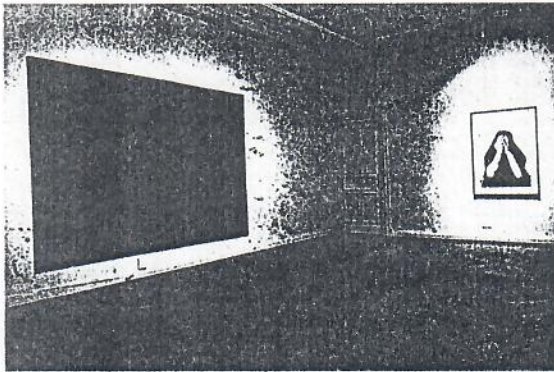


ULEMA • HOHENTHAL UND BERGEN, BERLIN, GERMANY



Habib Kheradyar & Shirin Neshat, "Ulema", installation view

"It is time we came to understand that there is nothing apart from modernity—no simple polarity between centre and periphery, modern and premodern. Modern cultural models are, of course, utilised in the course of political and economic domination, they are colonial, imperialist, neo-colonial, etc . . . , and they have generated very complicated cultural constructions and reactions . . . we should bear in mind that there are many houses in the mansion of modernity, that it is a *mélange* of many different processes of cultural construction, and is much more than just a game of Ping-Pong between Paris, New York, Berlin, Moscow, Vienna . . ."

—(Translated from Catherine David, "Undurchsichtige Räume," *Neue Bildende Kunst*, 4/5, 1995, 19-21)

With the exhibition "Ulema", which means the gathering of the believers, independent of origin and nation, Galerie Hohenthal and Bergen presents works which reflect the influence of Islamic culture. A striking feature of the exhibition space is the striking, brilliant blue diptych of Habib Kheradyar which seems at first to be an abstract painting. But this first impression is deceptive; the surface is an illusion. What look like the tiles of a mosque or the elements of a pattern is an object which oscillates between two- and three-dimensional representation. The artist uses a metal construction which appears to be thin line on the canvas, but which in fact projects towards the onlookers, and he has covered this structure with stretched material, which seems to repeat the shape of the metal construction. Endlessly spiralling shapes result from a complex sequence of interactions and iterations: a fractal. The objects produced by Kheradyar play with Western and Islamic perceptions, in order to irritate and confuse them. In a subtle way, he shows up the process of seeing, with its cultural traditions and acquired mechanisms, in a game of seeing, perceiving, and comprehending.

Güllsün Karamustafa from Istanbul sees the Orient not so much as a geographical place, but rather as a topos. She has gathered together fragments, references, quotations, images and imagination—a stage, small pop-up arrangements, from which the traditional Oriental protagonists appear: Harem women, dancing girls, slaves, etc. But instead of producing these in scenes, she arranges the figures in reflection next to one another, degrading them to ornaments of a frozen picture. These are not individuals, although they are shown with individual features, but representatives, designs of the other, pure constructs which Karamustafa deconstructs in her arrangements. The small images, reminiscent of comic books, and not without an element of kitsch, play at a variety of levels with the perception of 'the other', and the problem of 'inside' and 'outside' in times of increasingly complex cultural constitution. The problem is the crisis of alterity, an inability and fear of conceiving and representing the other. It is also a woman's view of patriarchal images of projected erotic desires.

Another view of the image of "Muslim women" is provided in the photographic works of Shirin Neshat. They are all, in one way or another, portraits. The central theme is the nature and the function of "Islamic" femininity. In plain black and white, without irony and in a seemingly objective documentary approach, we are shown a veiled woman, dressed in black, and with black Islamic ornamentation covering her face. A strange being—or an ally. Can I detach what I see from my own cultural background? By trying to analyze the 'other', I become the other myself. The pictures of Neshat show precisely this interference. They are much more than a comment on Islamic culture and the role given to women in it, since if one looks more closely, these roles are world vs Jihad. The artists made use of the image memory formed by the media culture and transformed it into a splatter film scenario. The result is so grotesque that one is rather frightened by the crude, but nevertheless cunningly persuasive explicatory models advanced by widely differing interest groups. Culture and civilization can not be regarded as fixed quantities and value systems, but are situated in a coordinate system of changing elements, somewhere between an object of historical research and contemporary development.

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(Translation: Richard Holmes)
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