Piecing together the jigsaw of perception

Anahita Razmi follows in the footsteps of the greats and asks unsettling questions about the representation of women and the Middle East

By Jyoti Kalsi
Special to Weekend Review

Video One's 1964 performance titled Cut Piece is an iconic work in the history of contemporary art. During this performance the artist sat on stage for a pair of scissors and invited the audience to come up and cut a piece of her clothing. The "flamboyant" work, presented in Japan and New York, was a participatory performance co-created by what the audience brought to it. Germany-based Iranian artist Anahita Razmi used the same concept but a different context for her performance at the opening of her first solo show in Dubai. In her re-enactment Cut Piece, the young artist was a woman in a dress and invited the Dubai audience to cut it up. By perforating a city associated with luxury, fashion and the nouveau riche, and focusing attention on the value of the dress, the artist has infused One's seminal work with new associations and meanings.

Razmi's performance redefined the context of One's piece, while also commenting on stereotypical perceptions about the Middle East. Just that is the essence of her entire show.

Named Automatic Assembly Actions, the show presents well-known works by famous artists in a different context. It juxtaposes passive automation with active intervention to deconstruct long-held perceptions and reconstruct new layers of meaning.

The centerpiece of the show is a set of collages made from discarded Persian carpets. Glued onto the carpets are phrases such as "permutation to fire", "you have no idea of earth", "identity complex identity".

Because these words have been laser-cut from similar carpets, they are almost hidden in the traditional Persian patterns and appear to be covert political statements connected to the coup events in the Middle East. But they are in fact taken from initial art piece Zarina's well-known quilted textile works and express her state of mind.

"The oriental carpet has so many existing social, cultural and political associations that just changing the fabric used by Zarina completely changes the context of what were very personal statements about her life into something with a very different connotation. It did not make this piece political – it is the viewer who does that. So this work questions associative patterns, expectations of the viewer, and the cultural characteristics of material," Razmi says.

Her photographic series, Untitled YouTube Still, is similarly a witty and thought-provoking appropriation of well-known American photographer Cindy Sherman's famous series Untitled Film Stills. Sherman photographed herself in various roles and settings reminiscent of stereotypical film scenes to create an iconoclastic series that asked questions about the role and representation of women, the media, and the nature of the creation of art. Razmi has used a similar technique – but to examine the contemporary medium of YouTube, the most popular online platform for user-generated videos today. Using herself as the model, she has created a variety of images typically found online, ranging from people posing with their pets, showing off their musical talent or offering styling advice to gun-wielding revolutionaries and protesters on the streets uploaded from cell phones during the Arab Spring.

"These pictures represent the variety of images we are surrounded by today. We have a woman singing her favorite song next to a picture of a firewoman being attacked by old ladies. The series conveys that YouTube features images that are staged and manipulated along with pictures that are being displayed on the news, as documentation of events. I am interested in exploiting what happens when the 'reality' format of YouTube replaces the 'documentary' format of the medium of film, and new media forms accessible to the masses replace exclusive media such as film. And I want to examine whether certain stereotypical images, recognizable figures, settings and aesthetics can be extracted from such a mass medium," the artist says.

Razmi is well known for her video art. She created a series of videos that explored the nature of war, using humor as a way to address the subject with sensitivity.

"My work is not about reconciling our particular representation of history, my work is about changing things and see what happens," Razmi says.

Jyoti Kalsi is an arts enthused born in Dubai.

Automatic Assembly Actions will run at Garden 1 gallery until March 14.

untitled Youtube Still, Razmi poses for a series of photographs, exploring the blurry lines between fiction and reality.

The oriental carpet has so many existing social, cultural and political associations that just changing the fabric used by Emin changes the context.

"The oriental carpet has so many existing social, cultural and political associations that just changing the fabric used by Emin changes the context."