Can My Art Do Me Justice?A Feminist Reading of Hend al-Mansour's Works of Art

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Introduction

Oppressed, imprisoned, subjugated, ill-treated, marginalized, all of these expressions are frequently used to collectively describe all Middle Eastern women. When it comes to Saudi women, such misconceptions are even more ubiquitous, especially when it comes to women's issues, gender roles, and expectations. Due to an unfair representation of Muslim women in Western media, many would assume that Islam is a patriarchal religion that oppresses women. Contrary to popular belief, Islam condemns oppressing any human being regardless of gender. Lack of understanding and poor informational resources are major proponents of this misrepresentation. Unfortunately, many would confuse Arabic traditions with Islamic religion—two things that are fundamentally unique.

Hend al-Mansour, among many Saudi artists, reflects such notions in her art.[1] The ideology of gender roles and expectations in Saudi society that is represented in al-Mansour's imagery was built upon some societal fallacies: cultural hierarchy of male over female (namely their bodies), and over the confusion between religious beliefs and cultural traditions. In particular, this paper looks at one specific work of art in which she portrays a full-figured representation of herself.[2] In this paper, I argue that al-Mansour, in both *Habiba in Pink* (Figure 5) and *Habiba's Chamber* (Figures 1-4), provocatively confronts cultural taboos concerning the female body and its sexuality.

Al-Mansour was born in al-Hufoof: the eastern region of the Kingdom ("Hend al-Mansour", n.d.). She started her career as a cardiologist, and then changed her major after moving to the United States in the late nineties. In 2002, she earned her Master's degree in Fine Arts from the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, Minnesota (Hend al-Mansour: Arab American Visual Artist, n.d).By reflecting upon her time spent living in a different culture, she examines "art from a different perspective and trace[s] the invisible path of Arab artistic production in the pre-Islamic era" (Ibid). In her previous works, she used *Henna* as a primary medium and as a reference to women in Arab/Muslim culture.[3] Her more recent art references identity and gender politics in her society while maintaining an Islamic art style.

By utilizing Islamic motifs and cultural allegories, al-Mansour confronts Islamic taboos. By living in-between cultures, Hend al-Mansour started to question cultural misconceptions of Arab/Muslim women. Simultaneously, she was fully aware of the limitations put on her as a woman at the time, especially when dealing with sensitive issues concerning gender ("Hend al-Mansour", n.d.). In her words:

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[1] For more information, refer back to: Lina Kattan, *The Conflicted Living Beings: The Performative Aspect of Female Bodies' Representations in Saudi Painting and Photography*, Texas Tech University, USA, 2015. This study affirms the overlooked interpretations of religious scriptures that permit two-dimensional art, with exceptions of idolatry, nudity, sexuality, and reasons of luxury.

[2] Among Muslim scholars, there is a common misconception concerning depicting full-figured living beings in art. Two positions have taken place: some find depicting living beings sinful, while others believe it is permissible. Many studies have shown that figuration in Islamic art depends on context related to issues of time, place, and personal intentions.

[3] *Henna* is natural dye made from a tropical plant. Women in the Middle East use to dye their hair and body by Henna: they make a paste from crushing dried leaves and mix it with water to have a reddish brown dye.

> My work is an expression of my strong consciousness of gender inequality. My childhood memories are my reservoir of images, colors and stories. Longings, secrets and desires of women in my hometown in Arabia provide me with endless inspiration and passion. Through this feminist forum I promote understanding between Arab and Western cultures (Hend al-Mansour: Arab American Visual Artist, n.d.).

Her significant life experiences affected her perception, attitude, and reaction, and therefore, influenced her distinctive artistic style.

Hend al-Mansour, notoriously challenges cultural and religious taboos while maintaining an Islamic identity and style. Because of the antagonistic messages she conveys, one could assume that the artist would abandon Islamic patterns and motifs; on the contrary, she is more attached to such elements.

