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## **In Many Worlds: A Discussion with Egyptian Artist Sabah Naeem**

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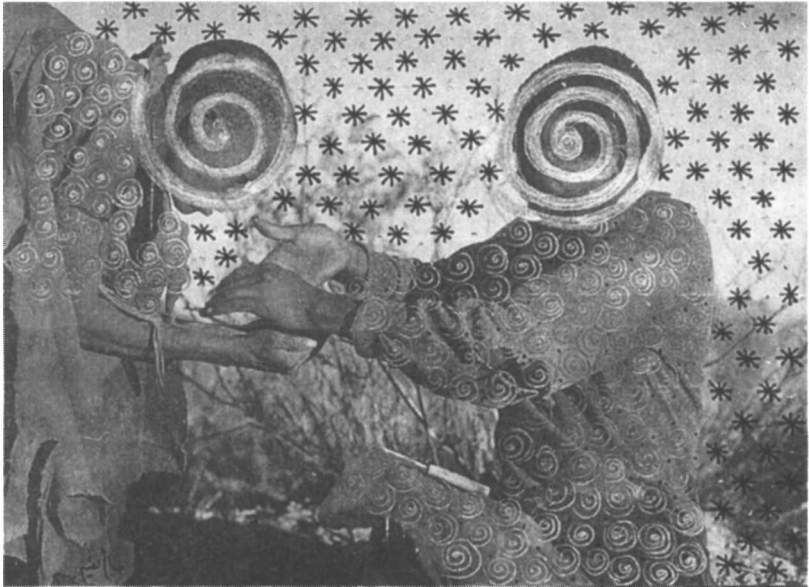
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## In Many Worlds

### A Discussion with Egyptian Artist Sabah Naeem

JESSICA WINEGAR

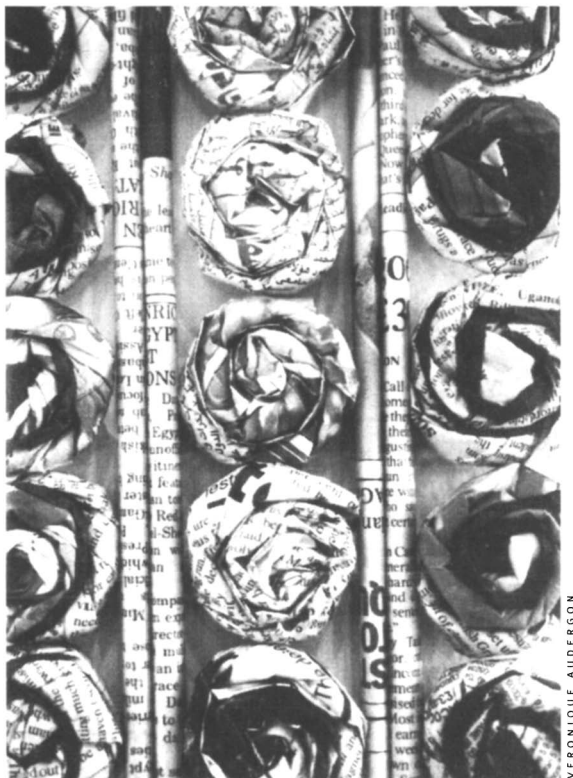
When she has free time between her responsibilities at the university and at home, Sabah Naeem sits in her family's apartment in a working-class neighborhood in Cairo, meticulously rolling and twisting newspapers into tightly woven balls. She takes print from Arabic, English, and French-language newspapers and coils or folds them together, creating a visual reference to the three cultural or colonial influences on contemporary Egyptian life. Sometimes patches of colored advertisements from the local press appear amidst these textual twists and folds—including



SABAH NAEEM. 2000. MIXED MEDIA ON PAPER.

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SABAH NAEEM.  
1999. PAPER.



