

**Foregrounding the Lived Experience: How Modern and Contemporary Artists of the MENA Region Resist and Negotiate Cultural Standardisation**

**Candidate Number: 667022**

**Word Count: 1835**

For this essay, I will examine how artists from the region of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) subvert cultural standardisation and prevent their work from being misunderstood through the reductive lenses of visual ethnocultural identity markers and the ‘paradigm of contemporary art.’ I will consider oeuvres of the modern Moroccan artist Mohamed Melehi and the contemporary Tehran-born artist Nazgol Ansarinia resists these issues through notions of identity, contemporaneity and specificity.<sup>1</sup> Both artists will prove useful case studies in understanding how practitioners might effectively negotiate and represent their identities through creating works that relate closely to their lived experience rather than relying solely on the reductive visual markers of their countries’ traditions.

Some of the most common cultural markers and visual tropes associated with the MENA region are the Arabic script and the veiled women, both of which frequently construct an ‘othering’ view of the region through highlighting what are portrayed as distinguished differences between the region and the rest of the world. While remaining the reality for many countries in the region, conflict, violence and the binary of freedom/repression are also some themes through which artworks from the region are explored or simplified.<sup>2</sup> Winegar outlines the detrimental effects of artists using solely these motifs and viewers using these motifs to solely interpret works, stating that

---

<sup>1</sup> I understand that this is a geographically and temporally broad spectrum of artists to examine, and my choice of artists can definitely be expanded on, but for I believe this is a strong way for this assignment to examine how the artists of the region has responded to the same problem of cultural standardisation across time and space.

<sup>2</sup> Irit Rogoff, “Oblique Points of Entry.” In *Contemporary Art from the Middle East, Regional Interactions with Global Art Discourses*, edited by Hamid Keshmirshakan (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2015) 40.

“it would be naive to believe a single image can express an innate identity”<sup>3</sup> and solely foregrounding the culture of an artist is reductive to understanding their works.<sup>4</sup> These ideas have the potential to be cemented in the artist’s process as they consider the art market, and may lead to deliberately or unconsciously using aforementioned “symbols and signs to present cultural codes or iconography” to attract audiences. While the relationship between cultural standardisation and the art market is not the focus of my essay, I believe it is important to underscore the detrimental effects of artistic practices who do function and succeed due to playing into visual stereotypes associated with the region.

While the issue of cultures standardisation and markers are integral to how we should assess the production and viewing of visual culture, these issues have actually been thoroughly considered by artists from the MENA region decades prior to the contemporary period. A prime example would be Mohamed Melehi, who hails from Morocco and is regarded as a pioneer of postcolonial Moroccan art and modernism.<sup>5</sup> Melehi’s work is characterised by compositions filled with brightly coloured two-dimensional geometric shapes, linear patterns and undulating waves. **(Fig. 1)** Visually striking and seemingly gestural, Melehi’s practice draws from painting, photography, decoration, graphic design, typography and calligraphy, and responds to the architecture of various locations in which he spent his life, such as Rome, New York and Casablanca.<sup>6</sup>

Primary interviews in the avant-garde journal *Souffles* reveal Melehi’s awareness of the importance of utilising Arabic script in local art, deeming it one of the country’s “traditional

---

<sup>3</sup> Jessica Winegar, “Framing Egyptian Art, Western Audiences and Contemporary Artists from Egypt.” In *Peripheral Insider: Perspectives on Contemporary Internationalism in Visual Culture*, edited by Khaled D. Ramadan (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2007), 45.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> The Mosaic Rooms, *New Waves: Mohamed Melehi and the Casablanca Art School 12 April - 22 June 2019* (London: The Mosaic Rooms, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

plastic activities that has garnered universal renown.”<sup>7</sup> However, the same source also elucidates the practitioner’s wariness towards using the script in a way that “bastardises” it or renders it sterile.<sup>8</sup> This is interesting to consider in light of Melehi’s own works, which do not explicitly any sort of script, though one could force the interpretation that the undulating aesthetics of his waves to echo the gesture of Arabic script. This comment is of notable interest as I believe that it foreshadows the struggles contemporary artists now face in representing their culture through visual means without reducing them to stereotypes or pandering to expectations of foreign audiences.

In this light, the oeuvre of Tehran-born artist Nazgol Ansarinia subverts any potential for cultural standardisation through showcasing realities of life in Iran rather than pandering to an imaginary of the region or the Euro-American expectations of what contemporary art should be. Arguably her most famous piece for winning the Abraaj Capital Art Prize in 2009, *Rhyme and Reason* (**Fig. 2**) is a handwoven carpet where scenes and figures of everyday Iranian life are incorporated into a rich floral design. Ansarinia’s choice of tapping into the aesthetic of the Persian carpet—“one of the most stereotyped artefacts in Iran”<sup>9</sup>—is an intriguing and well-motivated one. At first glance, the large-scale carpet appears to be a reproduction of a commodity that has been valued for its ‘exotic’ appearance, rich colours and ornate design; a symbol that might stand in for Ansarinia’s Iranian background, or potentially yield in a reductive understanding of the country. However, upon closer inspection, the viewer comes face-to-face with with an intricate design which blends traditional floral motifs and scenes of the Iranian working class,<sup>10</sup> thus subverting the

