

WOMEN AND MIGRATION(S) II



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Cover image: FIRELEI BÁEZ for Marie-Louise Coidavid, exiled, keeper of order, Anacaona, 2018. Oil on canvas. Installation view: 10th Berlin Biennale, Akademie der Künste (Hanseatenweg), Berlin, 9 June 9-September 2018. Photo: Timo Ohler. Cover design by Anna Gatti

1. Carry Over

Sama Alshaibi

Photography plays a historic and burdensome role in the construction of how the Middle East continues to be imagined. My work explores the impact that images of Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) women have had. In my photographs, I aim to disrupt the Western cultural paradigm through a strategy of assigning power to the MENA female body and the sets of the photography-studio scene. By using albumen and photogravure print processes of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries in my project *Carry Over*, I am evoking a not-too-distant century in which the West controlled the Middle East and North Africa.¹ Photography studios were largely run by Western photographers, and their portrayal of MENA women sought to express the region's inferiority. Their photographs constructed a singular narrative of the Orient's female subject—isolated, lacking social context, docile and sexually consumable. Women were repeatedly depicted carrying vessels on their heads and lounging with 'oriental' props that, along with veiling and nudity, staged a non-ambiguous formula of otherness. *Carry Over* recalls and subverts these images and their legacy: contemporary Western media continue to subject MENA women to a flattened visual representation.

The traumatic burden of such enduring representations is made tangible in *Carry Over* through the placement of a physical sculpture, absurd in scale and function, on the subject's head. In *Mashrabiya*, the Arabesque latticework of carved wood normally found on the windows

1 *Carry Over* was funded in part by the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture, The Arizona Commission on the Arts, Artpace International and the CENTER 2019 Project Development Grant.

of Iraqi or Egyptian homes is substituted with a latticework of laser-cut wood shaped as barbwire and framed within a box reminiscent of the mashrabiya found across the region. This traps the subject's face in a cage formed from a water-pipe hookah, an object found in most historical portraits of 'Oriental' women. Not only is she objectified by the studio prop, but her body also distorts into a physical object itself. In *Gamer*, the looming stack of pans forms a ladder, resembling an escape route out of the frame. In *Water Bearer*, the once compulsory ceramic water jug found in Oriental portraits is referenced by a vessel shaped like a massive grenade or a wooden wasp's nest, and hoisted high up towards the sky—exhibiting the subject's Herculean effort in surviving conflict. *The Harvest* depicts empty jute baskets, and *Eternal Love Song*, a hollowed-out travel trunk. Both of these objects contain a spatial void, reminding us of their former purpose and function, which has been amputated by forced migrations. These images challenge the invisibility of MENA women's suffering in conditions from which they cannot escape.

While the social, economic and psychological dimensions of war and displacement are referenced by the sculptures, *Carry Over* also implicates Western imaginings of MENA women's actual struggles as obscured behind a singular preoccupation with the hijab. MENA women's well-being is often related to the politics of veiling, and inversely correlated to how covered up we are. Instead of visualizing women's freedom and empowerment in terms of social, political, and economic rights—such as access to jobs, education and health care, or the critical importance of their physical security in accessing those rights, Western photographs perpetuate notions of women's oppression through their focus on how much skin and hair are revealed. As such, *Marjanah* and *Justice* depict the female figure as the personification of a water fountain or an electricity pole. The implication in both works is that through her isolation, the subject is transformed from a passive object into an empowered, dynamic body that sustains and delivers herself. She is the embodiment of transport, hauling and moving in her diasporic and migratory reflection. She is the vehicle of her own resistance, displacing the internalization of a Western and Eurocentric social order. As a site of refuge and regeneration, these images inscribe mechanisms of survival through the woman's body.

