

## Jananne Al-Ani (b. 1966)

Untitled 1998

**Key facts:**

**Medium: C-type photographs**

**Size: 2 parts - each 122 x 122 cm**

**Arts Council Collection**



## 1. Art historical terms and concepts

### Subject matter:

Both photographs are formal group portraits of Al-Ani's family. Five women - her mother (far left), herself (second from right) and her three sisters are lined up in a neutral, artificial setting suggestive of a photographic studio. Al-Ani's self-portrait is seen in the context of her family group, as well as in relation to traditions of family portraiture both in the Middle East and the West, and to histories of representation of women. In both images, the women all stand facing the front, with the daughters posed in order of birth date instead of according to the aesthetic criteria of height and balance. The father is absent. In the first of these binary images, the women wear western-style clothing and shoes with the middle sister bare footed; in the second, they have dressed in Middle-Eastern/Arab/Muslim clothing - some have their hair covered. Rather than referencing a specific culture, the 'Oriental' clothing is generic.

Traditional portraiture commemorates particular individuals in particular places, with a view to showing their external features and something of their inner psychology, while also being a form of propaganda. A historical family portrait would display its subjects' similar facial features and other physical likenesses, as well as exploring issues of wealth, status, and accomplishment, through the choices of clothes, pose, gesture and expression.

These photographs address the Orientalist tradition – stemming from the colonial past but still very much alive - in which the West sees the East as 'other': a "contrasting image, idea, personality, experience" (Said, 1978). An image of a group of women relates directly to the idea of the 'harem' (a private space for Muslim women), thus introducing the Western notion of sexuality into gender difference, while also questioning the supposedly 'objective innocent eye' within historical conventions of anthropological and ethnographic representation. The garments covering the women's bodies engage directly with the stereotype of non-white women, feeding into "an ideological construction of otherness" (Bhabha, 1983). Al-Ani investigates the inherent ambivalence and contradiction within these intersecting histories of representation.

### **Visual analysis:**

The composition of each photograph is structured formally by the arrangement of figures with a clear central axis (especially in the second image, with the middle sister's clasped hands). Both images have a sense of balance, with tight square framing and equal space above and below the women. The strong, predominantly warm, primary colours also balance the composition, especially the blues and the flowered dresses. The shallow space of the studio is suggested by the multiple light sources: one from the front right casts shadows onto the strong yellow floor, while another causes the block of shadow on the left.

The women's figures are clearly defined as they stand frontally, feet together and arms by their sides, gazing out at the viewer without expression. The artist explains:

*"What's important for me in the work is the returned gaze of the women; the fact that they are all staring out in a very confrontational way: so that the relationship between the female subject and the viewer is undermined in some way. My intention is for the viewer to become self-conscious."*(Al-Ani)

Rather than sitting or reclining the figures stand, and this upright stance gives the images their power - it undermines the patriarchal objectification of women in traditional portraiture, as does the short hair of the mother (in contrast to the long hair of the youngest sister).

Pattern and decoration is important as a marker of difference as the clothing in both images is loaded with meaning. In the first photograph, the floral patterns and dresses are associated with femininity, while the style of dress is associated with comfort. The exercise outfit of the eldest woman – the mother – is the most 'revealing'. In this image the fabrics reflect the light; in the second photograph most of the garments, which are longer and darker – absorb the light, apart from the shimmering robe on the right, the ornate brocade edge in the centre and the coins on the headscarf on the left.

## **2. Cultural, social, technological and political factors**

This is an early photographic work by Al-Ani, who was born in Kirkuk, Iraq to an Irish mother and Iraqi father. The family moved to Britain when Al-Ani was thirteen in 1979, the year Sadaam Hussein and the Ba'ath Party gained control in Iraq. Her father returned to Iraq and remarried.

Al-Ani studied fine art at Byam Shaw School of Art from 1986 to 1989 during which time the Iran-Iraq War finally ended. After Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait led to the Gulf War, a coalition of 35 states led by the USA formed against Iraq, and all those of Iraqi descent were forced to confront their personal narrative in the face of the changing experiences of how those in the West perceived these events. Photographs of the war published daily in the Western media revealed that the Orientalist stereotype was still strong. Concurrently, Al-Ani's work became more directly related to issues of women's identity within a historical narrative of colonialism and imperialism, especially while she studied for an MA in photography at the Royal College of Art between 1995 and 1997.

During this period, hair and clothing became an even more marked signifier of meaning, not only for wealth, status and fashion but also in relation to East/West, Islam/Christianity, past/present, feminine/masculine, rural/urban and so forth. In the second photograph Al-Ani deliberately rejects the veil, burka, chador and niqab; and only her youngest sister wears a hijab covering head and neck - with a kaftan. Two sisters have no hair covering and there are two scarfs. The bare legs of the central figure and other details reveal these garments to be rural 'tourist' items from the Middle East, rather than pieces specific to Iraq or the 1990s. The women are 'performing' plural, flexible, cross-cultural identities and refusing to conform to Western notions of covering/revealing the body.

