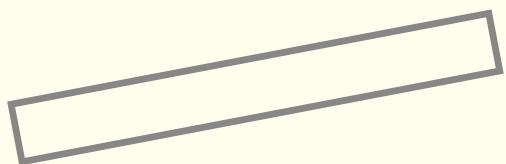


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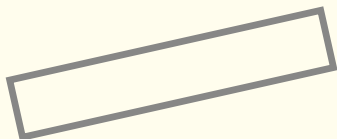
OF



THE



PRESENT



Artists

Nick Jordan
Farwa Moledina

This publication is available to read online at
www.curatorinthemaking.com

Curators

Lisa Abbott
Yumeng Gao
Hsiu-Wen Hsiao
Prachi Kapoor
Napatsorn Ngaosawangjit
Francesca Singleton

MA Art History and Curating 2019–20 cohort
Grand Union Art Gallery and the University of Birmingham

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Borderlines of the Present

‘We find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion.’

Homi K. Bhabha

The sudden outbreak of a global pandemic has brought the world to an extreme state of isolation and strict surveillance, social emergency and economic shutdown. Most plans made on the first day of the year have shifted to Plan B and beyond. We have come to realise that people’s lives are now categorised as statistics as death does not discriminate. Wearing masks is not over-cautious or a sign of forced conformity, but a necessary act of solidarity and civic responsibility. Another pressing issue of our times – racism and racially motivated violence – resurfaced following the tragic murder of George Floyd at the hands of police brutality on 25 May 2020. The accelerated growth of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has foregrounded the frustration and urgency faced by those challenging racial discrimination, and the structural inequalities laid bare by Covid-19. Damaging stereotypes and everyday microaggressions snowball into horrific events, reminding us that these threats against people’s lives are constant and require collective and individual vigilance and action.

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha introduces the idea that our existence at the turn of the 21st century was situated in a condition of *interstice* – a ‘hybrid’ site which emerged alongside the global division of labour – ‘where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion’. Bhabha analyses the subject condition of migrants, people of colour, and other suppressed voices and suggests that we should abandon the monolithic classifications of cultural identities based on the differences of ethnic attributes. Instead, he argues that we need to move to the ‘beyond’ – somewhere across the boundary of pre-given traits. In a slightly different sense, twenty years after Bhabha’s publication – when affirmative actions on race, gender, sexuality, climate change and deglobalisation are rising all over the world – we are still living in what Bhabha termed the ‘borderlines of the present’, which prevents us from evolving as we hang on to past conventions. The fragmentation of grand narratives in the postmodern era has generated

an interstitial space between politics and aesthetics, individuality and community, history and the present, wherein certain artists strive to create metaphors to resist the normative presumptions and racialised classifications that still exist among us. Farwa Moledina and Nick Jordan work across *Borderlines of the Present*, foregrounding distinct strategies of resistance that have emerged in ‘in-between’ spaces.

*

‘I have been concerned with re-appropriating and reclaiming Orientalist imagery of Muslim women, through which I hope to unveil the voyeuristic tradition of Western male painters, whilst inviting viewers to question Orientalist stereotypes and the prevalence of Orientalism in current society.’

Farwa Moledina

Farwa Moledina, a Birmingham-based artist, uses Orientalist and exoticised images of Muslim women – appropriated from western iconic paintings – to criticise imperialist ways of seeing. In her work titled, *You must choose your part in the end* (digital print on polyester, 2019), she creates a multi-layered narrative against racist and misogynist perceptions. An image of a woman stands with her face turned away from the viewer, wrapped in a cloak printed with elements taken from Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres’ Orientalist painting *La Grande Odalisque*. She stands in front of a comparatively modest window at the Hagia Sophia Grand Mosque in Istanbul; an architectural spectacle famous for its rich interior decorations. Combining recognisable icons from Western aesthetic tradition and the unidentifiable interior of a well-known landmark, Farwa rejects the viewer’s potential impulse to categorise and racialise the subject and her setting. Inscribed into the cloak, the words ‘Not Your Harem Girl’ challenges such assumptions and furthers her artistic claim to reconstruct stereotypes of Muslim women in contemporary society.

Moledina was raised in Dubai and later moved to the UK, where she developed her mixed-media approach and critical reflections on community experience and identity. Moledina lays great stress on the Orientalist iconography formed in the eurocentrist past – not to simply recall these visual precedents but to renew them through transcultural translation, from her experience of moving from the East to the West. This follows what Bhabha defines as ‘the borderline work of culture’, which ‘demands an encounter with ‘newness’ that is not part of the continuum of past and present’.

Nick Jordan’s documentary work *Concrete Forms of Resistance* examines the International Fair site in Tripoli, which has been witness to more than fifty years of disturbance in the country. Designed by the Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer, it was intended to be the starting point of the blueprint for the future development of the entire city. In 1975 after the outbreak of Lebanon’s civil war, the program was suspended and the

whole futuristic concept has since become a broken promise to its citizens. Architecture is the resisting evidence of human history. It is constructed by memories, making visible the hidden grounds of time, 'that of presents which pass and that of pasts which are preserved'. Viewed from its surfaces, it carries the scars of human interference and natural erosion. Yet its material and physical structure preserve the utopian expectation of its designer for a desirable future. Niemeyer is a futurist architect in the sense that he intended to explore predictions about the future of human society and its possible emergence from the present through architecture.

'Everything starts and ends. What's left for us is to fight for a better world ... is to achieve equality ... and to make life more decent for everyone. That should be the thought of any normal person.'

Oscar Niemeyer

Niemeyer suggests that 'the difference between the architecture of today and that of the future is that it will be open to everybody'. The fair site as a public area in the city was supposed to create intimacy between its citizens, but it has now been locked up to prevent entry. As a site of executions during the civil war, scars were left on the body of the architecture, and the effects of loss and displacement forms part of the social memory of this period of upheaval. Younger generations no longer remember the original intention of its construction, but the site itself persists. As is shown in Jordan's film, in order to reclaim life from this uncertain space of historical change, a reconstruction team is now trying to reconnect local residents with this abandoned site – it has recently become the focus of a restoration project to support the art of carpentry in Tripoli.

*

What we, as curators, are suggesting, is that the distinct strategies of resistance that emerged in the 'in-between' spaces explored by these artists and makers share similarities. They challenge the ways in which the free flow of human communities is blocked off and intersubjective communication is restricted – as in the contexts of colonialism, racial segregation and racism – and, in 2020, we are experiencing the strange condition of a world-wide pandemic. Farwa Moledina's *You must choose your part in the end*, resists the misrepresentation of Muslim women throughout the history of art; and in Nick Jordan's documentary work *Concrete Forms of Resistance*, strategies of defiance were developed in response to the Lebanese Civil War, and the site of the International fair as its architectural legacy.

