

Like a Rebel

Monira Al Qadiri may be known for wearing a beard and playing with gender constructs but her work is so much more than that. An artist-scholar whose interests are as wide-ranging as religion, politics and oil economies, her performances, videos and installations raise important questions about the nature of the Arab world.

Monira Al Qadiri is not someone you can put in a box. At the age of 16, she convinced her parents, and the Kuwaiti Minister of Education, to send her to Japan for a national scholarship that was normally reserved for boys. "I cannot believe they actually let me go," she exclaims, flicking a cropped, styled lock behind her ear. "It was my dream, though at the time I didn't even know the difference between cartoons and reality. When I finally arrived, it was like: here I am, in Cartoonland."

It so happened that Japan was the biggest importer of oil from Kuwait then and that's why this scholarship existed. Al Qadiri was the last person to become a grant recipient. "When I first saw the information about it in the paper, I was on it," she continues excitedly. Astutely, she made sure to get really good grades in school and invited the Minister of Education to her solo show of hyperrealist paintings, and then rather boldly informed the Minister that she had her parents' approval to go to Japan, should they consider her for the grant.

It's not that Al Qadiri wasn't well-positioned to become an artist – her mother is a famous Kuwaiti artist (and her sister, Fatima, is also a well-known electronic musician and digital media artist, who BESPOKE interviewed in issue 46) but for her, art arose from a different context. "When we were kids, it was what we would do during our play-time. During the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, we were

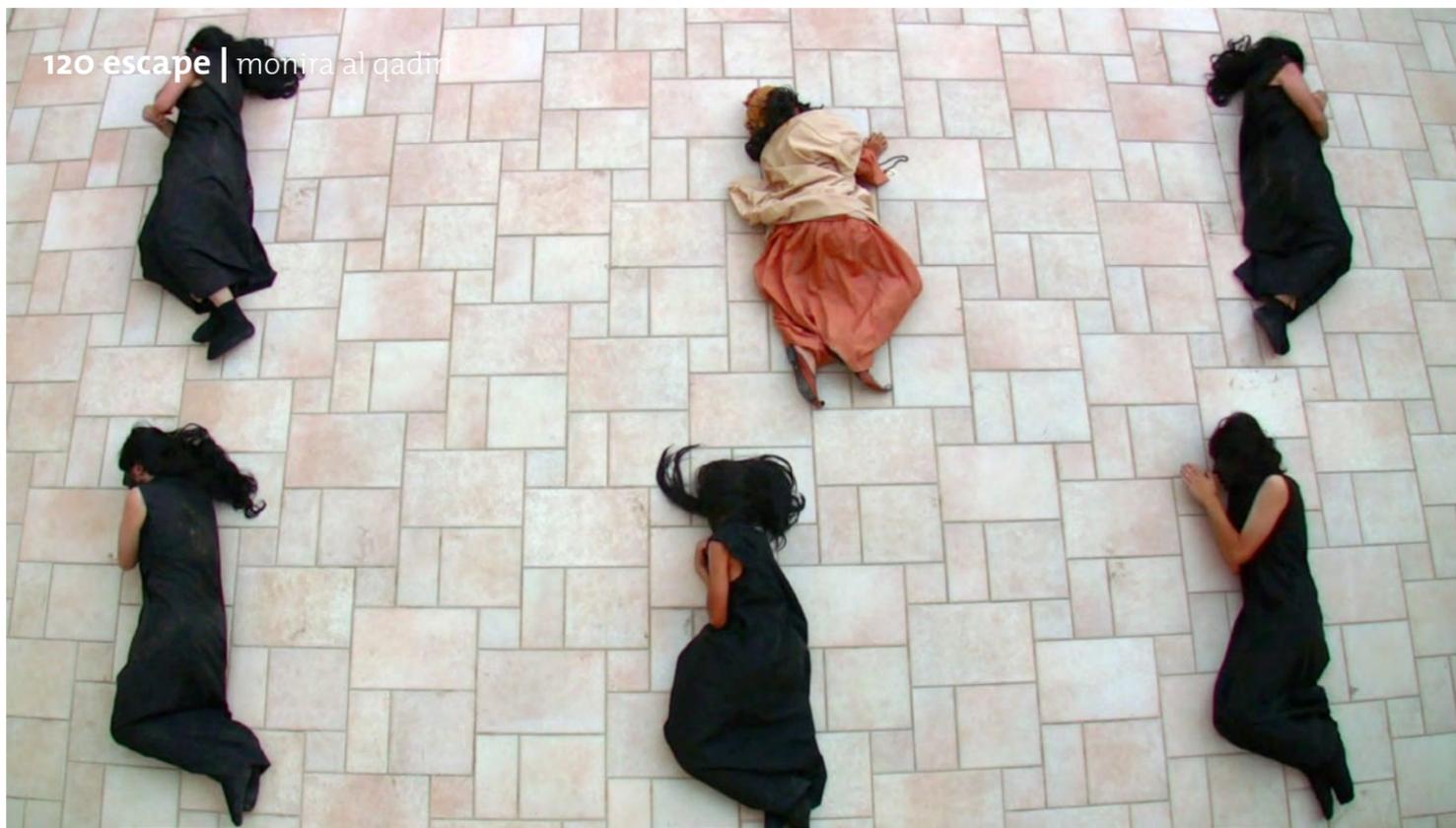
stuck at home and would draw all day, during the electricity cuts and the bombs."

