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'WHAT IF I WANT TO WATER SKI ?' AND OTHER QUESTIONS

A SELECTION OF WORK FROM THE CURRENT PROJECT 'RE-DRESSING THE VEIL'

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'WHAT IF I WANT TO WATER SKI?' AND OTHER QUESTIONS

'What if I want to water ski?' is not only a rhetorical question. It is, as well, a specifically intended question by a woman looking at herself wearing 'hijab' in one of the workshops I've run as part of the 'Re-Dressing the Veil' project. Having established the genuine nature of the question, the question also reveals something specific about its origin and location, that it comes from a place where water-skiing might be considered a not unusual recreational activity. I mention this, because my approach to this body of work is to move fluidly back and forth through the matrix of local to global without trying to establish clear parameters. And as an aside, for those interested, there is a 'cosi'iii, in lycra, marketed as the 'burkini'iv, designed in Australia for Muslim girls and women who cover and who, per chance, may want to water ski.

Voicing questions is one of the outcomes of the larger project 'Re-Dressing the Veil'. The project initially began both as a reflexive need to interrogate my own nagging judgements about women and 'hijab', and in response to a serendipitous thread from earlier work I'd undertaken in Indonesia and Malaysia during 2003-2006 in which Muslim women were initiating dialogue around 'jilbab' and 'tudung'. A backdrop to this is of course the growing attention to Islam in Western popular media, polarised by two highly charged images – the 'active *terrorist*' and the 'passive *veiled woman*'. Dealing with such a topical subject feels problematic, particularly as a non-Muslim. However, my beginning point is one of the possibility of art providing an active space for degrees of exploration and realisation of oneself in relation to socio-cultural codes, conditions, enactments and systems of belief – ideological, religious, cultural – and of how these participate in shaping our perceptions and misperceptions of 'others'.

Returning to the work. The work exhibited at Elsie Gallery affords an opportunity for me to present a fragment of the ongoing project in a format I have not used before. The photographic portraits of Muslim women resident in Cairns, Mareeba, Penang and Singapore – where the project has been undertaken to date – function as a documentation of a cross-section of styles of adornment of 'hijab', but also to locate the 'veiled woman' as 'portraitable', not reduced to journalistic depictions only. Photographing each woman comes at the end of a conversation in her home or other location of her choice. We talk about 'hijab'. I choose never to directly ask 'Why?' because choices and reasons will inevitably underlie and inform conversation. I also choose not to record our conversations. These portraits, as with the popular depictions they seek to counter, operate silently, being spoken for and about.

Questions, and the space to voice them, appear to lie at the heart of the work being shown at Elsie Gallery. How do questions, then translate into artwork? One of the hazards of art practice that is situated within a broader context of socio-cultural activity, is how to shape it for public presentation, especially when as the author/artist/instigator, I feel the real work lies outside of the gallery. Despite being plagued by stubborn reluctance to translate the processes and outcomes of the workshops into an exhibition, I hope, nevertheless, that the preview engages you enough to want to see more of the work and to ask questions. For this, the book invites you to locate and write your own questions.

What I can say of the workshops, which have been undertaken in parallel to the photographic documentation of Muslim women, and which may not be evident in this preview, is that they encourage a certain degree of courage: the courage to ask seemingly dumb questions, of a multifariously textured subject, in a climate that favours muffling of questions from various positions for fear of offending others. We are though, naturally curious beings. In the safe environment of the workshop situation, in which non-Muslim women are invited to probe and reflect upon their perceptions/mis-perceptions in the company of Muslim women, questions are invoked and allowed. In this same environment, the Muslim women I've worked with have had a genuine desire to explore how they are perceived by others, non-Muslims. The challenge is of how to translate this into an 'art exhibition'.

Research does underlie this project, but at this stage, not as a comparative – qualitative or quantitative – or exhaustive study. From an academic or scholarly perspective, the work may fail, since it appears to skim the surface, fluctuating across the desire to 'locate' and consume the content. The questions derive from local and beyond-local positions, for example, the people we see and/or engage with in our own community, on a personal micro-local level, and the dominant macro images of big picture politics. Perhaps the former has the potential to undo the latter.

And finally, the woman looking at herself in 'hijab' for the first time asking about the possibility of water skiing for a Muslim woman, phrasing her question with 'I' – 'What if I want to water ski?' – rather than 'You', takes a significant leap. She instinctively brings the subject into her own reality of recreation and leisure in a warm weather town near water. She imagines.

I hope you feel inspired to write your own questions in the book.

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ⁱ I use the word 'veil' and interchange it with the Arabic term 'hijab', which, through common usage, has come to describe the covering of hair [and sometimes body] by Muslim women.

ⁱⁱ Refer to footnote above

ⁱⁱⁱ Australian slang for 'swimming costume'

^{iv} The 'burkini', designed by Ahedi Zanetti in Sydney, has been available since 2007. See www.burkini.com or www.ahida.com. Even Wikipedia has an entry.

^v 'Jilbab' is used in Indonesia to generically refer to the headscarf or covering of the body. 'Tudung' is commonly used in Malaysia and Singapore for the headscarf.