



Xpace Cultural Centre
2-303 Lansdowne Ave
Toronto ON M6K 2W5
416 849 2864
Tuesday-Saturday 12-6
www.xpace.info

Leila Fatemi

Façade through the Façade

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Where the colonizer undresses her, the native's nakedness stares back at him both as the defiled image of his creation and as the indifferent gaze that says, "there was nothing, no secret to be unveiled underneath my clothes, that secret is your phantasm."

-Rey Chow, 2004

The *mashrabiya* is an ornate latticework screen traditionally found in homes and courtyards. Informally translated as "Harem Window", the *mashrabiya* circulated fresh air, filtered sunlight, and acted as a kind of 'architectural veil' wherein women and families could gather and "see, without being seen"¹. In *Façade through the Façade*, a site-specific installation that expands on Leila Fatemi's ongoing series, *Disorienting Orientalism*, the vinyl *mashrabiya* frames the viewer's access to a seemingly unending collection of Orientalist fantasy paintings assembled behind the window. Making the viewer complicit in an apparent invasion of privacy², what Fatemi reveals and conceals is not incidental. Merging Orientalist harem fictions with Islamic architecture, the work creates a voyeuristic environment where the viewer is invited to challenge their reading of the scenes behind the screen.

¹ Susan Hefuna, *Woman Behind Mashrabiya I* artist statement, 2004.

² Ibid.

In describing the conception of 'Orientalism', or the ways the native 'Other' is represented as backwards, dangerous, and in extension, conquerable, Edward Said reflects on an unbridgeable divide between the experience of being an Arab and the artistic representations of Arabness.³ In stark contrast to Said's 'Orientalism' and devoid of near any critical engagement with power, 'the Orientalist painting' is a term used to categorize 19th century European artistic depictions of the 'East.' Commonly associated with the Harem, the Orientalist painter portrayed a world of exoticism, of seduction, of excess, of unfettered masculine power, and notably, of his fantasy. While some European artists at the time chose to distance themselves from institutions, the Orientalist painter was most often state-sanctioned; funded to be the ambassador of Western rationality and actively participating in 'race science' (see also: scientific racism) ethnography.

Peering through the sacred geometric patterned *mashrabiya*, the super-realism of each painting is in plain view. Drawing from Said who observed that "Orientalism has always rested on the premise that the West knows more about the Orient than the Orient knows about itself"⁴, Rana Kabbani suggests this high finish and meticulous detail articulated a desire to convey "truthful", "rational" and even archival images of the 'East.' Although many Orientalist painters had never set foot in Algeria, Egypt, or any of the other places they depicted (often drawing from letters or other literary representations), the Orientalist painting was generally engaged with similar to the documentary photograph; encouraging the spectator to view the artworks as having "caught the Orient, exactly as it was."⁵

Troubling the entanglement of Orientalist artistry and ethnography, Fatemi's collection of repetitive and sometimes almost indistinguishable 'Eastern women' in highly sexualized and compromising manners renders the works to appear frozen in formula and fetish. Despite some variations in technique, the paintings assembled behind the window bleed and blur into each other, distorting the realism and forcing the viewer to question their own gaze as they absorb works borne from colonial fantasy. Challenging

³ Said, Edward. *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*. London: Vintage Books, 1997.

⁴ Edward Said, "Imperial Pursuits: Orientalism—25 years on", *The Guardian*, August 2, 2003.

⁵ Rana Kabbani, "Regarding Orientalist Painting Today", *The Lure of the East : British orientalist painting*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008.

“the stories that settler states tell about themselves”⁶ and the ‘Other’, Fatemi refuses to present the Orientalist paintings as ethnographic. Fatemi also spares no time ‘reclaiming’ the images or ‘rewriting’ more accurate representations of the Muslim women. Instead, she turns our vision inward, thinking through the intimate relationship between seeing and knowing or, more specifically, between Orientalist visual culture, the white gaze, and colonial knowledge production.