---

<sup>7</sup> Anneka Lenssen, Sarah Rogers, and Nada Shabout. *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2018), 277.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> “Abraaj Group Art Prize 2009,” Art Dubai, 2009, accessed April 13 2019, <http://www.artdubai.ae/abraaj-group-art-prize-2009/>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

viewer's expectation of solely viewing a floral design that which has only been reproduced as commodity. **(Fig. 3)**

Looking beyond its aesthetic content, another interesting facet of the work is its media, through which the work resists fitting into the paradigm of Euro-American contemporary art. The weaving of Persian carpet is commonly considered a 'craft' — a category that is commonly understood by Western viewers as separate from, if not below, the category of 'art' and is one which frequently allocated to cultures of non-Western origin.<sup>11</sup> Not only does *Rhyme and Reason* resist the reductive idea that contemporary art has to be made with new media/contemporary art cannot be made with traditional materials, one could also say it is a successful example of a "localised contemporaneity"<sup>12</sup> which is engaged with the here and now.<sup>13</sup> While some might say Ansarinia's choice of the carpet medium is too obvious a cliché to refer to her Iranian background, one can also understand that it is Ansarinia's balanced utilisation and reinvention of an object so deeply tied to the everyday life of her home country, as well as her choice to not not use materials typical of 'global' contemporary art, which enables *Rhyme and Reason* to effectively represent her take on cultural identity without reducing it to sheer tradition, and to subvert expectations that might be entrenched in stereotypes of the exotic.

Ansarinia shifts away from drawing on the aesthetics of Iranian tradition to foreground her specific lived experiences in contemporary Tehran in her 2013 series *Fabrications*. **(Fig. 4)** Focusing on the architectural relationship between the city's ongoing urbanisation and the loss of its rural environments, the series consists of models based on the combination of traditional architecture and the designs of existing modern buildings, such as residential apartments on the

---

<sup>11</sup> These key ideas are explored further in articles such as Keith Moxey's *Is Modernity Multiple?* and Dadi, Iftikhar's *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*.

<sup>12</sup> Hamid Keshmirshakan. "Contemporary or Specific: The Dichotomous Desires in the Art of Early Twenty-First Century Iran," *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 4 (2011), 46, accessed April 12, 2019. <https://contentstore.cla.co.uk/secure/link?id=01d88a0d-710f-e911-80cd-005056af4099>

<sup>13</sup> Keshmirshakan, "Contemporary or Specific," 47.

Sayad highway and Resalat highway. Quotidian architecture of apartments and storefronts are combined with domes, minarets, wind towers and porticos to create hybrid reconstructions that blend physical signifiers of the new and old Tehran.<sup>14</sup> In a video interview series ‘Artist Cities’ conducted by the Tate, Ansarinia expresses feelings of mournfulness towards the city’s changing landscape and the constant demolition of old buildings which are physical sites of memory for her, stating that:

“Ironically as the city is losing more and more of its open spaces, images of greens with blue skies or scenes of villages are painted onto buildings...creating an illusion of perspective openness... projecting the desired onto the undesired.”

“I have so many layers of memory from each corner of this city, every part of the city is associated with memory from each part of my life. I think that is what makes the fast speed of construction so destructive, in a way. It’s taking away our collective identity, along with our individual memory.”<sup>15</sup>

In this light, the *Fabrications* series resists any form of cultural standardisation through signifying a sense of the contemporaneity as well as specificity, through referring to the ongoing construction of new residential areas and resultant feelings of alienation, and the artists’ own memories and experiences respectively. Indigenously and specificity are key concepts that have the potential to complement the current arts discourse’s obsession with the contemporary and the global,<sup>16</sup> rather than completely opposing it. When effectively utilised, such in the case of

---

<sup>14</sup> “Surfaces and Solids: A Publication on Nazgol Ansarinia,” Media Farzin, Green Art Gallery, Summer 2015. Accessed 15 April, 2019. <https://view.publitas.com/green-art-gallery/nazgol-ansarinia-publication/page/10-11>

<sup>15</sup> Tate, “Artist Cities: Nazgol Ansarinia on Tehran –‘Neighbourhoods Are Changing So Fast,’” Youtube Video, 4:18, posted by “Tate,” June 8, 2016. Accessed April 14, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qaqVCZlrIhc>

<sup>16</sup> Keshmirshakan, “Contemporary or Specific,” 45.

Ansarinia's *Fabrications*, the convergence of indigenously and specificity allows for the creation of distinctive historical and geographical context which enhances, rather than solely defines, the work.

Although these artists hail from very different time periods, places, and socio-political contexts, the works and practices of both Melehi and Ansarinia call to attention their relationship with the living world around them, with a keen awareness of how their work might be perceived in light of markers that visually stereotype their cultures. While obviously it cannot be said these two artists are emblematic of all artistic practice across the MENA region, their works prove significant examples of how to negotiate the representation of one's society. Ultimately, it is through the foregrounding of their personal experiences as well as their innovation of individual artistic traditions which allows each artist to effectively represent the realities, rather than the foreign imaginary, of the cultures from which they hail.

