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## In conversation with Rah

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I am not one to take part in social media debates, but even I couldn't resist when almost two years ago, in June 2016, the founding editor of the online journal Reorient, Jobin Bekhrad, shared a public post, defending the casting of Leonardo DiCaprio as Rumi. In a later article he penned for the Metro, he clarified that because the Persian poet was born in the "cradle of the Aryan Race," and that his own family "had skin so white [that their] faces never fail[ed] to turn bright in the sun," the #Rumiwaswhite movement was groundless and there was no trouble, whatsoever, in DiCaprio assuming the role of the Middle Eastern, Muslim mystic.

What is lost on apologists like Bekhrad is taken up by and, indeed, excavated by Rah Eleh, a Toronto-based artist who employs performance to combat histories and mythologies of whiteness that have proven to be detrimental to racialized peoples at home and in diaspora. In the interview that follows, Eleh generously leads us through key moments and ideas that inform her work. A recurring theme appears to be the performance of "racial drag" that seamlessly moves through issues of racial purity, authenticity, and colonial history. By the artist's own telling, the aim of performing in the skin of the "other" – a process she has referred to as "self-orientalization" – is to unseat inherited notions of otherness, self and legitimated identities that are bound to colonial structures and ones that continue to perpetuate uncritically in contemporary sites of cultural exchange, be they Western museums, public protests, or Youtube makeup tutorials. When launching her critique, Eleh escapes the Bekhrad-syndrome by way of her own skin, which is at once readable and concealed.

*"I am concerned with with the ethics of representation and often question what it means to be a responsible maker. I start by asking myself who this work is for and who its servicing. I am concerned with the moral evaluation of aesthetics. My work is aestheticized but I do prioritize "call to action" over aesthetics, poetics and ambiguity"*

**How does comedy allow you to open up about difficult issues, such as racism.. and how have you felt your audience respond to these instances - are they able to locate comedy easily or do they kind of reperform the racial stereotypes you're critiquing?**

Comedy can be a powerful communicative, subversive and pedagogical tool. Under the guise of entertainment, comedy allows me to engage with socio-political discourses. I strategically use humour to illustrate the ludicrousness of stereotypes and simultaneously critique individuals and systems that perpetuate stereotypes. I also reclaim the power position as I am the one who performs the caricature and repossesses the power of representation. There is a tendency to dismiss humour, especially parody, as reductive or offensive. It really depends on how humour is used. In Oreó, for example, there are many references to political and personal struggle. Many overlook and are even unaware of the historical and cultural references in Oreó, especially in regards to the Aryan race myth which is a huge part of the national discourse of identity in Iran. Insofar that Iran means the "land of Aryans." Consequently, Iranians are indoctrinated with ideologies of white supremacy and inculcated with racial superiority. The struggle with racial superiority becomes further complicated for Iranians in the diaspora. The struggle with self-categorization is unique amongst the Iranian diaspora because many identify as white but have racialized experiences. Interestingly, within the inter-generational diasporic Iranian family, it is common that the first generation still maintains an ideology centered around belonging to the white race and the second generation are more likely to align themselves with people of colour. Oreó makes references to this social phenomenon and this is a subtext that requires the viewer to invest in the work. Oreó struggles with self-categorization, often claiming whiteness but fails to pass. I am interested in race as drag and race as performance. Oreó's racial drag explores issues of passing, racial purity and authenticity. With the character, I

speculate on the question, who can claim whiteness, what does a performance of whiteness look like, and what are the discursive, external and temporal factors that contribute to the formation of identity? Humour allows me to explore these complex questions whilst making the work relatable and accessible.