> Geometric design, henna patterns, Arabic calligraphy and stylized figures are characteristic of my drawings ... My aesthetics and choice of materials demonstrate how my Arab and Islamic upbringing have shaped me. However, I became aware of the general disregard of Arab art in the contemporary world … I found myself making art that tries to be both authentically Arab and contemporary at the same time. While I make homage to oriental rugs, Arabesques, Arab tile design and mosques architecture, I adopt aesthetics and themes from present everyday Arab life (Ibid).

By juxtaposing Islamic patterns, Arabic calligraphy, and sometimes nudity, she deliberately utilizes the element of shock to convey her powerful messages. Works such as *Wallada* (Figure 6) and *Dark Lovers* (Figure 7) are perfect examples of such technique.

Looking across her various work, Hend al-Mansour developed a challenging artistic style that no Saudi artist dare to present. Al-Mansour could be easily misunderstood due to her shocking works of art. In order to comprehend her antagonist messages, one should be careful not to jump to conclusions. What distinguishes al-Mansour from any other Saudi artist is the fact that she fearlessly confronts her audience with unexpected Islamic images that are provocative and may contain nudity. Anyone familiar with the conservatism of the Saudi culture would not associate most of her artworks with that culture (*Shia* Islam has different views concerning figuration).[4] For these reasons, the purpose of this paper is to shed some light on the gray areas concerning her notorious style. In order to do so, this paper will focus on one work of art, which is *Habiba in Pink* (Figure 5).

In *Habiba in Pink*, Hend al-Mansour portrays herself in a full-figured representation.[5] This piece is part of an installation titled, *Habiba's Chamber*. This installation is constructed from different printed fabrics (silk-screen prints) to build a "shrine-like

[4] There are various sects within *Shia* Islam that would be more permissive of depicting types of sexuality and nudity in art.

[5] *Habiba* (means *beloved* in Arabic) is one of the nicknames of Fatimah, the youngest and favorite daughter of the Prophet Mohammed, and a praised Islamic figure in Shia Islam. She was married to the Prophet's nephew Ali, and the mother of the martyrdom son Hussein. She is the counterpart of the Virgin Mary in Christianity.

spaces" where the audience can enter and walk through passages, which imitate the "sacredness of the feminine" ("Hend al-Mansour", n.d.). This chamber was displayed within a larger setting called *Fatimah in America*. In the artist's words, "[t]he installation is about a Saudi woman who studied in the US, and passed through stages of alternating *hijab* and non-*hijab* attire. *Habiba* is a woman who did not fear change, and was in complete control of her body and sexuality. At the same time, with incredible ease she was deeply spiritual and true to her Muslim faith."[6] Clearly, her feminist attitude is affected by her particular multicultural experience.

In *Habiba in Pink*, some elements may reference Arabian culture such as the veil (*hijab*), traditional silver jewelry on her hand, the pink L-shaped Bedouin decorations (Figure 8), and the unfolded red male headdress in the background (Figure 9), while the short hot pink dress, fishnet stockings, high-heel shoes, and the stool suggest a Western lifestyle. Silk-screen mediation flattens the overall composition, and this flatness reflects traditional prints such as Islamic miniatures (Figure 10). She and the white cat in her lap gaze directly at the viewers. One interesting aspect of this screen-print is the white outline surrounding the whole female body in a fire-like configuration that seems to isolate her from the rest of the composition.

