

Iconic Panopticon

Sharif Waked's installation shows a group of identical structures, consisting of two-meter-tall rectangular pillars. They are clad in black cloth, resembling burkas, the traditional dress of the Afghan woman, with a rectangular opening for the monitor screen which stands in place of the eyes. The monitors show a looped video—a fashion show in the accepted mode; elegant, glamorous, but self-distorting every time the models reach the end of the catwalk. The video-fashion show thus mimics the performance that Palestinians are forced into at the checkpoints. Waked exposes and transforms stereotypes of East and West and, in the images, displays the underlying power relationships. Waked plays on notions of covered body parts contrasted with the nudity of exposure; the segregated body of a woman comes to contain and symbolize the segregation, behavioral restrictions and powerlessness of an entire population. He alludes to images of the veil, the chador, the burka, and intervenes in the discourse of how women are seen in society, how they are objectified, which determines relations of power and looking.

In the fashion show seen on the monitors this male gaze is diverted. This gaze which allowed the woman only complementary exhibitionism and a narcissist fascination with her own image, is ambiguous and more complex here. It sends back a picture that confuses the issue, it decodes a stereotype and transforms it into a political encounter. The dichotomy between what is seen and what it represents points to a contradiction in value systems, which is not confined to any particular place, but is universally applicable. Waked explodes the frame of the fashion show and invests the stereotype of being looked at with a new sinister significance. Waked presents us with a performance of exposure, an exposure which is transformed into a metaphor of political exploitation. The installation can be seen within the wider context of performance, which has been used for subversive purposes by surrealist and futurist artists in the past. Like them Waked borrows the practices of the Cabaret and turns it into a political manifestation. These peculiar tall structures not only resemble women in burkas but also recall Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon. Michel Foucault describes the Panopticon as "a perimeter building in the form of a ring. At the centre of this, a tower, pierced by large windows, opening to the inner surface of the ring. The outer building is divided into cells each of which transverses the whole thickness of the building. These cells have two windows, one opening to the inside, facing the windows of the central tower, the other, outer one allowing daylight to pass through the whole cell. It was a system of centralized observation, a system of isolating visibility an observation point which served as a focus of exercising power." Foucault contends that in those systems of surveillance the inspecting gaze would eventually be internalized by the individuals. Here is precisely the point where Waked's figures become part of his rebellion. This rebellion, this refusal to yield, might ultimately represent a survival technique—not only for the surveyed but also for the surveyor who employs the technology.

(Henie Westbrook)

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