VERONIQUE AUDERGON

truncated images of fashion models, luxury homes, imported Mercedes cars, or European watches. In some of her other work, Naeem takes images of people—men, women, Egyptians, Europeans, Africans, young, old—and draws the rolls and the twists directly on them. Carefully and repetitively, she inscribes many small gold, white, and red spirals, circles, and stars over carefully selected portions of the images. Here a face is covered with an intricate spiral; there the entire background is awash in tiny stars, highlighting the image of a poor woman holding a cigarette, gazing out at the viewer. In another piece, part of a child's body is covered, with only the face, a foot, and a hand gesture left revealed.

Rolls, twists, folds, and circles that both cover and reveal texts, faces, and bodies. These are the elements of Egyptian artist Sabah Naeem's work. She explains that each roll or circle is like a different, intensely personal, world. When placed together, these private worlds create something more general and universal. Likewise, when she covers parts of images with circles and stars, she highlights a gesture or expression (like

sorrow or waiting) that could be found anywhere. Just as Naeem explores this relationship between the specific and the universal in her work, she lives her life at a similar intersection of “worlds,” some specific and some shared.

Naeem’s story reflects the struggles of an emerging generation of lower-class, public-school educated artists living and working in their home societies,<sup>1</sup> while at the same time trying to gain exposure in the U.S. and Western Europe. But in this foreign context, artists whose work critiques patriarchy or religious oppression in majority-Muslim societies, or which is at least interpreted to do so, tend to garner the most significant attention.<sup>2</sup> Yet Naeem and others like her do not fit into this category—in part because their aesthetic interests lie elsewhere and are shaped by art worlds and social dynamics outside the West, in part because of their class positions, and in part because of their religious practice.

In the following interview and accompanying images, we see that the major issues concerning Naeem in her work are shaped by the massive socioeconomic changes that have occurred in Egypt over the past thirty years. Not only are Naeem and her colleagues among the first lower-class Egyptians to move into the intellectual elite, but they are also part of a generation<sup>3</sup> that came of age during the radical reorientation of Egypt from the U.S.S.R. towards the U.S. that occurred during Sadat’s presidency. Now, as they begin their careers, they are confronted with a second wave of economic liberalization that is dramatically changing Egyptian society, especially its class structure and forms of consumption. Unlike senior artists, who often promote artistic national sovereignty, young artists like Naeem often stake out their position as simultaneously “global” and “Egyptian.” Indeed, their different class backgrounds, combined with the political and economic atmosphere in which they grew up, create an engagement with the West—its ideas, products, and art—that appears quite different from that of their forebears.

For example, to the dismay of many senior critics, Naeem juxtaposes materials and forms from different origins. She takes images from both Arab and European media, including advertisements for the luxury products increasingly available in the changing economy. Many of the symbols that she draws over them, such as stars, are borrowed from Pharaonic tomb painting. In her nude paintings, she takes a genre from the classical Western canon and tries to portray her figures with culturally specific modesty. Naeem combines her commitment to local sensibility, and interest in using symbols from Egyptian art history, with her desire to

reach a certain universality in her work. As we see in the interview, Naeem attempts to take that which has a local origin and, by combining it with elements whose origin is not local, aims to elevate both the local and the non-local to the universal. This project puts her work in a constant tension between denying “Western” or “Egyptian” monopoly on certain cultural media or forms, and claiming a certain local specificity.

These tensions among local, national, and global that are experienced and expressed by Naeem and her generation are often gendered as well. Just as many state and religious institutions around the world deploy women as symbols and protectors of the nation (cf., Abu-Lughod 1998; Chatterjee 1993; Kandiyoti 1991), much intellectual discourse in Egypt gauges the country’s success by the roles and actions of women. For example, religious intellectuals often argue that the veil is an important way for women to maintain cultural identity while the socioeconomic conditions of the country shift unexpectedly. In contrast, secular intellectuals, such as older-generation men and women in the art world, see the veil as proof that their society is unmodern or too provincial.<sup>4</sup> Naeem and other young Egyptian women who veil describe the practice differently: it is a way to be a good Muslim, it brings one closer to God, and it is a socially popular style of dress. Furthermore, they believe that the veil actually offers them more freedom from gender discrimination, because they are judged for their intellect rather than their beauty.