Critical Evaluation

Binary oppositions make the work restless. Similar to Western thought, the color pink is gendered as a feminine color in Saudi culture. Here, the artist uses a vibrant fluorescent shade of pink in order to immediately capture the audience's attention. While Saudi women should be modestly covered while in public, the woman in the composition casually appears in titillating attire (transparent stockings, a mini-dress, and high heels) without even bothering to choose a non-transparent veil to cover her hair. Moreover, this work brings Manet's *Olympia* to mind (Figure 11). Such paradoxes are kindled with a cat, which in Western culture references female sexuality and prostitution. As Alastair Smart (2001) acknowledges, "the word 'cat' in French slang means female genitalia – much as a word for cat in English slang means the same." On the other hand, in Arab/Muslim culture, like in many Western cultures, cats are common pets and "they were loved, not only for their beauty or elegance but also for their practical purposes. For example, Muslim scholars wrote odes for their cats because they protected their precious books from attack by animals such as mice" (Chittock, 2001). Cats are common images in Islamic art, and were admired by the Prophet Muhammad himself. As Georgie Geye (2004) writes, the "Prophet Mohammed advised the people to treat their cats (pets) as a member of their family, and by this he meant to take a good care of them. Not only by words, but also with his actions, he was a very good role model." In Islamic societies, cats are beloved and are the most common domestic animals because they are considered clean and favorable companions. In fact, mistreating them is sinful in Islam.[7] Therefore, choosing to include a white cat in the

[6] "*Habiba's Chamber* is an installation in a room that is 10'x10'x10' … *Habiba's Chamber* contained, in addition to the print described above, a prayer rug and shawl, a rosary and a prayer forehead stone. The chamber is made out of hand-dyed fabric, which was screen-printed with flowery and geometric design. In order to enter, viewers have to take off their shoes. After passing through three feet corridor adorned with arches, they get into the intimate prayer space - all in pink- and the large print on the wall. The prayer rug and shawl are displayed against a large arabesque designed window with light coming through." Hend al-Mansour, e-mail message to Lina Kattan, December 2, 2014.

[7] "Al-Bukhari reported a *hadith* regarding a woman who locked up a cat, refusing to feed it and not releasing it so that it could feed itself. The Prophet Muhammad said that her punishment on the Day of

composition shifts the meaning. Generally, in Islamic culture, white is associated with purity while black is linked to sins and demons. Paradoxically, the white cat placed on the woman's lap may not evoke negative connotations. By incorporating Islamic symbolism, positive notions may be associated with the woman and her sexuality.

Thus, the composition is charged with sexual symbolism and, to seemingly further ignite the composition, a flaming fire surrounds the entire woman. One interpretation could suggest *Shiism*. Because fire in *Shia Islam* represents spirituality and sacredness (inherited from Zoroastrianism), the image seems to reference her immigration to a non-Muslim country and being accused of impurity, indecency, and even adultery.[8] The overall fire, which acts as a halo surrounding the female body, protects her from impurity and vice. In *Half-Moon, Full-Moon* for example (Figure 12), al-Mansour depicts Ali (the Prophet Mohammed's cousin who married his favorite daughter Fatimah).[9] Ali appears to have a fire-like aureole that represents divinity due to his elevated status among *Shia* Muslims. Moreover, in the chamber installation, that *Shia* aureole also appears surrounding an abstract palm tree on the prayer rug. Therefore, regarding *Habiba in Pink*, it could be suggested that the combination of the white outline (symbolizes spirituality) and the cat (signifies pure sexuality) conveys positive connotations. Also, the backdrop pattern helps intensify that positive association: purifying flames cut across the background, and a white outline lifts the woman's layer above the flames. As a Saudi woman living in the United States and not wearing a *hijab*, she is facing multiple dilemmas. People around her may judge her faith, sexuality, and purity, even in a foreign country (whether these people are Muslims or not). The concept of not wearing the veil is not equivalent to anti-Islamic behavior, which is a misconception many Muslim women undergo in non-Muslim countries; they are misunderstood when they do not wear a *hijab*. She may look Westernized, but this does not mean that she has left her faith behind. The complications and contradictions posed by the image tell viewers 'not to judge a book by its cover.'