The points of connection between these two artists emerged as the six of us, student curators from the University of Birmingham, were selecting artworks for a group show which was originally planned to be held in

Grand Union, Birmingham, in the summer of 2020. In the very beginning of the selection process, in order to reflect the traits of this multicultural city, we were keen to involve artists representing multiple groups or communities and to create a space for people from different cultural backgrounds to convey different notions of identities. In response to the growing popularity of identity-based exhibitions and collections internationally, curator Mari Carmen Ramírez has argued that the role of the curator has extended to that of 'cultural broker'. Curators act as 'brokers' when they select, frame and interpret artworks of a specific cultural group in their exhibitions, in an attempt to shape a more democratic space. The aim of these curators is to reach a wide range of audiences by producing collections which appear to be inclusive. Although this can create a new platform that allows the voices of marginalised artists and audiences to be heard, there remains the problem of falling prey to stereotyping, and of lacking authenticity as identity is reduced to an image. As our conversations with Moledina and Jordan deepened, we also came to realise that identities cannot be simply exhibited, and that art curation does not work in a way of empowerment from an already authenticated cultural tradition. Instead, it is constructed through conversations vis-à-vis the complexity of individual and group experience; the contradictory social, cultural and political stances, as well as their multiplicity of approaches towards art. In different contexts, they are negotiating or even resisting a certain division caused by binary perceptions. With their work they are giving evidence to the existence of more diverse identities from the past and the present.

As curators from different countries, we are also facing a borderline situation that, due to the travel restrictions of each country, meant we had to work together remotely from India, China, Thailand, Taiwan and the UK. Faith in the potential good of globalisation once brought us together, but ironically, another global issue forced us apart. Conversations occurred between us about the possibilities of transforming the exhibition online, but it turned out that there were few effective models of online galleries for reference. Old viewing habits are not necessarily challenged through magical new technology and the contested meanings of these artworks would likely be reduced by pure visual online experience. We decided to transform the exhibition from site to paper. Structurally, a book is comparable with architecture. Take the argument as its foundations, and the discourses as its construction. This creates an intellectual space that generates inspirations as well as contestations and preserves untouchable thoughts and passions. Interestingly, a Chinese proverb suggests that 'a book holds a house of gold'. Even though it differs from a truly physical architecture, this publication can still be seen as the resisting evidence of our previous efforts to stage an exhibition, in which we strive to create a contested space where different voices can be expressed and conversations can occur.

One of the first major threads of the exhibition came in the form of the poem, *I Have a Seat in the Abandoned Theater* by Mahmoud Darwish,

which was shared with us by Moledina. The poem further resonated with the physical site of Jordan's work, as well as our emphasis on our own subjectivity as curators. Grand Union too was once an abandoned site, formerly a metal-working factory. During our close collaboration with the institution, we were fascinated by the way this geographical site was associated with social and historical changes, which invests it with transhistorical meanings. On the one hand, Grand Union pays attention to the new artistic power of the city, looking for voices that can represent its complexity of identities and social experiences in the present; on the other hand, it is not afraid to touch the problematic themes of society and politics, and as a charitable organisation does not take commerciality as its main interest. And now, in these 'borderlines of the present', when once again the fate of individuals and communities are being deeply challenged and so closely connected, we still believe that the personal and collective experiences of difference and universal interconnectedness can be actively negotiated. We will then learn from our losses and shared experiences to stand on consensus instead of divisions.

Lisa Abbott

Yumeng Gao

Hsiu-Wen Hsiao

Prachi Kapoor

Napatsorn Ngaosawangjit

Francesca Singleton

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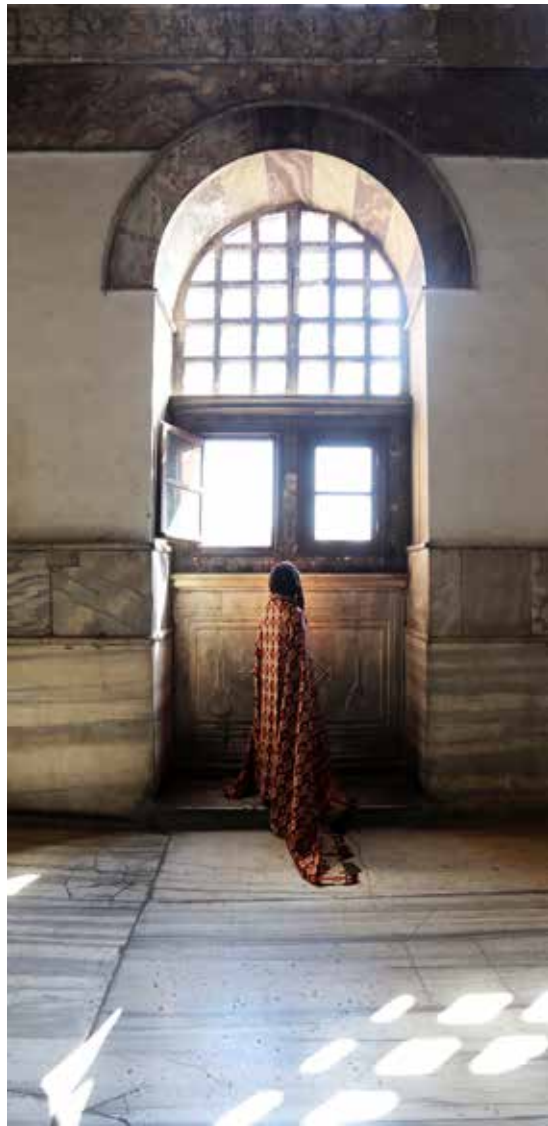
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She has taken the reign of narration from the Western Orientalist and has chosen the part of the author in her own tale

You must choose your part in the end

Farwa Moledina

I say: How is this my concern? I'm a spectator
He says: No spectators at chasm's door ... and no
one is neutral here. And you must choose
your part in the end'

Mahmoud Darwish

It is easy to fall back into the passive 'spectator' role when conflicts arise. At present, our sense of societal duty is being tested as issues affecting life and death are put before us. Through Mahmoud Darwish's words, Farwa Moledina emphasises the importance of speaking up and the conversely damaging impact of silence. Moledina presents the tapestry *You must choose your part in the end*; a large draping textile that depicts an anonymous woman standing within the grand architecture of the Hagia Sophia Grand Mosque, Turkey. We do not see her face as she gazes out of the open window away from us, her head covered and her body draped in a printed cloth of rich colours. The drapery with which she is adorned is another artwork by Moledina, titled *Not Your Harem Girl*. The intricate embroidery on printed fabric and the fragility of the material allows light to fall through it, which in turn illuminates the patterns of the textile. With the inclusion of this fabric, *You must choose your part in the end* acts as a constructive piece of collage that incorporates multiple layers of interpretation and meaning. The several intricate details, such as the significance of the site and the pattern of the cloak, unveil themselves as you engage with each element of the work, but can be overlooked at first glance.

