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Contemporary Art**

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ABSTRACT

The Emirati burqa or 'mask', a form of face covering worn by the majority of Emirati women in the United Arab Emirates until the late 1960s that reveals the eyes but does not cover the hair or body. Engaging with the research findings, the culmination of the thesis is the body of art works exhibited in the 2014 London exhibition, 'An Intimate Object', that re-animates the burqa as a living object with its own history and new contemporary meanings. Focusing on the significance of the body and senses in knowledge production, the art practice shows the burqa has 'a voice' in a conversation that draws upon past traditions referencing protection and its value as a personal and precious object. The burqa speaks, its indigo residue bleeds as an active witness to its lost past. It also plays a part in rediscovery or keeping the past of this material object alive through contemporary art practice as an aesthetic and political strategy. In this paper the traditional craft materials, inscription methods, film, photography and installation are used and experimented. The in-person practice and engagement are with performing the material culture of the female burqa as a response to its disappearing practice and its previously little recorded history. Focusing on the significance of the body and knowledge, the practice gives the burqa 'a voice' in a conversation that draws upon past traditions referencing protection and its value as a personal and precious object.

Keywords: Burqa, material culture, performance, intimate, memory

Introduction

Burqa is a traditional face covering for Emirati women. It is made of burnished cotton cloth saturated with indigo dye, covering the face, either wholly or partially, revealing the eyes. The literal meaning of burqa in Arabic (burqu') is 'content is covered' and consequently, the term has various meanings in the Arabian Peninsula beyond its prevalent association with women's face coverings. Notably, there are various animal burqas. One of the oldest and most well known in various parts of the world is the falcon burqa, placed over the eyes of the bird to limit its field of vision or to force it to sleep. Similarly, the camel burqa, for example, exists in modern day Yemen, where it is used for working camels walking around large sesame seed grinders to extract the purest sesame seed oil. The term burqa is also used to describe the highly decorated piece of cloth that is hung in front of the 'Kabba door' in Mecca in Saudi Arabia, the most holy shrine in Islam. In this paper the rituals and beliefs associated with the burqa, the craft of burqa making, the embodied experiences and social practices, the intimate object for women wearers and makers, and the marker of local, regional and national identity were understood and studied.

Literature Review

The first accounts that record the burqa's existence in the Arabian Peninsula are by western writers often referred to as Orientalists (Figure 1). An image of Sir Richard Francis Burton (1821-1890) wearing the pilgrimage clothing beside women wearing white clothes and mask cover her face is one of the documented images. In addition, in the diary of James Theodore Bent (1852-1897) wife, Mabel Bent (1847-1929), there were hand drawing of Omani burqa. Harold Richard Patrick Dickson (1881-1959) drew a face cover in Kuwait.

Figure 1. *The First Accounts that Record the Burqa's Existence in the Arabian Peninsula are by Western Writers Often Referred to as Orientalists (Top and Left) Sir Richard Francis Burton (1821-1890) (Top and Right) James Theodore Bent (1852-1897) of Mabel Bent, Wife of Theodore Bent (Bottom) Harold Richard Patrick Dickson (1881-1959)*



Scholars concur that the burqa was introduced into the Arabian Peninsula in the early eighteenth century by the Baluchi who mainly inhabited Baluchistan, an area between Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan. The Baluchi were in Arabia from the 16th and 17th centuries, especially the significant migrations of the Baluchi to Oman. The Baluchi settled first in Oman and gradually moved into the surrounding Gulf areas, including the UAE. According to the researcher Najlah Al Azzi, Baluchi's women brought with them new traditions including the wearing of the burqa face covering. Baluchi's women worked for local families as domestic servants and married local slaves who worked for wealthy Omani families in their palaces. Al Azzi argues that the Omani women from these palaces adopted the burqa but with more elaborate and decorative embroidery to underline their higher social status.

Some visual evidence of the Omani burqa at the turn of the twentieth century are documented in the form of photographs. The earliest photo, dated 1898, and titled 'Arab Woman, Muscat' is by Emile Allemann. However, several photographs produced as postcards by by A. R. Fernandez just a few years later, in 1901 show the highly decorative Omani burqa. These include the images titled "Arab Woman" Muscat and 'Baluch Woman, Muscat'.