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The colonial attitude... is characterized by a drive to see, to traverse, to know, to translate (to make equivalent), to own, and to exploit. It is based on the belief that everything should be accessible [and] is ultimately a potential commodity or resource.”

-David

Garneau, 2012, 29

From race science ethnography that categorizes the white European as ‘rational’ while disavowing all other, coexisting modes of being to imperial borders that, first and foremost, cross communities without consent and with impunity, colonialism and its Orientalist offshoots are nothing if not a form of spatial management. Determining, by force, who is *in or out of place*, the colonial project ultimately attempts (but never succeeds) to deterritorialize Indigenous peoples materially and symbolically. Indeed, in the words of Sylvia Wynter, the distinction between ‘rational’ and ‘irrational’ or ‘backwards’ is always intertwined with the theory of sovereignty.⁷ To this point, in describing the limits of what an archive can do (namely, function as the state’s cataloguing via the ‘violence of fact’ i.e. scientific racism which developed in tandem with colonial expansion), Mandeeg Mohammad insists on the importance of looking to silences, gaps, and ethnographic refusals as a point of departure for thinking through Blackness in the archive.⁸

⁶ Audra Simpson, *Savage States: Settler Governance in an Age of Sorrow*, presentation, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, 2018.

⁷ Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument”, *The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3, 2003.

⁸ Mandeeg Mohammad, “Somehow I Found You: On Black Archival Practices”, *C Magazine*, Issue 137, Spring 2018.

Guided by Mohammad, reading for the gaps and fictions that abound in Orientalist paintings is equally important in disorienting their meanings. By example, Adrienne L. Childs observes that some of the most notable omissions depicted in Orientalist paintings are relating to the Black women and men depicted: “the Oriental fantasy” served to divert immediate relationships such as North African domestic enslavement, Trans-Atlantic enslavement and the plantation economy “to a largely ornamental... fictitious setting.”⁹ Signalling to arts as a project for naturalizing enslavement, for Childs, what goes unsaid or unseen in a painting allows for expansive understandings of colonial encounters and attempts to conceal them.

Likewise, in depicting the ‘Eastern’ woman as hypersexualized and highly submissive, the Orientalist painting produced a “pictorial catalogue of the ‘goods of empire’”¹⁰, emptied of politics. More specifically, 19th century French and British colonialism were marked by strikes, riots, rebellions, blockades, impoverishment, famine, hangings and massacres —resistance movements Muslim women were a part of and organized violence’s they were distinctly impacted by. Ignoring “historical witnesses of women’s agency”¹¹, the omissions of the Orientalist painting not only reveal the disconnect between the European painter and his subjects but also place him in direct relation to the “rough designs of Empire.”¹²

If pictures, paintings and different kinds of representations are often weapons to exert violence... the image is implicitly the place where battles are fought and strategies of resistance renegotiated.”

-Rey Chow, 1993, 26

⁹ Adrienne L. Childs, “The Black Exotic: Tradition and ethnography in nineteenth-century Orientalist art”, Phd diss., University of Maryland, 2005.

¹⁰ Rana Kabbani, “Regarding Orientalist Painting Today”, 41.

¹¹ Fatema Mernissi, “Seduced by ‘Samar, or: how British Orientalist painters learned to stop worrying and love the darkness”, *The lure of the East : British orientalist painting*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008.

¹² Ibid.

In contrast to the human figures that mark each Orientalist painting, Fatemi's geometric patterned *mashrabiya* is an ode to the infinite. Framed and obstructed by sacred geometry, the paintings assembled behind the window function differently—and even in opposition to—their historical references. Toying with the untruths depicted in the archive of Orientalist paintings, *Façade through the Façade* asks for us to consider what old and new insidious colonial strategies and mediums continue to function as 'rational', 'universal', and 'natural'. Laws determining Muslim women's dress. Passports as markers of 'legality' and 'illegality'. And so on. Anchored by reflections on what an archive can or cannot do, through disruption and disordering, Fatemi looks to the gaps, the abstractions, and, of course, the outward fallacies—disallowing the white gaze, and, by extension, Empire.

- Mitra Fakhrashrafi