**I read that you recently had a mentorship with Wafaa Bilal. I'm most familiar with "Domestic Tension" and "and Counting" - both really brilliant and important projects. How do you feel your work evolved through this particular mentorship? Did it shift your understanding of performance art and the trauma resulting from putting your body on the line?**

It was a real pleasure to work with Wafaa Bilal. It was a great experience working with the artist and getting to know his work and process. I felt a connection with the the artist because we share similar experiences. We both lived through the Iran-Iraq war, from 1980-88. Although we had different generational experiences. We both have certain struggles in our host nations and we were both refugees. We talked about our practices as we draw from our experiences and aim to contribute to wider socio-political discourses. I am not suggesting a sameness at all, but we could relate to one another and had many good conversations. In regards to his work, I commend the artist for his courage and determination in Domestic Tension. After reading his book and discussing the project with him, I understand that there was great psychological trauma that resulted from this performance. It did not shift my understanding or knowledge about performance, or the possibility of trauma that may result from performance. I have studied performance art and was already aware of artists like Marina Abramovik, Chris Burden, Ron Athey etc.. and some of my own performances have been physically and psychologically taxing. I have done a few durational performances, nothing that lasts as long or is as intense as Domestic Tension, but did involve emotional and physical endurance. Anyway, we had a great time, and I am pleased to be working with the artist again on a new and exciting project, cannot say too much at this point, but stay tuned.

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**In what ways do you queer processes of art making and art viewing? And also, why do you feel queerness is important to discuss in conversation with Islam, the Middle East etc. In what ways do these overlapping fields subvert common understandings of Islam and Islamic bodies?**

Other than the three-channel video work "Refugees Welcome" which I completed in Vienna with queer Iranian refugees, my work does not have a lot of queer content. One could argue that because I am queer, my work is inherently queer but I don't think a queer read should always be applied, especially if the work does not explore sexuality. However, it is important to bring visibility to queer Muslim subjects as they are omitted from dominant discourse and visual culture. There is a common misconception that one cannot be queer and Muslim and that needs to be challenged. Many scholars and queer muslims are reevaluating and redefining Qu'ranic terms and they express religious affiliation in unconventional ways. It's important to introduce different perspectives, experiences and interpretations of the text and expand a space where a multiplicity of experiences and perspectives can coexist.

I am a non-believer and do not explore or critique religion in my practice but in terms of queering as a methodology, this is utilized in my practice in attempt to subvert the social fabric. Through my characters, I trouble traditional paradigms and challenge colonial history and hegemonic discourses. For example, my character Coco is my post-human, non binary character, that refuses to participate in colonial language, Thereby, suggesting an unwillingness to further perpetuate communicative inequality and hegemonic discourses that are

established through language. Moreover Coco, introduces new geographical landscapes, sites of resistance, and creates a counter language through movement, This character strays from normative performance of language and introduces a “queer” lexicon. Further, Coco’s has no fixed identity or body as their body oscillates between transparency and visibility and is not limited by corporeality. Coco has only been shown as a hologram and through projection mapping and multiple channel installations. These digital mediums and multiplicity of images and screens, allows for Coco’s hybrid and queer subjectivity to be “mapped out” and explored.

**The Orient looms quite heavily across your entire body of work. Why do you feel that this is a significant theme to be thinking through in the contemporary era - are you suggesting that the West is not as post-colonial/post-oriental as it likes to think it is?**

The prefix “post” is ineffective because it suggests that colonization and orientalism are problems of the past, however, we still live under colonial rule, colonization continue to bleed into institutions and systems that govern our daily lives. The misrepresentation of the East continues through fetishizing and dehumanizing depictions that are pervasive in visual culture and exhibited in cultural institutions. For example, cultural institutions continue to host exhibitions that are centered around ethnic subjects that are marketed, commodified, and consumed by Western audiences. Ethnic artists are expected to perform an “authentic” and legitimized account of their identity or they cease to be readable to the western audience. These institutions contribute to the ghettoization of culture by incorporating institutional multiculturalist policies and appear to provide the public with authentic cultural experiences and diverse epistemologies. But this is just a facade of diversity and inclusion, meanwhile ethnic artists are showcased in segregated museum wings while still granting the power of representation to the dominant culture.