You must choose your part in the end forms part of a series, with a further work by Moledina, *No one is neutral here*. Both share similar imagery of an anonymous woman wearing the same patterned cloak. However, in *No one is neutral here*, she stands beside a pillar viewed from a more distant perspective, which, in turn, provides the viewer with a greater emphasis on the bare architectural space around her. The works in this two-part series are not only linked aesthetically but also conceptually. Both titles have been



Previous page: Farwa Moledina, *You must choose your part in the end*, 2019, digital print on polyester, Courtesy of the artist.

Farwa Moledina, *No one is neutral here*, 2019, Digital print on polyester, shown here on display at Lahore Biennale: A Rich Tapestry, Aisha Khalid Studio Gardens, January 2020. Courtesy of the artist.

extracted from the poem *I Have a Seat in the Abandoned Theater* written by the famous poet of Palestinian resistance, Mahmoud Darwish.

The titles alone are strong moving statements that urge the viewer to take a stance on what they believe in. Moledina not only attempts to rekindle Darwish's significance as a poet but also to create awareness of the rich literary and artistic talent which is celebrated in the Middle East to a Western audience. The poem explores authorship by inviting the narrator to become the author. This in turn prompts us to question our role as spectators – whether we are neutral observers or coming in with our biases. In *You must choose your part in the end*, the anonymous woman occupies the 'seat' in an empty space that is stripped from its original associations. Here, Moledina is using her art as an instrument to raise awareness of the Orientalist image of female Muslim identity. She has taken the reign of narration from the Western Orientalist and has chosen the part of the author in her own tale. *I Have a Seat in the Abandoned Theater* maintains its relevance during this current pandemic as the world in lockdown becomes an abandoned theatre. Through this publication, we offer you a virtual seat to immerse yourself in this artistic display of multiple voices.

Reclaiming Orientalist Imagery

'I am interested in nineteenth-century Orientalist artworks and the way in which Western male painters depicted highly exotic and erotic versions of Muslim and Arab women from the Middle East and the Maghreb. Through my work, I try to subvert and reclaim the Orientalist narrative that is still so prevalent in current society.'

Farwa Moledina

The nineteenth-century paintings that Moledina challenges and reclaims in her work depict imagined inhabitants, landscapes, architecture and interiors from the Middle East and North Africa. They represent an 'exotic'; a seemingly distant culture which is racialised, feminised and often sexualised. Such paintings depict scenes in communal baths, harems and slave auctions which, conveniently, provided an 'acceptable' context of its time for depicting nude and semi-clothed women of different ethnicities. These paintings represent 'Eastern' subjects whilst expressing Western attitudes towards their imagined people. As Edward Said famously argued in his seminal text (1978), Western views of Eastern nations are inextricably bound to the West's own imperial and racist ideologies. This cultural separation establishes a hierarchical distinction between cultures, which allows for voyeurism and exploitation. Exoticism is not an attribute of the exotic place, object or person; it is the result of a process that consists of superimposing symbolic and material distance, mixing the so-called foreign and the foreigner, and it only makes sense from an exterior point of view.



Moledina's work is instrumental in raising awareness of these orientalist and exoticising approaches to images of female Muslim identity. She subverts Orientalist imagery of Muslim women to unveil the voyeuristic tradition of mainly European male painters whilst, at the same time, inviting viewers to question Orientalist stereotypes and their prevalence in contemporary society. Moledina's practice has been inspired by other Muslim artists such as Hauria Niati and Lalla Essaydi, who create artwork, poetry, and literature that dismiss and refute Orientalist narratives.

The practice of discrimination based on identity is rooted in the lives lived under colonialism, which gave rise to unequal power relations. Scholarship, such as Said's *Orientalism*, prompted the development of the post-colonial theory that recognises discourses such as primitivism, Orientalism and otherness as inherently racist. The theory brings attention to cultural differences that were either ignored or misinterpreted by challenging the assumption that male, white Western identity is either singular, or the template for all people. Of particular relevance to Moledina's work

Farwa Moledina, *Not Your Harem Girl*, 2018, Digital print on fabric, shown here on display at Lahore Biennale: A Rich Tapestry, Aisha Khalid Studio Gardens, January 2020. Courtesy of the artist.



is Homi Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity; a by-product of colonisation, which leads to cultural collisions and interchanges. For years artists have been consciously or subconsciously exploring this hybridity in their artworks by fusing elements of different cultures together to create their respective works.

La Grande Odalisque

In *You must choose your part in the end*, Moledina has created a hybrid artwork by combining elements from Middle Eastern and European practices. On closer viewing of the abstract design of the cloak, one can make out an intricate pattern of floral imagery with the head of a woman turning her gaze towards us, and the overlain script 'Not Your Harem Girl'. Moledina appropriates Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres' *La Grande Odalisque* in *Not Your Harem Girl* by using the fragmented head of the woman in her geometric pattern. Ironically, the French artist Ingres had never visited the Middle East yet he explored the genre of an exotic Orient in his artwork. *La Grande Odalisque* is a depiction of a white nude odalisque or concubine who is staring back at the viewer. Ingres used stereotypical 'exotic' details such as the hookah, the turban, ruby and pearl headpiece, and the peacock fan, to highlight its location in a harem. For contemporaries, the most problematic element of *La Grande Odalisque* was the woman's body, which is intentionally disproportionate, such as the scale of the head, the elongated spine, inverted pelvis, and different length arms. These physical qualities are perhaps made with the intention of giving the figure of the woman an exotic

Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, *La Grande Odalisque*, 1814, photo: Wikimedia Commons.

look, implying that the imperfections of Eastern women not only makes them an intriguing specimen but also one that has irresistible sexual appeal.

