

The Aesthetics of Arab Identities in Contemporary Visual Arts: The Painting Practices of Alia Al-Farsi

Assistant Prof. Dr. Mohammed Baker Mohammed Al-Abbas (Corresponding author)
The University of Jordan, School of Art and Design, Department of Visual Arts
m.alabbas@ju.edu.jo / mohdbaker83@hotmail.com

Marah Hassan Jamus, Manar Maher Al-Asassfeh, Bater Suhail Abida
(Students of Political Science Bachelor Degree)
The University of Jordan, Prince Al Hussein Bin Abdullah II School of International Studies, Department of
Political Science

Hashem Qassem Al-Nobani, Leen Imad Hindi, Aya Mohammed Al-Qadi
(Students of Visual Arts Bachelor Degree)
The University of Jordan, School of Art and Design, Department of Visual Arts

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to analyze the painting practices of the Omani artist Alia Al-Farsi in connecting feminine, cultural and Arab influences in her artworks. And to reveal the significance of such connections with contemporary Arab art from global perspectives in delivering cultural connotations. The present study contributes to visual arts research through further understanding of women's creativity according to cultural developments in Arab countries. The main outcomes of this research reveal the practices of contemporary Arab artists in selecting their subjects to express aesthetic thoughts addressing the cultural concerns of common people. Artists manipulate their artistic practices into the exhibition's spaces to resemble cultural identities in their artworks and endeavor to establish an advanced understanding of the contemporary visual cultures in the local Arab communities. In this case, they reflect on feminism, and they bring feminine subjects as well as assorted ideas that provide a more comprehensive range of iconographies to represent women and their belongings. The artistic representations of women in the painting practice show human dimensions and draw into consideration many cultural components to interpret and analyze the artwork. This investigation concentrated on the visual culture issues expressed by the Omani artist Alia Al-Farsi in her contemporary artworks. Also, the study utilizes the methodology of qualitative analysis to investigate the layers and the elements of feminine iconographies in the Arab contemporary arts to unveil the connections between being a woman, being an artist, and being an Arab. The significance of this critique rests on the objective outcome that reflects women-made art as feminine, cultural, folkloric and social. Nevertheless, the practices, themes, and activities create the feminine aesthetics connected through concurrent art practices manifested in global art functions.

Keywords: Contemporary Arab Art, Painting, Visual Culture, A/R/Tography, Practical Research.

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1. Introduction:

Female artists' contributions manifest creativity in diverse methods in contemporary Arab arts. Painters signify their perceptions through hybrid techniques into figurative and non-figurative painting styles. Today, feminist visual arts practice unconventional accounts through multiple pop cultures, semantics and aesthetic manifestations. Taking into consideration that contemporary artists reproduce these aesthetic manifestations to communicate social iconographies from society (Al-Abbas, 2016).

In this feminist context, Alia Al-Farsi is a visual artist who practices expressive figurative painting style, into which she represents the faces of women and men from the Omani community, to which she belongs. As a student in elementary school, Alia discovered her creative talents in arts by chance. After the class teacher assigned her to draw a sea ship and she portrayed the best ship in the class. Since that moment, everyone at that school responded to her as a creative student with skillful talents. She endeavors to represent the culture of her country, the Sultanate of Oman, in all of her artworks to the global community. Alia Al-Farsi is an outstanding and unconventional artist while Oman is her constant inspiration. She challenged all the traditional artistic restraints in the purpose of enjoying the experience of demonstrating the true essence of everything creatively, which explains the appearance of poetry, textiles, ancient writings and letters, coins and other visual elements into her paintings, creating harmonious narratives based on spiritual aesthetics and sensitivity for Sufi philosophy (Al-Farsi, personal communication, 2019).



Figure (1): Alia Al-Farsi (2017), mixed media on canvas, 95 X 150.

In this paper, the authors discuss Alia Al-Farsi's painting practices in depth and attempt to show the more profound significance behind the creation of each painting, through which she incorporates the Omani culture in most of her paintings. From a biographical point of view, Alia received an academic education in art and business administration and participated in many exhibitions around the world. She connects with the global art scene, expresses her culture as a global citizen, and symbolizes new portraits of feminist artworks, symbolizing the folkloric cultures that emerge in the countries of the Islamic World. Artists in such places portray the feminine image as one of the symbols of folkloric culture, concentrating on the aesthetic manifestations that represent the cultural significance of the social life (Grovier, 2015).

Feminine iconographies appear through a mosaic of complex symbols that conveys different symbolisms to the audiences, which aspire to investigate the connections and purposes of this mosaic. In the same context, feminist art represents assorted aesthetic identities that emerge in changing connections on distinct cultural, political and economic grounds. Furthermore, this sphere of feminine arts yields distinct similarities with other realms. Cultural and political impacts generate significant intrusions into the artistic practices of women artists in the Arab societies. On the other hand, the aesthetic influence on art connects to the cultural contexts, social

dynamics and creativity that interact across different levels of politics, and culture, consequently, simultaneous pop culture is a vibrant space for coextending visual arts that represent feminine iconographies (Al-Abbas, 2016).