The artistic style of Hend al-Mansour differs from any other Saudi artist, yet her critique towards Islamic extremism is similar to many. It is evident that veiling is a relevant issue to many Saudi female artists. The woman depicted in al-Mansour's work is in complete control of her body, she does not fear change, and in fact, she is willing to establish a positive kind of change. Even though representing a seemingly realistic/naturalistic figure, the artist is avoiding the commonly known religious prohibition concerning figuration in Islam. She eschews reality in order to focus on conveying her powerful messages. Al-Mansour portrays a realistic full-figure living being that reflects her own likeness. Even though al-Mansour primarily depends on photographs as her initial departure, her photographic images are flattened by silk-screening. Silk-screening, as technological intervention based on photography, helps to

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Judgment will be torture and Hell: Narrated Abdullah bin Umar: Allah's Apostle said, 'A woman was tortured and was put in Hell because of a cat which she had kept locked till it died of hunger.' Allah's Apostle further said, (Allah knows better) Allah said (to the woman), 'You neither fed it nor watered when you locked it up, nor did you set it free to eat the insects of the earth" (Bukhari, n.d.).

[8] See footnote 6, al-Mansour installation description.

[9] *Shia Islam* considers Ali Bin Abi-Talib to have been divinely appointed as the successor to Prophet Muhammad. They consider him as the first *Imam*, whom should be followed by other Muslims. Shia also extends his *Imami* doctrine to *Ahl al-Bayt* (Muhammad's family), who *Shia* believes they acquire spiritual traits over Muslim community. Sunni Muslims on the other hand, highly respect *Imam* Ali as a Caliph, cousin, companion, and son-in-law of the Prophet ("Sunni Vs. Shia", n.d.).

mediate what might become realistic in painting. Even though she represents a full-figure, it is flattened in a way that recalls the flatness of Islamic miniatures. The degree of abstracted and flattened images is sufficient to avoid the commonly known prohibition of figuration in Islamic art.

Works such as *Habiba in Pink*, in which the female artist portrays herself, brings the notion of self-portraiture in contemporary Islamic art and how Saudi women artists are challenging cultural norms of representing the female body in public.

Unlike Western art, self-portraiture is an uncommon genre in Saudi art. Western artists master the antecedence of this artistic domain of expression.[10] Western artists' self-representation flourished during the Renaissance period because "it was an age preoccupied with personal salvation and self-scrutiny," and has become a genre of its own in the nineteenth-century.[11] Through self-portrayal, artists celebrate individualism by creating likeness of themselves and becoming both the observing subject and the object observed. When representing themselves, artists expose to their audience more than their physical looks. *Truth* can be exposed, in the way in which they want to be viewed by the audience, and the way they desire to view their own self-image. What differentiates self-portraiture from other artistic styles is the reversed gaze. In this style, the artist deliberately gazes back at the viewer. Aside from self-recognition, "[w]hatever stance they promote, be it pompous or playful or merely pleasing, self-portraits have much to say. Thus, self-portraiture has a more significant stance than any other genres of art"("The Self-Portrait: A Cultural History," 2014).The postmodern era, in particular, emphasizes skepticism and individualism, "artists began putting themselves more in the picture – physically, socially and stylistically – for portraiture had become more naturalistic and more concerned with the individual … The pursuit of the elusive self, it seems, never ends" (Ibid). Accordingly, this sort of imagery complicates meaning and interpretation because the viewer's attention oscillates between viewing as a picture of someone else (with all that is bound up with that) and as a self-portrait (with what might that entail for interpretation). In short, the viewer's visual experience changes because the image represents the artist's gaze in her own likeness.

