

# Qinza Najm: Still I Rise

Tami Katz-Freiman

*"You may shoot me with your words,  
You may cut me with your eyes,  
You may kill me with your hatefulness,  
But still, like air, I'll rise."  
—Maya Angelou*

Qinza Najm is a New York-based, Pakistani-American artist whose work is interdisciplinary in the deep sense of this term. Najm, who holds a PhD in Psychology, creates art that is informed by both Eastern and Western philosophies based on compassion, as well as by feminist theories concerned with gendered violence and female subjectivity. Her fluid movement between different disciplines is given expression in this small-scale exhibition, which nevertheless features a selection from four complementary bodies of work that resonate with one another as four chapters of a single story. The plot centers on a female body (represented, for the most part, by the artist's own body) situated within a physically, socially, or mentally constraining space. The body is recurrently represented sitting, reclining, kneeling or stretching, either wearing a hijab or else exposed. It is painted, woven or photographed, while always being related to oppression and violence against women, in a manner that crosses both geographical borders and cultural boundaries.

The central image serving as a point of departure for this exhibition is *Veil of Bullets* (2018). This grid of 16 photographic units presents an image of the artist against the backdrop of a traditional, blood-red Persian carpet, whose golden frame surrounds her body. Kneeling (in the pose she uses to practice meditation) with her gaze lowered, she is enveloped – or perhaps trapped – in a hijab made of fishing net. This work is based on a performance enacted by Najm two years earlier (2017) at the Museum of Moving Images in New York City, which attended both to mass school shootings around the US and to honor killings in South Asia. The 40-lbs. veil worn by the artist during the performance was laden with 1100 empty bullet casings – representing the number of honor killings that occurred in Pakistan during the previous year. The 1100 gleaming brass shells also formed a somber memorial to the victims of gun

violence in American schools. The transparency of the veil, which stands out in contrast to its use as a form of concealment, constituted a sort of body armor that had a distinctly aesthetic appeal, lending grandeur to the frozen, stoic pose.

This female image was subsequently “cut” and used as a silhouette, or negative, in other carpet works and a series of carpet paintings, which include images of women’s bodies represented throughout the history of art. By means of such transitions between figuration and abstraction, materiality and representation, the local and the universal, East and West, Najm offers visual alternatives for the construction of another femininity, which attempts to free itself of the boundaries imposed on it from without. Najm treats the carpets as a multilayered “metaphoric material” pertaining not only to a specific cultural and historical heritage, but also to a domestic sphere identified as female territory. It attends to what was silenced over the generations and swept under the carpet – to the metaphorical dirt related to traumas originating in oppressive norms.

These traumas are given expression in an additional body of works that includes five black-and-white prints, which return the plot to a local, specific context: these are closeups of the face of Rashida, a woman who worked as a cleaner in the home of the artist’s parents in Lahore, Pakistan. Her face is veiled by a hijab and only her eyes are exposed, gazing directly at the camera. In a “Third-World” takeoff on Martha Rosler’s iconic video work *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, Najm asked 27 women from different underprivileged communities to collect quotidian household objects that represented, for them, gendered violence and oppression. Rashida models a selection of items, holding them up close to the camera: a hammer (*Her Hammer*, 2016–2017), scissors (*Cut it Up*, 2016–2017), a grater (*Her Shredder*, 2016–2017), a hijab coiled like a snake (*Gaze from Veil [Dupatta]*, 2016–2017), and a *lota*, a cleaning vessel whose symbolic meaning is related to conventions of bodily purity and impurity (*Female Gaze*, 2016–2017). This series was preceded by a confessional video work titled *Story of the Mother* (2018), which documents a similar action – in the course of which women from the artist’s childhood environment in Pakistan were asked to choose two objects – one symbolic of violence, and another symbolic of retribution. The exposure of the life stories of these female narrators – which are concerned with immense pain and vulnerability, struggles, persistence,

resilience and hope in a culture of silence – may serve as a voiceover for the mute black-and-white photographs.

