

The self as a part of the bigger picture

Ghazel talks about the evolution of her Me Series as she emerged from her own crisis of identity to examine the injustices plaguing the world

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Ghazel's desire to explore the themes of identity and displacement comes from her own experience of feeling like an outsider in Iran, where she grew up, as well as in the West, where she has lived most of her adult life. By sharing her personal stories with viewers, the artist invites them to reflect on their own experiences, highlighting the fact that we all have multiple identities and have been in situations where we felt like outsiders. The multimedia artist is best known for her witty and thought-provoking *Me Series*, which she began in 1997. In this series of performance videos, the artist, wearing a traditional black chador, is seen enacting various "scenes" based on her memories and experiences.

For her latest exhibition in Dubai, Ghazel has created a different version of the *Me Series*, titled *Family Tree*. It features 12 "episodes" based on her childhood memories, and shot in her family home in Tehran, with the chador-clad Ghazel playing herself as well as her parents, great aunt, nanny, uncle and even the family's pet dog and cats. Unlike the three-channel video installations in the *Me Series*, here the performances have been deconstructed into single scenes, shown as individual videos or presented as framed, storyboard-like photographs.

The scenes include amusing anecdotes about her family members, her pets and the atmosphere in her home during the Iran-Iraq war. The artworks have the flavour of silent era, black-and-white films, with Ghazel's slapstick style adding to the humour. The stories are personal, but every viewer can connect with them. They are funny but you can feel the pain of the loss of something familiar and comforting that once defined her identity. Ghazel spoke to *Weekend Review* about the concept and evolution of the *Me Series*. Excerpts:

■ **What motivated you to use this video and performance format?**

When I started the *Me Series* in 1997, I had a nomadic existence, moving from one European country to another. And whenever I was in Iran I would do art workshops with delinquent children at a correction centre. I realised that the only thing I had in common with these children was our typical Iranian sense of humour, and also that this humour was missing from my work, which dealt with serious issues such as war, displacement, exile and rootlessness. I wanted a simple and humorous way of talking about these heavy subjects and felt that video and performance was the best option.

■ **Why do you wear the chador in these enactments?**

This series is a self-portrait of my multiple imperfect identities. And one of these is the veil covering my head, which was imposed on me at the age of 15 because of a law passed by the post-revolution regime. It is also a tribute to my grandmother who had to stop wearing the veil in 1936 because of a law passed by Reza Shah, and to my nanny who brought me up. Even though I have never worn the chador, I see it as a timeless icon that represents one of my identities.

■ **How has the series evolved over time?**

The series began as a narrative, first-person reconstruction of the past through my childhood memories. Later the reality of the places I lived in seeped into it. When I moved to New York in 2000, I did not have to wear a veil anymore and live with a double identity. The scenes became more about local issues such as the piles of garbage and the homelessness I saw in the city. In 2001 I moved to Paris and became a full-time artist, travelling around the world for exhibitions and events. And I began to talk about issues such as the atrocities in the Abu Ghraib prison under the pretext of self-portraits. It was no longer about me, my family, be-



*Dandan was scared to order fries.
(because I ate them all)*

Episode 5 (Dandan), Family Tree, video still, 15 seconds, 2013

ing a woman, or about Iran; it was just a human being saying something about what is happening in the world. My narration became more universal and the series moved from "Me" to "We". The form remained the same, but the content and the humour changed because my life had changed. Although I continued filming new scenes, I wanted my other work to be noticed too. *Family Tree* is a new beginning, but I plan to continue with the *Me Series* too.

■ **How did you pick the scenes?**

I tried to pick everyday anecdotes that would resonate with viewers' own memories. The idea is to take my "little" history and put it in the "big" history of war, revolution and geopolitics. I am talking about myself and my country, but when viewers look at the scenes they can see themselves and their countries. I am amazed at how easily people can connect with this form of art, and how many new stories are triggered by my little stories.

■ *Jyoti Kalsi is an arts enthusiast based in Dubai.*

■ *Family Tree will run at Carbon 12 gallery in Al Quoz until November 10.*



*Whenever Majy got bored,
he would come to check on me...
"Az atagheh man boro beeroon!!!!!" **

***Get out of my room!!!!!"*

Episode 3 (Majy), Family Tree, video still, 1 minute, 2013