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Artists Use Images of the Veil to Explore Identity, Culture

Veil is most visible icon of contemporary Islam



By Carolee Walker
 Staff Writer

New York — The veil is the most visible icon of contemporary Islam, says the producer of an exhibition featuring works by artists from North America, the Middle East and Europe. "If you see a veil, you automatically think about Islam," said Andreas Stadler, director of the Austrian Cultural Forum, which hosted *The Seen and the Hidden: [Dis]covering the Veil*. The exhibition was part of Muslim Voices: Arts and Ideas, a 10-day festival in New York City celebrating Islamic culture.

For some artists, including Adriana Czernin, who was born in Bulgaria but lives and works in Vienna, Austria, depicting images of the veil comes easily because she believes that the veil connects women with each other and unites

them. In Czernin's self-portraits, the artist conceals part of her face with shapes resembling flower petals or leaves, recalling the latticework of the traditional Arabic *mashrabiya*, a common type of covered window used throughout the Muslim world to hide from public view the domestic lives of women.

Yet the topic of the veil is complex, according to Stadler. This is so even in the United States and in Austria, where veiled women do not provoke much controversy. In Austria, Islam has been an officially recognized religion since 1912, said Stadler, and "in the United States, the biggest nation of immigrants in the world, there are so many different ethnicities, languages and clothing styles that we could hardly seriously discuss a rejection of this piece of clothing." (See "[Acceptance of Religious Garb in U.S. Shows Diversity, Tolerance.](#)")

In Turkey, the followers of the secularist ideology of the country's first president, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, are opposed to the headscarf, according to Stadler, but in recent years the Muslim democratic movement has gained ground by advocating wearing the scarf. A growing number of young women in Turkey and around the world are consciously and actively in favor of covering their necks, heads and faces.

Artist Asma Ahmed Shikoh, who is of Pakistani heritage and lives and works in New York, collected *hijabs*, or headscarves, from 100 Muslim women across the United States to create *Beehive* in 2007. As "honeybees bear special mention in the Quran for their healing powers," writes the artist, each opening is meant to represent one of the participating women by holding her scarf and therefore part of her identity. Unlike her mother and aunt who gave up wearing the veil 30 years ago in Pakistan, Shikoh, who lives in New York, wears a headscarf. "I wear the veil as an act of faith," she said.

Some artists, including Ayad Alkadhi, who was born in Iraq and spent his childhood in England, the United Arab Emirates and Baghdad, use the veil as a tool to explore tensions between what can be seen and what is hidden by the scarf. In *Structure*, Alkadhi "veils" himself with texts only to reveal parts of his body with an X-ray. Typically, the artist mixes layers of Arabic and American newspapers with traditional



calligraphic techniques and painting to create cloaked figures, using the veil as an integral part of what he calls the "skeletal elements assembled to create a whole being."

In other works, artists use images of the veil to explore identity, women's role in society and cultural heritage. In *Endless Tether*, a three-channel video, by Canadian artist Farheen HaQ, of South Asian-Muslim descent, two arms hold a long piece of red cloth and help to wrap it around a woman and then unwrap it. HaQ said that the "tension in the fabric oscillates between being a protective veil and a restrictive rope."



In *Endless Tether*, Canadian performance and video artist Farheen HaQ references the veil as part of her family's cultural heritage.

In her series of collages, *Unknown Sports*, Vienna, Austria-based artist Nilbar Güreş depicts women enclosed by curtains, but behind the curtains are private spaces transformed into sporting arenas: "high jumpers instead of window cleaners," the artist writes. While in public or in the presence of males, female athletes in some Muslim countries cover their heads with scarves. During practice and competition, when only females are present in the arena, female athletes wear their team uniforms without covering their heads.

Male stereotypes of women as objects are explored in the witty works of Iranian photographer Shadi Ghadirian, whose series *Like Everyday (Domestic Life)* presents veiled women with kitchen utensils substituted for the faces. Juxtaposing traditionally patterned fabrics for a veil and a rubber kitchen glove as a face, for example, is meant to depict conflicts between tradition and modernity, said Stadler.

The Seen and the Hidden was organized by curators David Harper and Martha Kirszenbaum in New York and Karin Meisel in Vienna, who selected contemporary works from young artists, or emerging artists. "It's not just an issue in Europe and America," Harper said at a panel discussion in New York. The issue of the veil, he said, is a global issue.

See also the photo gallery [Images of the Veil in Muslim Life](#).

Additional information on the exhibition can be found on the [Muslim Voices Festival Web site](#).

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