## **Bibliography**

Art Dubai. "Abraaj Group Art Prize 2009." 2009, accessed April 13 2019, <http://www.artdubai.ae/abraaj-group-art-prize-2009/>

Keshmirshakan, Hamid "Contemporary or Specific: The Dichotomous Desires in the Art of Early Twenty-First Century Iran," *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 4 (2011), 46, accessed April 12, 2019. <https://contentstore.cla.co.uk/secure/link?id=01d88a0d-710f-e911-80cd-005056af4099>

Lenssen, Aneka, Sarah Rogers, and Nada Shabout. *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents* New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2018.

Media Farzin, "Surfaces and Solids: A Publication on Nazgol Ansarinia," Green Art Gallery, Summer 2015. Accessed 15 April, 2019. <https://view.publitas.com/green-art-gallery/nazgol-ansarinia-publication/page/10-11>

Rogoff, Irit. "Oblique Points of Entry." In *Contemporary Art from the Middle East, Regional Interactions with Global Art Discourses*, edited by Hamid Keshmirshekan. London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2015.

Tate, "Artist Cities: Nazgol Ansarinia on Tehran –'Neighbourhoods Are Changing So Fast,'" Youtube Video, 4:18, posted by "Tate," June 8, 2016. Accessed April 14, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qaqVCZlrIhc>

The Mosaic Rooms, *New Waves: Mohamed Melehi and the Casablanca Art School 12 April - 22 June 2019*. London: The Mosaic Rooms, 2019.

Winegar, Jessica. "Framing Egyptian Art, Western Audiences and Contemporary Artists from Egypt." In *Peripheral Insider: Perspectives on Contemporary Internationalism in Visual Culture*, edited by Khaled D. Ramadan. Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2007.

## List of Images



Figure 1: Photograph depicting Melehi's graphic two-dimensional paintings (cellulose paint on wood) alongside his three-dimensional sculptures. Photograph taken by myself, at the exhibition *New Waves: Mohamed Melehi and the Casablanca Art School* held at the Mosaic Rooms in London.





Figure 2: Nazgol Ansarinia, *Rhyme & Reason*, 2009. Green Art Gallery, Dubai. Handwoven wool, silk and cotton, 360 x 252 cm. <http://www.gagallery.com/artists/nazgol-ansarinia/works#50>



Figure 3: Detail of *Rhyme & Reason*, depicting figures of quotidian Iranian society.

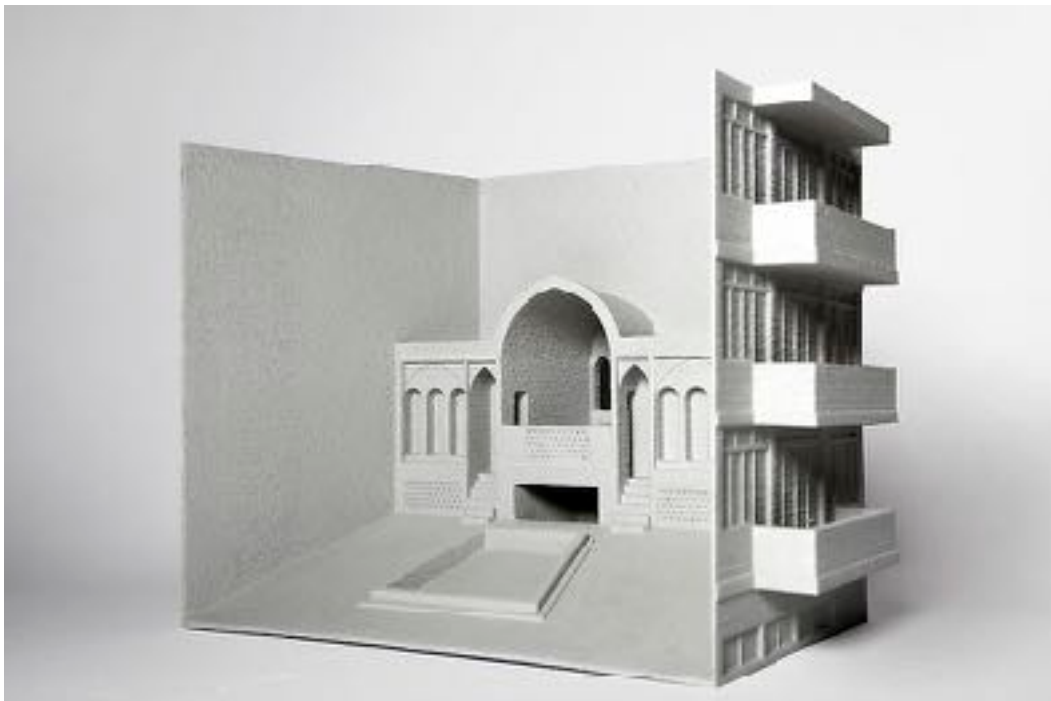


Figure 4: Nazgol Ansarinia, *Fabrications*, 2013. In collaboration with Roozbeh Elias-Azar. <http://www.gagallery.com/artists/nazgol-ansarinia/works#34>