

Freedom of the Forbidden

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What is it about Amira Ziyān's works that makes such an impression? What ushers us, visitors to her new exhibition at the Umm al-Fahm Art Gallery, into her artistic and personal world?

By and large, one may say that Ziyān's works give high priority to questions that center on the concept of "culture" as a category through which her social habitus may be examined and understood. The aesthetic artistic space offers the possibility of reconciling nature and humankind and defers to voices that do not make themselves heard in other spaces of discourse.

In her current work, Ziyān chooses to focus on dialogues with Druze women, some close to her and others recent met. Ziyān asks questions and listens to the women's experiences in youth and adulthood, in their single and married lives, and as daughters, mothers, and spouses. Her impressions steer her to visual imaging—photography—through which she channels her findings and conceptualizes them in a unique photographic language. From both the experiential and the conceptual standpoints, her works demonstrate the creative process, the transition from a spoken narrative to the picture as a new visual reality, concise and poetic. Through the medium of photography, Ziyān reflects and works through her personal insights and links them to the insights that dialogue and shared life experiences have given her.

At the core of her creative process, Ziyān constructs a stage of sorts, an infrastructure on which she can stage bodily postures and gestures in a theatrical and ritual manner. Thus, in fact, she sketches their cultural profile. The content of her works pertains to issues and questions that concern the role, sexuality, transparency, and bodily images of the individual in a society that explicitly punishes those who deviate from conventions and expose themselves in these respects.

Two dominant visual aspects link Ziyān's works: white and black. Colors figure importantly in the way we experience the world, both physiologically and culturally. They serve as social codes that manifest in rituals, public events, and private experiences. The world of art abounds with, and engages in deep psychoanalysis of, contents and attitudes associated with the nature and role of colors.

In Ziyān's works, white typifies the dress, be it a cloth dress that symbolizes a bridal gown or a foam dress. The fabric, the veil, the foam with its symbolism of cleanliness—all are white. The contrasting black serves as a background for the works. Concurrently, it alludes to mystery, a hidden secret, what is not being said. "In Druze society, lots of things are unsaid," Ziyān remarks.

The artist Frida Kahlo offers an interesting comment in this context: "Black—nothing is black—really nothing."¹ Throughout history, many artists have refrained from painting in black, tending

¹ Maria Popova, "Frida Kahlo on the Meanings of the Colors," *Brain Pickings*, retrieved December 20, 2017, <https://www.brainpickings.org/2017/07/06/frida-kahlo-diary-color/>

instead to create dark shadows and complexions by blending colors. Today, women and men of various religious faiths dress in black (e.g., Jewish “ultra-Orthodox” men and their wives, and Druze and Muslim women) as an absolute in their daily attire. Although their reasons for doing so vary, for all of them, it seems, black symbolizes an aesthetic of polarity and finity—thereby signaling the antithetical choice, typified by white. In Ziyān’s photographs, black appears not in traditional clothing but as a background for the picture, which may also be interpreted as a metaphor for the concept of finity and infinity, of timeless and fear of disappearance and nullity. It is against this backdrop that Ziyān dresses her women-figures in white clothing and white foam, creating a binary contrast of life and death.

White also symbolizes purity and cleanliness. The concept of cleanliness repeatedly surfaces in talks with Ziyān and in her attitude toward her work. Keeping things clean is a woman’s job; it includes household chores, concern for and attention to children, and even more so for herself. Here Ziyān relates to stringency in maintaining personal cleanliness, attention to woman’s body, and woman’s contact with people generally and men particularly. Each such contact erodes the value of cleanliness, diminishes woman’s social status, and impairs the way she is treated by both female and male members of the community.