## **3. Developments in materials and techniques and processes**

A C-type - or Chromogenic - print (named after Kodak paper) is a photographic print made from a colour negative or slide that is exposed to Chromogenic photographic paper (wet process paper) which contains three emulsion layers, each one is sensitised to a different primary colour. After the image has been exposed it is submerged in a chemical bath, where each layer reacts to the chemicals to create a full-colour photograph. The image continues to react even after this process is complete, as the chemicals are so complex and extremely sensitive to water, light and heat. For this reason it is difficult to protect C-type prints from deterioration. By the 1990s, C-type prints were standard for fine art photographers, but they would later be superseded by digital printing. The square format of the composition would suggest that the images were printed from a slide film.

The photograph's history as an 'accurate and truthful' medium used for anthropological records is emphasised here as both shots were taken using a tripod and cable release cord. There is no attempt to hide the cable, which can be seen on the floor, and is held in Al-Ani's right hand, simultaneously identifying her as the active photographer and revealing the image to be staged.

*"In cultures where the regulation of women's visibility was an important part of patriarchal control, photography might suggest not only an assertion of the photographer's power over the subject, but also a loss of indigenous male control over women. Western men's fantasies of what lay hidden out of view from them are a common theme in the writings of the time:"*  
(Al-Ani)

#### 4. Ways it has been used and interpreted in past and present societies

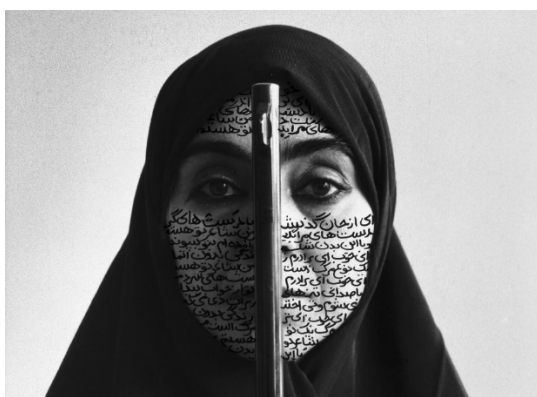
In Untitled (1998) Al-Ani is both the artist/photographer and the model. More importantly, she is a woman artist photographing women, while referencing directly patriarchal images. The fine art tradition of formal painted portraiture, and photographic traditions of nineteenth century studio and anthropological photography, are all influential, as theoretical concepts relating to 'the gaze' (Laura Mulvey), and Orientalism (Edward Said). This results in a shift in power alongside a kind of cultural mixing - of Irish and Iraqi, but also genuine and fictional.

These photographs allow for an empathetic response from a very wide trans-national public audience. They explicitly make a claim for inter-cultural understanding by addressing issues of displacement from one country to another, absence and memory (of the father) - alongside notions of attachment to a community and a sense of belonging. While appearing to be personal (with the self-portrait) they in fact undermine ideas of a photographic truth and single reality, in order to explore overlapping, changing experiences of identity.

#### Related works



Al-Ani Untitled 1996



Shirin Neshat Rebellious Silence 1994



Delacroix Women of Algiers 1834

### **Further reading:**

Alloula, Malek (1987). The Colonial Harem. Manchester University Press

Badran, Margot (2007). Feminism Beyond East and West: New Gender Talk and Practice in Global Islam. New Delhi: Global Media Publications

Bhabha, Homi K. (1983 ). 'The Other Question'. Screen 24.6, pp 18-36

Bode, Steven et al. (2005) Jananne al-Ani. London: Film and Video Umbrella 2005

Brodsky, Judith K. and Olin, Ferris (2012). The Fertile Crescent: Gender, Art, and Society

Faraj, Maysaloun ed (2001). Strokes of Genius: Contemporary Iraqi Art. London: Saqi Books

Said, Edward W. (1978) Orientalism. New York: Pantheon Books

### **Questions:**

Who is the photographer? How can you tell?

Where was the photograph taken?

Is this intended to be a realistic portrait? Why?

What might be the relationship between the women? What is your evidence?

Is this a 'family portrait'?

Are the women relating to each other or the viewer?

Who is absent?

What is the difference between the two photographs? Make a list.

Can you tell if these photographs were taken in Britain?

Can you tell to which class the women belong?

To what tradition of photography do they relate?

How does the Middle Eastern clothing affect the viewer?

Is one image more 'authentic' than the other?

How has Al-Ani identified herself? Think of multiples identities.

Can you imagine making a similar work today?

How might you change it and why?