

Contemporary Art and Geopolitics in the Middle East

Majida Khattari



The artist, Majida Khattari

Moroccan by birth, living in Paris, France, by choice, Majida Khattari's work (whether photographic, videographic or plastic) reflects her fascination with the situations women face in Arab societies and throughout the world.¹ Uniting her own traditional Moroccan heritage with the French modern society she lives in, Khattari bridges East and West in her work into a harmonious and fascinating whole.

Born in Erfoud, Morocco, in 1966, Majida Khattari grew up in an open family environment, which acquainted her with French culture. After her graduation from the École des Beaux-Arts in Casablanca in 1989, she continued her studies at the École Nationale Supérieure des beaux-arts (Ensba) in Paris, where she received her diploma in 1995.²

With the intensifying public debate over the veil in France, Majida Khattari started to work on this object of obsessive scrutiny, often misunderstood in our Western society. Considered in the West as the greatest symbol of women's oppression and servitude, the veil or the head cover has been central to Majida Khattari's work since 1996, and continues to be re-interpreted by the artist even today.

In France, public debate has often reduced the meaning of the veil to a very simplistic explanation: considered as an ostensible sign of religion in a secular environment, the veil is often believed to be a sign of man's authority over woman or a sign of woman's subjection to man.

On the contrary, Khattari's work is a strong declaration that the decision to wear the veil is not a categorical black and white reality, with enslaved women on one side, and emancipated women on the other.

¹ "Biography: Majida Khattari," Newmedia-Art, (<http://www.newmedia-art.be/cgi-bin/show->

² Nicolas Michel, "Majida Khattari: la provocation douce," JeuneAfrique.com, December 2012 (<http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/ARTJAJA2656p060-061.xml0/>)

While the veil was considered a symbol of tradition at the time of Khattari's birth, it quickly took on a different dimension after the 1970s – especially after Egypt's defeat in the Arab-Israeli War in 1967 – and, more recently, after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In our post 9/11 world, the meaning of the headscarf has been completely transformed, and Muslim women of all races and levels of religiosity now face unique forms of discrimination at the intersection of religion, race and gender. The debate no longer centers on whether the pejorative “veil” serves to oppress women by controlling their sexuality and, by extension, their personal freedoms and life choices, or if it symbolizes choice, freedom, and empowerment. Rather, it now “marks” them as representatives of the suspicious, inherently violent, and forever foreign “terrorist other” in our midst.³

Khattari is “careful to point out that religion is not the only source of oppression of women. As she states, “the reality of the imprisonment of women's bodies is not only related to the headscarf. In the fashion world, for example, models all have the same body and the same look. I think it's the same kind of imprisonment as the burqa. It was interesting for me to examine, side-by-side, these two types of imprisonment, one of which is condemned and one of which is accepted as something natural.”⁴



"VIP Voile islamique parisien", Théâtre de la Cité Internationale, 2010

³ Sahar Aziz, « The Muslim “Veil” Post-9/11: Rethinking Women's Rights and Leadership », *Institute for Social Policy and Understanding*, November 2012 (<http://www.ispu.org/Getpolicy/34/2590/Publications.aspx#sthash.f40KvZWN.dpuf>)

⁴ Daphné Segretain, “Franco-Moroccan visual artist Majida Khattari unveils her burqas,” *France 24*, April 12th 2010, (<http://www.france24.com/en/20100412-franco-moroccan-visual-artist-majida-khattari-unveils-burqas>)

This reflection on the imprisonment of women's bodies is particularly striking in her 2010 V.I.P (Voile Islamique Parisien) show presented at the Cité Internationale in Paris. Choosing performance art rather than classic runway show, a method popular amongst feminists in the 1960s and 1970s⁵, Majida Khattari invites her audience to take a new look at the woman's body.

The show starts with the figure of a woman, wearing a niqab from which tumbles down a cascade of rags and dirty clothes, entering the room. On the opposite side, a naked woman – completely robotized and deprived of any facial expression – stands covered in glitter, perched on peculiar platform shoes. Gliding through the room at an extreme and singular slow pace, both women finally cross path, looking up and down at each other silently. Which of these women provokes the most discomfort? Why are they so fascinating, and how come we can't stop looking? Is the naked woman freer than the other? Khattari does not really attempt to answer all the questions her work raises. Rather, her objective is to show that there are, in fact, questions to be asked. As she explains, her end is to create "something else", and "this something else is a debate one has to do within, to know oneself better but also to know the other better."⁶



"Ceci n'est pas un voile," Place de la Concorde, 2012

The veil is an inexhaustible source of aesthetic research for the artist, who prefers to highlight its beauty and elegance rather than its religious aspect. This was particularly true in her 2012 "défilé performance," which took place during the Nuit Blanche Parisienne. By putting veils front and center in the show, she moves the debate out of politics and into the realm of art, which seems to be much more appealing to French people.