In her work, Naeem explores the idea of freedom and its relationship to gender by seeking culturally specific ways of dealing with the human body. In her paintings of her own body,<sup>5</sup> she represents herself in sheer clothing, which, while inappropriate for the Cairo street and “nude” in her definition, still preserves a respect for the body. She argues that this respect, and modesty, is culturally and religiously important. In her later work, she remains committed to the sanctity of the human (especially female) body, and to its ability to express emotional and physical states other than sexual ones. She takes photographs from newspapers and covers faces and backgrounds to highlight the expressiveness of the body and its gestures. Whereas in other contexts covering signifies negation, Naeem draws on a whole cultural complex (including veiling) in which covering illuminates important aspects of personhood while reserving privacy and respect for other aspects (cf. El-Guindi 1999).<sup>6</sup>

In the following interview, we see how Naeem is striving to formulate an alternative mode of thinking and doing art that reflects not only her cultural and religious sensibility (shaped by her class background), but

also the other worlds in which she lives. These range from the elite art scene to the global “scapes” of media, technology, and ideas (Appadurai 1990). The intersection of these worlds, and/or the way Naeem deals with them, may appear contradictory or compromising to many artists and intellectuals—in Egypt, and in the U.S. and Europe. But for Naeem, the language of universalism binds these worlds together in a way that makes sense. Universalism allows her to express her own specificity while resisting imprisoning categories of difference (based on her veil, gender, religion, or culture). Such a construction of difference, she argues, inevitably contains within it an evaluative apparatus, which denies her parity with other artists.

*The following discussion is a condensed and edited combination of two open-ended ethnographic interviews which took place in Arabic on September 16, 1999 and February 19, 2000, between Naeem and myself, a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Anthropology at New York University. The first interview was conducted for my dissertation concerning cultural politics in the Egyptian art world, while the purpose of the second was to clarify points for this article. I was introduced to Naeem early on in my fieldwork (in 1996) through mutual artist friends. Much of my analysis of Naeem and her work in this accompanying essay is also based on the many casual discussions we have had over the past several years about her art, her Ph.D. work, and my own dissertation. This essay and interview have been edited with Naeem, in part because we did not want to replicate a problematic trend in much art writing, in which white Western women “explain” and therefore categorize Arab/Muslim women in what are often strikingly Orientalist ways.*

**JESSICA WINEGAR:** How did you begin as an active artist in the Egyptian art scene, and what were some of the first topics you dealt with in your work?

**SABAH NAEEM:** After participating in several group exhibitions in college and afterwards, I thought of starting on my own. I began to make things that are close to me, which express my personal stories. My first exhibition was called *Discussions of the Body*. It was about my own identity and body. I was trying to see how the body is more free and expressive than a smile or a laugh, so I tried to impart emotions to the body, not to

the face. I was really dealing with the relationship between the body and life, or the external world. A lot of this work was about exploring and expressing my own emotions and feelings, but then I decided to get out of the circle of the self and look at the woman in the world, or the female among other persons. I wanted to express something more universal—like I am a person among others, or a condition among other similar conditions. I was thinking about the issue of repetitiveness, and how from a distance we all start to look the same. Differences appear only at closer distances—differences in the ways we look, our ways of thinking, and in our ways of dealing with other human beings.

So that's when my work became three-dimensional, and I started to form newspapers into circles in a way that referenced the circles of daily life, but also the cycle of life itself. Inside each circle there is a world that is so distinctive from the others beside it. Each circle of newspaper was a world that embodied other worlds. In this sense my early work was a search for myself in all my states—the unknown person who on the outside is just like everyone else (like the newspaper), and the distinctive person inside the circle. I have always been looking for something that is very common but specific to me at the same time. I found this in the idea of circles. I use symbols that are not specific to a certain place. I am trying to create a three-dimensional state that illuminates the universal dimensions of my work.

