon's photographs and through her work, we come to know her whole family, yet the images are never anecdotal. My first meeting with the artist's work occurred several years ago when I came face

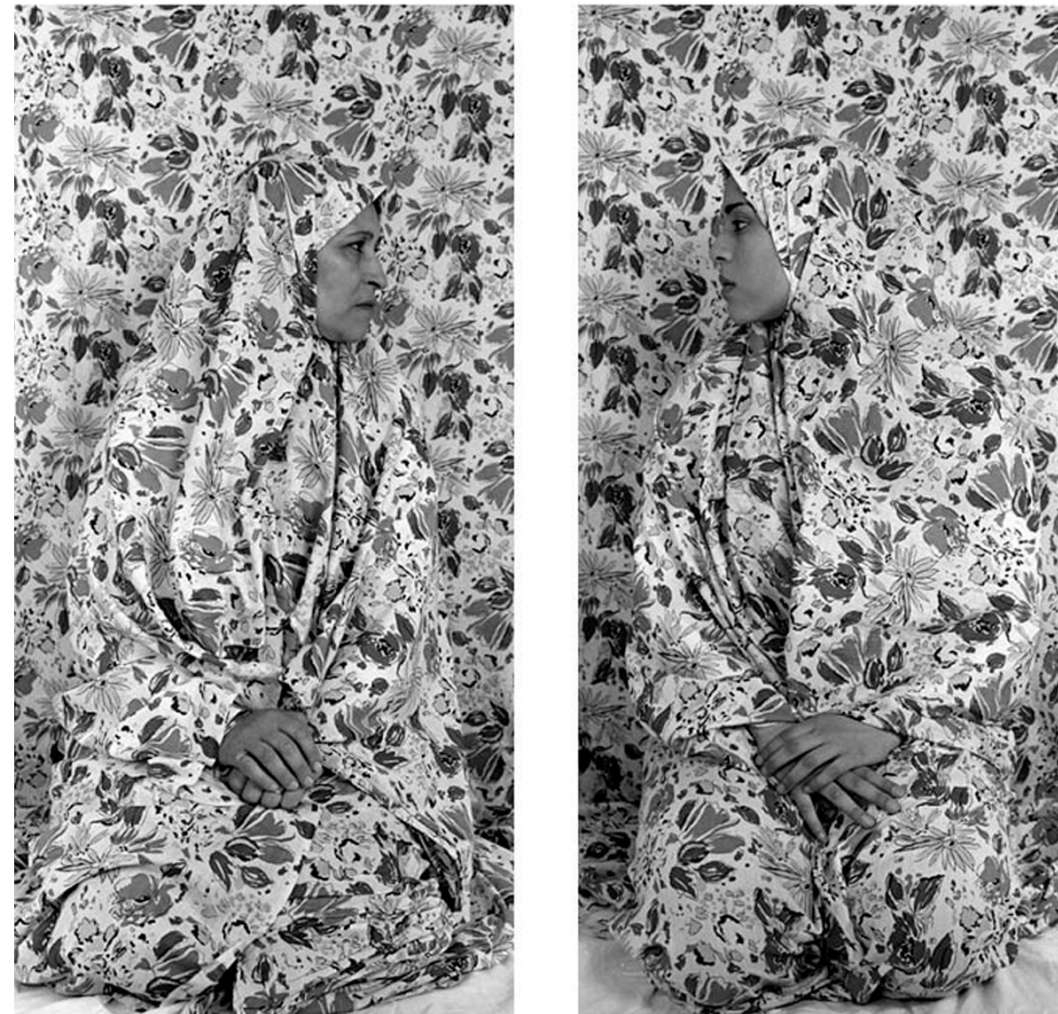
to face with two almost life size black and white photographic portrait diptychs from the *Generation Series*, images so powerful that I spent two years tracking down the artist to meet her. *Generation Series: Father and Son* (2004) shows

two men – the artist’s father and brother- standing, looking straight and unswervingly at the viewer (*fig. 1*). Both the young man on the right and the older man on the left are wearing crisp white jilbabs. The background is also completely white; a hint of shadow around each of the men’s bare feet constitutes the only indicator of space. The ethereal whiteness highlights the physical presence of the two men and, in tandem with the flowing white *jilbabs*, draws the viewer’s attention to the subjects’ faces, hands and unavoidable gaze. The frontal and hieratic poses as well as the minimalist but carefully constructed composition are reminiscent of the long tradition of European painting rooted in Greco-Roman ideals. The long elegant robes which could also be seen as referencing the great Western tradition of art nonetheless function to bring forth and ennoble subjects the latter has generally left out, namely Arab Muslim men who continue to be portrayed in a

poor light in European and North American visual culture.

