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# Veiled Visuality

## Video Art in Syria

CHARLOTTE BANK

Europe is witnessing an increased interest in contemporary art from the Arab world with almost every European country having had its own show of works of young artists from the region. However, Syria has been largely absent from these events. To a large extent, this is due to the conservative character of the Syrian art scene as well as lack of institutional support for contemporary techniques. Nevertheless, young Syrian artists experiment with new artistic techniques and while using an international visual language reflect on the state of contemporary Syrian society.

Syrian artists suffer from a general lack of visibility both inside and outside the country. It is rare to see works of contemporary Syrian artists on international art events and exhibition spaces in Syria showing the works of these artists are largely missing. Due to the lack of an institutional network of organizations supporting contemporary art, financial aspects of art production tend to stand in the foreground in Syria. Artists are forced to produce sellable work, which in Syria mainly means art of a purely decorative character.

Most artists in Syria work in traditional techniques like painting and sculpture; contemporary artistic forms of expression like video, digital photography, and installation are rare. Art academies are highly sceptical of new techniques and offer very limited space for them in their

**Although the Syrian art scene is by and large characterized by artists working in traditional techniques like painting and sculpture, young artists are discovering new forms of expression such as video art. Building upon a long tradition of artists offering social criticism, these artists comment in their work on present-day Syrian society. This article analyzes videos of two artists, locating their art in the context of current social and political debate.**

ly documentary in character, addressing socio-political and socio-cultural issues of contemporary Syrian society. Syria has an impressive intellectual and artistic tradition with writers, caricaturists, and filmmakers offering critical investigations of the rigidity of Syrian society and its paralyzing effects on people's lives. Young artists who engage in social and political projects can place themselves in this tradition of engaged

artistic production in their endeavour to pin out the paradoxes, weaknesses, and injustices of contemporary Syrian society.

By focusing on two works of two young artists as representatives of this tendency in contemporary artistic praxis in Syria – one an art video, "Poster" by Samir Barkawi (2004) and the other an experimental documentary, "The Pot" by Diana El-Jeiroudi (2005) – I will attempt to show how contemporary artists in Syria position themselves in current debates and how they seek to influence the future of their society through their work. Both videos investigate the duality of traditional values presented by piety, morals, and family versus contemporary individualism in respect to female existence.

### Social criticism

Both Barkawi and El-Jeiroudi represent a minority within the Syrian art scene. But it is exactly this minority that is the most visible on the international art scene. As mentioned above, the restrictive character of the Syrian art scene leads most artists to work in traditional techniques and produce work of a kind that leaves aside all conflicts and secures them opportunities to exhibit their work and their existence. Syrian artists who investigate political and social issues in their work place find themselves in a difficult, even potentially dangerous position. Artists are frequently put under pressure to either change the character of their work or refrain from showing it altogether if it is deemed too controversial. Pressure comes from both official authorities and private event organizers.<sup>1</sup>

Notwithstanding these obstacles, many young artists feel a strong need to address current issues of Syrian society, a society that has witnessed massive changes since Bashar Al-Assad took over as president from his father in 2000, especially in the field of mass communication. This has brought contemporary visual culture to the country together with ideas of individualized lifestyles and raised hopes for change, especially among the young generation. Young Syrians often express feelings of being caught between the expectations and traditions of their parents and own wishes for individual development. Their society leaves little room for individualism in social and political terms, meaning that every attempt of self-assertion needs to take place within the restricted frame of family, state institutions, and religion and makes it a difficult balancing act.

Through addressing issues of importance within their own generation using an international and contemporary artistic language, artists like El-Jeiroudi and Barkawi are seeking to renew the Syrian art scene and place Syria on the map of the international art community.

### Modesty and display

Barkawi's short video *Poster* deals with the conflict between contemporary individualism and traditional notions of female modesty. The video shows three girls having fun taking photos of each other. What makes the private photo sessions of these three girls so amusing and slightly absurd is that their heavy veiling prevents us from recognizing who is in the picture. As soon as one girl has finished taking a picture of her two friends, she hands the camera to another girl who takes over



Still from  
*Poster* by Samir  
Barkawi

curricula. This lack of training means that artists wishing to work in contemporary techniques are to a large extent left to themselves to experiment and since Syrian artists are only little exposed to international contemporary art, they are left strangely isolated from international visual codes and modes of expression.

### Video art

Despite these obstacles, a number of young Syrian artists have begun to work in contemporary techniques and seek a presence on the international art scene. This is especially the case with artists working with video and experimental film. One advantage of this medium is its comparative affordability, its easy distribution, and the fact that no large and costly studio space is needed for the production of works. These factors have made video one of the major artistic media in the entire Middle Eastern region over the past ten years.

As is the case with other artists from the Arab world working with experimental film and video, works of Syrian film/video artists are strong-

COURTESY OF SAMIR BARKAWI, 2005

the role of the portraitist. The sound of the girl's high heeled shoes, their giggling laughter, the birds singing in the background form together with the distinctive click of the camera the soundscape of the film and convey an atmosphere of light hearted joy. The situation and the setting of the film seem at first sight idyllic and rather banal, we expect something easy to consume. Only the veils turn the situation into parody.