The qualitative visual analysis is the foundation of any subject corresponding to any creative phenomena (Gemtou, 2010). At the same time, such a subject has an individual personality to describe the artistic phenomena if it refers to the popular culture as a cause of motivation. The connection of the feminine representation with popular culture, gender differences, and social identity attributes traditional studies of women's status in society and investigates the stereotypical perceptions of women depicted in media, literature, and art.

The qualitative research methodology in this paper depends on the authentic artistic practice, noticing that this methodology focuses on practical experimentation. This qualitative methodology depends on three basic components, which are Art, Research and Teaching. These terms are combined with one word, which is (A/R/Tography). The significance of this methodology rests on the integration of research and art for the purpose of teaching, and this methodology is able to clarify the stages of creating and making artwork in order to shed light on various research and creative issues of interest for the research-oriented artist (Savin-Baden and Wimpenny, 2014). The artistic process through this methodology becomes a significant occasion, delivering personal, symbolic, and artistic meanings. As the researchers (or art students) approach art, society, and visual culture, they experience and learn how to incorporate ideas in terms of theory, philosophy, and application/practice.

This qualitative methodology is significant because it promotes practical research into aesthetic, individual and societal levels by focusing on the community's collective memory and personal cultural identity. In this context, artists/researchers/teachers/learners display their authentic practices in art as part of a complex creative process that documents the reflections of the individual in a full, mobile and progressive society in the artwork/research details as a dynamic process of producing knowledge and art together (Savin-Baden and Wimpenny, 2014). A/R/Tography has emerged as a research methodology that focuses on mixing the production of the artwork and the research process, through which the artist or art student, the researcher, and the teacher meet in a collective relationship based on knowledge and practice. The artist/researcher standpoint led the art phenomenon to a further authentic methodology through the combined action of creativity, research, and learning. Consequently, the central focus of A/R/Tography encourages artists and practicing researchers who are exploring authentic critiques, technical knowledge, and practical applications. This methodology is adopted to explain the qualities and features of the creative artistic process, focusing on integrating art and education. A/R/Tography is a practical and vigorous practice of inquiry and research, as a system of combining writing with visual arts and creativity that documents the process of producing artwork spontaneously.

2. The Feminine Iconographies:

Alia Al-Farsi became involved in Sufism as a reflection of individual practice in her art. She embraced the idea of resembling internal peace, meditation, and communicating with the inner spiritualities directly.

If I love him, I will reach out directly to God. I represented the Omani heritage from the beginning affected by Sufism and Jelal Eldin El Rumi's poetry. Oman is a source of inspiration toward preserving the beauty of the identity. The Omani nature and heritage Influence my artistic practice through the fashions of women and men into the Omani context, which I portray in my painting by using a hybrid painting technique that utilizes the conventional painting technique with collage and mixed media (Al-Farsi, personal communication, 2019).

Alia Al Farsi uncovered an interest in art from an early age, as she gained the support of her father. Her early drawings were of mountains and nature. She also used the impressionist style in her artworks and stated in an interview that she does not use ambiguous surrealism in her artwork, but she does use explicit surrealism and prefers to be amorphous. The amorphous aspect of her work is what makes it special. She wants to create a space where people can find the deeper meaning of the artwork by themselves.

She employs the Omani visual identity and fashions in her artworks by using different mediums from planks of wood to stones and she made some artworks on chairs, as she does not like sticking to one medium for a long period. Al Farsi uses oil and acrylic paints in her paintings. She does not display all her artwork to the public, she does keep some of her artwork hidden from the public as they tend to hold sentimental value to her and they convey some personal emotions (Al-Farsi, personal communication, 2019).

Al Farsi has her own style of art and her paintings are somewhat connected. You can see that a vast amount of her paintings include the depiction of women dressed in Omani clothing. She also uses simple clear outlines in her work especially in her paintings that show faces. Personally, she is a genuine surrealist and poetic,

while words add something of her personality but do not hinder the viewer from interpreting the painting. The ambiguity in her artwork is that although she states that simplicity is the secret to her paintings, the meaning behind those paintings is not simple at all. She is an unconventional Omani artist whose inspiration in most of her paintings was Oman's pure beauty and nature. She held exhibitions in various countries despite not studying art, but through her constant travel, her love for her homeland Oman and her love of Sufi philosophy, she was able to produce paintings through which she won many awards and was known as a plastic artist.

