

## **What if I want to water ski? And other questions Motivation, process and hope...**

When I began working on this project, I was plainly aware of how 'hot' the topic potentially was. One would have had to have been living under a rock for the past several years to not be awake to this – not just the vigorous interest in all things Islam, especially in contexts where Muslims are not the majority, but specifically the interest in and attention given to Muslim women's attire and its accompanying rhetoric.

I hoped however, and I do not believe naively so, that it might be possible to fashion a creative exploration of the topic that could skirt around assumptions of its 'inherent' controversial nature. 'Assumed', because I would like to undermine the notion that the controversy is inherent within the square of cloth referred generically to as *hijab*, *tudung*, headscarf or veil. It is not difficult to provoke audiences, especially with such subject matter. It is more challenging though, and without overstating the point, to attempt to open up a conversation that prompts individuals to reflect upon such a topic. Its 'controversial' nature is not a given.

Disclaimers aside, I would nevertheless like to stress that the work in the show does not represent any one particular view on the broad topic of *hijab*; neither does it represent the scope of *tudung* in Singapore, nor of the women who wear it. Other subtexts such as the range of women represented within their diverse respective domestic settings and communities, serve to foreground a more central purpose. That purpose is to present a collection of 'domestic' and personalised portraits, as counter images to popular media representations, and in doing so, locate women in headscarf as 'portrait-able'.

Accompanying the photographs are videos and books. The books are self-explanatory, inviting audience to interact by contributing questions and answers concerning the veil to the book. The books build upon one another, creating their own narrative from one place to another. The main video, *Re-Dressing the Veil*, is edited from an interactive workshop held in Singapore. It is one of three workshops that have been run in the centres where I've undertaken the project – Penang [Malaysia], Singapore, and Cairns and Mareeba [Australia]. The workshop invites women who don't wear headscarf, to interact with the garment by trying it on and viewing themselves in the atmosphere of an open discussion with Muslim and non-Muslim women. My hunch is that [our] innate curiosity can be a beginning point from which to explore sensitive topics such as *hijab*. The nature and structure of the workshop provide a safe, yet creative, environment for questions [about the veil] to be asked, and answers provided. The creative emphasis, with its less tangible outcomes, is an alternative way to work with such sensitive themes.

The hypothesis about the sensitivity of the topic and its negative stereotypes, depends, of course, upon from where one is standing, culturally and physically. In the Singapore context with its cultural diversity, application of this hypothesis might be considered redundant – I.E. that *tudung*, being part of the local social fabric and landscape, is not an issue, as it might otherwise be considered an issue in France or Turkey for example. While conversations I have had suggest that this is debatable, I would ask - not an issue for whom? Assumptions arrived at through 'familiarity' can render a subject distant. An acknowledgement of not knowing, on the contrary, can potentially engender curiosity, and in doing so, bring the subject into closer proximity. What curiosities exist in the gaps between our assumptions and that which we don't yet know?

I have tried, with this work, to remove myself one step from the 'controversy', and hope that you, the audience, can also remove yourself one step - that is - from instinctively taking a reflexive position, to instead, occupying a more reflective space. It's a circuitous route that takes an 'issue based' subject and asks you not to take issue, nor revert to and remain trapped within conventional arguments or dialectical narratives. And as to the question of wanting to water-ski – there is an answer.