*In my photographic work, I cover the face with color or signs. I do this so that the state of the body itself can express what I want to say. I am not erasing a face; I am covering it to show other characteristics.*

**JESSICA WINEGAR:** In your dissertation project, how have you developed these ideas of the relationship between the body and the world, specifically women's bodies?

**SABAH NAEEM:** I am working on my dissertation at the Faculty of Art Education in Cairo. As you know, we don't work on degrees in specific media, but most of my work is painting and assemblage. The topic of the dissertation is the body in contemporary Egyptian art. I first started by considering the different ways that the body is dealt with physically, asking such questions as, "Why is it sometimes humiliated and at other times protected?" Or, "Why is it sometimes covered?" "Why do we sometimes give it importance and at other times ignore it?" And I thought

about the relationship between the mind and body. The thought process links the body to the mind but it is always the body that captures attention. For example when a thief steals something, it's his body that gets punished and not his thoughts. We often paint people and not ideas because it's the body that executes the thought. Then I started to think more about how the body is connected to society.

The way people dress is a reflection of the society and how they think. In an Eastern society like mine, people are always trying to cover the female, and she is not allowed to do many things. This [control over women] really has nothing to do with religion, but with society. Artists in other places can draw the nude. If I tried to do something like draw the nude here, it would be considered unacceptable. There are still people who will never accept a naked woman's body in art. They see it as bad or sacrilegious. But if I ignore the idea behind a painting and just say that it is bad or unacceptable, then I lose out on the meaning. Like if I say that because you are American, you leave your family's house at the age of twelve and date twenty different guys, and sleep with anyone. From my cultural perspective, I might say that you have no morals. You can do whatever you want to do. But when I deal with you as a person it is different. I start to realize that you have your own beliefs and morals. So I cannot make my way through the world using old stereotypical ideas. I can be either very *sh`abiyya* [a term referring to the "popular," or lower classes] and not catch up with the new, or be too liberal and overlook the old. Or I can merge the two and choose what I want. In my dissertation I am trying to express the body from my own perspective and my culture's perspective.

**JESSICA WINEGAR:** What are some of Egyptian society's concepts of the body that you are working with in your research?

**SABAH NAEEM:** In my thinking, I link the present, past, and future. I link Egypt, the U.S., and Europe. People here think you are imitating Europe if you are not dealing with tradition or respecting the taboos of society. But if I am watching television from the satellite dish, I can make choices about what I want to watch. Do I want to watch the sex channels or the respectful ones? Art is based on my choices and convictions. I don't do American or European art. The idea of the body that I want to convey is entirely my own. It comes from my culture, but it can have international



relevance. The point is to study the art of other cultures and learn what I want from it, but not apply it directly in my work. I produce work that has the influence of my own background. In the Western world you can represent the physical relationship between the two sexes very freely without embarrassment. In my work the body is represented with all its respect and privacy, often without any face or portrait. That is what I am looking for—the body with its own special essence.

When I was painting myself, I was searching for the state of bare feelings. I was looking for the inside, inside Sabah's body, rather than its superficial, material state. Some people at the university object to my work on the body. For them, the body is connected to sex only. And sex is related to nudity. We do not have public nudity in Egypt because of some Islamic ethics and beliefs. There are things that are forbidden. People believe that the nude body has no use other than for sex. I believe that we should be given complete freedom to draw the nude. I drew myself many times to learn how to draw the nude, because this is not taught in college. For my first exhibition, I drew myself nude many times in front of the mirror.

