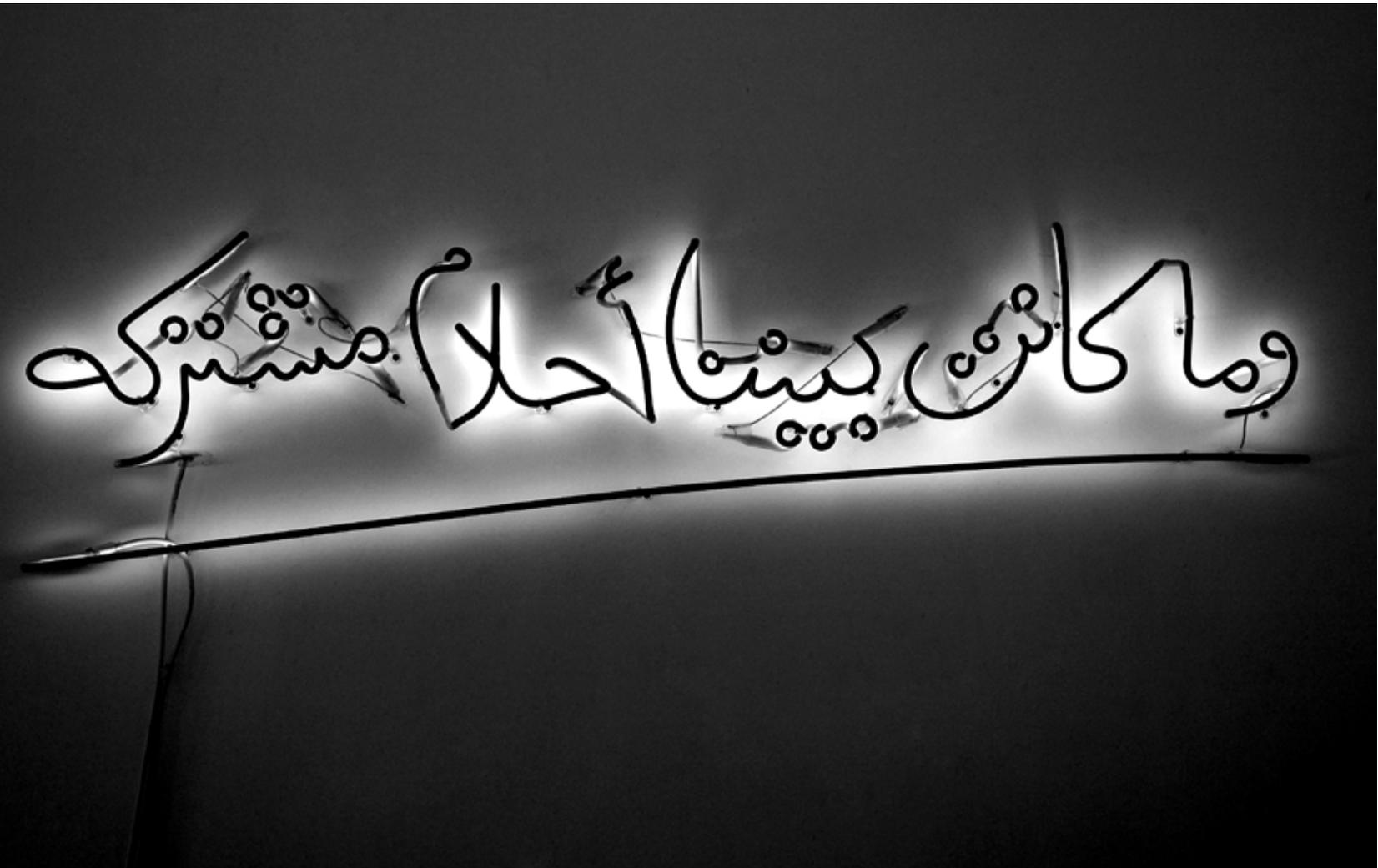


Through the world of Manal Al-Dowayan

By: *Elvina Halli*



And We Had No Shared Dreams, Manal AlDowayan, 2010. Image Copyright to the Artist, Image Courtesy of Cuadro.

“The eye should learn to listen before it looks.” In his candid post-war photo-book *The Americans*, Robert Frank captures the ubiquitous voice of a nation in mundane and fleeting moments. Frank’s black and white photographs draw the viewer to “listen” to the quotidian, even monotonous, stories of individuals. As they unfold in the familiar language and landscape of everyday life, these ordinary stories collectively shape

the narrative of a generation and a people.