12-The British Museum collection of burqas from the Arabian Peninsula, established in 2010, has two Omani burqas of relevance here. The first dating from the late nineteenth century is referred to as the 'Burqa Oman' and the

second is the 1920s ‘Burqa Zanzibar’. These two examples are further evidence of the burqa in this region. The first record of Emirati burqa is by Ronald Codrai in 1951 (Figure 2).

Figure 2. *The First Record of Emirati Burqa is by Ronald Codrai in 1951*



In response to existing confusions in western sources, the accompanying photographic self-portrait clarifies the differences between the different forms of face in the UAE, and that includes the veil, niqab, and burqa (Figure 3). The veil covers a woman’s head and neck down to her shoulders and back. The niqab is made from black fabric and a woman wears it over her nose to cover her face (leaving a gap for her eyes) to the top of the chest. The burqa is a mask for women covering the face.

Figure 3. *Photographic Self-Portrait Clarifies the Differences between the Different Forms of Face in the UAE*



The most important question is “why women are wearing the burqa?”. The first reason is that according to them it is a sign of modesty. In the interview with the burqa makers, they point out that wearing the burqa was not a religious practice required by the Quran or the Prophet Mohammed. Therefore, the burqa is part of the UAE tradition and culture and is not related to Islam religion. The second reason is that burqa provides protection from the elements as it protects the woman’s delicate skin from the wind, sand and sun. The third reason is that women had to wear the burqa whenever they were in the presence of men outside the family. According to the researcher Fatimah Al Mughanni in her book [Traditional Adornment and Woman’s Fashion in the United Arab Emirates] (2012), some women did not take off their burqas in

front of their husbands until they have had three children; at that point, the woman would allow her husband to see her face for the first time.

Methodology

Throughout researching for the history of the burqa and its making processes, several methods are employed that are drawn from ethnography, interviews with women making and wearing burqas, artists who used burqa as subject matter, and manufacturers who produced burqa textile. In addition to that, observations, workshops with students of fine art in Kingston University and Sharjah University, and questionnaires are done alongside the empirical research. The interviews are done with women making and wearing burqa, men, artists, and manufactures from UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, and Mumbai. Moreover, as part of this paper enquiry I wore a burqa for the first time, and when I first looked at myself in the mirror, I realised the burqa enhanced how my eyes look. Speaking while wearing the burqa was unsettling, because the timbre of my voice changed and my speech was rather muffled. I felt that there was a barrier between the outside world and myself; this helped me to consider how the burqa felt for its wearer. When I was with my children, they treated me as if I was a stranger and they did not look directly at me, not even into my eyes. It was as if the burqa was controlling me. This experiment provoked a great deal of curiosity and spurred on me to understand Emirati women's actual experience of wearing the burqa. The experiments done on the burqa include testing the perceptions of the quality of the burqa fabric.

Discussion and Artwork: How is This Research Materialised through the Practice?

To further develop the knowledge of different Emirati burqa types and their usage, numerous visits to places such as souks where women typically gather, as well as attending occasions such as weddings and funerals where women are asked about their knowledge of different burqa forms were accomplished and completed. Based upon these discussions, together with the in-depth interviews, photographs of the burqa wearing women interviewed, images drawn from publications and documentary film, and the old burqas donated by interviewees, a map of the UAE that represents the historical sites associated with specific burqa forms and the areas where the different burqas are still worn today was constructed (Figure 4). Having plotted this map of burqa types, the resulting visualisation makes it clear that the larger burqas can be seen solely in the desert areas where arguably women needed to protect their faces from harsh weather and may have been less exposed to modernising influences. The concentration of burqa wearing practices also aligns with the density of populations in the major Emirates cities overlooking the coast of Arabian Gulf.

Figure 4. Map of the UAE that Represents the Historical Sites Associated with Specific Burqa Forms and the Areas Where the Different Burqas are Still Worn Today



Embodying Memory: Loss and Recovery of the Burqa

The artwork “Embodying Memory: Loss and Recovery of the Burqa” is created carrying indirect references to the importance Emirati women attached to the burqa fabric as an embodiment of their culture, history and lived customs, its association with memory and ritual. The main aim is to identify what women burqa wearers and burqa makers feel about the burqa, how they experience the burqa, when they wear it, and the meanings that this intimate object carries for them.