I am concerned with with the ethics of representation and often question what it means to be a responsible maker. I start by asking myself who this work is for and who its servicing. I am concerned with the moral evaluation of aesthetics. My work is aestheticized but I do prioritize “call to action” over aesthetics, poetics and ambiguity. Fatimeh crosses certain ethical boundaries as I performs a caricature of the other. My intention with this character is to critically highlight self-exoticization and challenge both western orientalist fantasy and Iranian nationalists self-romanticizing tendencies. However, it can easily be read as though I am masquerading around as the other. Similar to Oreo, Fatimeh satirically performs in racial drag, she dresses in traditional garments that are no longer worn in contemporary Iranian society. She sings in an archaic language, she offers tea to passerbys on the street, she ululates, dances on Persian rugs, sings about kings, mythological birds, and battles in the night skies. She is frozen in time and stagnant and presented as a historical and romantic figure that has seemingly been untouched by modernity. Fatimeh brings attention to the troubling classification system of ethnic art by strategically objectifying herself and presenting the body and her ethnicity as an art object. Fatimeh’s raison d’etre is not merely to perform an oriental aesthetic but her satirical performance highlights the complexity of self-exoticization. Fatimeh is performing a caricature of her ethnic identity and brings attention to the construct of orientalist imagery by occidental artist and writers, contemporary native informants and Iranian nationalists that continue to perform an essentialist and singular narrative of their ethnic identity.

Unlike Oreo, Fatimeh does live- action and relational performance works. In 2012, when the Canadian government closed the Iranian embassy and expelled the diplomats, Fatimeh stood outside the embassy and offered Persian tea to passerbys. In 2014, she did a series of live “Oriental Dance workshops” in museums and cultural centres. She taught traditional Persian dancing while confronting and challenging the audience.



Oriental Dance Workshop, Coalesce, Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa, 2015. The Oriental Dance Workshop was performed by Rah's character Fatimeh

**Thinking about image documentation being a form through which your work gets mediated, what do you think is gained or lost when for example the corporeality of a live performance becomes an image?**

Performance art is ephemeral, therefore, we rely on documentation to archive the performance. However the energy and the sense of urgency is not always available in the documentation, The process and experience differs in live performance and performance for the camera. When I do performance for the camera, it is tightly controlled, scripted, edited and the medium is manipulated to enhance the viewer's experience; one's emotions are manipulated through sound and selective editing. Live performance, such as the dance workshop, relies on active participation or it ceases to exist. In live performance there are moments where "winging it" is necessary. There is friction between the performer and the audience, a power dynamic, an immediate intersubjective exchange that live performance offers. Unfortunately, live performance sometimes involves objectifying and exhibiting the body as a spectacle.

**Regarding the exploration of the diaspora in your work - do you have a particular audience in mind? Or do you feel that there are points of connection between all diasporic people that have in their own ways lived through loss and displacement?**

Diasporic communities do not share one universal experience as there are multiple diasporas throughout the world and individuals in these communities with idiosyncratic experiences, there is not a homogenized diaspora. That said, the experience of loss, displacement, exile, inbetweenness and disconnection to the homeland, is commonly expressed by members of different diasporas. Through my character Coco, I explore this liminal position and introduce different dimensions that become available for the diasporic subject in the margins. Coco reclaims that alien and in-between position and there is great power in this gesture.

I do not select or limit my audience and not to self-adulate but I think the interdisciplinary nature of practice offers a little something to everyone. I currently have seven characters that explore several mediums, humour, ethics, spatiality, as well as identity politics. It is limiting to project a single monopolized interpretation onto any work. I do make work about identity politics and difference, for me, its important and necessary. However, I resent being expected to perform my ethnicity, prove my "authenticity," and perform my trauma for a western audience. These narrative are exhaustingly performed. Unfairly, white artist's works are assessed on artistic merit whereas non western artist are expected to represent an ethnic community. This conversation is tricky, because it suggests that non-western artists are coerced to performing their ethnicity and have no agency, and I