

# GHAZEL

*Illuminating perspectives on Iranian femininity*

BY SAMANTHA ARMSTRONG

*One of the most significant Iranian artists on the international contemporary art scene, Ghazel is renowned for challenging perceptions and taking an ironic look at established ideologies relating to feminism, class and art itself.*

## FAMILY TREE (FROM THE ME SERIES) — GHAZEL



**B**orn in Tehran in 1966, Ghazel studied Visual Arts at France's École des Beaux Arts in Nîmes and is a pioneer of video and performance art. She experienced the death of a close friend during the war and felt a deep sense of guilt leaving her family in 1986 when the country was in crisis. This transience had a significant impact on Ghazel's early work, as did the complexities of Iranian womanhood marked by the ban (1936) and subsequent reimplementations of the veil (1982). Ghazel's grandmother was one of the first women to remove her chador and Ghazel herself had to re-adopt the veil at the age of 15.

Referencing a permanent state of 'displacement' Ghazel says her works "talk about the outsider I am in the West and the outsider I am in Iran," whether from her seminal Me series (1997 – present), Geopolitics of Roots - No

Man's Land (2011) or now, her most recent, Family Tree (2013), a reformatted extension of the almost two-decades long Me series. Ghazel currently resides in Paris but her relationship with home remains a multi-faceted one: "or me there are many homes plural, but the capital H Home will always be Iran."

In 'Me' a series of filmed self-portraits with over 730 scenes, Ghazel engages in various different activities, including sunbathing and boxing, while dressed in the traditional Iranian chador. 'Family tree', the artist's second solo exhibition, recently at Carbon 12 in Dubai, consists of 12 episodes made from family stories enacted by the artist via her 'Me' series persona. In 'Family Tree', the artist becomes her great aunt, her dog, her mother, her brother, her father and nanny. The five single scene videos, plus seven photographs, are deliberately destructed, as well as displaced, floating neither here nor there in

their monochromatic video installations and framed images. The images need the viewer to both ground them and to interpret them, within the context of their own experiences.

The picture captions in 'Family Tree' lend a humorous narrative to the work that is absolutely central to Ghazel's artistic expression. It is humour the artist calls "my most Iranian side, and the most ME side of my work." She explains: "humour is a great ally for me, it's best to express serious, deep subjects with humour as you touch more people."

Ghazel returned to Iran in 1997 until 2000, when she worked at a correction center for troubled boys, a role in which she was fully veiled. The experience marked a pivotal turning point in her ability to make peace with the realities of her home country. As Ghazel's own perspective of the veil has changed over the years, she believes its representation, and

assumed shackles, are very much a matter of perspective. "Women are changing and occupying more and more public space in Iran. The veil is not what westerners see; it is the reality of Iran and it doesn't stop women from being lawyers, doctors, bus drivers, police-women, teachers... but different generations see it differently to each other. What I see is different from a girl who started school veiled."

Ghazel's work has received worldwide acclaim with the 'Me' series shown across Western Europe, the Middle East, North America, Cuba, Chile, Brazil, Japan and Australia and with each audience is envisioned a new understanding. Ghazel believes this reinvention is integral to its success: "a good work has to have as many interpretations as viewers. I am happy to have communicated with, and touched, so many people from different cultures, countries and backgrounds."