Such Western artistic traditions could not be entirely relevant to Saudi self-portraiture. Anyone familiar with the Saudi art scene would notice how rare self-representation is, even for artists who usually depict living beings. Self-portraiture is considered an uncommon art genre mainly for religious reasons. Many artists would avoid the well-known prohibition regarding the depiction of living beings, even for fragmented figures. This might explain the notion that "Saudis buy more abstracts than portraits, since abstracts contain no images of human beings and they … carry a great mixture of colors" (Al-Mukhtar, 2010). As for female artists, Islamic religion magnifies the potential controversy. Muslim women veil in public (many even cover their faces); therefore, unveiling or revealing their image/identity through portraits would be discouraged on both personal and social levels. Aside from religious intentions, other artists might disregard self-representation for educational or personal reasons. Because figurative art is not celebrated in the Kingdom, educational institutions do not include

[10] One could argue that Ancient Egyptian and Greek artists introduced the first known self-portraiture, but it was done for different reasons. Perhaps, individuality and subjectivity were not the principal purpose (The Self Portrait: A Cultural History, 2014).

Albert Dürer, Diego Velasquez, Rembrandt, and Van Gogh would be great examples.

portrait training or anatomical studies in their curricula, so many artists lack the artistic training and creative guidance needed to render self-portraiture. Moreover, many Saudi artists follow Islamic art traditions, which have lacked self-portrayal during the span of fourteen centuries. Accordingly, they would not think to represent themselves. Because self-portrayal is a Western tradition, Saudi artists may disregard it as a type of reaction against Western Orientalism, that is, they abandon self-portrayal as an anti-colonialism act. For personal reasons, many Saudi artists do not approve of following postmodern characteristics.

Furthermore, individualism and egocentricity is discouraged in Islam. On the other hand, modesty is greatly praised because egocentrism was the main reason behind Adam's expulsion from Paradise.[12] Other artists might disregard self-representation out of unwillingness to *freeze* a moment in time, and thus, misrepresent her realistic likeness when the artist aged. Finally, due to commercial demand, artists tend to focus on what the public desires, and in this case, not the artist's own portrait. In short, Saudi artists tend to paint what others desire to see instead of what they look like.

In a series of four paintings, al-Mansour uses the medium of painting to explore her identity and self-image and portray her image without stylistic alteration. *In Identity #2* (Figure 13) for example, she uses more of an expressionist brushwork and includes a profile of hers that gazes at her own portrait (as well as the viewer), but only a single image gazes back at the viewer. By combining Arabic and English handwritten texts, she charges her composition with symbolism. Some words are clear and others blend in with the background colors.[13] Both texts revolve around ideas of identity, individualism, and self-recognition. The text integrated in this self-portrait suggests that she expresses her own struggles as a Saudi woman, so her self-image conquers her paintings.

In general, self-recognition seems to be the main motivation behind the development of female self-portraiture in Saudi Art. Women felt the need to present themselves in the art world, which had previously been dominated by males. Therefore, Saudi women artists pursue a different artistic style from males.

Meskimmon's (1996) article stated that female's subjects differ from males', in which they need to connect their bodies with the self when performing social critique about the daily struggles they undergo now, women are fearless, courageous, powerful, strong, educated, have agency of their bodies, making statements through art, re-

[12] To be a Muslim is to be humble and submissive to Allah. That is the essence of Islam.

a. "*So the angels prostrated - all of them entirely, Except Iblees [Satan], he refused to be with those who prostrated. (Allah) said, O Iblees, what is (the matter) with you that you are not with those who prostrate? He said, 'Never would I prostrate to a human whom You created out of clay from an altered black mud. (Allah) said, 'Then get out of it, for indeed, you are expelled.'*" Quran 15: 30-35, translated by Sahih International, http://quran.com/15.

b. Narrated by Abu-Hurairah, the messenger of Allah said: "*Charity does not diminish wealth, Allah does not increase a man in anything for his pardoning (others) but in honor, and none humbles himself for Allah but Allah raises him*." "Jami at-Tirmidhi." Book 27, *Hadith* 135, translated by Darussalam, English translation reference: vol. 4, Book 1, *Hadith* 2029, accessed January 29, 2015, http://sunnah.com/tirmidhi/27/135.