**JESSICA WINEGAR:** How can you be a veiled, pious woman and draw yourself nude?

**SABAH NAEEM:** Now, had I been a veiled doctor, wouldn't I operate on a nude person? Of course I would. This is science, and there is nothing shameful about science. The same applies to art. If I want to learn important things, then there is nothing sacrilegious about that. I personally see no difference between a woman in a bathing suit and a veiled woman, because this is such a personal relationship between the woman and her body, a secret. The veil for me is not about covering up. It is about religious duty. Just as I veil, I also pray and fast and believe. If I want to take off the veil I can, because it is not a cultural thing for me. I began wearing it three years before my mother did, so it was not forced on me. I have even asked my father plenty of times what he would say if I wanted to take the veil off and he said to do it. I use the veil as a means of becoming closer to God. Sometimes I think that if I could wear this veil on the inside, underneath my hair, and show my hair on the outside, I would. I see the veil as a special relationship with God, and not for people to see. I am totally liberal on the inside. I have my own concepts and beliefs that are specific to

me and not dictated by society. I love living an open, liberal life. Religion is ease and not difficulty. The veil is a choice. People might think I am ignorant. Other artists view the veil as repression, but I don't.

**JESSICA WINEGAR:** Why are artists against the veil?

**SABAH NAEEM:** Because artists feel that the veil is against freedom and they want their freedom. But the veil is not against freedom. Sometimes people in the art world think that you wear the veil because you can't live the life of the rich [i.e., afford a stylish hairdresser], or that your hair is ugly, or that your way of thinking is backward. They all refuse the idea that the veil is a choice. In a sense, I forced the issue of my veil on all of them. Many people did not even want to deal with me, but when I made them deal with me, they started to see past their ideas about a veiled woman. They started to let go of their misconceptions, which were based only on my appearance. But some still refuse my existence as an artist. They say, "she looks *balady*" [refers to lower-class taste]. They start saying that it's "a pity" that I veil. They say that I should be like modern progressive people. They say it doesn't suit me. They actually say all these things to me on a daily basis and it is really irritating.

But I feel that the veil gives me so much freedom that they cannot see. It gives me complete freedom to deal with people through my thoughts and not through a face or a body. I want people to treat me as a human being and not as an object of beauty or ugliness. You can tell how intellectual people are from the way they speak, or think, not from the way they look. This is why I look for a way to remove the outside and see inside. I also teach my students to have this kind of flexibility in their thinking.

**JESSICA WINEGAR:** Do male artists have something similar to the veil that might cause similar misconceptions in the art world?

**SABAH NAEEM:** Men handle it better because their veil is internal.<sup>7</sup> And in Egypt, men have more rights than women. Women do have some freedoms. I can go out with a group of men to a coffee shop and it is fine. But these same men would not allow any of their sisters to do the same as me. So the way they think is one thing and the way they act or pretend to act is something else. Men can look good on the outside and be very limited on the inside. You can have a university professor who views his own marriage as if he were buying a refrigerator. He buys it to keep it at home for

certain functions and that's it. But a male artist who is veiled on the inside—it doesn't show on the outside, so his career is not affected. Veiled women artists suffer marginalization because their veil is exterior.

**JESSICA WINEGAR:** Many artists, curators, and critics in the older generation criticize your veil, even though most Egyptian women wear some form of the headscarf. At the same time, though, they accuse you and your peers of imitating Western art. How do you respond to this?

**SABAH NAEEM:** I cannot say that to be an authentic Egyptian artist one should paint pictures of peasant women or ancient Egyptians. I am expressing a condition. We live a life of interconnection. A person chases after all that's new—technology, the Internet, computers, and the whole world that we find ahead of us. At the same time, a person still lives in an Egyptian state of mind because she or he still lives in Egypt. We are not solely Coptic, Pharaohs, or peasants, and we are not only Islamic either. We combine all that along with new technologies, products, and influences in our society. All this is Egypt. So in order for an Egyptian artist to be distinctive, he or she has to come up with something different and new. This is originality. I have to express the world I live in. I can have the old serve as a reference, but not as a basis for authenticity.