During that period, Al Qadiri also watched a lot of animation, which fuelled her urge to escape the present moment and immerse herself in other fantasy worlds. This fermented her desire to go to Japan – the farthest point from where she lived – in what became a 10-year odyssey that ended in a doctorate in the arts from Tokyo University of Arts, in 2010. She became fluent in Japanese at the age of 17 (she has even read untranslated books on Islamic culture in Japanese, by Toshihiko Izutsu, famous for his 1958 translation of the Qur'an), yet the animations that drove her to the country in the first place, comprise a visual language she may have largely left behind as a contemporary artist today – though she says the genre still influences her work, just in a much more indirect way.

Her early 2006 animated films, such as 'Visual Violence', which is described as 'a journey through the landscape of a tortured man's mind,' and 'Nightmare', a haunting piece with a bearded Cyclops, naked fairy-like women and a beheaded chicken, evoke some of the themes surrounding gender and masculinity that appear in her later work in video, sculpture and installation.

As we probe these obsessions in her work, she says, "You know it's funny how art is very text-based here," referring to contemporary Arab artists in particular – Beirut is now the place she has made her home. "Everyone here wants to talk about ►

Opposite: A portrait of the Kuwaiti artist Monira Al Qadiri who was born in Senegal in 1983 and later educated in Japan, where she obtained a doctorate.



their art. In Japan, they tend to shy away from explaining their work. You learn that the work should speak for itself; it's a different experience of art while in the Arab world, we have a more literary than visual culture. One thing I've learned in Japan is to be true to my art, to the extent that I 'become' it somehow. That's why most of my work is autobiographical." And part of this merging with her work relates to how Al Qadiri projects herself, often as a bearded man. Inevitably, I ask her to explain.

"The beard is such a foreign thing, unattainable to women," she begins, showing me the early instances of when she first started playing with the idea of being a man, in incredible photos that her sister took of her, sometimes with a painted moustache, other times with a comb in her slicked-back and parted short hair, posing dramatically in a suit, totally taking on the character.

"I guess men fascinate me. I remember how during the war, we were hiding at home: me, my mum and my sister while the men were out there, with the resistance. I thought they were so cool and I always wanted to be like them, even though the only problem is

I'm heterosexual, so it wouldn't actually work," she says, cheekily adding how relieved her parents were about that part.