The powerful presence of the hijab in these photographs competes, and perhaps even overpowers, the presence of the symbolic artifacts of violence. The eye focuses on the concealment of the face and body, the cloth cover that paradoxically serves as a clear and quintessential marker of Muslim female identity, as well as a means of concealing individual identity. This presence is enhanced in *Stories of 158 Dupattas (Veils)*, a sculptural work located at the center of the space. It features a pile of 158 coiled, colorful hijabs that the artist collected in various places around the world, and which Western eyes have difficulty distinguishing from one another. Najm relates in this work to the multiplicity, richness and variety of female headcovers. Since she is well aware of the resonances of the hijab in the post-9/11 Islamophobic American culture, and of her identity as an Pakistani-American artist exhibiting in a New York gallery, she relates to the many resonances of Muslim headcovers in the context of globalization and modernity, ranging from the perception of the hijab as a symbol of subjection to a patriarchal regime to its perception as a symbol of protest and subversion involving female empowerment. It thus appears as suspended between a place of refuge and between a symbol of immigration, religion, or separatism; between a seemingly conservative strategy of concealment and between an independent choice, which showcases modesty as a form of subversive protest delineating alternative trajectories.

The pile of veils is thus a form of protest against the policing and control of sexuality. Yet it represents not only religion, but also a manifestation of otherness, a rejection of the male gaze and of the liberal sexual game practiced in the West, which is based on the man's right to gaze at the female body. One of her earlier performance works, *#DamnILookGood (2014)*, presented at the DUMBO Arts Festival, was created following several Islamophobic incidents in the US and as a reaction to the banning the hijab in France. This work invited men, women and children to wear a niqab, which covers the entire face, as well as a hijab, and to experience them as a kind of second skin, a form of separation between the body and the environment – as well as an exercise in tolerance.

The idea of covering and concealing, as well as the rejection of the male gaze, also recurs in the works created over the last two years (2017–2018), in which Najm attends to masterpieces from the historical canon of Western art history, thus providing her own take on the East-West dichotomy: “As a Pakistani-American I personally find myself stretched by these two environments and cultures, ultimately finding inspiration from multiple histories.” The exhibition features eight oil paintings on canvas in which the silhouette, or negative, of the artist’s figure is covered by fragments of Persian carpets and images of iconic muses painted by men, which seem to have been stretched over her entire body: Klimt’s *Lady in Gold*, Picasso’s *Dora Maar*, Vermeer’s *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, Botticelli’s *Venus*, Courbet’s *The Origin of the World*, Warhol’s *Marilyn Monroe*, and Ingres’ *Odalisque*. This laborious act of appropriation, which is seemingly occluded beneath the carpet with thin brushstrokes that reveal more than they conceal, endows the painted figures with a new kind of presence. Exposing them to a different gaze, while demanding ownership of the female representation, Najm fuses them with her own body and with craft traditions of weaving and spinning, which were excluded from high Western culture due to the dismissal of techniques and traditions identified with women.

As early as the 1980s, postmodern appropriation and quotation were discussed as singular artistic strategies. These strategies were distinguished from the earlier tributes familiar throughout the history of art, which were characterized by the assimilation of the source into the influenced work. The act of quotation “imports” the glimmer of the aura of the original artwork into a new context while revealing the “seams” – self-reflexively referring to the act of quotation. In Najm’s case, the metaphorical quotation marks are the carpet fragments and the vertical stripes of color that define the appropriated muses. For in contrast to a desired female figure offering the pleasure of ownership (as in Ingres’ *Odalisque* and Courbet’s *The Origin of the World*), Najm’s women are part of a multicultural assemblage that merges with her own figure. This act of appropriation seems to constitute a declaration of her own presence within the Western tradition.