[13] The English text reads: *What am I.. I am my window.. the wind.. I am the vision.. I am the beholder.. and I am the seen.. I am everything I know.. and everything I reach.. I am my void.*

The Arabic text consists of scattered words: *perspective- vision- viewer- myself- I am one.*

examining/re-visiting artistic traditions, presenting new visual experiences of the optimistic future.

Self-portraiture has become a new apparatus to rebel against patriarchal domination, in both society and the art world. Instead of being gazed at and being judged by their appearance or unveiled identities, Saudi women artists, such as al-Mansour, now can return that gaze back and show the audience how they perceive the world around them. This way, Saudi women artists can initiate a transnational agenda of the particularity of Saudi women. In brief, self-portraiture for Saudi women artists has become an escape from social seclusion and a way to challenge the masculine canonical system.

Unlike Western notions of autobiography, Saudi women's self-portraiture positions female art productions within modernistic realms. Saudi female self-portraiture deals with issues of identity and transnationalism. Feminist sensibilities ground their differentiation from other types of self-representation. This explains why males do not feel the need to establish their identities as Saudi women do. By employing issues of gender roles, politics, and expectations within the social sphere, contemporary Saudi artists adapt a feminist approach whether they acknowledge it or not. Through their art, Saudi female artists provide an alternative vision to re-visit both the private and public cultural boundaries in order to regain their self-presence. For these reasons, Saudi female artists dominate the self-portraiture genre because they desire to reclaim the act of looking, become more visible, and share their own interpretation of the world around them.

Conclusion

Women artists employ their self- images in a way to put their life struggles as Saudi women at the focal point of their works; they sometimes do this by self-consciously co-opting the superiority of male artists, and they often rely on photographic media. Like many modernist female artists, Saudi women are appropriating the masculinity of their society and the art world itself in order to par with contemporary realms, critique issues of identity, and celebrate transnationalism. By addressing sensitive cultural and religious controversies such as the issue of veiling in public, Islamic sectarianism, male chaperon, women's reputation, and self-image, Hend al-Manour's *Habiba in Pink* seeks *justice* through the eyes of her audiences. In complete sentence. Now, Saudi female artists are creating change by challenging cultural norms of representing the female body in public. *Habiba's Chamber* could be one way to create a positive kind of change: Muslim women are seeking justice though art.

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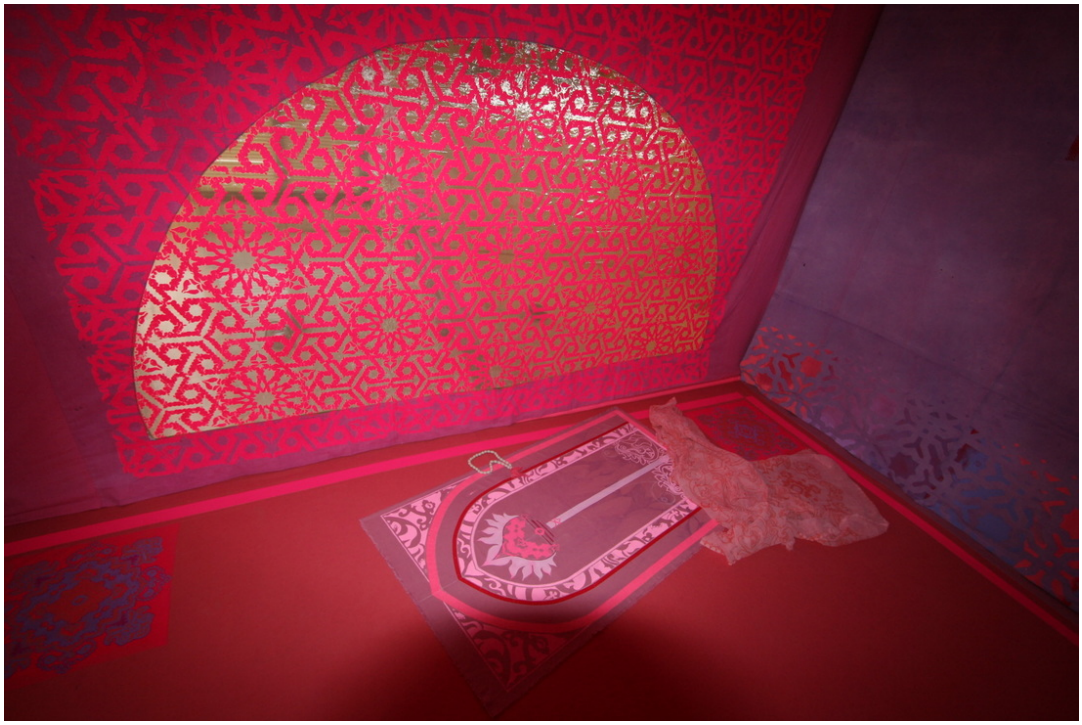

