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Published: 30/09/2010 05:37 PM

Something old, something new

“Beauty is more present and better incarnated in people who represent both sexes,” states 46-year-old Lebanese artist Chaza Charafeddine as she describes the underlying idea behind her work. Her exhibition, *The Divine Comedy*, is a collection of photomontages of androgynous-looking individuals mounted on replicas of actual Islamic art.

Although **Islamic art** is more generally known for prohibiting the depiction of humans, Charafeddine sought inspiration from manuscripts of the Mughal period and from 14th- to 18th-century Persian miniatures. Classical Islamic art focuses on motifs, such as arabesque and calligraphy; however, the backdrop of Charafeddine’s collages reflects a more flexible approach to human and animal representation in Islamic art thanks to Indian and Persian influences.

Having originally studied special education and dance before working for the House of World Culture in Berlin and **Ashkal Alwan** in Beirut, Charafeddine discovered the “wonderful world of Islamic art” three years ago when her friend offered her a book on the discipline.

She was particularly captivated by how older Islamic art portrayed humans with androgynous traits, “men with make-up and feminine accessories,” she notes. “But modern Middle Eastern

artists from the 1940s represented the characters as strictly female.”

“What you see here is not religious [art], but Islamic art,” insists the artist, referring to the wider definition of the term. Perhaps this is why she brushes off some people’s concern of offending spiritual sensitivities when combining the famous pieces with provocative photographs of gender-neutral persons.

To Charafeddine, her photomontages are not meant to draw a reaction; rather they are to show the changes in the perception of beauty across time.

“I wanted to re-examine the aesthetics of Islamic art and compare it with today’s [perception] of beauty, especially the [phenomenon] of the pop star queen,” she says. The criteria for what is considered attractive have greatly evolved over time, she adds.

She illustrates her point by showing a sequence of images depicting the *Buraq* – the mythological steed said to have carried the Prophet Mohammad on his journey from Mecca to Jerusalem. The 16th century art depicted the half-horse half-man as androgynous, which piqued the artist’s interest.

Charafeddine purposefully chose not to hire professional models and brought in regular people to pose for her. “At a glance, they do not look like a man or a woman,” explains the artist. Although not obvious, all of the individuals photographed are men.

Interestingly, research has found that what people find attractive are the **different shapes of the person’s face**, rather than their gender. Charafeddine emphasized these traits with make-up and coloring. “I intentionally made them look ambiguous,” she states, adding, “To me, beauty goes beyond gender.”

The Divine Comedy is on display at the Agial Art Gallery in Hamra from September 23 until October 13, 2010.



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