

Portraits: Reflections on the Veil

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Jane Brettle & Tulu Bayar

Belfast Exposed Photography

Picturing the Veil: Staging Faith and Ethnicity in Contemporary Art

The words in the title of this exhibition *Portraits: Re•ections on the Veil* summon up the tensions that characterise any discussion of the Islamic veil and the misapprehensions that descend on the women who wear it. *Portraits* suggests knowable individuals and social status – yet the media is full of images of veiled women that stand as generic, un-individuated figures mobilised by conflicting interest groups in debates over everything from multiculturalism (whether seen as beneficial or divisive) to the threat of Islamic terrorism. *Re•ections* suggests a form of contemplation and consideration that is often difficult to achieve in current cultural and political discussions, especially when trying to talk about Islam in the UK. *Re•ections* also brings to mind mirrors, with associations of vanity and narcissism that many would see as negated by the decision to veil the female body.

The works by Jane Brettle and Tulu Bayar intimate the multiple meanings that garments associated with Muslim modesty hold for those who wear them and those who view them. How can a simple piece of cloth cause so much consternation and how can art contribute to those debates?

As we see in Jane Brettle's photographs, there is no single item that makes up 'the' veil. The sitters in her portraits use different types of clothes to present themselves as modest according to Islamic convention. This immediately highlights a common misapprehension held by non-Muslims – that there is a specific or regulation form of veiling – and poses questions for those Muslims who would argue precisely that there is a divinely required form of covering. To talk of 'the veil' is in fact to refer to a variable set of historically specific and geographically variable dress practices deployed by women who aim to maintain, in gender mixed company and spaces, the codes of modesty felt by some to be required by cultures informed by Islam. That men are also required to dress and behave modestly is often forgotten, and, as with signs of other minority and faith cultures, it is most often women who bear the burden of representation in their clothing and demeanour.

Brettle's photographs contrast the generic with the particular, showing an un-named figure in black chador and niqab (face veil) alongside colourful images of named individuals wearing a range of clothing. The black-garbed figure replays famous images of women from within photography history, her hyper-visible 'Muslim-ness' and all-encompassing outst standing in for the often nude female form more characteristic of art photography and highlighting the unmarked white, western (and by inference Christian) norm of the typical photographic subject. In their mimicry the restaged photographs provide an unseen body whose apparent illegibility as an individual forces the viewer to confront their presuppositions about the veil. These re-enactments are of portraits and self-portraits, but what could be more ridiculous than a portrait of someone whose face you can't see? Yet there she is – seeing and looking – just as are the visible faces of the women that accompany her.

The two sets of photographs are not equivalent, but they set up a visual dialogue that invites us in. That the de-

personalised, black-clad figure comes to stand as an Every(Muslim)woman emphasises the individuality of the women pictured alongside her. The variety of their clothing, and the expressions on their faces (none of them wear niqab), foreground the diversity of veiling practices. That some of them are not 'veiled' at all illustrates the multiple ways in which clothing can signal modesty. And, as the sound-piece in the exhibition installation confirms, these women make careful choices about when and where to wear clothing classified as Muslim or as secular/western. But, like the identity of the woman in the chador, the flexibility of their wardrobe choices is lost in the photographs since photography produces an image of stasis, locking sitters for all time into their momentary presentation. Any photographic subject may look back on an old picture and bewail the now old-fashioned hair-cut or dress, but when the inherent fixity of the photograph is attached to the veil we enter into another domain – the ethnographic portrait. Transforming the individuating potential of the portrait into a process of category formation, early ethnographic photography produced individuals from 'other' cultures as ethnographic 'types' – emblematic of their group (be it tribe, race, culture, or, at home, region or class). With the development of photography serving as essential to the construction of ethnography as a mode of social and imperial investigation, the objects of ethnographic attention were often presented as coming from cultures that existed outside the 'modern' time of their western observers – illustrated by the classification of 'exotic' clothing as timeless and unchanging 'costume'.

Though identified by name, printed near life-size, and in full colour, these commanding images could risk being depersonalised as ethnographic types. What saves them is that the series is anchored in the mutually beneficial contact between a non-Muslim photographer and the *Pakeeza* group of Muslim women community activists. The images here share their provenance with other photographs of the women taken by Brettle for the group's educational publication *Beyond the Veil*. For some, the willingness to be photographed developed over a long period of time and, like decisions about what to wear and how to pose, was often arrived at through discussion within the group. Whilst the sound piece testifies to the participatory process, the images

exist independently and will be seen by viewers without inside information. But without collaboration the images could not have been produced without coercion – and the work's strength lies in its ability to retain sufficient traces of this process to unsettle the ethnographic protocols to which it critically alludes. In the confident address of these images we are held in a gaze that is owner of the look.