In less than a minute, Barkawi succeeds in laying bare the contradictions between traditional values and contemporary individualism. The ritual of the girls taking pictures of each other becomes pointless since no two girls are distinguishable from one another. We, the spectators, only see two figures covered by black veils looking completely alike, yet for the girls it seems of great importance that each of them has her picture taken. While they seemingly adhere to tradition, symbolized through their full cover, this does not prevent them from wishing to display themselves. They play with their camera, an object of vanity and self-indulgence, the exact vices traditional religious leaders are polemicizing against, seemingly without any sense of the contradictory character of their behaviour and the absurdity of the situation and thus show a complete lack of reflective thought.

By using a subjective camera angle, letting the spectator identify with the photographer searching for the best focus before pressing the button, Barkawi invites the spectators into the action of the film and asks us to reflect on whether or not a full cover makes sense in contemporary society. *Poster* is successful in asking this question because of its subtlety and freedom from moralizing and dogma. The spectator is invited to smile, laugh, and reflect.

### The blessings of motherhood

El-Jeiroudi's *The Pot* looks at women's experiences as child bearers and mothers. El-Jeiroudi's own feminist position is reflected in the provocative title of the film and informs the entire work. Her work is highly critical of traditional notions on motherhood as the fulfilment of female existence. While women's presence on the job market was long encouraged, an increasing emphasis on women's traditional roles as mothers and wives has been observed in official discourse since the 1990s.<sup>2</sup> In a number of videotaped interviews El-Jeiroudi presents a generation of women who were directly affected by this change in attitude. They are women of her own generation, in their twenties and thirties from different backgrounds, caught between their own individual wishes and society's expectations.

The interviews are rare in their openness, especially in a society where women are expected to keep their self-control and not discuss their emotions openly and in public. They voice a variety of views, from the openly regretful example of one woman telling of her sadness when leaving her job to the more stoic acceptance of a situation seen as unavoidable and necessary. It is not so much a personal choice in favour of motherhood which leads the women to adopt this role that stands out but rather the pressure from their surroundings. Once they accept these roles, society's perception of them changes; they experience greater respect towards them as persons. For some women, this respect might even represent a sort of redemption for the loss of their individual dreams.

*The Pot* is in many ways a raw work, spectacular effects are avoided, camera work is kept calm and a style reminiscent of home videos with sharp cuts between the sequences is kept throughout the work, giving it a personal, intimate quality. This style is common in the contemporary wave of experimental video documentary of the Middle East. Technical simplicity is often used to bring the subject of a film closer to the public, to make it accessible through absence of sophistication.

El-Jeiroudi chose to film her interview partners without showing their faces. While this may have been necessary to ensure a climate of confidentiality and privacy at first, she hereby also succeeds in lending the statements a representative character and adding an emotional distance, thus stressing her own critical view on the subject. Intercepted images function as dividers between the interviews and present subtle, ironic comments. An advertisement board displaying a smiling, young woman together with the slogan "always at your disposal" gets an entirely new meaning in the context of El-Jeiroudi's film, as do wedding gowns displayed at store fronts to swing in the wind.



COURTESY OF DIANA EL-JEIROUDI, 2004

### The Syrian art scene

The two videos question traditional notions on female existence. By addressing this controversial issue both El-Jeiroudi and Barkawi declare a will to engage in a debate to achieve change in Syrian society. However, their work is hardly ever shown in the country itself. It is one of the great paradoxes of contemporary Syrian artistic production that venues for showing and screening experimental contemporary art and films and videos are so few, both in Damascus and the rest of the country. This means that works like the two videos above, produced with the aim of addressing problems of Syrian society are better known to international audiences than to Syrians. Likewise, the works of Syrian filmmakers, whose highly artistic and much admired work is better known to international festival goers than the Syrian public.<sup>3</sup> Syria has only recently begun to develop an art scene with artists, galleries, an interested and knowledgeable public and critics.

This lack of a genuine art scene is strongly felt by Syrian artists and gallerists alike, many place much hope for improvement in a greater international visibility, both in the West and the more affluent Arab countries in the Gulf region. They hope that foreign interest can increase interest in the works of Syrian artists in the country itself and so facilitate the creation of a larger space for contemporary art in Syrian urban society.

And while artists engaged in social critique rarely expect to gain interest from financially strong collectors, they hope that more opportunities to produce, display, and sell art in general will also give more space for non-commercial art, art produced with the aim of provoking thought and encourage reflection on current issues among the public. While Syrian art is often criticized for being backward minded and outdated, the works of artists like Diana El-Jeiroudi and Samir Barkawi bear witness to the potential of Syrian art in producing just this kind of thought-provoking work. It is still new for the Syrian public to witness art other than painting and sculpture – video as an artistic medium has only appeared in the past few years. And it is newer still for the Syrian public to regard visual arts as other than decorative.

Syrian artists are producing meaningful work that gains international interest; however only if they are enabled to both produce and exhibit more work, a true contemporary art scene can develop in the country. More institutional support could be one clue to ensure the continuing production of art of high quality in Syria.

### Notes

1. Samir Barkawi, personal communication. On the resistance of artists to state ideology, see Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago 1999), especially pages 87–142.
2. Sara Lei Sparre, "Educated Women in Syria: Servants of the State, or Nurturers of the Family?" *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 17, no. 1 (2008): 3–20.
3. The paradoxes surrounding Syrian film production are the subject of Rasha Salti, ed., *Insights Into Syrian Cinema: Essays and Conversations with Contemporary Filmmakers* (New York, 2006).

Artists are  
forced to produce  
sellable work ...

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