

Feriel Bendjama

'We, They and I'

16 January – 17 April 2014

The Return, Goethe-Institut Irland, Dublin 2

WHEN France outlawed the wearing of face-covering veils in 2011, 'the veil' had been a potent trope of feminist inquiry for some time. Various representations of the hijab, burqua, niqab and chador had appeared in contemporary art and popular culture; for example, in works as diverse as Marjane Satrapi's graphic novel and film *Persepolis* and Paris street artist Princess Hijab's 'hijabizing' of advertising posters on the city's Metro – she paints veils on the male and female models featured in luxury goods adverts.

The veil is the dominant symbol in German-Algerian artist Feriel Bendjama's series of photographic self-portraits 'We, They and I'. The works comprise stylised three-quarter-length studio images of the artist wearing a selection of different colored khimars, a covering that conceals the body from head to hips but displays the face.

Curated by Düsseldorf-based artist Sebastian Riemer, the nine images in the show are displayed in sets of three, each ostensibly themed by colour. Bendjama respectively wears a red, white or black khimar against black, green and white backgrounds. The artist accessorises each figure with cheap evocative props that look as though they came from the toy section of a Euro saver discount shop. While seemingly iconoclastic, the work also prompts questions of femininity as defined by contemporary perceptions of Islam. The artist is heavily made-up in a manner that references the cliché that well-heeled Muslim women wear costly couture clothing beneath their plain veils.

In the 'white' category of the photographs, we find the artist pictured against a green background with eyes closed, first wearing a plastic child's tiara, then blowing a bright red candy whistle and finally balancing a copy of the Qur'an on her head. Here are notions of perfect womanhood, particularly evoked by the Disney-princess-perfection of the tiara and the 'finishing school' referenced by the book-balancing act. Using a holy text further drives home Bendjama's comment on the complexity of contemporary Islam's position in Europe – including the artist's home, Germany.

In the 'black' series, the artist is depicted against a white background – again with eyes closed. The props are a brightly coloured plastic pistol – which the artist points at her own head – a baby's soother and a paper facemask of the kind used to protect

against pollution. The artist is explicitly gagged, contemplating suicide, and infantilised.

The 'red' images depict a woman with open eyes and a considerably more engaged demeanor. Her props are also not subtle: a cigarette, a fake moustache and an opera mask make for a persona that both challenges and looks quizzically at the viewer, while the addition of a decorative lace part of the headdress personalise her clothing in a way that the previous images do not.

During the artist and curator talk that launched this exhibition, Riemer asked Bendjama what she wanted the viewer to see when they look at these images. She replied, "They can be whatever you want them to be".¹ While this may be her stated intention, it's clear that she is communicating an experience of womanhood within Islam. The works illustrate the stereotypes associated with the wearing of the veil – which Bendjama subverts with various masculine and / or feminist symbols.

Long an emblem of feminine 'otherness', Western tradition associates veiling with women who opt out of conventional society – nuns or female members of other religious sects for example. In the context of Islam the veil has become a symbol with dual meaning, suggesting both the subjugation of women and Muslim solidarity and empowerment. For Princess Hijab, mentioned above, and fellow French activist duo Niquabitch – who challenge the French ban by publicly wearing the niqab with shorts or a mini skirt – explore and exploit both these readings. Bendjama doesn't throw her hat into the ring here, preferring the viewer to form their own interpretation of these images.

It's a shrewd decision given the potency of the veil and its many meanings. Bendjama's 'We, They and I' references various sides of this seemingly Gordian knot of a debate. Though the artist doesn't provide any solutions, she offers a progressive and important voice in the tumult.

Anne Mullee is a Dublin-based writer, curator and filmmaker.

Note

1. Feriel Bendjama in conversation with Sebastian Riemer, Goethe Institut, Dublin, 16 January 2014



Feriel Bendjama, work from 'We, They and I', The Return, Goethe-Institut Irland (16 Jan – 17 April 2014), courtesy of the artist



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