But it's more than just being subversive or putting on a brave gender-defying alter-ego, Al Qadiri has long studied, much like an anthropologist, thought-provoking discourse, especially in her doctoral research, such as the link between masculinity and narcissism, between aesthetics and suffering, tragedy and self-indulgence. In her 'Tragedy of the Self' series (2009-2012), she has herself framed in gold, with lipstick, a dark veil, a long flowing black beard and a melancholic expression in what can be seen as an ironic depiction of religious iconography and saintliness.

Then there's her 2013 'Dreamer' sculpture, which she says is a kind of death mask. It comprises a mould of her own face in a glass coffin, wearing a two-metre long beard made of sheep hair. "It's subconscious, perhaps it's me mourning my own narcissism as a man," she wonders aloud.

In her 2008 music video, 'Oh Torment' (Wa Waila), based on a Kuwaiti folk song (which plays a bit like kitsch), >

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This page and upper right: Two stills from *Wa Waila*, a surreal music video depicting love lost, displacement, gender identity and death, where the artist plays the main male singer. **Lower right:** *Alien Technology* is a large iridescent oil drill sculpture, commissioned by The Arab Fund for Arts & Culture (AFAC). >



This page: Behind the Sun is a video comprising amateur footage taken in 1991 of the burning of Kuwaiti oil fields. Al Qadiri has juxtaposed these images with audio monologues from Islamic television programmes aired during the same period.



Al Qadiri is again present, except her face is painted a muddy colour, she is wearing that omnipresent beard of irony and the men are dressed as women. This is a performative genre she calls 'video-painting' because the movements appear so flat, almost two-dimensional.

Not limited to these tongue-in-cheek self-portraits, Al Qadiri's work extends to her academic researcher side, delving into macro-issues of religion and power. "Through that microcosm, which is myself, I try to expand to something bigger," she explains. Her Prism series (ongoing from 2007) is a case in point, and links to her exploration of 'the aesthetics of sadness' and the way mourning is manifested in physical space. "I always had this attraction to the tragic moment and I tried to find it in actual space." We then abstractly discuss the origins of grief and practices of suffering before and during Islam and how they're influenced by Iran and Turkey, poetry and Sufi rituals. "I did research on metaphysical ideas of life and death, as well as looking at religion itself as a form of art," she continues. And so for this series, she filmed the national Kuwaiti cemetery, Sulaibkhat, which is divided into two parts that couldn't be more different in character – one is a Sunni graveyard and the other Shi'ite.

"The Shi'ite one was more lively, it was where people would meet, socialise, or pray." The Sunni one, in contrast, was lifeless, bare and undecorated and yet Al Qadiri poses the question of which one can be considered sadder in terms of both aesthetics and experience; she says the answer isn't obvious, or clear.

She has also ruminated on the oil industry such as in her 2013 apocalyptic-looking 'Behind the Sun' series, where she uses found footage of the burning of Kuwaiti oil fields in 1991 by Saddam Hussein during the Gulf war. "It was such an expression of his power." Or the 2014 'Alien Technology' public sculpture, which is a grotesque, octopus-like form that looks like an oil drill in black pearl – a reference to the forgotten pearl industry that came before the discovery of oil in the Gulf.

It's true that Al Qadiri's work is staunchly grounded in the Middle East thematically, but she will soon come full circle in an exciting partnership with Art Jameel and UK-based Crossway foundation. She has been appointed as artistic lead for the Journey to Japan project that selects young applicants from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait and the UK, to experience the arts in Japan over an immersive 2-week period. As the project head, Valeria Mariana, explained, "We were working with Al Qadiri on an unrelated film project when by chance, we found out about her experience with the creative industries in Japan."

Constantly crossing geographic boundaries in her practice, Al Qadiri is someone who seems to be on a relentless creative journey but she remains modest, and humbly rooted, about her own artistic sensibilities. "My parents' generation in Kuwait in the 1960s and 1970s lived through a cultural renaissance of sorts, they were so progressive. And that culture lives on in us. We inherited it even though the landscape of our country is different today." ¹⁵