The piece’s female counterpart, *Generation Series: Mother and Daughter* (2004) also affirms Arab Muslim subjectivity through beauty rather than anger, but here the icon of ‘difference’ is the veil, a continued object of debate throughout the West that Abouon has managed to present afresh by framing it in the realm of aesthetics and not politics (*fig. 2*).

Abouon who, unlike her mother, does not veil in everyday life, has aesthetically rewritten the veil in other works as well. *Al Matar Rahma* (2007) was an in situ installation piece commissioned for the Cultural Village in Dubai. The piece appeared on two huge billboards facing each other on the highway leading into the Cultural Village, one side presenting a huge panorama strip of clear blue sky dotted with clouds and the other, the artist donning traditional prayer clothes in various intense colours and in various poses of prayer.



(*fig.2*): *Untitled, Generation Series (Mother and Daughter)*, 76x36 inches, digital print, 2004.



(fig.4): *Complementary Colors (Watermelon)*, 11x20 inches, Digital print on Duratrans, 2004.

“**Abouon’s work is unique. Its sheer visual beauty knocks down barriers.**”

Abouon is enacting a rainbow. The installation’s title literally means ‘Rain is Mercy,’ and in the same way that mercy is a feminine noun in Arabic, the woman seems to embody not only the ease and beauty that follows hardship but also the feminine aspects of spirituality (fig. 3). In *Complementary Colours* fixed attitudes towards the veil and the Muslim woman are displaced using humour and incongruity. The colour photograph shows the artist’s mother wearing a green *hijab* holding surprisingly and contrary to dreary stereotypes, a large slice of delicious looking fresh watermelon (fig. 4).

Abouon, by drawing upon and mixing both eastern and western, and contemporary and traditional elements, dissolves the simplistic antagonism usually dressed be-

tween them. That the Abouon family clearly lives in a world where these alleged opposites mesh is expressed humorously in the triptych, *Abouon Kids* (2007), showing as the title hints, the four Abouon children (fig. 5). In the image on the left, we see Arwa and her brother dressed in global urban style standing in a typically Canadian winter landscape setting. Both are chewing gum but the photo has captured only the brother blowing a big blue gum bubble. In the central photograph, another brother lies down in a dark western three piece suit on a quintessentially Oriental carpet. Because the image is purposely shown upside down, he appears to be standing, albeit in a somewhat topsy-turvy world. The last photograph shows the third brother against a ge-



Photo (fig.5): *Abouon Kids (Triptych)*, 16x20 inches, digital print on photographic paper, 2007.

neric highway backdrop. Wearing a small white Muslim prayer cap, he is eating an orange Popsicle. *Abouon Kids* is funny but not irreverent, or more importantly not culturally self-deprecating, a trend sometimes found in contemporary art made by artists of Muslim origin. Rather by documenting the reality of Muslims and hence of Islam in an increasingly globalized world, the images reveal the radical even subversive power of the everyday. Therein lays the power of Abouon's work.

If the artist uses daily life as matter for art, her aesthetic sense is never ordinary. It exhibits rather a deep sensitivity and a full awareness of the potential of the image to subjugate or even transform the viewer. *Abouon Family* (2007) (fig. 6) is a perfect example of how the artist carefully builds her images like a weathered film director, suppressing any detail that belies her intent. The colour photograph shows the whole family sitting outdoors in a characteristically Canadian landscape, reminiscent

of the long Canadian tradition of landscape painting. The father, frail, is nonetheless the only person standing, seeming thus to willingly assume his role as pater familias. To his left, the four children, whether sitting or lying down, are leaning on the mother and forming a circle around her. Her long white *hijab* stands in stark contrast to the cool colour scheme of the overall image. Holding prayer beads for all to see, she is the only subject whose gaze meets the viewer. All the others are look-