In the show, models – with their bodies covered but wearing chic headscarves – walk through the veiled catwalk while scenes of Grace Kelly and Audrey Hepburn - their heads covered by silk

⁵ Daphné Segretain, "Franco-Moroccan visual artist Majida Khattari unveils her burqas," France 24, April 12th 2010, (<http://www.france24.com/en/20100412-franco-moroccan-visual-artist-majida-khattari-unveils-burqas>)

⁶ V.I.P., Majida Khattari, entretien nov 2010, (<http://vimeo.com/31577707>)

headscarves - are projected on to the stage. In her attempt to desacralize the veil, the latter loses its religious connotation, and simply turns back into an aesthetic accessory, a piece of fabric gracefully tied around the head. Printed with the line 'ceci n'est pas un voile' (this is not a veil) – a clear reference to the surrealist painter René Magritte – the scarves are no longer a controversial subject, but rather a reminder of a long-gone era of old Hollywood glamour.

An artist of contrasts, Khattari likes to play with alleged opposites, to better understand their differences and similarities. The nude and the veil have quickly become irreconcilable extremes, respective symbols of freedom and oppression for the West, but respective emblems of sinfulness and dignity for the Orient. This apparent dichotomy between the nude and the veil has not frightened Majida Khattari, whose work often presents the two together, side by side, as though they are not so different after all.

Majida Khattari's initial fascination for the contrast between the nude and the veil, which originally developed during her youth,⁷ has continued to remain central to her work for the past two decades. "I've always had, since my adolescence in Casablanca, a deep interest in the contrast between the modern grandeur of the female body, and the rules imposed by tradition," Khattari argues. "This brought me naturally to try to understand the ambiguous situation of Muslim women caught between sacralization and threat."



"Les Parisiennes (Voilée-Dévoilée)", 2007/08

⁷ "Majida Khattari, Personnalités ELLE.fr (<http://www.elle.fr/Personnalites/Majida-Khattari>)

While the image on the left presents the veiled woman and the nude woman side by side – which obviously reminds the viewer of the clear-cut opposition of the two -, the image on the right connects the women in ways that are open to many interpretations.

On the right, the two women are connected, despite their differences. The veil is bridging the two extremes, and neither belongs to the nude woman nor the veiled woman; it is a shared space, an element of union connecting two seemingly opposite women together. One could argue that the two women are actually a representation of the West and the Orient, and the veil a platform for dialogue, an “in-between” of two cultures. In the end, it is not so much the opposition of the two women that matters, but the union of the two – a theme recurrent in Khattari’s work.

Her work is not about the Arab women, though Arab women are included in her work. It’s about all women, regardless of their race, their religion or their clothes. For Khattari, the issue of the Islamic veil – as presented in Western society – and the revival of identity conflicts over the true meaning of secularism, is only a sort of epiphenomenon. Khattari’s work invites her audience to a much more meaningful questioning of the political dimension of the woman’s body.

Indeed, Khattari’s work focuses on women’s general reality - one that is not often lived by choice by the women themselves. Whether women have to wear the veil to conform to standards of female dignity traditionally set up by men or are constantly reminded by magazines of plastic surgery and beauty tips to be more likable to men, the artist underlines the fact that their behavior is dictated by norms that they did not take part in creating, and that are not theirs. Thus, she portrays a society a lot more complex, a lot less dichotomous, than the French political debates about the burqa and the veil contributed to create.

In paintings and through art in general, the female form has often been used as an allegory of liberty and freedom. Yet representations of the naked body are censored by Islamic states for such public displays of nudity are considered indecent and unlawful in the Quran. In this system based on an apparent lack of art education and blatant censorship, Khattari wonders if such a dramatic shift in the artistic and cultural landscape of the Gulf is not premature.

New museums and galleries are being built across the region, with the UAE and Qatar leading the way. However, many people throughout the world have expressed serious concerns about the region’s lack of openness to ideas expressed through artwork from around the world. Which tenets that Westerners see as central to museum ethics – for example, freedom of artistic expression – will guide the new museums, and which ones will be tossed aside in favor of local cultural mores and religious traditions?

Immaculately white on the front, but fully covered on the back with images of Delacroix’s *Odalisques*, “Le Louvre Abou Dhabi” is a clear reflection on such concerns and evokes the paradox between the rise of the Gulf art scene, and the censorship still in place in the region.