According to Islamic culture, women were expected to be veiled in public; however, the harem was an exception, a secluded domestic space that was exclusively for the women of Muslim households; it is reserved for the wives, concubines, eunuchs and guards. It was an area even the Western colonising male was barred from accessing. As a response, Orientalist painters like Ingres were particularly fascinated with the concept of the harem and created fictitious, fetishistic, erotic and romanticised representations of its interiors. For example, in *La Grande Odalisque*, the woman lies nude on a bed with the elaborate curtains, furs, silks and jewels within a private space that is suggestive of a harem. At the time, these artworks were for an audience who were never present in the scene and saw these artworks partly as visual evidence. In her undergraduate dissertation, *From Orientalism to Feminism: Reclaiming Female Muslim Identity*, Moledina examines the harem as one of the most significant symbols of the Orient and Orientalist imagery. The notion that women were imprisoned as slaves in these segregated spaces for their masters was one of the dominant interpretations that allowed Europeans to continue to believe Muslim culture as oppressive and violent. Moledina disputes and challenges these nineteenth-century improvised depictions of Middle Eastern culture in the inscription of *Not Your Harem Girl*. This statement is empowering as the Muslim woman is refusing Orientalist interpretations by taking the initiative to form her own identity and reclaiming the narration of her own story. In *You must choose your part in the end*, the interior scene with its open window, marble walls and floor, and the figure of a standing woman, her body concealed by unstructured drapery, attempts to suggestively move away from the Orientalist paintings of harems.

Not Your Harem Girl and You must choose your part in the end

As Moledina explains, the woman's face in *Not Your Harem Girl* is taken from Ingres' famous painting, *La Grande Odalisque* (1814, Louvre):

'An anonymous woman is photographed wrapped in a cloak that has been designed using elements of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres' *La Grande Odalisque*, a well-known Orientalist artwork from the nineteenth-century. The pattern includes a scanned-in image of an embroidery I created with the words 'Not Your Harem Girl' and also an image of a hand with a henna design I made from the same text; when combined these elements form a pattern that resembles Islamic geometric art.'

Farwa Moledina



Farwa Moledina, *Not Your Harem Girl*, 2018, detail, digital print on fabric, courtesy of the artist.

After studying Ingres' *La Grande Odalisque*, Moledina has alluded to it by extracting recognisable imagery from the work to create the pattern on the cloak. Here, she has taken the turban-clad woman and the peacock fan from *La Grande Odalisque* to create a design that resembles Islamic geometric art. She has thus responded to an Oriental artwork by reclaiming and refiguring its derogatory elements. At the same time, Moledina's work embraces the elements that accurately represent aspects of Middle Eastern cultures, like the practice of women covering their head with either turbans or scarves, and the use of a brightly coloured cloak. *Not Your Harem Girl* creatively brings together geographically distinct practices in a harmonious manner as it celebrates similarities and differences in both Eastern cultures and the Western interpretation of those cultures. The juxtaposition of the fabric with the bare stone architectural background of the Hagia Sophia in *You must choose your part in the end* deviates from the norm that the decorative arts are central in Eastern culture. Here, Moledina brings focus to the often overlooked or marginal elements of the architecture such as the simple arched windows in *You must choose your part in the end* rather than the majestic dome of the monument. With Moledina's choice to show a comparatively bare section of the building, the viewer is forced to appreciate the architectural design without its embellishment. The greater emphasis on textile over architecture defies traditional art historical hierarchies. It is significant to note that unlike Ingres, Moledina has placed the anonymous woman in an intellectual space of a museum, which complements her cerebral intelligence. Moledina's approach thus expands beyond this artwork to fight for all Muslim women to be perceived as more than their outward appearance; more than a sexual object.

This would not be the first time Ingres' *Odalisque* has been appropriated as a form of political and ideological critique. In 1989 the Guerrilla Girls reproduced the image in their iconic poster, *Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?* using it as a symbol for creating awareness of the



Guerrilla Girls, *Do Women Have to be Naked to get into the Met. Museum?*, 1989. Copyright @ Guerrilla Girls, courtesy guerrillagirls.com



sexualisation and objectification of women in art institutions. Since 1984, the anonymous feminist group have actively campaigned against the sexual and racial discrimination of artists in museums and art galleries, notably through high-profile poster campaigns. *La Grande Odalisque* has been a touchstone for feminist and anti-racist artists for decades and artists like Moledina are following in that tradition with their own unique approach.

Artworks by other Muslim artists have also been made in response to Ingres' *La Grande Odalisque*, such as Lalla Essaydi's *Les Femmes du Maroc: La Grande Odalisque* (2008) in which she celebrates elements of Islamic culture. Essaydi replicates the composition of *La Grande Odalisque* but has photographed a real woman to emphasise the unrealistic depiction of the imagined woman's body by Ingres. Instead of being nude, Essaydi has chosen to cover the woman in fabric and envelop the entire work in calligraphy using henna. The almost illegible Arabic script that runs across the print records Essaydi's personal experiences that express the struggles she has faced being a Muslim woman living in the West, an experience Moledina also shares.

Lalla Essaydi (Moroccan, b. 1956), *Les Femmes du Maroc: La Grande Odalisque*, 2008, Chromogenic print © Lalla Essaydi, Courtesy the artist and Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York



Farwa Moledina, *Not Your Harem Girl*, 2019, Digital print on fabric, shown here on display at Lahore Biennale: A Rich Tapestry, Aisha Khalid Studio Gardens, January 2020. Courtesy of the artist.

Moledina's *Not Your Harem Girl* echoes the motifs set by Essaydi's *Les Femmes du Maroc: La Grande Odalisque*. The insertion of text adds a hidden layer to the important conversation that both artists are addressing. Despite the overt reclamation of these images from the voyeuristic traditions of male painters, detail of the text is illegible from the prints. In *Not Your Harem Girl* the arrangement of the floral pattern on the fabric originates from the practice of women applying henna tattoos to their hands. In certain cultures, women adorn henna designs on their hands and feet for celebratory functions such as Eid, weddings, pregnancy and birth. Moledina's fabric combines these elements to form a pattern illustrative of Islamic geometric art, which is a traditionally male form of art like calligraphy. However, textile work and henna designs are traditionally seen as feminine media. By bringing these elements together, Moledina is fighting two evils by redefining traditionally gendered art forms and, at the same time, questioning oriental stereotypes.

*

'I am a Muslim Woman born and raised in the Middle East and currently living in the West, and this experience is often reflected within my practice.'

Farwa Moledina

Moledina's work is partly autobiographical, embracing religious, gendered, national and cultural identities and experiences. It also holds broader resonances, speaking to the wider struggles of women and female identity. Through her work, Moledina aims to create a more critical debate regarding female Muslim identity within contemporary art. Artists like Moledina who celebrate their identity through art are particularly needed at this time of great protest and uncertainty. Artworks like *You must choose your part in the end* that acknowledge complex and problematic histories are proving to be of invaluable political, artistic and educational importance.

