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Visions of the Islamic world Behind the veil

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EDWARD SAID, a literary scholar and public intellectual, spent much of his lifetime ruing the way Westerners represented the Islamic world. "What America refuses to see clearly," he wrote months before he died in 2003, "it can hardly hope to remedy."

A fascinating exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston brings the region into sharper focus. "She Who Tells A Story" collects the work of 12 contemporary female photographers and film-makers from the Middle East. At a time when American and European views of the Islamic world tend to be filtered through a lens of fear and anxiety, these images offer a more nuanced portrait of a culturally complicated place.

Take for example the giant triptych that opens the show. "Bullets Revisited #3" (pictured top, 2012) by the Moroccan-born Lalla Essaydi depicts an olive-skinned woman draped across a sumptuously jewelled bed against an ornately tiled wall. The image recalls the sensuous odalisque paintings of Western art history—a clichéd view of Eastern opulence that Said railed against in his 1978 book "Orientalism". But closer inspection reveals that the bed in the photograph is made from shimmering bullet casings; the tiles are too. The woman's body is covered in scar-like calligraphy. This enticingly exotic subject of Western fantasy may well be a corpse.

In the "Today's Life and War" (2008) series by Gohar Dashti, an Iranian photographer, a couple pursues a relationship amid the detritus of a battlefield. They eat supper in front of a tank. Their



laundry is strung along barbed wire. Their wedding car has been reduced to a burned out shell. Shadi Ghadirian's "Nil Nil" (2008) series features still lifes that juxtapose combat boots with red stilettos, a grey helmet and a colourful head scarf, a grenade and a bowl of fruit. These works suggest not so much the atrocity of war but the day-to-day reality of living with it.

Largely narrative-driven and eschewing strict realism, these photographs are measured in their anger and melancholy. Newsha Tavakolian's "Listen" (2010) series, for example, features portraits of professional Iranian singers who are forbidden to perform in public. She photographs each of them mid-song; with their eyes shut, their faces filled with tenderness and passion, these singers look a bit like classical busts articulating an ancient, nameless pain. Few photographers have used the silence of the medium more gracefully, and to such powerful effect.

These photos reveal some of the humanity behind the headlines. And they defy conventional assumptions that women lack a voice in the Muslim world.

"She Who Tells A Story: Women Photographers from Iran and the Arab World" is at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston until January 12th 2014



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