One of the first experiments was prompted by a personal childhood memory of seeing women bathing and washing their clothes in the sea, leaving their burqas on the beach for safe keeping. This memory gave me the inspiration to think about what would happen if a burqa was immersed in the sea. To test this out, I went to the beach in Sharjah early one morning when the sea was calm, taking the camera with me. Throwing several burqas into the sea, I wanted to see if the indigo colour seeping from the fabric would be visible in the seawater. Traces of the indigo dye were not visible, also there were no visible changes to the burqa even when it had been in the salty water for some time. The current took one away and buried it in the sand. Another floated out to sea and I managed to catch the others and stop them from drifting off. The resulting photographs, Figure 5, depicts the burqa that was buried by the sea in the sand like an abandoned or discarded object, paralleling the disappearance of the Emirati burqa. These photographs inspired me to think about my work for the first time as a form of performance or enactment.

Figure 5. Photographs of the “*Embodying Memory: Loss and Recovery of the Burqa*”, of *Burqas Thrown in the Beach*, 2013



The second experiment was done in order to capture the visible effects of indigo seeping from the burqa (Figure 6). Where the survived burqas were re-submerged in a large glass basin of mineral water and recorded the process of seepage on film. When submerged, the indigo started to escape immediately as if the fabric was bleeding and this created conflict and mixed emotions. On one hand, the indigo escaping was like the burqa disappearing or fading. On the other, I was happy that the dye was running out as the effect was visually stunning. In the produced video entitled ‘Neel’ (Indigo) the indigo disperses in the water in a mesmerising way.

Figure 6. Shots from the Film of the “*Embodying Memory: Loss and Recovery of the Burqa*”, of *Burqa Submerged into Water*, 2013



This visual dispersal, with no accompanying sound, could be seen as a metaphor for the disappearance of the burqa and, in time, a loss of the personal and collective memories associated with it in the fast changing society of the UAE. In this context, ‘Neel’ could be seen as visually representing or re-presenting the burqa as an active witness to its lost past. It also plays a part in rediscovery or keeping this material object alive through re-activation. Incorporating some of the personal narratives and memories of my interviewees, the film could also be perceived as a visual diary of the life of a woman who used to go to the beach to wash her family’s clothes and bathe, leaving her burqa on the beach.

Zeena, 2013

Traditionally, it is recounted that in the three days before a bride's wedding she would have been isolated and hidden from her family. Her mother (or close female relatives/friends) would have been responsible for preparing her for her groom, applying indigo dye with herbs and aromatic oils onto her entire body, and she would have had a mixture of oils applied to her hair to soften it. Some of the women I interviewed confirmed their experience of this custom saying that the dye contained the light of the Prophet Yusuf and that they wanted this light to exist in their faces.

'Zeena' (Adornment) of 2013, Figure 7, was filmed in an old building in Sharjah. This location is chosen because of its former life as a domestic dwelling and its highly textured interior walls that provided a striking colour contrast with the white clothes I had selected to wear. Creating the idea of a woman's personal life and of her treasured belongings, I placed metal tins on the floor containing burqas. Through using a mirror I observed myself performing the role of the bride-to-be applying the indigo dye from the burqa textile to my face. As a form of female embodied enactment I wanted to experience what a bride might have felt just before her marriage. Applying the dye with my fingers as if I was painting a portrait, I focused on moving from one area to another of my face in order to enhance the features. In the process, my fingers touched the burqa and then moved to touch the skin, creating an intimacy between the burqa and my body.

Figure 7. *Shots from the Film of the "Zeena", 2013*



I needed to see myself in order to know where I was applying the dye and I wanted to see myself performing and experiencing the ritual. The mirror, often associated with the world of women, is also a metaphor for painting and acts as

a frame within a frame, where my body and the reflection of my body in the mirror reveal feeling and emotions both as the subject and object of the work. In reality 'the bride' would not be able to see herself during or after this ritual.

Depicting a woman isolated from the outside world, without a sense of time, and involved in an inner dialogue, the silent video imaginatively reflects upon the marriage ritual and the isolation of the three days before her first night of marriage. I imagined what it was like to have the indigo dye applied to one's body. Whilst performing this ritual I could see my face gradually turning indigo blue and memorized my physical and emotional feelings. Looking at the mirror I could see a stranger looking back at me, an out of body experience. It was an uncomfortable experience and I wondered how brides felt after three days of this, all in the name of beauty.