**JESSICA WINEGAR:** How does your family life and background influence your work?

**SABAH NAEEM:** I am the oldest of my siblings, and well educated in a society where very few people reach higher levels of education. There is still the idea that a person works nine to five, like a normal employee would. I am not your average employee. I need to be out of the house a lot for my work and I need a lot of time for my work. People in my social stratum don't understand this very much, because there is a big part of the society that does not understand what art is, or that an artist requires a lot of freedom. You find people who think that this freedom could lead a person to do something wrong. You have to start explaining to people that more freedom means more creativity, and that each person is responsible for his or her life and choices. Women here have cell phones, wear jeans and makeup, and have televisions and the internet, so I cannot say I live in a different world. But my brother still thinks it is a disgrace when I stay out after ten at night. He knows nothing about what I do from nine a.m.

to ten p.m. when I am out of the house. I could do anything in those twelve to thirteen hours. We need to break down these contradictions in our society. Here we have to live alike, so people around you will not think that you are being boastful or too proud. My family is adapting to the fact that I am considered crazy by their standards and that I cannot be like them, and they have understood that I am different. This difference has led to success, and they can see how fruitful it has been, so they are accepting it.

**JESSICA WINEGAR:** How did you become so different from the rest of your family?

**SABAH NAEEM:** First of all, art makes you different. Take a professor of medicine versus a professor of art. The professor of medicine wears an expensive suit. He talks down to his students. Art professors are easy-going even when they are well read and intellectual, because art requires that you feel the people around you more. The level of education is not the only difference between my family and me. The real difference is being an artist. Art is a kind of freedom, but it is also about being connected to the society and the people. For people in richer areas of the city, being educated is a familiar and common thing. But look at people from lower-class areas. When any of them gets a Ph.D. or becomes a professor, this is a big thing. Their families are so happy and ecstatic that they show their kids off.

**JESSICA WINEGAR:** When people from your family or your neighborhood see your lifestyle and your work, what is their reaction?

**SABAH NAEEM:** They feel that it is something they cannot grasp. Now I am doing my Ph.D. My relatives don't understand how I could not be finished studying yet. They say, "How much longer have you got to finish?" They don't realize that this is my job. They cannot grasp the concept of a woman who is still studying and has not started a home and a family yet, or who attends conferences and meetings at ten p.m. They ask why I can't do this in the morning. So I explain to them that there are such things as appointments and so on. It is very hard to explain this to them. When I try to explain modern art to some people, they think I should be drawing a portrait of them, or gardens, trees, and flowers. This is their way of thinking. You cannot explain everything to them.

JESSICA WINEGAR: Finally, some viewers, especially those from Europe and the U.S., see or want to see a feminist element in your work. How do you feel about that?

SABAH NAEEM: I don't really feel that I am making women's art. I make art as art and it is not relevant to my gender. It is the human state, at any age and any gender.



SABAH NAEEM. 2000. MIXED MEDIA ON PAPER.

Sabah Naeem's persistence against the kinds of discrimination she mentions here<sup>8</sup> has garnered her significant attention from unexpected places. In 1999 and 2000, she held two solo exhibitions at a new private gallery in Egypt owned by a Canadian. These shows resulted in sales of her work to major European curators. She was also chosen to exhibit at the 1999 Biennial of Mediterranean Countries in Rome, where sizable audiences gathered around her plexiglas boxes filled with newspaper rolled into small balls and folds. An American curator then selected her work for the Fall 2000 Beaux Arts exhibition in Paris.

But because she is veiled, religious, lower-class, and not a self-described feminist, Sabah Naeem presents perhaps an even greater

challenge to Western audiences than she does to certain Egyptian ones. Her work is not self-consciously critical of social inequality. It is not even political in any way easily recognizable to Western audiences, who seem to gravitate toward the obviously defiant. On the other hand, American viewers at her exhibitions have been intrigued by her intricate manipulation of newspapers and the way she highlights the pensive and melancholy moods of her anonymous subjects. Curators have been attracted to the intimacy of her works, how she draws symbols in a way that highlights the preciousness of certain forms or moments. And critics have highlighted the way she obsessively rolls tight balls that resemble curlicues of Arabic script, all the while emphasizing generality through the use of mass media and repetitive forms. (e.g., Knode 2000 and William Wells, personal communication, 2/2000).

