

Art and Faith - Art, race and religion

By Hammad Nasar

The arts have long been entwined with religion, faith and identity. Hammad Nasar examines the ways in which faith, race and art collide. For a cultural practice whose development has largely been shaped by humanity's devotion to the supernatural for all but the last two hundred years, contemporary art's reticence in dealing with issues of religious faith are an anomaly. While full of admiration for Florentine churches, the Vatican's ceiling, illuminated Qurans of the Middle East, and the architecture and sculpture of Khajuraho, the modern cultural consumer has been conditioned to cringe with embarrassment when confronted with present day religion's visual culture. These changes in tastes and attitudes are reinforced by the political economy of artistic production as art institutions have long since replaced their religious counterparts as the foremost source of prestige and patronage for visual artists.

This alignment of factors working against artistic practices that have their roots in faith is buttressed in the UK by the Arts Council's policies against supporting faith-related cultural production. This position sits oddly with other spheres of government policy, most prominently education, where the dramatic rise of faith-based schools is busy producing the most faith-aware generation for centuries. Combine this with the flagrant politicisation of visible signs of faith (think British Airways staff or neo-colonial concerns with the niqab) and we have a fairly toxic mixture. Insulating contemporary arts discourse from engaging with faith seems an act of self-censorship that is unlikely to diffuse this toxicity.

Religious repression

'Faith and Identity in Contemporary Visual Culture,' a symposium organised jointly by the national Festival of Muslim Cultures, the University of Manchester and the Manchester-based art organisation Shisha, and held at the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester last November, was an attempt to engage with some of these issues. Keynote lectures by the Harvard-based postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha and writer/broadcaster/activist Tariq Ali bracketed the two days. In between, an innovative format of 10-minute 'polemics' and panel discussions encouraged dialogues that crossed theory and practice, and linked image with word. Key to this flow was the heterogeneity of artists (including Shez Dawood, Rachel Garfield, Gonkar Gyatso and Zineb Sedira), academics (Rajinder Dudrah, Amelia Jones, Reina Lewis, Chris Pinney and Bobby Sayyid) and other cultural practitioners (including curator David A. Bailey and artist/diplomat/arts administrator Princess Wijdan Ali) that the symposium brought together. While attempting to address faith per se and covering a wide range of issues including Rastfarianism, the Armenian genocide, and the changing diasporic nature of Tibetan identity, it was only to be expected that the current repressive atmosphere for Muslims in

the West, and specifically in the UK, was the central concern of many of the participants - especially as visual markers of Muslim identity, the veil being the most obvious, have become such charged political issues of international significance, from the banlieus of Paris and the parliamentary elections in Holland to Jack Straw's Blackburn constituency just down the road from the symposium's physical location. Arguably, these are leading to the conflation of faith and race - a point ably demonstrated by the BNP's recent court victory.

While reactions to the politics that surround us do not always make for compelling art, the political dimension of the European Muslim question has opened up wide-ranging issues of national identity, immigration, integration/assimilation and even that abused f-word - freedom - that affect us on an everyday level. And artistic concerns cannot help but reflect our lived reality: a reality the brown-skinned among us encounter every time they travel through an airport, where the colour of their passports can no longer eclipse the colour of their skin, or the linguistic origins of their names.

Freedom

This freedom to cross borders was poignantly brought home in a moving DVD presentation by the American/Palestinian artist Emily Jacir who could not attend in-person because of the risk of not being able to re-enter Ramallah. Tariq Ali's film, 'Muslims in Spain', and subsequent lecture brought home the chilling historic parallels between the conditions in Ferdinand and Isabella's Spain at the time of the Inquisition, and contemporary Europe. Several artists chose more creative approaches for their polemics: Shez Dawood dressed up as Hassan Ibn al-Sabah - the leader of the Assassins whose activities are the subject of popular myths - while reading from Mao's little red book and presenting a visual essay entitled 'The absurdity of identity politics', and Yara el-Sherbini ran a 'pub quiz' exploring the stereotypes and prejudices that normally go unchallenged in popular visual culture.

Dawood and el-Sherbini are also part of the accompanying exhibition 'Who are you? Where are you really from?' at the Whitworth Art Gallery that continues until later this month. It showcases the work of five artists whose work questions the processes through which different people, in this case Muslims, are aligned along religious and ultimately racial lines. Most of the artists reference the tropes of popular consumer culture - 'bling' novelty jewellery, a general media obsession with celebrity and the visual language of product advertising - to highlight the construction of stereotypes, and how the forces of global commerce facilitate their mass 'consumption.' Many of the works are double-edged, and both satirise and question the source of power that these simplified constructs have. Playful, thoughtful and laced with a lacerating wit, the works in this small exhibition take on the serious business of faith-based identity politics with a sense of humour - an

enduring strategy in these testing times. And together with the more open-ended symposium they could be one small step in beginning a serious engagement with the cross-section of faith and contemporary visual culture.

Hammad Nasar is a curator and Fellow of the Clore Leadership Programme for 2006/07. He is co-founder of the arts organisation Green Cardamom and the advisory firm Asal Partners. He is Arts Director of the Festival of Muslim Cultures.

e: hammad@mac.com

The symposium (Faith & Identity in Contemporary Visual Culture) and the exhibition (Who are you? Where are you really from?) were part of the national Festival of Muslim Cultures.