Le Louvre Abou Dhabi, 2010

Clearly influenced by global current affairs, Majida Khattari's work goes well beyond the subject of the veil. Through her work, Majida Khattari takes part in the political changes occurring in France – and in the West in general - while remaining faithful to her origins. She is an “*artiste engagée*,” and as such, her work is constructed on a constant questioning of society and power relations.

With the project “*Art Action*,” Khattari conveys a strong message against political extremism by putting faces of world leaders and dictators on “*haute couture*” Afghan burqas. As Khattari argues herself, “it is the fundamentalism and the extremism of Western and Arab countries alike that have provoked the wars and the chaos in the Middle East.” The sculptured-dresses express the amalgam of lies and propaganda, the misleading ideas put forth by the media and the politicians, the “*mixes of horror*”⁸ that lead the Middle East into war and instability. While she believes the dynamic has somewhat changed with the Obama administration, the internal politics of the region are still strongly shaped by the interests of a few countries (namely the United States and Saudi Arabia).

⁸ Majida Khattari's website, « *Art Action* » - About, (<http://www.majidakhattari.com/#/PERFORMANCE%20FASHION%20SHOW/Art%20Action/About/>)



Art Action, 2003/2004

Through her art, Khattari also reflects on the common negative perception of Islam by the West, and “reveals the gaze Muslim people often feel resting on them, wavering between fascination, fear, and unease.”⁹ Attached to the idea of unity and bridging extremes, Khattari’s piece “La Prière de l’Absent” – entitled after a Muslim prayer – expresses the artist’s desire to pray for the victims of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The work is composed of a series of calligraphed masks – with Jewish, Muslim and Christian prayers written on them in Arabic – resting on a bed of flowers. Conceived as a chapel where people can pray for the victims or the closed ones who passed away, the piece also asserts the “will to distinguish Arabic from a language of violence.”¹⁰

The portraits of two anonymous young men, praying on the side, are also featured in the piece, which prompts the public to reflect on the possible identities of the two individuals. Are they praying for the victims? Are they the perpetrators of the attacks who killed themselves in the name of Allah?

⁹ Majida Khattari’s Website, « Prière de l’Absent » - About (http://www.majidakhattari.com/#/INSTALLATIONS/Priere%20de%20absent/visuel_islam_and_the_city.jpg).

¹⁰ Majida Khattari’s Website, « Prière de l’Absent » - About (http://www.majidakhattari.com/#/INSTALLATIONS/Priere%20de%20absent/visuel_islam_and_the_city.jpg).



The Prayer of the Missing, 2011

Usually displaying her pieces in Western artistic circles – like most of the “artistes engagés” whose work is not yet accepted in their countries of origin – Khattari managed to set up an exhibition in the French Institute in Morocco that was very well received by the critics, and especially by the women present at her show.

In France, public opinion was mostly positive on her work, although the feminist group “Ni Putes Ni Soumises” targeted one of Khattari’s “défilé performance” a couple years ago. Essentially fighting for women’s rights and against fundamentalism and extremism, the feminist movement threatened to sabotage Khattari’s 2008 performance show because the artist was playing around with the veil and had not declared to be fully against it.

In a way, the veil might be just an excuse – or at least a means - for Khattari to discuss much more complex and interesting topics such as integration, fundamentalism, and identity. With the rise of political extremism in France and throughout the world, Khattari may be the inspiration our society needs to reach out and embrace the ostracized “other.”

Her work is also an attempt to awaken imprisoned women throughout the world, women who have long-forgotten hopes of a better and freer life. Regretting the passivity of some women in the Middle East, her work might allow women to draw the strength they need to take control of their own lives.

A true artist and gifted messenger, Majida Khattari perhaps knows better than anyone else how to bridge extremes and transcend conflicts. As a political artist, Khattari brings together art, fashion and religion in a way that is at once spectacular

and antagonistic.¹¹ Writing on her work, the psychoanalyst Fethi Benslama - a specialist on Islam in the West - argues “It is an approach which, while directed towards one of the most burning aspects of Islam, has managed to create a bridge between the situation of the woman as a theologico-political issue and the contemporary language of the visual arts ... a bridge between a system of repression of the female body and the system of fashion.”¹²

In a perpetual quest of creation, Khattari now dreams of new horizons – possibly a new life away from Paris, in New York City. Her work will surely continue to inspire and enlighten us wherever she goes, and hopefully bridge some new alleged irreconcilable extremes.

¹¹ “Biography: Majida Khattari,” Newmedia-Art, (<http://www.newmedia-art.be/cgi-bin/show-art.asp?LG=GBR&ID=900000000080661&na=&pna=&DOC=bio>)

¹² Fethi Benslama, Majida Khattari, “Hyperbole du féminin”, Art Press special issue 18, “Art and Fashion” (1997), pp. 107-109.