Prachi Kapoor

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I Have a Seat in the Abandoned Theater

Mahmoud Darwish, 2007

Translated by Fady Joudah

I have a seat in the abandoned theater in
Beirut. I might forget, and I might recall
the final act without longing...not because of anything
other than that the play was not written
skilfully...
Chaos
as in the war days of those in despair, and an autobiography
of the spectators' impulse. The actors were tearing up their scripts
and searching for the author among us, we the witnesses
sitting in our seats
I tell my neighbour the artist: Don't draw your weapon,
and wait, unless you're the author!
—No
Then he asks me: And you are you the author?
—No
So we sit scared. I say: Be a neutral
hero to escape from an obvious fate
He says: No hero died revered in the second
scene. I will wait for the rest. Maybe I would
revise one of the acts. And maybe I would mend
what the iron has done to my brothers
So I say: It is you then?
He responds: You and I are two masked authors and two masked
Witnesses
I say: How is this my concern? I'm a spectator
He Says: No spectators at chasm's door...and no
one is neutral here. And you much choose
your part in the end
So I say: I'm missing the beginning, what's the beginning?

Mahmoud Darwish, "I Have a Seat in the Abandoned Theater" from *The Butterfly's Burden*, translated by Fady Joudah. Copyright © 2007 by Mahmoud Darwish. Translation copyright © 2007 by Fady Joudah. Reprinted with the permission of The Permissions Company, LLC on behalf of Copper Canyon Press, www.coppercanyonpress.org.

Graffiti superficially marks the walls, yet its messages remain permanently etched into the site through collective memory, damaging a place designed for unity and community



Concrete Forms of Resistance

Nick Jordan

'When a building is talking you should listen.
These buildings are screaming, and somebody has to listen!'
Wassim Naghi

When civil war paralyses cultural development and community unity, somebody has to scream. Ten years of intense manual labour by Tripoli's carpenters stand useless and abandoned after mutilation by the Syrian army. Their work in Lebanon served the vision of Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer, to construct a concrete cultural exhibition site designed to unite the international and local community. After suffering damage through civil war, neglect and environmental pressures, these buildings beg to be noticed as they resist the factors affecting them. This story of resistance in the face of



Previous page: Nick Jordan, *Concrete Forms of Resistance*, still showing aerial view of the International Fair in Tripoli, 2019, HD Video [17:05], courtesy of the artist.

Nick Jordan, *Concrete Forms of Resistance*, still showing the Exterior of Experimental Theatre Dome, 2019, HD Video [24:45], courtesy of the artist.

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adversity inspired Manchester-based artist Nick Jordan to travel to Lebanon to document the personal stories associated with the site, after coming to know the situation from a Guardian news article in 2019.

Jordan emotionally engages us with the declamatory presence of the Brutalist concrete architecture in Tripoli through his documentary film *Concrete Forms of Resistance*. He presents layered themes of 'progress and crisis, material and memory, and the contrasting utopian vision of the original plans with the stark realities of religious conflict, regional instability and rising economic inequalities'. Drawing on multiple narrators to emphasise the effect of this international fair on Tripoli and its local citizens, Jordan emphasises the resistance of the people, their communities and their heritage, aligning their mental resistance with the physical resistance of the architecture.

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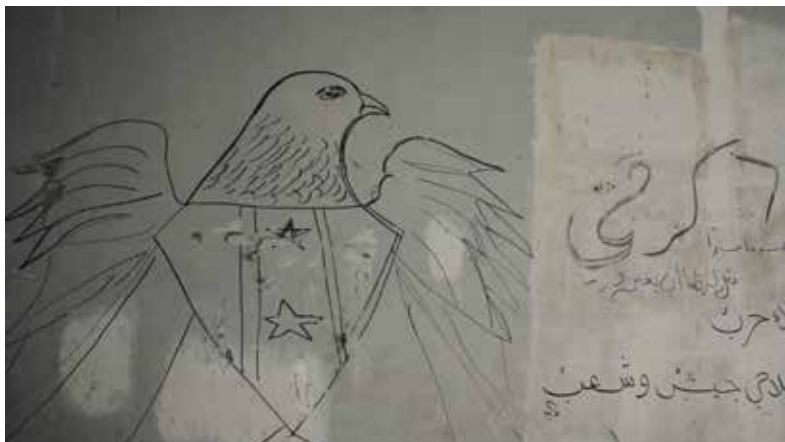
The International Fair and the Lebanese Civil War

Designed by a defining figure in the development of modern architecture, Oscar Niemeyer, the International Fair site in Tripoli, Lebanon, was originally developed as an urban regeneration project in 1962. Across fifteen buildings constructed on the site, many were conceived as cultural spaces including a museum, an experimental theatre and a permanent exhibition space, which lies beneath a 717-metre-long curved concrete canopy. *Concrete Forms of Resistance* documents the current state of this site, which was never completed or operational. The fair's iconic buildings were used by militia forces at the outbreak of Lebanon's civil war in 1975, and for many



Nick Jordan, *Concrete Forms of Resistance*, still of the 'Wall of Executions', 2019, HD Video [09:18], courtesy of the artist.

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years served as a strategic base for the occupying Syrian army. The site is now undergoing reconstruction with the further challenge of reconnecting local residents with the abandoned site, and meanwhile helping the city to recover from the scars of war and to reclaim its identity. In 2006, the World Monuments Fund placed the fair on the World Monuments Watch list of 100 Most Endangered Sites. They hoped that 'this listing may serve as a reminder that as Lebanon steadily mends its war-torn landscape, room should be made for sites of architectural importance of the recent as well as the distant past.' 'Economic marginalisation means that much of Tripoli's historic fabric lies dilapidated and in urgent need of attention.'

Construction began in 1965. However, any progress made during the first decade was perpetually halted by the outbreak of the civil war in 1975. The interwoven relationship between religion and politics in Lebanon affects every aspect of life, including cultural communal spaces. In 1975, Phalangists (a militia group mainly supported by Maronite Christians) ambushed a bus after claiming guerrillas had attacked a church in the Ayn-al-Rummanah district of Beirut. These clashes escalated into the fifteen-year-long civil war. The following year, in 1976, Syrian troops entered Lebanon in an attempt to restore peace. They took over the international fair site, using its walls to contain those being executed, marking the architecture with scars of conflict. Structural damage degrades the site but less so than the emotional damage. Graffiti superficially marks the walls, yet its messages remain permanently etched into the site through collective memory, damaging a place designed for unity and community.

