



POWER AND PLAY: INTERVIEW WITH QAIS ASSALI

BY DIANA SEO HYUNG LEE, March 18, 2020



Portrait of QAIS ASSALI. Courtesy the artist.

The paintings and drawings in Qais Assali's installation "*if you Like you can show my works in galleries*" (2017–20) are displayed and treated like archaeological findings. At the SculptureCenter's exhibition "In Practice: Total Disbelief," these components were laid out on a low wooden pedestal and table—mechanisms that necessitated looking at and studying the pieces with some distance, while the exhibition title suggested accompanying this gap with a healthy dose of disbelief. The video installed adjacent to the paintings and drawings confirmed the need for this doubt. The footage, documenting the installation's process, revealed that Assali is not the artist behind the images. A former roommate of Assali was an administrator of the fair Art Chicago and had received an unsolicited submission package from an artist supposedly with an Iranian passport, living in Afghanistan at the time. When she was moving out, she gave the materials to Assali, assuming he would find some interest in the works due to his shared Middle Eastern background with the artist. Regardless of the ignorance in this presumption, Assali found himself drawn to this package and used it as a departure point to further his ongoing investigation regarding artistic authorship and identity. Utilizing baffling, satirical, and even somewhat trivial elements, Assali intentionally disturbs the most private

and unquestioned stereotypes constructed by Western hegemonies. I sat down with the artist to discuss the conceptual underpinnings and personal motivations in his practice.

What is apparent in your recent and previous works is a play with power dynamics. In your current piece at the SculptureCenter, the unsolicited submission from the artist illustrates the footing of non-Western artists in relation to United States arts institutions, which are seen as gatekeepers to fame and success. In Costume Party at the Moslem Temple (2019), you investigate a secret society called The Shriners, where white men appropriated Arabic symbols and dress. You even attempted to “out” their secrets by trying to purchase a billboard space or a float to showcase their archival images. I understand it is not your desire to set up a dialectic relationship between the powerful and disenfranchised—obviously it is more complicated than that. But I do think that there needs to be a system in a work before you can complicate it. Could you speak about how your work does this, or not, or goes beyond?

I agree with you that systems of thinking need to be put in place. In different projects I found myself starting to embody other identities or persons that I construct or sometimes collaborate with to deconstruct my subject position.

Seeing myself through someone else’s stereotypes or hierarchies allows me to understand who is looking and from which way they are looking. This issue, or the idea of occupying or being outside a perspective, stems from something I have discussed with my family. I was born in Palestine and raised in the United Arab Emirates. I would have to answer the question, “Where is better? Here or there?” in or outside Palestine while visiting from the UAE. It was tough to answer not only because I have to satisfy my extended family’s ideas and say Palestine, but also, I think, I was looking at myself through their eyes and answering the expectation from myself as a Palestinian living in the diaspora.



Installation view of QAIS ASSALI’s *Moslem is Family*, vinyl billboard, 518 × 274 cm, at “Costume Party at the Moslem Temple,” Union Art Gallery, Michigan State University, 2019.

Considering your concern with “who is looking and from which way they are looking,” did you notice a change in your work once you began showing in the US?

Well, I have always been interested in thinking about communication methods and their impact on us, who is the sender and the receiver, and, because I was a teacher and student at the same time, I also pay specific attention to hierarchical teacher-student ways of communication. I always consider my audience. The questions for me are: which audience? What does that audience know? And what do they know about me or expect from me as an artist from Palestine? For example, in my abstract newspaper work *One Day After* and video installation *Parade* (both 2016) I wanted to deconstruct what myself and my people know about 1948. I was fascinated by what else happened that year besides the Nakba. I pored over archives for international news images that weren't of the collective exile of thousands of Palestinians from their homeland. Thinking about the Nakba, an event embedded within my culture, gave rise to my curiosity about those who don't know it at all or don't know it well. This idea of considering the audience might sound like a turn off, but in my practice I tried to avoid thinking of the viewer and I failed.

After moving to the US three and a half years ago, I continued to toy with the relationship between viewpoints and subjects. I found myself unpacking orientalist approaches I encountered, such as with the naming of towns, cities, and places in the US after places in the Middle East. It was like having the Middle East projected onto this new American landscape. These new places had different relations to “the original.” Strategies of copying and mirroring became more apparent as I kept digging. I mirror back Western audiences' images of the Middle East. This became my chosen method to play with the foundations of orientalism and generalizations in the US. I see my work as a form of political witnessing. Focusing on naming and cultural appropriation, I unpack colonial strategies, showing US cases and their connections to settler colonialism. Working in this way allows me to sidestep stereotypes of victimhood and cliché images of what it means to be an Arab artist in the US, while still remaining rooted in a political critique of the US.



Installation view of **QAIS ASSALI**'s *One Day After*, 2016, ink on newspaper, 38 × 60 cm each, at Khan Al Wakala, Nablus, 2016.

Speaking of sidestepping stereotypes of victimhood while still remaining political, “if you Like you can show my works in galleries” began with an assumption based on your ethnicity. Rather than using this as an occasion for activism or protest, your artistic response to it is actually quite personal and tender—vulnerable, even. Could you speak about this?