Carpets thus play a central role in the exhibition, and their symbolic charge is multilayered: on the one hand, they bear an affinity with traditional Muslim culture, where they are associated with the religious, ritual context of prayer carpets; at the same time, this is a

common decorative item in the domestic sphere that is under the responsibility of women (the painstaking labor of women in this context is due not so much to the weaving process, but rather to the work of keeping the carpets clean). To this one must add the fact that Lahore, boasts a centuries-old tradition of Pakistani carpet weaving, as well as the fact that European painters during the Renaissance used carpets from the East as an exotic motif, assimilating them into their paintings in an attempt to represent control, aristocratic status, and power. Orientalist painting in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was characterized by stunning descriptions of interiors replete with carpets. Najm thus offers an alternative to a stereotypical perception that became fixed over time in Western art – the affinity between carpets, women and the East – and reappropriates these Orientalist attributes in a subversive manner. In some of the works the carpet (the actual rather than the painted one) becomes a hijab that covers her body and defines its limits. In doing so, it serves as a metaphor for the body that is subject to the same rules governing the creation of traditional carpets – clear regulations that are transmitted from one generation to the next. The other (painted) carpets form part of the assemblage of quotations together with Marilyn Monroe and Botticelli's Venus, in an elegant, ornamental mixture that undermines all dichotomies.

The symbolic act of stretching, which always moves upwards, in accordance with the body's outlines, is an act involving digitally created distortions, a vertical form of abstraction that is an amalgamate of East and West, universalizing the idea of oppression not only across the spheres of geography, religion and culture, but also across time. Actions involving stretching also characterize the abstract, freer works in the exhibition – a collection of acrylic drawings on archival film (*Essence in Pose*, 2018–2019) and sculptures of torsos covered with stretched vinyl (*Yellow Stretch*, 2019, and *Red Stretch*, 2019). This series is based on a performative action, in the course of which dancers modeled for the artist the pose that defines them. The small, rapid sketches capture the energy of the dancing and stretching movement, while dissolving into ghosts in motion.

In 2018, Najm presented a solo exhibition on similar themes in Pakistan, titled "All Around Her was a Frightening Silence" (Chawkandi Art Gallery, Karachi). The works in that exhibition were intended to critique the manner in which gender, sexual violence, and abuse of

power function in Islamic society, and were interpreted as a subversive form of protest against the deep-seated sexual taboos of the artist's culture of origin. By contrast, in the current context, with an almost identical selection of works being presented in New York, the criticism is now directed against Islamophobia, violence, discrimination and silencing in the United States. The exhibition's title, "Still I Rise," refers to a poem by Maya Angelou, which celebrates female empowerment in the context of slavery and black culture. Najm chose words that promise redemption, thus endowing her personal story with a universal feminist context, while also attending to the themes of empathy, generosity, transformation and change. In the current age of the Trump Administration, with three states already passing legislation that strips women of control over their own bodies, and which seems to belong to the Republic of Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale* rather than to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there is a sense of urgency to this kind of message, since nothing, at this point, can be taken for granted.

***Tabdeeli*, 2017-2019**

Performance with five dancers, video projection, soundtrack

Sept 11, 2019, followed by an artist's talk

*Tabdeeli* – "transformation" in Urdu – explores cultural, political, and personal displacement. The immersive choreography represents a journey that depends on the individual's determination to reach his/her full potential, and to change his/her narrative from one of trauma to healing. The artist considers this performance as a live extension of her paintings. Notions of resisting, pushing against, and transcending barriers, taboos, and social and political norms are expressed through the movements of the dancers, as they stretch and struggle within the translucent fabric that covers their bodies like a cocoon, constricting their movements. The metaphor of stretching refers to the expansive metaphysical stretching of awareness and the broadening of one's consciousness. The dancing bodies are integrated with projected images of the artist's painting and collages, based on images of artifacts of violence and healing she collected over the years. This performance was first performed at the Queens Museum, NYC, in 2017

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