Al-Dowayan similarly invites the audience to “listen” as she spotlights socio-cultural norms that underscore and influence the daily lives of women in her native, Saudi Arabia. In each conversation, hopeful, nostalgic, tragic and brave, is woven the artist’s own story, that is the fingerprint of her work and, perhaps, the most poignant of all her endeavors. As a child she was the family

photographer, stacking boxes of images she took during their travels and celebrations. By the 1990's, as a high-school student, she was taking part-time photography courses and experimenting in dark rooms. A decade later, while earning a Master's degree in Systems Analysis and Design in London, Al-Dowayan produced her first conceptual, black and white, photographic series; Under the mentorship of a master printer, the artist chose to photograph Saudi Arabian women living in London. The concept was a natural and simple; the choice to capture the soul and circumstance of women from her country. The images relayed an intimate dialogue between the artist and her subjects, making the global audience a participant of an important conversation. As the series traveled for exhibitions from London to Spain, it became evident that people were listening. In 2005, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia listened as King Abdullah Al-Saud made his ascension speech calling for a united nation and specifically noted the significance of women's contributions to the economy sparking a series of debates from each side of the political spectrum. The artist heard conservative voices ask, "What kind of jobs will women be allowed to practice?" and, then declared that "Women will participate in jobs that suit their nature". Al Dowayan set out to answer the question for herself. Between 2005 and 2007, she produced three bodies of work tackling female gender roles in Saudi Arabia. The first two series, "Look Beyond the Veil" and "The Choice" focused on the nature and consequence of socio-legal restrictions derived from local traditions that exempt women from common activities such as driving, voting or playing music. The stark black and white photographs captured disarming, closed frame images such as a henna-patterned hand sliding a vote into a slotted wooden box and ornaments, that the artist's entitles "Gold Chains", weighing down as much as adorning a woman's veiled head. The British Council, which had recognized and commissioned Al-Dowayan's work chose a selection of photographs from the two series to be part of a traveling group exhibition entitled "Common Ground" as one of only nine other Middle Eastern photographers included in the show. Throughout 2005 and 2006, "Common Ground" traveled across the Middle East completing its journey in Russia and Europe. A year later, she



The Choice VI, Manal AlDowayan, 41 x 51 cm, Silver Gelatin Fibre Print, 2006, Image Courtesy of Cuadro Gallery

completed a third collection of thirteen photographs inspired by King Abdullah ascension speech entitled "I Am". The series of high contrast, black and white images, depicted real women in their respective socio-economic roles; "I Am an Educator", "I Am a Saudi Citizen" and "I Am a Mother", the images funneled the surging voices and opinions of a nation into sound bites. The series once again engaged a community of women including the artist herself in a private, though deeply relevant, dialogue that ultimately transcended geo-cultural boundaries to join a global discourse on the female identity. Today, the "I Am" series is housed in the permanent collections of the British Museum, Victoria and Albert Museum and the Qatar Museums Authority.



I am a Saudi Citizen, 41 x 51 cm. Silver gelatin fibre print 2007. Image Copyright to the Artist, Courtesy of Cudro Gallery.

In addition to having representation in a Dubai based gallery and a growing list of exhibitions and accolades for her photographs, Al-Dowayan held a full time position as Creative Director at Saudi Aramco. In 2009, The Delfina Foundation invited her to participate in their residency. After returning from the six-month course in London where she resigned from her ten-year tenure to become a full time artist. Her early photographs had been minimalist and straightforward, but as her ideas evolved she sought to manifest their complexity. Al-Dowayan found inspiration in Pop Art - the idea of removing an impersonal item from its common context to transform it as a work of art that was relatable and, therefore, enduring. In “Landscapes of the Mind” an introspective series produced in 2009 the artist reflects upon herself as a symbol of society superimposing motifs

(flightless birds or watchful eyes) over photographs of the Saudi Arabian landscape, the artist’s own veiled presence is deliberately overlaid to amplify a sense of tension. Manipulating reality, she highlights the power of perception, posing the question: Do we belong to the landscape or does it belong us? While she continued to dissect the many aspects of the female identity, her narratives grew increasingly intricate and conceptual. In 2010 she drew inspiration from founders of the New York graffiti movement, Futura2000 and Stash, her consequent body of work, “And We Had No Shared Dreams” expounded upon the symbiotic relationship between a landscape and its inhabitants. The series included photographs, layered with spray paint and collage, as well as LED and neon lights. The works visualized mixing energies and voiced the ever-present



I am an Educator. Manal AlDowayan. Image Copyright to the Artist, Courtesy of Cuadro Gallery.