The project started while I was in graduate school three years ago. It’s been quite a journey, with many iterations, from archival display cases at a library to a gallery, and a lecture performance, mostly in Chicago and now at the SculptureCenter in New York. The work is very personal. Thank you for bringing that up. It in some ways is about copying and learning from another artist’s work by mimicking their forms. To blur the lines of authorship I decided after all these iterations of the work to transform it into a conversation or dialogue with the artist I was obsessed with for years. I decided to make a video letter, kind of like a public service announcement, to reach out to him and tell him my/our story. The weird thing is that the call worked and a couple of days before the opening at the SculptureCenter, he appeared. So I became a little worried about how to explain that I have his work, I’ve been copying his work, and I’m now showing this video and installation, all about him. But you’re also right, it’s really about me and a confusion of our identities too. It is autobiographical, to a certain extent, as it tells the story of my relationship to this other artist’s work.

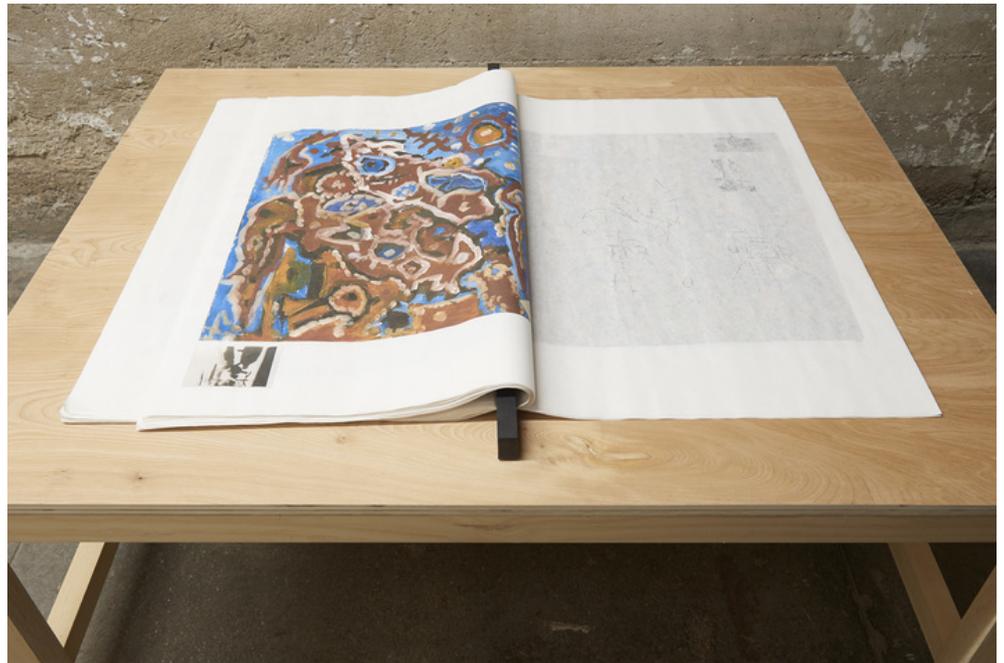
When my former roommate first handed me the artist’s work because of our shared regional cultural identity my first response was to prove the commonality, which I promptly rejected but later wanted to subvert or play with. This artist became something of an alter ego as I related to the work and the few Farsi phrases disclosed on the back of his letter. In his proclamation, “This project is about Afghanistan,” I could see my own position as a Palestinian artist, framed in the geopolitics of war and terrorism. As a Middle Eastern artist pigeonholed and defined by this identity and my ambivalent desires to break free of or play with these signifiers, I feel a strange kinship with this artist sending his work to the West and in some ways catering his art to Western audiences.

Exhibiting the unidentified artists’ archive of paintings, drawings, video art, and photographs, while concealing to a certain degree his role, serves as a means for me to question my own authorship and the ethics of curating such work. Alongside my own explorations of his work, I share my learning process of copying his paintings and techniques. I question my own responsibility, using his work without his permission while simultaneously inserting his work into Art Chicago’s catalogue as my own intervention.

The video for SculptureCenter includes various forms of public address or lectures where I’m talking about him and to him through the camera in first-person narration. From a bit of Facebook stalking I found out he lives in New York, so the first-person voice made sense. I co-authored this video with a longtime collaborator and video artist Jose Luis Benavides to rescript my previous performances, didactic texts, and all of this content that I have accumulated over the years into a new form. We were interested in questioning and doubting the truthfulness of the materials. What does watching me in the video evoke while I’m claiming the work as my own? And in this final iteration, the question is: does having found the artist change the work? Is the work over?



Installation view of **QAIS ASSALI**'s *"if you Like you can show my works in galleries"*, 2017–20, video installation with inkjet print on architectural bond paper and copy paper, acrylic on canvas, archival material, ink on sketching paper: 17 min 31 sec, dimensions variable, at "In Practice: Total Disbelief," SculptureCenter, New York, 2020.



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