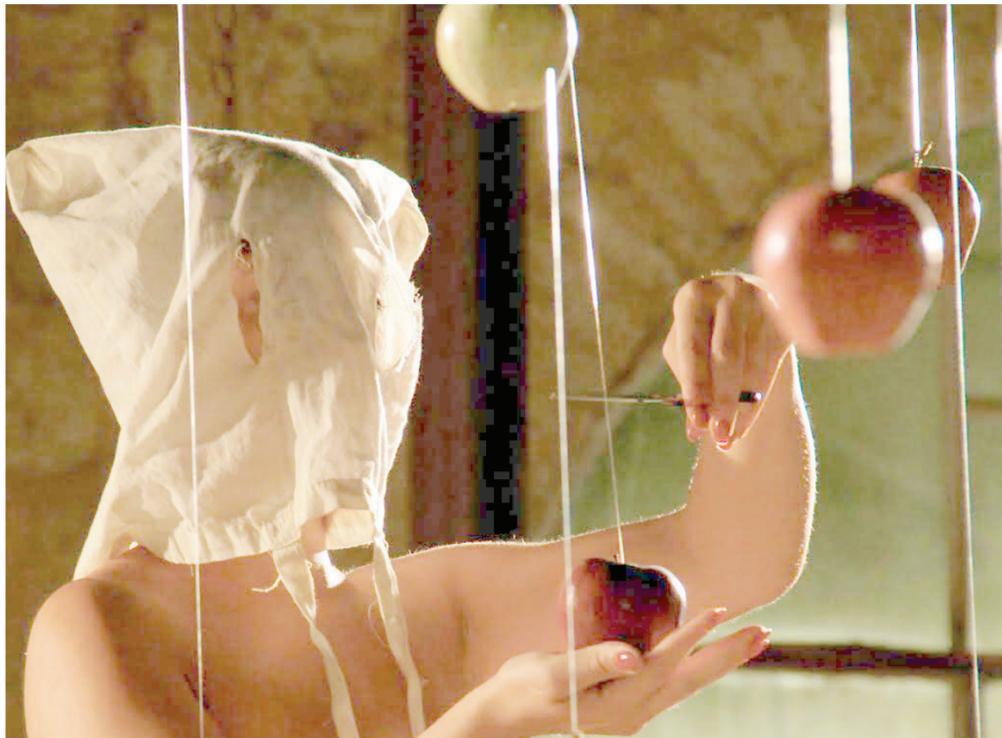


Culture

Arab women artists tell of suffering

London's Rich Mix celebrates International Women's Day



Maiada Aboud in performance



Malika Sqalli's photo "Lost"

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London

“Arab women suffer.” That is the message of two Arab women artists showcased at Rich Mix, an independent arts venue in East London, in celebration of International Women's Day.

Visual artist Maiada Aboud and poet Hala Ali both live in the West but bear the burden of Arab culture. They speak of double standards imposed on women and the expectations of their societies to fit the stereotype of an obedient wife.

Maiada Aboud was greeted with loud cheers and applause by the predominantly female audience as she took the stage. The smiling

woman, her head half-shaven, politely apologised for being late and began her story. Even though her parents were disappointed she was not a boy, Aboud has fond memories of her childhood as a Christian Arab growing up in the Palestinian Territories.

Then puberty hit and everything changed. Suddenly, the young girl was no longer able to mix with boys, play football, climb trees or ride her bike. Her frustration mounted. Later, she married the wrong man and demanded a divorce; something that is not easy to obtain in the Arab world, though she eventually succeeded.

Aboud said she found her escape through endurance art; a form of performance art in which the artist endures pain or hardship. As

she told her story, the audience was treated to a slideshow of her work behind her. The first images showed her in a white gown, slowly being covered in blood. Next to Aboud was a film showing her holding a fish for two hours until she could not hold it anymore, shook and dropped it.

Aboud chose endurance art to test her patience as well as the patience of her viewers and give them a taste of her suffering.

More images showed her with an opaque white bag over her head, dipping apples in dye and painting her nails. She deliberately removed her vision to reflect her adolescence, a time when she told to do things she did not want to do. Painting her nails signifies traditional femininity, something she

did not want to be forced into. So instead she dreamt of redesigning her own life through art. She hates apples so she uses them as another test of endurance, eating apples until she vomited.

Through her endurance of pain, Aboud said she hopes to reach out to other women who feel her frustration.

Hala Ali then took the stage. The young unveiled Saudi woman with curly black hair suddenly burst into rap, a style that immediately took the audience aback. Born in Saudi Arabia, Ali grew up in the United Kingdom. Her poem “Mr Khaleeji Man” addresses issues experienced by Saudi women – “Khaleeji” means “Gulf” in Arabic.

Ali attacked the tradition of an arranged marriage, speaking of a wealthy man buying her at an auction as if her body is up for sale. “I will not serve you dates on a tray and I will not have my hair straight”.

She mocked the “Khaleeji” man for being proud of his skyscrapers even while he should be ashamed of the blood spilt building them; a reference to the deaths and suffering of migrant workers preparing for the 2022 World Cup in Qatar.

Behind every great man is a great woman? No. Next to every great man is a great woman

The night ended with an exhibition shedding a more positive light from Moroccan photographer Malika Sqalli who revealed optimism in her work. Her picture “Lost” shows a woman looking towards the sea with a cloud to replace her head.

She says, “Although we can't see ahead of us, we have our head in the clouds, and tumult under our feet. We can then only stand tall and keep our head on the direction. We all know clouds dissipate at some point and the tide goes down.”

But just how much are Arab women really suffering compared to the Western women? Aboud admits that while she was living in the Palestinian Territories, she imagined women in the West to be totally free from suffering. She admits she was wrong and that Western women do face suffering, but, she says, it is not as extreme.

In Arab culture there are many ways women are protected. If a man wants to marry a woman, he must pay a dowry, an investment to make him think twice before a divorce, along with the social pres-

sure to provide for any children. The woman is welcome to live in her parents' home until she marries whereas, typically, a Western woman is expected to rent her own place after the age of 18. With an average monthly gross salary in the United Kingdom of \$3,283 a month and average rent of \$1,725 a month, who is really suffering more?

As Saudi Arabia's Princess Ameerah al-Taweel states: “Behind every great man is a great woman? No. Next to every great man is a great woman.”

Organised by creative director Aser El Saqqa, “Arab Women Artists Now” took place March 7th at Rich Mix in London.

Dunia El-Zobaidi is an Arab Weekly correspondent in London.



Untitled by Hala Ali



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