sounds of an inhaling and expanding city, exploring the destruction and escapism brewing beneath a concrete surface. The following year, she produced her first sculptural works; A series of fiberglass doves, similar to the silk-screen motifs often seen in her photographs, were motionless and frozen mid-flight. In what would become her first collaborative work of art, Al-Dowayan collected from accomplished Saudi Arabian women permission slips signed by male guardians, which allow a Saudi woman to travel alone. Each dove was then imprinted with a unique permission slip. The completed installation of 200 flying doves, entitled “Suspended Together” married the agonizing loss of freedom to the hopeful intention of flight. “Suspended Together” was exhibited during the 2011 Venice Biennale and was later acquired by the Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern

Art, Doha.

In early 2012, Al-Dowayan undertook her second collaborative project entitled “Esmi” (My Name). “Esmi” commented on the unique Saudi Arabian custom of not mentioning a woman’s name in public. In response to this, over 400 participating Saudi women, including Princess Ameerah Al-Taweel, hand wrote their names on large wooden beads that were strung together to form three-meter prayer beads. A total of nine prayer beads were produced and are today housed in important private collections. In the latter part of 2012, Al-Dowayan returned to producing black and white photographs. In a deeply personal series entitled, “If I Forget You, Don’t Forget Me” she compiled memorabilia representing the youth of her father’s generation. The nostalgic images spoke of ordinary moments and



Baders Camera, Silver gelatin fibre print, 25x35cm, 2012. Image Copyright to the Artist and Courtesy of Cuadro Gallery.

ordinary people that are truly extraordinary in that they cannot be replaced. In 2013, the complete series was acquired by the British Museum. The same year, she drew attention to the misrepresentation of women by Saudi Arabian media. In “The State of Disappearance” she interrupts an actual news image of a woman by layering it with words. These interruptions evoke an association between the word (love, courage, happiness and intelligence) and the veiled women, therefore, humanizing a generic image and emphasizing the act of preservation in the presence of social bias. Again, a photograph entitled *Courage* from the series was acquired by the Los Angeles Contemporary Museum of Art.

Al-Dowayan continued her investigation of memory - the act of forgetting as well as safeguarding, the elements that evoke nostalgia and those that leave us numb to the suffering of another. In 2014, brought her

third and most recent collaborative art project, “The Tree of Guardians” drew attention to the exclusion of women from Saudi Arabian family trees. Participating women engraved the names of female relatives on brass leaves, which were then assembled as an installation. The tree celebrated Saudi women of the current generation and simultaneously held in reverence the silent voices of generations past. Over the course of 2013, Al-Dowayan researched frequent car accidents that claim the lives of women school teachers appointed to work in remote Saudi Arabian villages. Poorly paid and restricted from driving, the school teachers were forced to pool funds to travel in groups, putting their lives in the hands of unreliable drivers and vehicles. She year-long research on “Crash” culminated with a residency at Doha’s Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in 2014. The artist converted the museum’s project space into a temporary studio to compile information



Mohammed and Oil, Silver gelatin fibre print, 25x35cm, 2012. Image Courtesy of Cuadro Gallery.

that attempted to humanize the accidents, command attention to the forgotten victims and provoke a dialogue on the traditional and future position of women in Saudi Arabian society. While her early works spoke in unified and minimalist straightforwardness, Al-Dowayan's multi-layered photographs, research-based projects, installations and sculptures rose in emboldened rebellion with as much potency as grace "I try to include many layers to my concepts and force myself out of the comfort of simplifying data, because simplicity does not mean clarity." She persisted in unveiling the importance of women's contributions to a nation, highlighting the effects of cultural and legal restrictions on the political, social, economic and psychological, identity of the female gender. In engaging the world to listen, not only to her own story but also that of entire communities, Al-Dowayan cemented her role both as a leading conceptual

contemporary artist and a cultural diplomat. Her work repackages the everyday, humanizes the faceless and emblazons a trail for empathy, preservation and change.

About the Writer

Elvina Halli has a Bachelor of Science in Business Management with a parallel focus in Politics, Philosophy and Economics from The King's College, New York. She began her career in the art industry with Christie's, New York and continued working with the auction house's South Asian Modern and Contemporary art department in London and Mumbai. In 2013, Halli joined Cuadro Gallery, Dubai to handle international projects and communications.

Note

1. Robert Frank. *The Americans*. Robert Delpire, Grove Press, Steidl, France, 1958.
2. *Emaho Magazine*, Interview by Shreya Bose with Manal Al-Dowayan, *Art & Culture*, 2014.

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