In most of her paintings and because of her strong connection with her homeland Oman, she has painted her country's history through traditional dress and customs and the things that Omani people do daily. As a political science student (Jamus, personal reflection, 2019), I found that there are very strong links between politics and art, for example; most of the artists and singers and musicians have painted well-known politicians or sung for them. On the one hand, artists have painted certain paintings during circumstances that are closely linked to domestic politics. For example, Al Farsi linked Oman into most of her paintings and in every Omani celebration, she has created paintings that embody Oman. From this opinion, the relationship of art to politics is that a relationship that is based on duality.

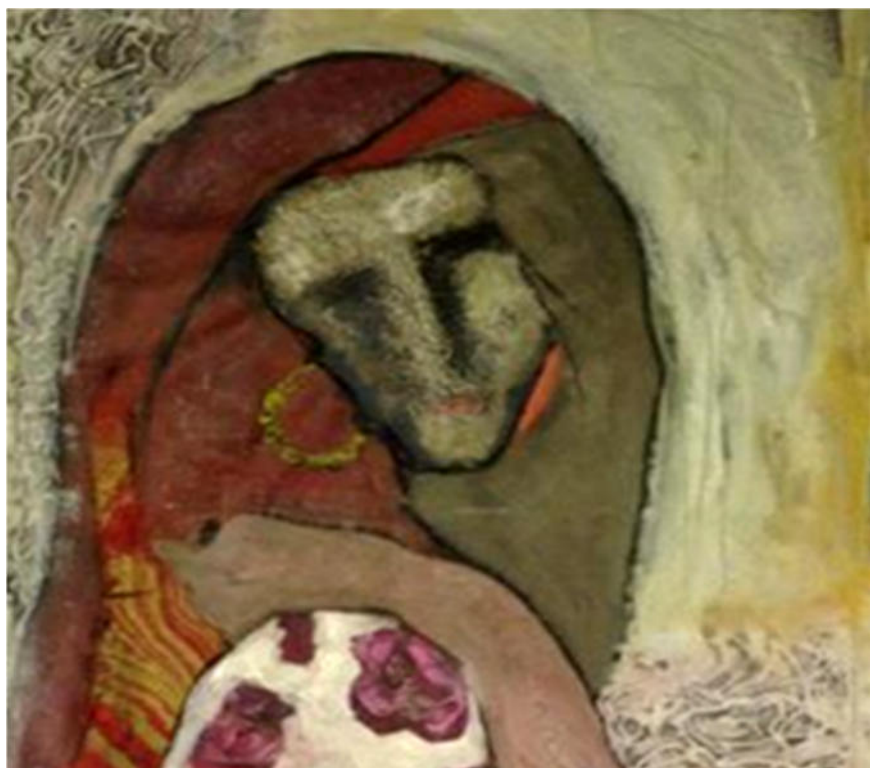


Figure (2): Alia Al-Farsi (2014), *Juhayna*, detail.

"Juhayna" (Oman's Fairouz) the reason behind this painting is the extreme love Al Farsi has for Fairouz (a Lebanese famous singer, and an Arab icon of modern culture) and how she wishes that Fairouz was Omani. In this artwork, Fairouz was painted wearing Omani clothing and holding a handkerchief in one hand in such a prestigious manner. Al Farsi mixed the colors that made her see the beauty and simplicity in Fairouz. She has painted the clothing in all of its delicate details and embroidery. Alia was also able to portray Fairouz's strength and her beautiful aura into two separate things that are relative to her source of strength and love.

Through watching all her interviews, she has expressed that Oman is her source of inspiration and that she always likes to paint the Omani clothing because of her love for colors and details that are found in the traditional dress. She also likes to paint women. After all, she believes they are the basis of everything and that she likes to depict women as powerful because she believes that they are the stamina of society.

Al Farsi believes that art is all about feeling. Even if she is sick or tired, she resorts to her studio and empties all those feelings and energy on to a canvas. She has not only to empty her feelings on a canvas, but she has also painted on several different mediums (wood, furniture, and stones) and this is a way for her to show her

freedom of expression. In my opinion (Al-Nobani, personal reflection, 2019), by looking through some of her paintings, her paintings are realistic. She made me like Oman through her work and every time you look at one of the paintings, you see the simplicity of lines that show meanings of her style as she reflects her inner emotions.



Figure (3): Alia Al-Farsi (2019), mixed media on canvas, 198 X 329.

When we look at this painting, we can see that the artist, Alia Al-Farsi focused on showing the Omani culture. This is also evident in most of her paintings. We can see a group of Omani women, which we can identify because of the clothes that they are wearing. The traditional costume of Omani women includes the headscarf; which is adorned in decorative embroidery through (sequins and colored beads), the dress; which is also embroidered with golden threads from the chest area and so are the trousers. Accordingly, we can see in this painting a group of women walking in a market. They are all wearing gold anklets. Their traditional outfits vary in color from red to purple to yellow and green. The painting showed us the strong relationship between the women of Omani society; women also wear jewelry for other occasional reasons. The traditional aspect is adornments known as one way or another that will protect its owner.

