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IRAN

THE MANY FACES OF GHAZEL

BY SAMINE TABATABAEI

The works of Iranian performance artist Ghazel reflect the artist's dry humor. From early in her career, she has insouciantly focused on the depiction of Iranian women both in Iran and abroad—revealing intricacies and tensions within this contested discourse.

Ghazel's first encounter with happenings and performance art was in post-revolutionary Iran. In the early 1990s, the country was invigorated with “a new form of post-Islamist thinking combined with neoliberal policies,” as sociologist Asef Bayat has pointed out. This, along with the somewhat relaxed cultural policies of the time, inspired cultural centers in various neighborhoods to interact with a range of social and economic classes. While studying at the *École Supérieure des Beaux-Arts* in Nîmes, Ghazel, returning home to Tehran, was flabbergasted by the elitist veneer the art scene had developed during her years abroad. Addressing this disparity among social groups through performance has become one of the hallmarks of Ghazel's work.



GHAZEL, still from *Family Tree* from the “Me” series (1997–) at Carbon12, Dubai, 2013. Courtesy Carbon12.

For one of her first projects, *Mardâbâd* (1993), Ghazel invited a number of Tehran's art-circle insiders to an exhibition of her work at a family-owned orchard near Karaj. A flock of sheep was allowed to mingle freely among the guests while the latter pursued intellectual discussion about the work. But, the space itself was devoid of the glossy and delicately framed images typically found at a gallery, leaving some invitees—who found the sheep less than worthy of their attention, and their smell not wholly pleasant when combined with their own perfume—offended. At another event, *Red Home Installation IV* (1998), which took place in the same location, Ghazel staged a middle-class wedding ceremony, inviting viewers to the reconstructed dwelling of a refugee Afghan family. Boldly targeting the social status of some of the event's participants, Ghazel conveyed the class tensions endemic at the time.

Straddling both Middle Eastern and European art scenes, the class critiques featured in Ghazel's work are often overshadowed by the artist's assertion of herself as an Iranian woman artist. In Tehran, where there is an implicit anxiety pertaining to representations of the chador in non-government-run art galleries—such depictions are often written off as “chador art” in an impugning, self-deprecating manner—Ghazel has attempted to dismantle stereotypes relating to dress codes using their vocabulary as a means to instigate irony. Wry works, especially the “Me” series (1997–), have been dismissed as being complicit with stereotypes of Muslim women.



*Ajoon got nailed to the wall by Dino.
Dino licked her face and
expressed his gratitude for being
fed with delicious saffron meals.*

GHAZEL, still from *Family Tree* from the “Me” series (1997–) at Carbon12, Dubai, 2013. Courtesy Carbon12.

At first glance, *Family Tree* (2013) from the “Me” series merely depicts a woman (Ghazel herself) clad in black. The contrast of black and white, along with the figure’s stark and staged gestures, however, invokes a certain pathos. Alluding to Roberta Breitmore, the alter ego created by new media artist Lynn Hershman Leeson in the 1970s, Ghazel probes the fluidity of identity. Departing from anthropocentric identification—she even identifies with her dog—she goes beyond the most stringent categories of Middle Eastern identity.

In her works, Ghazel assumes multiple invented and imposed identities, vacillating between them so as to never be fully reducible to one sole identity. In doing so she questions what it means to be an Iranian woman today.

*Amoo A lined us all up in a row and
taught us Karate. We stood silently
and listened to his instructions.
At times an unwanted sound would make
us laugh like crazy and the class was over.*



GHAZEL, still from *Family Tree* from the “Me” series (1997–) at Carbon12, Dubai, 2013. Courtesy Carbon12.

Ghazel’s solo-exhibition *Family Tree* will be on view from September 9–November 10, 2013 at **Carbon12** in Dubai.

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