This assertive gaze is also directed at the viewer in Tulu Bayar's video piece *Conscience*, only here the women who look at us appear also to be gazing at themselves as if in a mirror whilst they arrange and remove scarves over their hair. The work uses moving image technology to present the myriad of constant adjustments characteristic of hijab wearing that are frozen in Brettle's stills. But the motions we see are not naturalistic: the mirroring sequence on the two screens emphasises that the women perform to a script, offering to fulfil the stereotypical Orientalist fantasy of penetrating behind the veil only to confront us with our own voyeurism. Formalist qualities serve simultaneously to place the work beyond the specific, alluding to art historical conventions of female vanitas (and hidden, usually, male voyeurism), and to locate it as categorically contemporary. When the women replace their scarf with a wig *Conscience* links Islamic veiling to other forms of head covering (such as the wigs worn by ultra-orthodox Jewish women) and invokes a recently developed strategy of Muslim wig-wearing by religious students in Turkey where the secular state bans veiling on university premises. Using conspicuously non-naturalistic wigs like that in the film, students make a politicised spectacle of their wiggling processes. Replacing their hijab with false hair at the campus gate, their public performance of pseudo bare-headedness permits them to avoid educational disenfranchisement while at the same time revealing as political the secular investment in the apparently natural uncovered head.

Conscience dramatises in order to confound the ethnographic desire to fix and interpret the bodies it investigates. Unlike the sitters from *Pakeeza*, these women may or may not be Muslim – the racialised contrast of their bodies indicating both the multi-ethnic nature of Islam and the tendency to racialise religious identities. *Conscience's* invitation to witness the tying of hijab appears to offer a typical

ethnographic manners and customs narrative, but does showing how a piece of cloth is transformed into a veil only when it is worn on the body similarly suggest that the indeterminate bodies on screen become Muslim when they put on the scarf? How then to read the unlikely and un-Islamic conjunction of a hijab worn over an apparently naked torso?

Running the risk of incorporation into a sexualised ethnographic gaze, the works of Tulu Bayar and Jane Brettle reveal the overburdened significance of the veil, bravely intervening in art historical debates and contemporary cultural politics. Unpicking the possibility that any one type of veil or image of the veil could provide a unifying truth of either religious experience or racialised identity, their works celebrate women's agency, inviting us to recognise the multiple and contradictory investments in veiling practices held by those who (sometimes or always) wear one and by those who observe. The dialogue set up between these two sets of work offers a chance for exactly the sort of considered reflections on the veil that are so urgently needed.