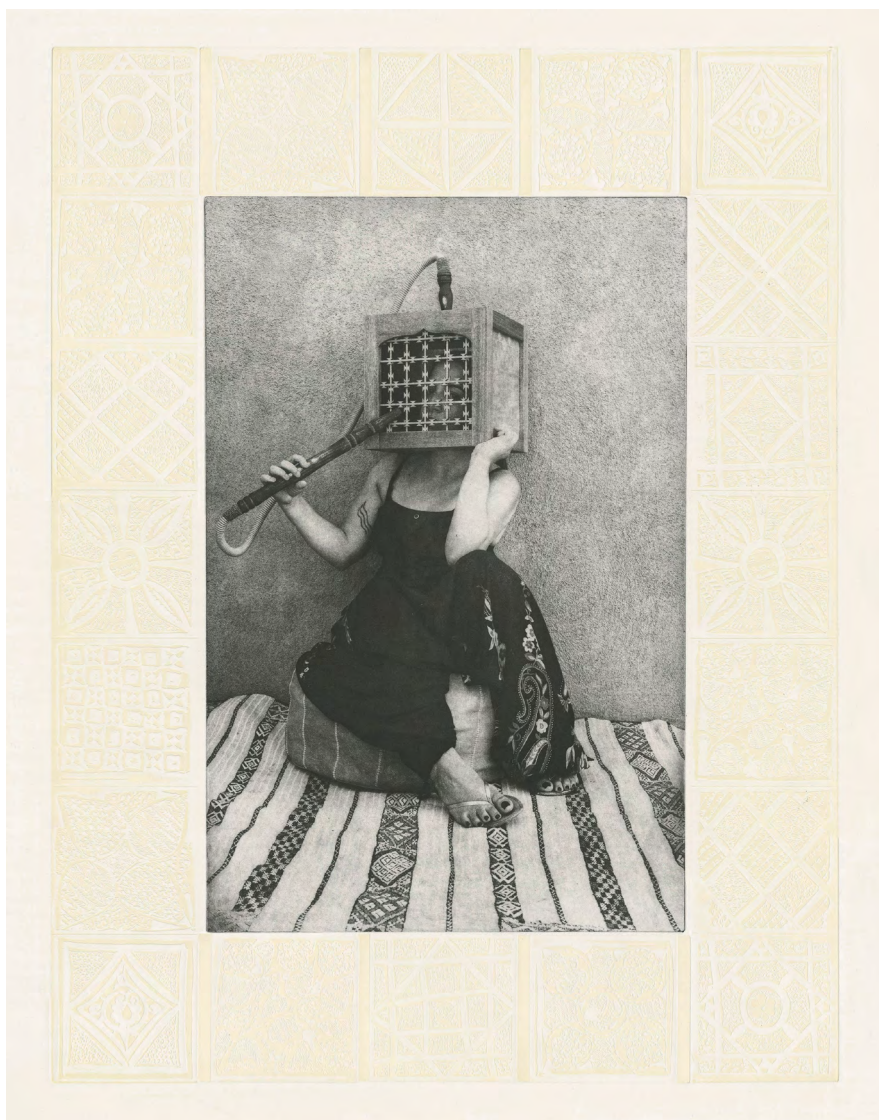


Fig. 1 Sama Alshaibi, *Mashrabiya*, 25x20", photogravure print with blind embossing and transparent ink relief rolled, 2019 © Sama Alshaibi.



Fig. 2 Sama Alshaibi, *Gamer*, 21x14", albumen print, 2018 © Sama Alshaibi.



Fig. 3 Sama Alshaibi, *Water Bearer*, 21x14", albumen print, 2019 © Sama Alshaibi.



Fig. 4 Sama Alshaibi, *The Harvest*, 21x14", albumen print, 2019 © Sama Alshaibi.



Fig. 5 Sama Alshaibi, *Eternal Love Song*, 25x20", photogravure print with blind embossing and transparent ink relief rolled, 2019 © Sama Alshaibi.



Fig. 6 Sama Alshaibi, *Marjanah*, 25x20", photogravure print with blind embossing and transparent ink relief rolled, 2019 © Sama Alshaibi.



Fig. 7 Sama Alshaibi, *Justice*, 25x20", photogravure print with blind embossing and transparent ink relief rolled, 2019 © Sama Alshaibi.