The viewer's first encounter with the trauma of past Syrian occupation in *Concrete Forms of Resistance* is the Syrian coat of arms – a golden

Nick Jordan, *Concrete Forms of Resistance*, still showing Syrian Coat of Arms graffiti, 2019, HD Video, [02:23] courtesy of the artist.

eagle – crudely marked onto a wall. This bold, aggressive symbol destroys Niemeyer's utopian vision of community. The surrounding graffiti enlarges the eagle's presence – 'I'm committed to fight traitors and my weapons are my army and my people ... congratulations to the nation that gave birth to al-assad' – and references the family that has ruled Syria since 1971 and transformed an authoritarian regime into a totalitarian one. These messages, left in the areas where Syrians based themselves in the fairground over fifty years ago, declare their dedication to the regime, their comrades, and the commitment to fight for their nation; 'life... love... hope ...the leader'; 'spread our bodies like linking bridges for our comrades to cross'. The fair embodies decades of political upheaval and destruction over an area of 1km, challenging the mental resistance of Tripolians as they engage with these memories every day when gazing upon these structures.

Niemeyer's vision

Before artillery was inflicted on the site, Niemeyer saw this project as hope for a new future of society with architecture at its core. His vision was to unite Lebanese society through a cultural fairground accessible to everyone, irrespective of their religion, political views or wealth – 'The poorer people won't be looking at architecture from afar. That's the difference between the architecture of today and that of the future: it will be open to everybody.' Niemeyer's proposal included 'an entire new city quarter, with the fair as its focal point, accommodating a culture and leisure programme ... paying particular attention to the problem of housing, which he saw as being debased and subjected to commercial interests'.



Archival image of the International Fair being constructed, 1969, courtesy of private collection/ Wassim Naghi.



Niemeyer never saw his vision become a lived reality, considering it 'an architectural lesson lost in time!' At the same time, Tripoli's fame as Lebanon's hub for luxury and beautifully crafted furniture, during its so-called 'golden era', tumbled into decline. Not only was the war to blame but also the emergence of low-cost imported furniture dominating the market. However, recent renovations have enabled part of the site to support culture in Tripoli. In 2018, the furniture design hub *Minjara* was established for local artisan carpenters to revive the history of craftsmanship so inseparable from Tripoli's heritage. Here, carpenters are resisting the impact of emotional and physical scars by reclaiming this land and its buildings. *Concrete Forms of Resistance* documents and legitimises their experiences through

Nick Jordan, *Concrete Forms of Resistance*, still showing carpentry machinery being used in Ibrahim Sabouné's workshop, Tripoli, 2019, HD Video [20:21], courtesy of the artist.

Nick Jordan, *Concrete Forms of Resistance*, still showing carpenter Fawze Sabouné carving wooden floral design, 2019, HD Video [05:40], courtesy of the artist.

interviews, which individualise and frame the carpenters as the embodiment of resistance. They continue to create in a place of political conflict, reclaiming the space by pursuing their historic craft and contributing to Niemeyer's utopian vision of community cohesion.

*

Constructing Memory

Tactile objects embodying material and memory in *Concrete Forms of Resistance* were to be presented alongside the film, to connect the gallery space with the fair. The first of these is a wooden carpenter's mallet; a handmade functional item encapsulating Tripoli's carpentry heritage. Its ergonomic yet simple design complements the architectural forms of the fair. Whilst the chips and dents covering the surface from years of whittling resemble the weathered surface of the concrete architecture, larger, absent fragments from the mallet's rounded form create a texture similar to the walls scarred by executions, evoking the sinister actions which were carried out there. In juxtaposition with the film, this seemingly unassuming material item – a well-used carpentry mallet – can evoke memories of civil war, craft and renewal.

Accompanying the mallet is a wooden floral carving handcrafted by Fawze Sabouné. *Concrete Forms of Resistance* documents the carving process from wooden block to decorative bloom. Whittling down the wood surrounding it so the carving stands in relief gives way to a skillfully carved seven-petal flower with a dappled centre and leaves. This decorative item connects the viewer with the material which physically supports the fair's structures and economically and creatively supports Tripoli's carpenters. Adding these objects to accompany the film frames the carpenters as the



Wooden carpentry mallet and Wooden floral carving by Fawze Sabouné, 2019. Photo: Nick Jordan.



Nick Jordan, *Concrete Forms of Resistance*, still showing wood grain marking in concrete, 2019, HD Video [18:15], courtesy of the artist.

Concrete Casts, 2020, Holden Gallery, Manchester, Photo: Nick Jordan



protagonists in this narrative and celebrates their part in the past, present and future of the fairground. The role of woodwork in these utopian modernist structures was foundational, as timber was used to fabricate the structural form of each building into which concrete was cast. So intrinsic was their role in the fair's construction that it seems fitting that they were the first community to reclaim the site.

'The concrete umbrella could be cast in steel, but they have done it in timber. And with the Brutalism school of modernism it is not only the wood itself but even exposing the wood grain to be printed on concrete [that] was considered one of the beautiful aesthetic values of the Brutalism school. To see the wood grain, to give it this organic touch, to emphasise the texture, to have this skin.'

Wassim Naghi

Jordan manifests his response to the Tripolitan site in concrete casts of the wooden carving. Using the carving to shape the concrete in the same way it was used in the fair, Jordan reproduces multiple sculptural pieces which are

Nick Jordan, *Concrete Forms of Resistance*, still showing a woman pacing back and forth, 2019, HD Video [08:11], courtesy of the artist.



intentionally damaged to imitate the forces the fair has withstood. A new organic wood-grain skin, like that described by Wassim Naghi as imprinted onto the concrete of the fair, is visible in these casts, emphasising their hand-made quality. Casting the carving multiple times highlights the reproducibility of concrete casting versus wood carving, a daily dilemma faced by the carpenters in today's fast-paced consumer culture.

Documentary as Art

Jordan conducts a mostly improvisatory documentary practice in *Concrete Forms of Resistance*, layering slow-panned shots with close-up details of carpenters working and scenes of walking through the buildings as if we, the viewer, are exploring them. This cinematographic style allows for unstaged reality to be captured. An old woman pacing back and forth under the concrete canopy is framed with the city in the background, its high contrast emphasising the silhouette of the woman and the monumentality of the structure above. Jordan overlays these images with interviews and a musical score composed by David Chatton-Barker and Sam McLoughlin, inspired by the material qualities of the buildings. A collage of on-site field recordings, sustained drones and string instruments that engage with local traditions, and distorted industrial and carpentry sounds, creates a musical score which complements the patchwork nature of the film with its multiple narrators.

