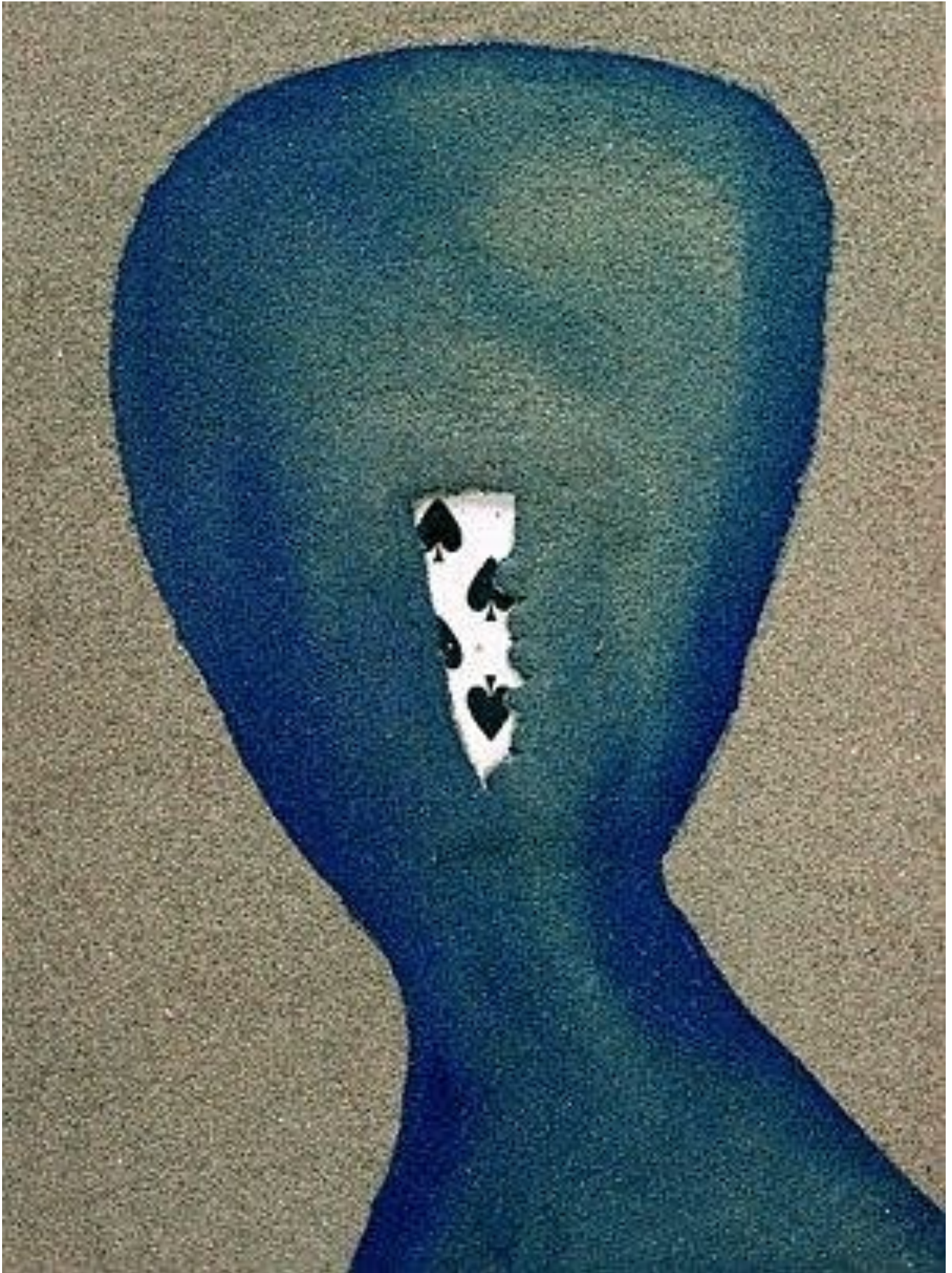


# Lifting the veils from our own eyes

February 5, 2010 4:52 p.m.



[image]

*Meriam Bouderbala. (Tunisia, 1960). Untitled. (Undated). Mixed media. (28 x 20 cm)*

In the weeks following September 11, 2001, Americans as a whole suddenly had a much greater awareness of the Middle East and Islam, and a deep interest in learning more about both. While there was a lot of fear in the air, it was also a time that seemed heavy with potential for cultural exchange and understanding - an opportunity to break down stereotypes and reveal more complex truths.