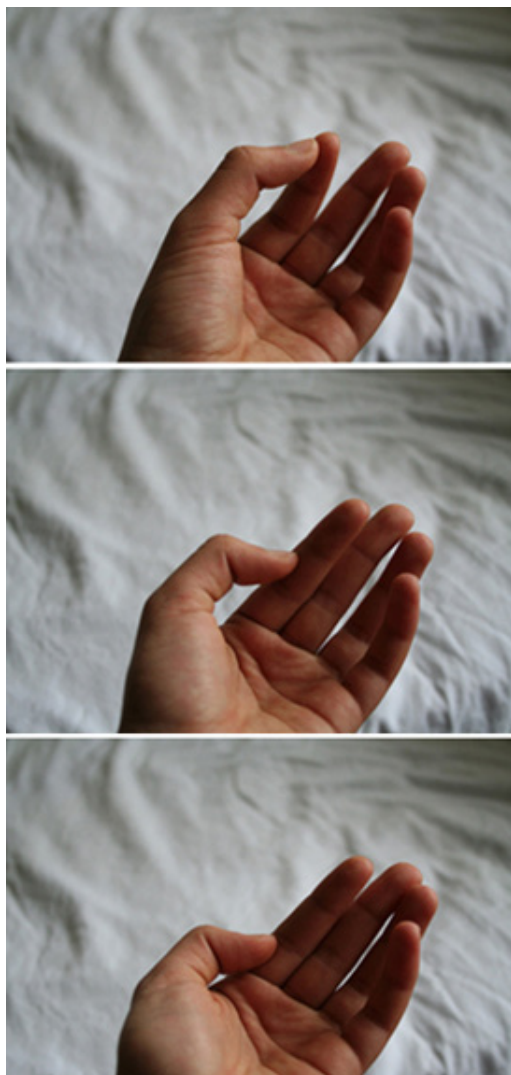
ing elsewhere, away from her and beyond the borders of the photograph and yet this seems to only further emphasize in pure visual terms, that if the father is pillar, the mother is the psychological cum spiritual core of the family and the life giving force allowing each member to find and go off in his or her direction. To make contemporary art on the importance of motherhood, a theme central to both feminism and Islam, without falling into sentimentalism or pedantry is an incredible feat.



(fig.6): *Abouon Family*, 16x20 inches, digital print on photographic paper, 2007.

Poignant and unabashedly simple, *Abouon Family* translates into contemporary terms the hadith that Paradise is found underneath the feet of mothers.

The Muslim dimension of Abouon's life is a recurrent theme throughout her art, present not only in obvious elements such as dress. A piece like *Duaa* (2008), a sequence of close-up shots of a hand making *tasbeeh* is a direct reference to Islamic practice and prayer, and yet the work, both the sequential aspect and the focus on the body, parallels the visual codes of international conceptual art (fig. 7). The artist has again used a contemporary globally understood language – at least within the art world- to reference Islam often considered at odds with modernity. The piece is however, not about (re)claiming an identity or challenging prevalent discourses but rather simply about witnessing life, albeit one informed by Islam, as it is lived. In fact because *Duaa* possesses a global aesthetic and both its image and performance have been pared down to the barest minimum, it moves beyond or



(fig.7): *Duaa*, 11x20, digital print on photographic paper, 2007.

at least widens the concept of Islam, the focus on the body pointing instead to our common humanity. A related work, *Hands are Holy* (2007), consists of a white light box bearing a seemingly clipped x-ray of two long hands stretched out side by side in a way also reminiscent of personal prayer (fig. 8). Here, the sight of bones, a stark reminder of human mortality and sameness, comments on the relative nature of both physiological vision and difference. *Hands are Holy* poeticizes the clinical by showing how, as Abouon says, “no matter who we are, no matter our race or our differences, we are all the same underneath.” The more enigmatic *Allah Eye Doctor Chart* (2008) also seems to play upon the distinction between vision and insight using the funny metaphor of ‘needing glasses’ to recall the hidden aspects of reality (fig. 9).