The underlying theme of material and memory is addressed in the obscure juxtaposition of sound and image in the opening scene. Shots of Tripoli's natural landscape are supplemented with a background buzzing of

Nick Jordan, *Concrete Forms of Resistance*, still of closing scene – Adele Jordan striking iron rod, 2019 HD Video, [23:49], courtesy of the artist.

insects. When images of concrete and construction interrupt the natural environment, the buzzing escalates into an intense swarm and is joined by industrial banging, preparing the viewer for the conflict ahead. However, the intrusion of the concrete is also reversed as vegetation reclaims the site. Plants growing through concrete emphasise its vulnerability and fragility after years of neglect and structural damage – as well as shoots of new life and regeneration. As wildlife grows through the physical cracks, the metaphorical cracks in Lebanese society are revealed; a sign that this site is begging for attention before it is overpowered once again by forces larger than itself.

Francesca Singleton

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Concrete Forms of Resistance

Transcript extract

Architect Oscar Niemeyer, archival recording

00:04:14:23

I must confess I am tired of talking about architecture.

More important than architecture is protesting on the streets. That is the important stuff.

I am interested in architecture in that I am interested in life, in political struggle, in seeking a better world. One where all are brothers and all human beings are respected.

Otherwise, only when there is a human, social programme ... will architecture fulfil its destiny.

For now, only those who have money benefit from architecture. The rest are fucked-up in the slums.

That's my motto: "The fucked-up have no rights"

Carpenter Hajj Ahmad

00:05:11:08

Today we consider the economic standstill a reason to take ultimate care, following political and external economic trends.

Our business is no longer a necessity. More a luxury for whoever can afford it.

Upon the mere sniff of war, ours is the first profession to cease.

Wassim Naghi, Professor of Architecture at Lebanese University

00:06:33:02 Here, quoting from Oscar Niemeyer's book, *My Architecture*:

One of the trips I did abroad was to Lebanon, where I was commissioned to design a huge international exhibition. And it was in Tripoli that I did my job during one month.

Whilst studying this project. I didn't want to repeat the usual international exhibitions of that time. Like the New York one for example, with its independent pavilion of so bad architecture and focussing structures, that I hate.

And I designed a huge long block where the countries would make their exhibitions. Architecture would be simpler, disciplined.

The construction began, the structures were concluded but the complex is still unfinished due to the wave of violence that shook the country.

What an architectural lesson lost in time!

... We say "lost" because it wasn't used! Because the architectural lesson, it is spread, when it is functioning, when it is useful, when people are having this relation with it.

Otherwise, it's ruins, empty ruins, abandoned spaces.

Full Credits:

Cinematographer, Editor, Director: Nick Jordan

Wood carvers: Fawze Sabouné, Abdullah Ezzeddine

Voices: Oscar Niemeyer, Wassim Naghi, Samer Barakat, Yvette Chehade, Karina El-Helou, Hajj Ahmad, Elie Mouchaham

Soundtrack score: Sam McLoughlin & David Chatton Barker

Production assistant: Adele Jordan

Translators: Mohamed Dibsy, Hussain Ussaili

The architecture remains the evidence of
past human existence and traverses the
ever-shifting borderlines of the present,
which humanity endeavours to outrun

Curatorial Reflection

Since the filming of *Concrete Forms of Resistance* in February 2019, the political tensions of Lebanon have continued to rise. Whilst adding a global pandemic to the country's stresses, a devastating explosion of improperly stored ammonium nitrate in a port warehouse in Beirut occurred on 4 August 2020, considered the largest non-nuclear explosion in history. Due to the government's failure to prevent this disaster, protests have erupted adding to those being held since 2019 accusing the government of corruption, mismanagement and neglect. Understandably, this intense political turbulence is the focus of many Lebanese peoples. The physical damage to Beirut's heritage emphasises the immediate importance of preserving architecture, heritage, and local businesses in Lebanon, such as *Minjara* in Tripoli. Multiple fires have occurred since the explosion, one in Beirut Souks, a commercial district rebuilt after the severe damage from the civil war. Its organic, latticed architecture designed by Zaha Hadid suffered fire damage, adding to the plentiful scars that the capital city carries. These recent events bring up questions of how to preserve architectural heritage in areas of conflict, prompting us to consider whether Lebanon can learn from its destructive past. *Concrete Forms of Resistance* shows how people can persist through these political challenges to maintain heritage – but how long will they be able to continue to fight back?

You must choose your part in the end was photographed in Hagia Sophia which holds its own significance with time and space. As a notable symbol of the cosmopolitan city of Istanbul, Turkey, its status has been significantly influenced by matters relating to international politics, religion, art and architecture. Built between 532 and 537, the then Church of Hagia Sophia was the largest Christian church of the Byzantine Empire. After the fall of the Roman Empire to the Ottoman Empire, the place was converted into a mosque. In 1935, it was established as a museum by the secular Turkish Republic. However, in 2020 Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced that the architectural space will be reopened as a mosque. The rich transitional history of Hagia Sophia illustrates how it has often found itself living on the *borderlines of the present*; as soon as it has secured its identity, a new one occurs and interjects. This shift of the architectural space's function may lead to further interpretations of *You must choose your part in the end*. When Moledina photographed the anonymous woman in Hagia Sophia in 2018, it

was a secular museum. However, as Hagia Sophia is currently exercising its role as a mosque, the artwork *You must choose your part in the end* could now be read with religious connotations, thereby opening up new avenues of interpretation. Is the empowering academic environment lost with the building's new purpose? How does the appropriated *La Grande Odalisque* in the fabric design situate itself in this environment? Does the evolving function of this space in fact promote the importance of the visibility of Muslim women outside – and inside – religious and other institutional contexts?

Over this year-long project, these sites of resistance have endured changing functions, turbulent contexts, superficial damage and evolving interpretations. However, the architecture remains the evidence of past human existence and traverses the ever-shifting borderlines of the present, which humanity endeavours to outrun.

The Curators

This publication has been curated by the 2019-20 cohort of students on the MA Art History and Curating programme at the University of Birmingham: Lisa Abbott, Yumeng Gao, Hsiu-Wen Hsiao, Prachi Kapoor, Napatsorn Ngaosawangjit and Francesca Singleton. This is the fourth curatorial project in partnership between Grand Union and the MA Art History and Curating programme.

Lisa Abbott, UK

I have a degree in Information Technology, a masters in Fine Art, and a post graduate certificate in Education. I am currently in my second year of completing a masters in Art History and Curating. My fine art practice centres around the historical portrayal of death and suffering and the dialogue of how this compares with contemporary representations. My research interests are found in the use of social media by teenagers to access contemporary art and the role of technology in art galleries to grow young audiences.