In the now close to nine years since, what have we learned?

An exhibition at St. Catherine University provides us with the opportunity to find out. Titled "Breaking the Veils," the show is *not* - as you might well assume - aimed at raising awareness of the oppression of muslim women. Rather it's concerned with helping us to lift the veils that filter our own perceptions.

[image]

*Sharifah Fatimah Syed Zubir. (Malaysia, 1948). Evening Glow. (1991). Acrylic on canvas. (120 x 130 cm)*

Jordanian Princess Wijdan Al Hashemi conceived of the exhibition in the wake of 9/11 as she saw news reports and witnessed some of the deep misunderstanding that persisted in the following months. "Breaking the Veils" first opened to the public in Rhodes, Greece in 2002 before embarking on an international tour. Her Majesty Queen Rania-Al Abdullah of Jordan attended the launch and spoke about the exhibit this way:

"Breaking the Veils" features work from 51 women artists from the Islamic world. They work in different media and styles. They have had different life experiences, and they come from more than 20 different countries. But they have something in common that is more important

than any dissimilarity. That "something" is the essence of Islamic art, of all art. It is the spirit of creativity and humanity. Real art connects. It connects us with ourselves and one another. It leads us to discover new truths and helps to illuminate the humanity we share. The work of these artists light up not only the Islamic world, but the human world as well. Through this exhibit they are helping to break the veils of misunderstanding and ignorance.

The artists featured in the exhibition are not just muslim, but buddhist, christian and hindu, as well; but they all were raised in Islamic countries. Their work varies dramatically in theme and image, but they all show a high level of talent and skill. As a whole, the exhibition reveals a candor and diversity that defies many commonly held stereotypes about the Islamic world.

[image]

*Fahda Bint Saud. (Saudi Arabia, 1953). Three Women. (1992). Watercolor on paper. (65 X 84 cm)*

Dr. Khalid Khreis is the Director General of the Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts, and is overseeing the exhibition's international tour. He says the goal of the exhibition is to help stimulate a cross cultural dialogue, and to underscore the difference between religion and culture.

People think that all muslim women in the world are like those found in Afghanistan or Saudi Arabia. We wanted to show that Islamic women are like all women all over the world. We have artists, teachers in universities... Of course we all have our problems; we just wanted to show the reality.

One of the more startling works is "Three Women" by Fahda Bint Saud (pictured above). In it she depicts what appears to be a reluctance on the part of Saudi women to recognize the reality of their restricted lives. Khreis

says it's a piece that might not have been allowed if it weren't for the fact that Fahda Bint Saud is in fact a daughter of Saud bin Abdul Aziz, king of Saudi Arabia from 1953 to 1964.

[image]

*Laila Shaw. (Palestine, 1940). The Deal. (1994). Silkscreen on paper. (48 x 68 cm)*

There is also work critical of the United States and its involvement in Middle Eastern politics, particularly Palestine. But on the whole the art is much more personal, displaying deep introspection, a passion for women's issues, and spirituality.

What is most surprising about this exhibition is that it did not reach the United States until 2008, after having toured most of Europe and Australia. It finally reached the Clinton Presidential Library, thanks in large part to Susan Anderson of the [ArtReach Foundation](#). The foundation uses art programs to help people heal from traumatic experiences, including the conflicts in Bosnia and Lebanon, and natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina. Anderson attended the opening of the exhibition in Greece, and immediately saw a connection between the artwork, and her own work using art to heal wounds and start conversations.

[image]

*Karima Bin Othman. (Jordan, 1972). Unity. (2002). Acrylic on canvas. (60 X 72 cm)*

St. Catherine University plans to launch a dialogue of its own in conjunction with the exhibition. On Tuesday, March 2, I'll be hosting a panel of muslim women from around the Islamic world. They'll share stories about misconceptions surrounding their religion and culture, and give a sense of just what their lives are like. The talk runs from 7-9pm at the Rauenhorst

Ballroom.

*"Breaking the Veils: Women Artists from the Islamic World" runs Feb. 6 thru April 1 at the Catherine G. Murphy Gallery Visual Arts Building on the campus of St. Catherine University.*

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