Figure 1 Hend al-Mansour, *Habiba's Chamber* Installation (outside view), 2013.

Figure 2 Hend al-Mansour, *Habiba's Chamber* Installation (inside view #1), 2013.

Figure 3 Hend al-Mansour, *Habiba's Chamber* Installation (inside view #2), 2013.

Figure 4 Hend al-Mansour, *Habiba's Chamber* Installation (inside view #3/ prayer rug), 2013.

Figure 5 Hend al-Mansour, *Habiba in Pink*, 2013.

Figure 6 Hend al-Mansour, *Wallada*, 2004.

Figure 7 Hend al-Mansour, Dark Lovers, 2008.

Figure 8 Unknown artist, Bedouin interior Fresco designs from Asir region, Saudi Arabia.

Figure 9 Embroidered red headgear (*Shemagh*) worn by Saudi Bedouin males.

Figure 10 Persian Miniature Painting, *The Kevorkian Portrait of a Seated* Flautist, c. 157

Figure 11 Èdouard Manet, *Olympia, 1863*

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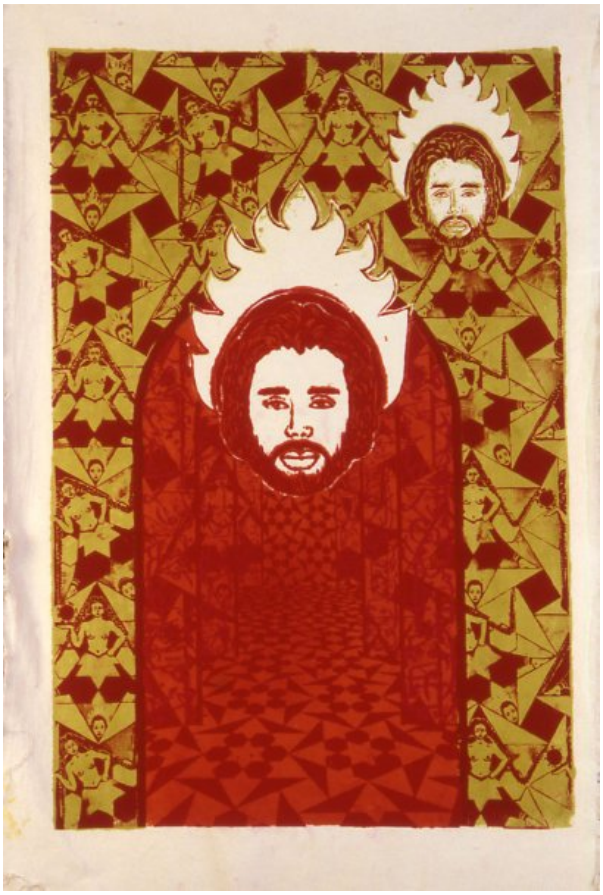

igure 12 Hend al-Mansour, *Full-Moon, Half-Moon*, 2011.

Figure 13 Hend al-Mansour, *Identity #2*, 2000.

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