

Phantom Punch / Suzy Sikorski.

Phantom Punch: Contemporary Art from Saudi Arabia

Suzy Sikorski interviews Nouf Alhimiary

The Saudi Artists' US Tour comes to Lewiston, Maine! *Phantom Punch: Contemporary Art from Saudi Arabia* brought 16 artists and two YouTube collectives to Bates College, introducing them through lectures, performances, story-telling and pop-up events. Phantom Punch refers to Muhammed Ali's 1965 boxing match with Sonny Liston that took place in Lewiston, shocking the crowds through Ali's unexpected lightning-fast knockout. Bringing back this unexpected thrill to the local community, this show disbanded stereotypes of the Middle East during one of the most divisive periods in US history.

One of the featured artists is Nouf Alhimiary, an experimental photographer and visual communications designer that uses her background in English literature and linguistics to explore identity politics and gender issues from a feminist perspective.

Alhimiary's series of photographs, *The Desire to Not Exist* (2015) features three photos of a woman caught underneath the water's surface, reaching towards the light but forever caught within this moment of silence and stillness. Further adding to the performative role of fixed social narratives, the woman is not wearing a black *abaya*, but instead a prayer garment. Re-appropriating texts taken from Egyptian literary figure, Tawfiq Al Hakim cited in an article from an online youth journal, Alhimiary paints these women's faces with Arabic words 'no' and 'walks on water and does not drown,' shifting the focus of these signs of refusal to the female context. I had the chance to interview artist Alhimiary as she travelled to the US for the first time during the show.

Suzy Sikorski: Before arriving in Lewiston, what were your expectations?

Nouf Alhimiary: I really had no expectations other than it being freezing cold. I looked up Lewiston because I never heard about it before. Stephen Stapleton (founder of *Culturunners*) and Danny Danforth (curator of the exhibition) took us around Lewiston, Auburn, and Portland. We also had the opportunity to speak about our perspective in Danny's anthropology class: myth, folklore and popular culture. It felt beautiful to witness the students' openness to us, and our stories; as well as listening to the questions they had about who we were, where we came from and what our projects meant.

(SS): *The Desire to Not Exist* deals with women drowning. Does this touch upon the stereotype that Saudi woman do not have a voice?

(NA): No, not necessarily. My work deals with representation, basically reclaiming my narrative as a Saudi woman and a millennial, and taking agency to define my reality as opposed to having it defined for me by others (whether that other is the Western media, or men in my society). The *hijab* is not just a religious symbol, it is also cultural. Because I live in Saudi I have to wear a *hijab*, regardless of my religious beliefs.

The Desire to not exist – Drowning is the most perfect form of isolation. In my opinion, as a motif, drowning captures an integral struggle in the human condition that is universal to all of us. In Danny's class, I was asked a lot of questions

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about the garments the girls are wearing—*hijab* is a symbol of oppression in the West, the general impression from a Western perspective, I found, was the association of *hijab* and drowning with oppression. However, there was the cultural aspect of *hijab* that I found to be absent. In the image, the girl is wearing a prayer garment, which signifies vulnerability and openness to the divine, being able to tell those students about those additional layers of meaning that they were never exposed to allowed me to represent a part of my *herstory* that told something about who I am.



(SS): So, this is more of a personal battle with yourself—whether you are in Saudi or in the West?

(NA): It's personal and universal at the same time, I suppose. I got asked an interesting question—one of the American students asked me: if I was speaking about universals such as isolation, alienation and vulnerability, then why not use outfits that are easy to relate to? To me, that was really important to address; what is easy to relate to? Does it have to look westernised to be relatable? I think we hold ourselves accountable when we confront these questions, 'why can't I relate to people dressed differently to me?'

(SS): What was the best platform for you to exhibit your work?

(NA): The internet is my main platform. It allows me to reach audiences that I can never reach through exhibits and within the walls of galleries. However, it is an honor to be able to take your art across borders to a such a liberal, diverse and beautiful campus as Bates College.

Spearheaded by the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture, this multifaceted program of exhibitions and education initiatives was launched in Houston, Texas, in June 2016.

To date, the exhibitions have attracted over 15,000 visitors across four cities, offering community focused public programming, including seven artists' performances, fifteen artists' talks and lectures, and curator-led tours for over thirty local universities and schools. Confirmed locations in 2017 include Los Angeles, Salt Lake City, Detroit, Washington D.C. and New York City.