The value of cleanliness has several complex aspects. Cleanliness is associated with the personal and the intimate domain but is also perceived as a signifier of social class. The community invests critical and judgmental attention in the physical and the metaphoric value of cleanliness. In several of Ziyān’s works, foam appears in the form of white or turgid blots that mask transparency, do more dirtying than cleansing, and produce a Rorschach image or a map of physical actions such as bathing rituals and scraping of dishes. The bathing act and the donning of a foam dress as a bridal gown signify the submission of the Druze woman and her absolute acceptance of her community’s strict dictates in everything pertaining to marriage, property, and housekeeping.

In the 1970s and the 1980s, American “second wave” feminists coined the expression “The personal is political.” What is it, they asked, that will determine, *ab initio*, the outlines of language, the economy, culture, authority, and hegemony in the present and the future? In the background of their activity stood the freedom of choice—true freedom, one that leaves room for contemplation and investigation of the underlying premises of the hegemonic ideology. This freedom allows people generally, and women specifically, to ask and test every detail in their lives and to hold their quotidian experiences up to scrutiny. These feminist women and artists perceived the world not as a mere object, on par with its constituent artifacts, but as a whole defined in advance by human praxis, as though a world without the human body that organizes and accommodates it could not exist.

As a woman and an artist in Druze society, Ziyān relates to herself and others in her in works via sundry kinds of functioning that we, the viewers, are asked to interpret to the best of our understanding. That is, we are invited to read the signs, the bodily gestures and movements, like a ritual or a dance in which motions bring their hidden secrets to the surface of the photographic image and the consciousness. These motions and gestures are parts of speech in the internal feminine language that accompanies women in their mundane lives. It is argued today that cultural practice has lost

much of its traditional social relevance. Here, however, it still deals with the person and her or his specialness through the medium of familiar and, sometimes, grotesque motions that emanate from the women's memories and diurnal practices.

In her photographs, Ziyan dialogues with bodily gestures that are conventionally seen as devices with which to take up questions of femininity and women's roles in traditional Druze society. These works, however, encompass a much broader circle than one specific culture. Most conservative cultures restrict everyone's freedom of choice, and *a fortiori* that of women and girls. In her current work, Ziyan reveals the presence of the scarfed face, investigates the complexity of her identity—and, in turn, of that of her society—and bases herself on the inventive and imaginative capacities that manifest in the personal stories of the women with whom she converses. Excavating deeply, Ziyan reveals secrets from her conversations without divulging personal details. These are not gossip sessions but talks at the inner levels where the desire and yearning for change, and fear of change, are expressed.

Wherever art is concerned, the aesthetic discourse causes seemingly spontaneous, natural expression to expand and acquire complex intellectual meaning. By contemplating and listening to the experiences of life, Ziyan's work connects with that of Druze and Muslim women artists in Israel and abroad, who find their way in an ongoing process of change of consciousness and a sense of mission that leads to the perception of social change and self-fulfillment as goals *per se*. One may describe Ziyan's attitude toward the women of the Druze community in her village—members of her social family—as based on empathy, cooperation, and self-confidence. In her photos, they lose their individuality and become symbols, metaphors, possibly aphysical ones, that create a place or a space into which new meanings are poured.

Against this background, the viewer observes changes in self-perception, both feminine and masculine, and processes that acquaint worlds with each other. For example, dominant aggressive traditional attitudes that impose a high level of homogeneity and conformity on the individual, invoked concertedly by group and community, are introduced to Western outlooks that are considered pluralistic and open. Here as before, thorough and critical examination of underlying assumptions is needed because even this ostensible freedom is controlled and subjected to a series of conditions.

Ziyan does not settle for searching for representations of identity; instead, she wishes to expose the nature of representation itself. She creates new situations through an array of images that come with associative, stereotyped, and cultural contexts that have plainly seeped into society's collective subconscious. Women in society, Ziyan says, are pressured to adapt to religious or social conventions. Men are conspicuously absent in her photographs. Ziyan is a woman who testifies about women. She reflects the mental state of the time in which she is living; she is not afraid to present herself as having tired of a world controlled by men. As such, she projects a voice that challenges the hegemonic male culture, which she acts to change in its deepest stratum.