Bride Reflecting, 2014

Another ritual related to the burqa practice is Bride Reflecting. In 'Bride Reflecting', I considered the traditional custom of the bride and groom not seeing each other until the night of their wedding, if the groom wanted his wife to remove her burqa, he had to give her money first. This tradition was called 'Revealing the burqa'. In the photograph I using myself as the subject, I wanted to capture the bride's imagined emotions at the particular moment of waiting alone in the 'marriage bedroom' and her internal conversation with herself. Is he handsome? Is he kind? Will I have a good life with him? Will he like me?

I wanted to portray the bride asking herself these questions and the feelings she may have experienced in the moments before the groom walked through the door. Was she experiencing fear, excitement or uncertainty?

Wearing a burqa decorated with crystals and the white traditional garment, the black background of 'Bride Reflecting' symbolised night and created maximum contrast (Figure 8). Using motion capture methods, I produced three self-images within a single frame, creating an imagined narrative about the unknown husband in the 'form' of a conversation. The photograph was intended to express a female subjectivity with an obvious sense of self-communication. The three figures were intended to symbolize the bride with two other voices in her head. Two of the figures are facing one another and the third is looking at the viewer inviting us to share a private moment and reflect upon her inner conversation as an embodied female subject.

Figure 8. *“Bride Reflecting” Portray, 2014*



Intimate Performance, 2018

In this performance, Figure 9, the function of the burqa textile use to making Emirati burqa cover women face is used as tools of the created painting. The indigo dye within the burqa textile was used as the basic of my painting dealing with the fabric as brush to create the artwork.

In the performance, the intimate between the burqa textile and the actor (me) through touch, moving, fold, compresses and squeeze move from corner to another of canvas was impersonated. The main goal of this work is to transfer the light of Prophet Yusuf from burqa textile to exist on the canvas.

Figure 9. *Shot of the “Intimate Performance” Artwork in Abu Dhabi Arts Fair, 2018*



The Burqas Awning, 2019

The Burqas Awning is a public art project constructed in Hatta Public Park, Dubai (Figure 10). This art installation highlights an important Emirati cultural element using contemporary art towards representational and functional work. It aims to remind park visitors of this cultural element which represents the identity of Emirate women, linking it to the community's memory and heritage.

Figure 10. *The Burqa Awning Artwork in Hatta Public Park, Dubai, 2019*



The Burqa form is different from one region to another within the UAE. The Burqa form applied in this artwork is from Dubai and it is called “Bulafah”. The artwork consists of an assembly of small burqas to form one large one with an area of 4m x 6m. The project began with the adoption of one Burqa unit to calculate the total number of Burgas required to compose the awning. The material selected is off-white opaque acrylic sheets fabricated by laser-cut machine. Wires were used to assemble the small burqas, and the work was suspended as an awning for shade. Lights were incorporated into the work for a different visual effect at night.

A Few of Their Stories, 2021

Miss Mariam was forced to wear the Burqa on her wedding night despite her refusal and crying. Aisha, tore and destroyed many of Burqas, refusing to wear them, until she was convinced that her husband will give her an amount of money in return for him removing the Burqa. That would be the first time he sees her. Then there was the story of Miss Tarifa when she tried to mimic her mother by wearing a Burqa when she was young. Then, at the age 15, she wore it without knowing how to tie it properly. In this artwork, I tried to communicate these women's emotions, feelings, and stories through put them on stage of gathering together within unspoken conversations. On this stage it can be seen that young woman with modern style of dress on the other side there is grandmother wearing scary burqa shape. The work present different figures with different forms of burqa, on gathering seen made from clay (Figure 11).

Figure 11. *Clay Sculpture of “A Few of Their Stories”, 2021*



Conclusion

The history of the Emirati burqa and its associated rituals was studied and used as an embodied material object, made and worn by Emirati women. It is presented a new body of fine artwork that involves with and responds to specific parts of this history, as well as to the materiality of the burqa itself. In order to study and further understand the burqa four methods were used and applied, which are: ethnography, workshops, participation and observation, and experimenting. From there, several artworks and videos were created embodying the stories, beliefs, and rituals of the burqa. Through the creation of new work that engages with the specific sensorial world of the Emirati burqa as an intimate object once made and worn by women, the research gives this little studied subject a new life in the present and transforms it from an inanimate, dead object to a living object with its own history and new contemporary meanings through the performativity of embodied material culture.

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