Some of these non-Egyptian viewers are also attracted to the fact that Naeem wears a headscarf. While discrimination against the veil among Egyptian curators and artists has Western roots and class motivations,<sup>9</sup> one could see it as a neo-Orientalist twist that certain Western actors are now fascinated by Sabah Naeem, in part because she wears the veil, and in part because of her ability to disturb their stereotypes about it. Naeem and I discussed how to make this essay/interview communicate the social context that shapes her life as an artist and as a young Egyptian woman without reproducing the reductionism of her critics or some of her supporters. She finds my social analysis of class and veil necessary, and she further insists that you look beyond her headscarf and see her as an artist and a thinker.

In a sense, then, this accompanying essay is conflicted. On the one hand, it has contextualized the work and life of one remarkable woman. It is clear that differences in social class, religious practice, and one's position *vis-à-vis* local art worlds are crucial to understanding variations in artistic practice and ideology among people too easily grouped under one rubric. On the other hand, as Naeem herself suggests, such differences are too often the basis on which her art is evaluated. If she is seen as just a backward veiled artist, or just a Muslim woman artist who challenges stereotypes, or just an uncritical universal humanist, a critical part of her subjectivity is denied. There are no easy answers to this dilemma, except to engage in dialogue with artists and write against the categories that bind them. Such an endeavor means insisting on a separation between contextualizing artists and evaluating them. And to be

open to the possibility that what appears contradictory in some contexts makes sense in others.

#### NOTES

1. In 1962, Nasser instituted free higher education for all Egyptians. This decree, along with the 1970s boom in rural migration to urban areas (where the universities are located), meant that the late 1980s and 1990s witnessed the first generations of lower-class Egyptians attaining their higher degrees. They come largely from working-class families, especially those of manual laborers in the factories built in the Nasserist period; or, like Naeem, from working families who run very small shops (e.g., selling meat, bread, or car parts) or streetside stands. These recent beneficiaries of the free education system are distinguished from the majority of professors, curators, and critics in the art world, who come from a range of middle- and upper-class backgrounds, from managerial technocrats to the aristocracy.
2. In fact, most exhibitions and critical press in Europe or the U.S. that include women artists from Arab and/or Muslim countries frame their work in two main ways: as a challenge to stereotypes about Arab Muslim women; and as a critique of restrictions in Muslim societies. The phrase “women living under Islam,” that appears so frequently in articles or wall texts explaining their work, or in audience reactions to it, is particularly telling. Islam emerges as a monolithic, oppressive power that women are forced to submit to, rather than as a religion practiced and combined with politics in different ways all over the globe. See for example Schwartz (1994) on the traveling U.S. exhibition *Forces of Change: Women Artists of the Arab World*, Hightet (2000) on the British exhibition *Dialogue of the Present: The Work of 18 Arab Women Artists*, or Camhi (2000) on the work of Iranian photographer and video artist Shirin Neshat.

It should be noted that many of these artists actively contribute to these framings of their work. Because they are living outside of Muslim societies, in the condition commonly referred to as “exile,” they are often compelled to explore Muslim societies, or their personal state of in-betweenness, using symbols and metaphors that have gained a loaded potency in the Western imaginary of Islam. For example, the veil and sexuality are ubiquitous areas of inquiry for artists such as Shirin Neshat, Ghada Amer, and Shahzia Sikander. Only recently have certain interviews and articles highlighted the potential problems with the use and translation of such symbols and metaphors (e.g., Jana 1998; Jones 1999; Wallach 2001).

At a time when Arabs and Muslims are being vilified with particular intensity subsequent to the World Trade Center attack, and the veil is used to justify Western claims to superiority over Muslim societies, such problems become more acute. It is especially important to listen to Naeem now for several reasons. She presents a different understanding of the veil. For her, it is a symbol of freedom and choice rather than oppression. Second, her position within the art world reflects larger changes in secular and religious intellectual life in the

region, the resulting heterogeneity of which is usually glossed over in the Western media. Finally, the struggles of Naeem and her generation to reconcile a colonial past and the imperialist tendencies of contemporary globalization with nationalist, localist, or religious ideology provide insight into the kinds of forces that influence the development of violent political movements.