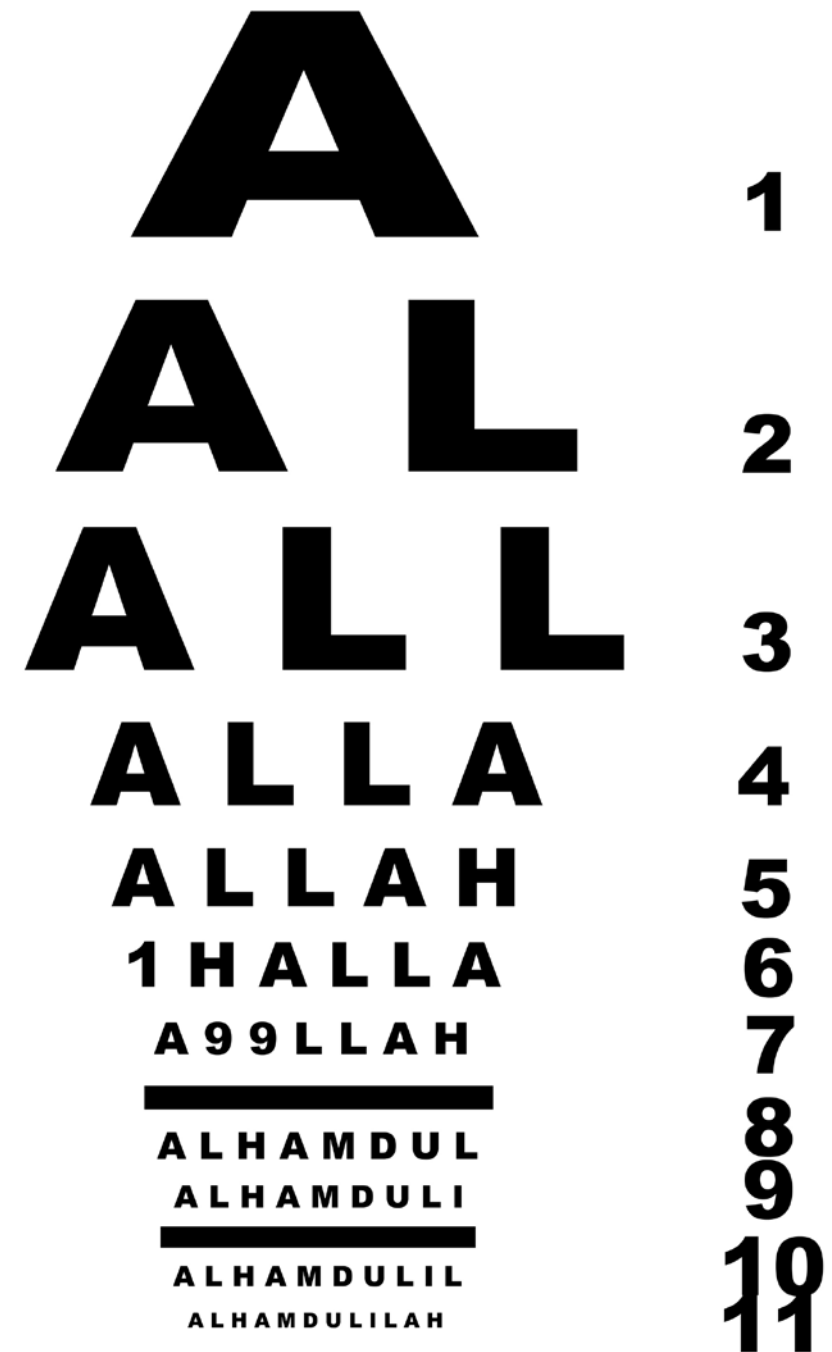


(fig.8): *Hands are Holy*, 48x32 inches, Digital print on Duratrans, 2008.

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Abouon’s art is however evidently open to various meanings as she herself concedes. Discussing this specific piece with her, the artist explained that it emerged out of a reflection on the power of the gaze and on how certain Muslim words and sayings can soften the gaze of both the seer and the seen. The works above all mirror and give form to experiences and ideas occurring in the real time of the artist’s life. Their poetic quality however transforms with rare delicacy the personal into a much wider story.

Abouon’s work is unique. Its sheer visual beauty knocks down barriers. Clearly aware of wider debates surrounding Islam in Europe and North America, it steers clear of politics with the exception of the tongue and cheek parody, Weapons of *Mass Discussion* (2007), showing two women – the artist and her mother - putting on bright pink *hijabs* like two wrestlers preparing for the next round.



(fig.9): Allah Eye Doctor Chart, 48x32 inches, Digital print on Duratrans, 2008.



Her art doesn't fight back, it doesn't need to. Instead it proposes that the commonality of human experience is capable of superseding often artificially constructed divisions and differences. That Abouon consistently leads the viewer from the specific to the universal or from separation to unity is most eloquently and concisely conveyed in *Untitled* (2004) (fig. 10). The photograph shows a couple from the shoulders down, both wearing long white *jilbabs* unmistakably associated with Middle Eastern culture. The viewer sees only the white background, the sculptural robes and much more significantly the couple's holding hands which, because the heads and faces are not included in the shot, constitute the image's condensed core. The simple but powerful visual abbreviation of love translates across cultures and thereby, like all of Abouon's work, tells a story of hope and possibility. The world needs many more such stories.



(fig.10): *Untitled*, 20x40 inches, digital print  
on photographic paper, 2007.