Yumeng Gao (Iris), China

I am Iris from Beijing. While studying Spanish language and literature as an undergraduate, I took my second degree in art history and decided to continue my studies in this direction. During my practice in museum and art galleries, I fell in love with the vitality of contemporary art and will continue working in this field in the future. I hope to contribute to the introduction and global circulation of artists and artworks with my language skills and work experiences in a multicultural environment.

Hsiu-Wen Hsiao (Wen), Taiwan

Having a Chinese painting and calligraphy background, I am interested in exploring the approaches of curatorial practice and how they apply to different cultures. I have experience in charge of public art education in a private art institution, which made me realize the significance of curation as a bridge between the exhibition and the audience.

Prachi Kapoor, India

After graduating with a BA in English and History of Art, I am currently studying for a MA in Art History and Curating. My education has provided me with academic and practical knowledge of dealing with art, which has paved the way to my ambition of curating a platform for artists to display their practices. Living, studying and working in a foreign country has given me the confidence to build networks but also my personality and broadened the scope of my thinking.

Napatsorn Ngaosawangjit (Ja), Thailand

I am a person who has a big interest in art. I have an intention to further my knowledge in art which is the reason why I intended to be a curator. Being a curator allows me to meet with a variety of people. Different people will have different opinions. Therefore, I hope that what I have learnt during my masters is going to allow me to represent as many voices as possible as the world now is so diverse and does not present only one specific group of people.

Francesca Singleton (Fran), UK

From my background in Musicology and Sound Art, I have an interest in interdisciplinary approaches to curatorial practice, exhibition display and interpretation. My dissertation research focuses on contemporary artist interventions with psychiatric hospital archives through photography, to promote the ethical practice of working with hidden histories through artistic response and the foregrounding of first-person narratives when curating exhibitions around sensitive topics.

The Artists

Nick Jordan is an artist who works with film, drawing, painting, objects, publications and collaboration.

Jordan's short films deploy a documentary approach, photographed in direct response to particular locations. Combining original cinematography, voice-over, soundscapes and archival material, the films present oblique, layered narratives that explore the interconnections between natural, social and cultural histories.

Jordan's work has been shown extensively at international exhibitions and film festivals. Recent exhibitions include *MEETINGS*, Thorsminde (Denmark); *Sources*, Castlefield Gallery, Manchester (UK); Innsbruck International Biennale (Austria); *Labo*, Tabakalera International Contemporary Culture Centre, San Sebastian (Spain); *Mental State Signs*, Paradise Works, Manchester (UK); *The Art of Magic*, Horse Hospital, London; *STRATA: Structures, Transformation, Solidarity*, Barnsley Museum (UK); Whitstable Biennale (UK); *Ecology Without Borders*, National Centre for Contemporary Arts, Samara (Russia). Film festival screenings include Clermont-Ferrand International Short Film Festival (France); BFI London Film Festival (UK); Edinburgh International Film Festival (UK); Interfilm Berlin (Germany); São Paulo International Short Film Festival (Brazil); Kassel Dokfest (Germany); Documenta, Madrid

(Spain).

Artist residences & commissioned projects include: Headlands Center for the Arts, (San Francisco, USA), The National Trust (UK); The Manchester Museum, (UK); Book Works (London); LOCWS Art Across the City (Swansea); ICA (London, UK); Art Gene (UK); British Society of Aesthetics (UK); Arts & Heritage (UK); The Swedenborg Society (London, UK).

Concrete Forms of Resistance has been screened at a number of festivals in 2020 and was voted one of the best foreign films at São Paulo International Short Film Festival in August 2020.

www.nickjordan.info

Farwa Moledina is a Muslim artist who spent her formative years growing up in the Middle East. For the last 10 years, she has been living, studying and working in the West, and this experience is often reflected within her practice.

Through the use of pattern and textile, Moledina's work addresses issues surrounding Feminism and Muslim Women and Faith. Most recently, she has been concerned with re-appropriating and reclaiming Orientalist imagery of Muslim Women, through which she hopes to unveil the voyeuristic tradition of Western male painters, whilst inviting viewers to question Orientalist stereotypes and it's prevalence in current society. Through her work, Moledina aims to create more nuanced debate regarding female Muslim identity within the world of contemporary art.

Moledina has had work exhibited at some of the most prestigious art galleries in Birmingham including Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, the Midlands Art Centre and a showcase at Ikon Gallery. In 2019 she was one of 40 artists selected from over 1200 entries to show at the John Ruskin Prize in Manchester, and she is one of 2 artists selected to show at Grand-Union Gallery in Birmingham this summer. Most recently, Moledina has exhibited work across two venues in Lahore as part of a collateral exhibition for the Lahore Biennale organised by Ikon Gallery and Aisha Khalid.

Moledina's work *Not Your Fantasy* has been acquired by the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery for their collection, whilst other works exist in private collections.

www.farwamoledina.com

Image credits

Farwa Moledina, *You must choose your part in the end*, 2019, digital print on polyester, Courtesy of the artist.

Farwa Moledina, *No one is neutral here*, 2019, Digital print on polyester, shown here on display at Lahore Biennale: A Rich Tapestry, Aisha Khalid Studio Gardens, January 2020. Courtesy of the artist.

Farwa Moledina, *Not Your Harem Girl*, 2018, Digital print on fabric, shown here on display at Lahore Biennale: A Rich Tapestry, Aisha Khalid Studio Gardens, January 2020. Courtesy of the artist.

Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *La Grande Odalisque*, 1814, photo: Wikimedia Commons.

Farwa Moledina, *Not Your Harem Girl*, 2018, detail, digital print on fabric, courtesy of the artist.

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Concrete Casts, 2020, Holden Gallery, Manchester, Photo: Nick Jordan

Nick Jordan, *Concrete Forms of Resistance*, still showing a woman pacing back and forth, 2019, HD Video [08:11], courtesy of the artist.

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Artists: Nick Jordan and Farwa Moledina

Text researched and written by: Lisa Abbott, Yumeng Gao, Hsiu-Wen Hsiao, Prachi Kapoor, Napatsorn Ngaosawangjit and Francesca Singleton

Editor: Francesca Singleton and Prachi Kapoor

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Grand Union Art Gallery
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Programme leads; Kim McAleese & Alice O'Rourke

MA Art History and Curating, University of Birmingham
www.birmingham.ac.uk
Lecturer, Claire Jones