About the exhibition

Tell me about the title of your exhibition.

“Until Total Liberation” is an often-used slogan in Palestinian revolutionary politics and is seen in a number of Palestinian Liberation Organization posters. Over the last 100 years or so, Middle Eastern women in photography, postcards, newsreel cinema, and other images perpetuate the idea of a very singular struggle with patriarchal oppression. These representations and their narrow focus in no way address the complexity and diversity of the Middle Eastern experience, let alone the female experience. Middle Eastern women do not merely bear the burden of representation, but also actively and currently, struggle with access, security, displacement, socio-economic mobility, and very simply, human rights. The title enforces that until, as a people, we are afforded the same human rights as our Western counterparts, we will never truly, and fully, be liberated. It also provides an intersectional moment in its reference to universal women’s experiences in general.

What do you want viewers to take away from your exhibition?

Historically, Middle Eastern and North African women were portrayed by the Western perspective as exotic, sexual temptresses, or the “other” making them of objects of desire but also revulsion. Featuring myself as the protagonist, the photographs suggest colonial-era photographs and contemporary imagery popularized through the media, but ultimately act as an artistic intervention from a Palestinian Iraqi female’s perspective. Representation of female slaves, the sultan’s harem, the mashrabiya (an Arabic architecture element of homes also mistakenly referred to as a “harem’s window” in English), water pipe and water vessel were part of a non-ambiguous strategy of staging otherness.

Appropiaring film rushes made between 1935–1955 by the British Pathé, the video addresses the early period in which motion picture “newsreel” cinema was popular in the West. Their depictions of Middle Eastern women and their lifestyles are reframed to magnify the problematic nature of their reporting. These film rushes are interwoven with footage of myself as live, human water feature in the tradition of human sculpture as a water fountain often found in public spaces or traffic circles.

All of the works in the exhibition make reference to the presentation and representation of women, some more directly, like those in the studio space, and some refer to an absence, as in the sculpture on the roof. The sculpture is out in the public sphere just as the iconic fountain Kahramana, by Mohammed Ghani Hikmat, it references in Baghdad, Iraq. The fountain depicts a scene from Ali Babba and the 40 thieves, in which a sharp slave girl (Marjanah) outwits the 40 thieves reflecting the ingenuity and self-reliance of women, even under physical danger. The sculpture on the roof here at Artpace is separate materially from which a sharp slave girl (Marjanah) outwits the 40 thieves reflecting the ingenuity and self-reliance of women, even under physical danger. The sculpture on the roof here at Artpace is separate materially from the rest of the exhibition, so it’s displaced. The silhouetted figure calls attention to the invisibility of Iraqi women who have disappeared or been assassinated since 2003.

Ultimately, I’m confronting our image-history through a feminist and postcolonial lens. The project is an implicit critique of the social exploitation generated over a century, while disrupting the paradigm through a strategy of assigning power through the female body and narration of her stage.

Thank you

The artist wishes to thank all those who contributed to UNTIL TOTAL LIBERATION, including:

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Sama Alshaibi (b. Basra, Iraq, 1973) is a multimedia artist who employs the use of photography, video/object hybrids, and installation. Alshaibi’s practice explores spaces of conflict, post-war, and migration to tease out issues of citizenship and power. Frequently featuring herself as a protagonist within her works she applies the body as an allegorical device to investigate geographical metaphors that exist between spaces of political and social oppression. Alshaibi’s monograph, Sama Alshaibi: Sand Rushes In (New York: Aperture, 2015) presents her Silsila series, which probes the human dimensions of migration, borders, and environmental demise. Silsila was exhibited at the 55th Venice Biennale (Venice, 2013), the Honolulu Biennale (Hawaii, 2017), Marta Herford Museum (Germany, 2017), and the Qalandia International Biennial (Haifa, 2016). Her 15 solo exhibitions include Silsila (Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University, NY, 2017 and Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, Arizona, 2016), Collapse (Ayyam Gallery, Dubai, 2015), and Sand Rushes In (Ayyam Gallery, London, 2015). Alshaibi is a professor and Co-Chair of Photography, Video & Imaging at University of Arizona, Tucson, where she was granted the title “1885 Distinguished Scholar”. She received a Visual Arts Grant by the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture in 2017, the Arizona Commission on the Arts “Visual Arts Grant” in 2018 and was awarded a Fulbright Scholar Fellowship (2014–2015) as part of a residency at the Palestine Museum in Ramallah.

Alshaibi is represented by Ayyam Gallery in Dubai, UAE.