3. Here I use the concept of generation as theorized by Mannheim (1952) and employed by Ginsburg (1989), to refer to a group of people whose members experience a particularly dynamic historical situation at key points in their youth. For Naeem and her peers, the first dynamic historical situation occurred in the 1970s, when Egypt witnessed a massive influx of foreign consumer goods and upheaval of the economy that produced a *nouveau riche* and widened the class gap as the population was rapidly increasing. Many Egyptians view this period, known as *Infitah*, as the major cause of Egypt's economic and social problems. The current period of economic liberalization, part of the larger wave of neoliberalism confronting the Third World, has likewise destabilized the class structure and increased the visibility of foreign luxury goods, media, and other technologies.
4. The art world is dominated by such secular intellectuals who, uncoincidentally, are part of the middle and upper classes mentioned in note 1. The class dimensions of these gendered struggles over Egyptian identity are extremely evident in the art world. Just as artists subscribe to a secular version of modern art, they participate in secular intellectual life with writers and other artists. It follows that intellectuals such as these tend generally to espouse the values of the secular Egyptian women's movement. This movement borrowed substantially, although not wholesale, from early Western feminism and Western discourses about women more generally (cf. Abu-Lughod 1998; Badran 1995). The roots of this model lie with the upper and upper-middle classes that had—and still have—the most access to secular Western thought, and who also maintain a certain interest in subscribing to it. This kind of feminism often focuses on the veil as a sign of backward localism and women's oppression (see El-Guindi 1999). Thus the vast majority of self-described secular intellectual women, including most female artists, curators, and art critics, are opposed to the veil.

Yet these intellectuals have been greatly outnumbered by the majority of Egyptian Muslim women, including prominent religious intellectuals like Safinaz Qassem. In a dramatic shift beginning in the mid-1970s, these women have decided to wear veils for a number of reasons. For example, El-Guindi (1981) has argued that veiling emerged as an attempt to mitigate the Westernizing effects of an open-door trade policy by reasserting Muslim ethics and morals. Certainly, many Egyptian women who wear the simple headscarf are expressing their religious and cultural identities in partial response to the influx of Western media and products, increase in Westernized lifestyles in some segments of society, and U.S. domination in Middle East politics.

5. An example of these early paintings is not provided here because, for Naeem,



they are not representative of recent developments in her thinking on these issues, which are part of her ongoing dissertation project.

6. It should be noted that the Islamic injunction against depicting the human form has been interpreted in different ways throughout the history of Islamic art and in contemporary art produced by Muslims. For example, Persian illuminations depicted Muhammad (albeit with a sheet over his face). The human figure has been a favorite subject for Egyptian painters and sculptors since the beginning of the modern art movement in the early 1900s. Most artists say that this injunction applied more to the time of the Prophet, when there was a serious danger of people worshipping graven images. Nonetheless, teaching nude drawing in Egyptian art schools was made illegal in 1976 in response to the heightened politicization of religion at the time. Drawings and paintings of the nude, however, are still exhibited regularly in private galleries, and sometimes in public ones. There are stories that state officials who are in charge of public galleries sometimes remove images of nudes out of concern for public decency. The nudes produced in Egypt are always female.
7. In most interpretations of Islam, men are enjoined to modesty as well. For example, they are expected to cover the middle region of their bodies, not flash their wealth (e.g., by wearing gold), and to lower their gaze when in the presence of a woman who is not a relative.
8. Naeem has recounted several other instances of discrimination by powerful art critics and curators. For example, she was told that jurors in a government arts competition decided not to award her work a prize upon learning that a veiled woman had created it. There are other similar examples. When I first began fieldwork in Egypt, I was told by a prominent female critic to “not waste my time” with artists who veil.
9. See note 4.

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