3. Conclusion:

On representing the current art between the predictable and the avant-garde, finding definite qualities of modern art is considerably questionable now. As artists are exploring the established thoughts of everything, they keep questioning our current visual culture by provoking new negotiations within the conventional and unconventional forms and contents of art. The definitions of modern art are various due to the variety of its examples (Robertson and McDaniel, 2013). Artists are expressing endless issues, which are also unclassifiable. Artists today tend to create unfamiliar artworks. They practice unconventional mixtures of images, texts, performances as well as computer-aided audiovisual compositions. And mix calligraphy with portraits or landscapes, or use huge canvases to make drawings. Also, they use printed images on canvas as under-painting to over-paint with figurative or abstract compositions. Contemporary art is more social today, artists created big scale paintings to cover big walls inside and outside the public building such as hospitals, banks, and shopping malls. Furthermore, contemporary artists represented people's public cultures outside galleries and museums and integrated art with people's social life by painting on the walls they pass by on the way to work or home.



Figure (4): Alia Al-Farsi (2019), mixed media on canvas, 100 X 81.

Postmodernism as a term was coined around the 1970s. It is not easily defined as it includes a vast number of art styles and theories and is not based on a certain theory or style. In contrast to Modernism, Post-modernism as an art movement did not emerge cohesively (Lindas, 2013). What sets Post-modernism apart from other art movements or theories is its “questioning of the master narratives that were embraced during the modern period...” It mainly questioned the idea of technological progress as to how it was viewed as a negative thing. Other ideas that were rejected by postmodernists is that only men can be artistic geniuses and the colonial assumption that people of color are second class citizens. Moreover, Postmodernism abolished the notion of there being one explanation or interpretation to a work of art (that being the explanation given to us by the artist after creation), the viewer is said to be an integral part of the meaning of the work of art.

Postmodernism was a breakaway from the past; it was a revolt against it. It was an attack, a set of critical and rhetorical practices that aimed to weaken modernism and everything that it stood for. However, above all that, postmodernism was a way of thinking and it had the artistic tendency to grow and take on political and social significance (Docx, 2011).

Alia Al-Farsi paints many women dressed in traditional Omani clothing and one very important and ever-present aspect of this painting and other paintings similar to this is the single gold hoop earring that these women seem to be wearing. I believe it is an emblem of Omani wealth and its standard of beauty (Jamus, personal reflection, 2019). Al-Farsi also uses a lot of bold and vibrant colors in her paintings, which make them, look more appealing and exciting. The dark tones used might indicate the deeper meaning and a deeper story behind these women. To connect the basis of postmodernism with Farsi’s painting through her statement. As I asked Al-Farsi to interpret her painting she replied “It involves a lot of stories and tales...and these paintings cannot be explained, their interpretation lies in the eye of the beholder (Al-Farsi, personal communication, 2019)”. Postmodernism

declined the idea that there is only one meaning of artwork and the artist determined that meaning or interpretation of the painting at the time of creation.

Al Farsi's work is unconventional and can be viewed from a feminist perspective. Women portrayed in her paintings do not reflect the neo-classical and impressionist approach of how women are painted or illustrated, where the women's body is sexualized or objectified (Walker, 2019). The women in Al Farsi's painting are fully enwrapped in loose clothing. Traditional Omani dress consists of three parts: the headscarf; that is sequined and engraved with colored beads, and it is sewed together with shiny threads as shown in the painting. The dress; which is the second piece which is hand embroidered and is sewn with silver or gold threads. The dress is also beaded in different forms depending on the region and the dress is usually of bright colors (red or purple), as well as pants (*surwal*) which are wide and narrow on the ankles with a variety of embroidery. It is evident how Alia Al-Farsi tried to combine both traditional Omani heritage and modern techniques of art to create her colorful pieces of art. Each piece of hers is filled with intricate details and holds an intriguing background.

Al Farsi has been a successful visual artist in the region. An outstanding and unconventional female artist, Oman is her constant inspiration. She challenged all the traditional artistic reservations enjoying the experience of demonstrating the true essence of things differently, which explains the presence of poetry, textiles, some ancient writings, coins, and other elements on her paintings, to weave a harmonious tale based on its spiritual depth and admiration for Sufi philosophy. Her style of art and that her paintings are somewhat repetitive. You can see that a vast amount of her paintings include the depiction of women dressed in Omani clothing. She also uses simple clear outlines in her work especially in her paintings that show faces. Al Farsi believes that art is all about feeling and emotion and that these two aspects are the reasoning behind her paintings.

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