

From the Harem to the Revolution: Worn Out Images of Middle Eastern Women in Art

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Two chador-clad figures gesticulate with fully covered arms onscreen at the rear of Carbon 12, a gallery in Dubai. It would be easy to yawn and dismiss Anahita Razmi's video, *Middle east coast west coast* (above), as yet one more work in which an artist covers Middle Eastern women's faces and bodies to insinuate that they are voiceless. That assumption is turned on its (veiled) head, once one picks up a set of headphones to listen to the work's sound, which reveals that the performers are actually a male and female couple bickering about stereotypes associated with west coast and east coast artists in the United States. It turns out that Razmi set Nancy Holt and Robert Smithson's 1969 audio recording to the performance.

Razmi's show is titled *Sharghzadegi*, after a made up Farsi term for "Eastruckness," which plays on "Gharbzadegi," a somewhat derogatory adjective for "Westruckness," used in Iran to describe a person who models her or himself after Western values. The exhibition concerns our predilection for labelling and branding by questioning whether terms like "The Middle East" are relevant or even mean anything. Razmi, who is half German, half Iranian, photographed a Farsi tattoo on her forearm that translates, "This is Not Iranian." She asked in our interview with exasperation, "What is not Iranian? Is it the person or is it the sentence?" then went on to clarify, "I am making a personal statement but a non-statement at the same time. These works are labelling something but at the same time questioning what labelling does." Razmi is suggesting that the Eurocentric notion of "The Middle East" has become absurdly vague in our globalized times, as have tired gender and cultural typecasts.