Reina Lewis

Jane Brettle: Beyond Black



Nasreen Akhtar



After Man Ray



Tasnim Rafiq



After Helen Chadwick



After Julia Margaret Cameron



Nasim Azad



After Duane Michals



Rubeela Umar



Tania Islam



After Lee Miller



After Frederick Sommer



Hosnaera Begum

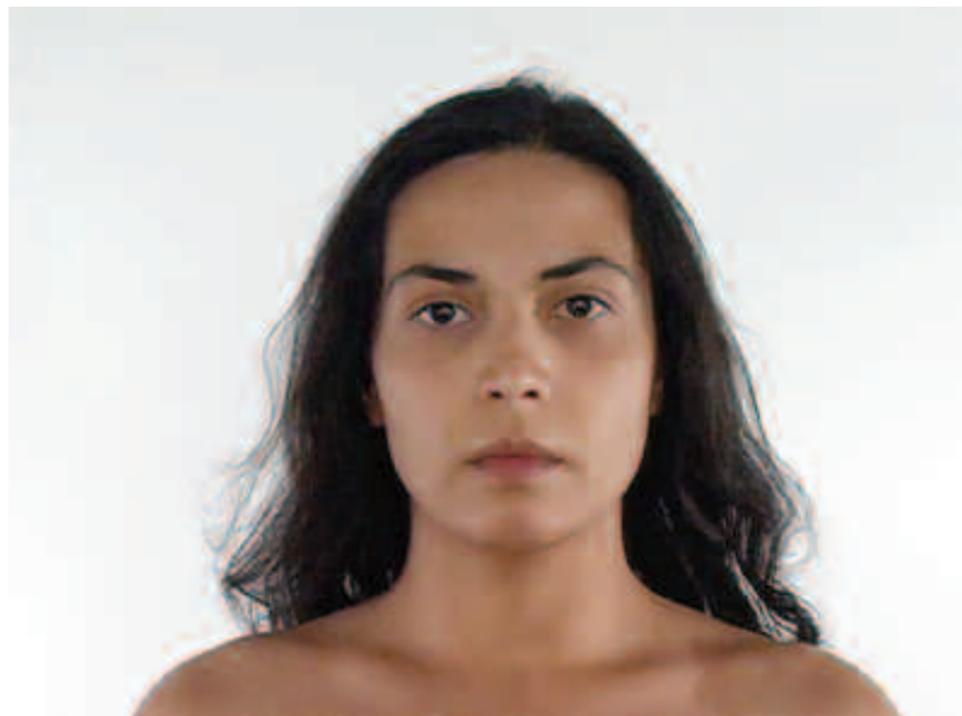


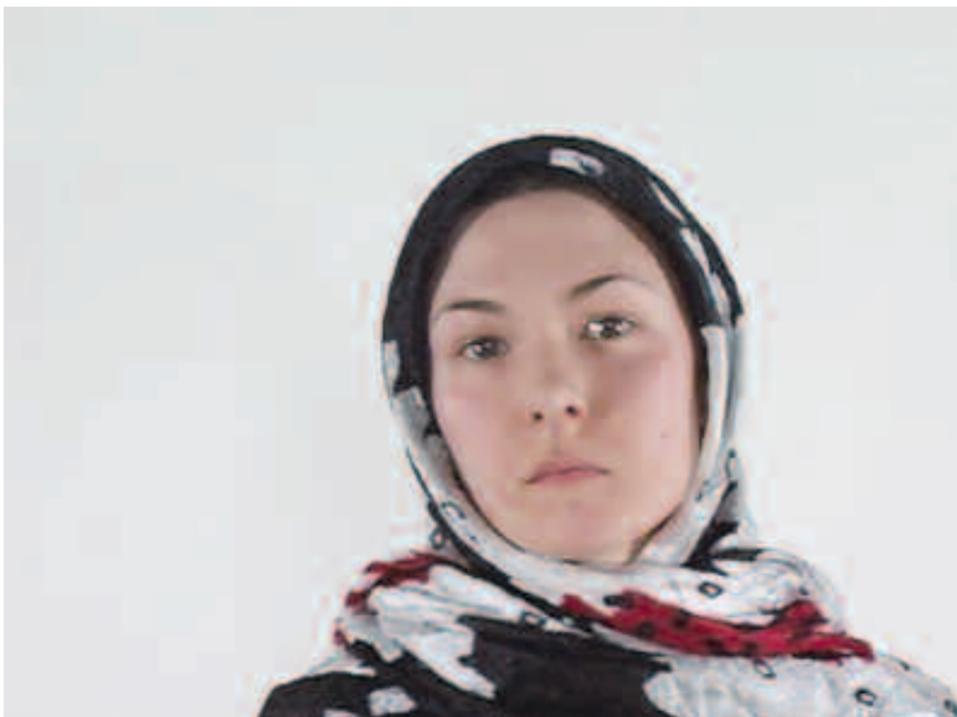
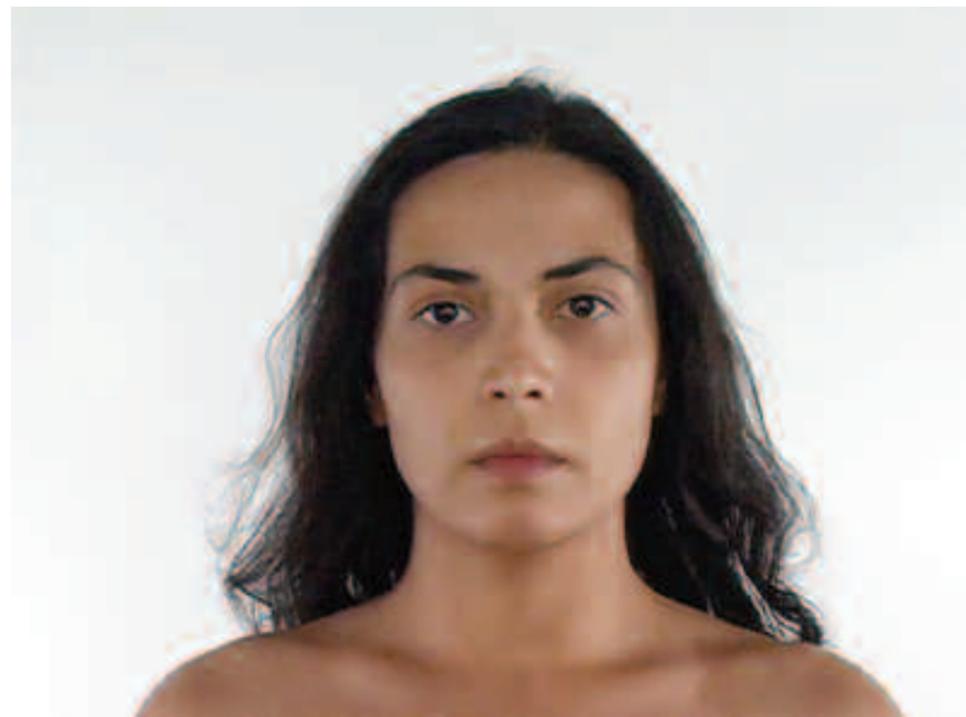
Nasreen Akhtar & Tara Butt

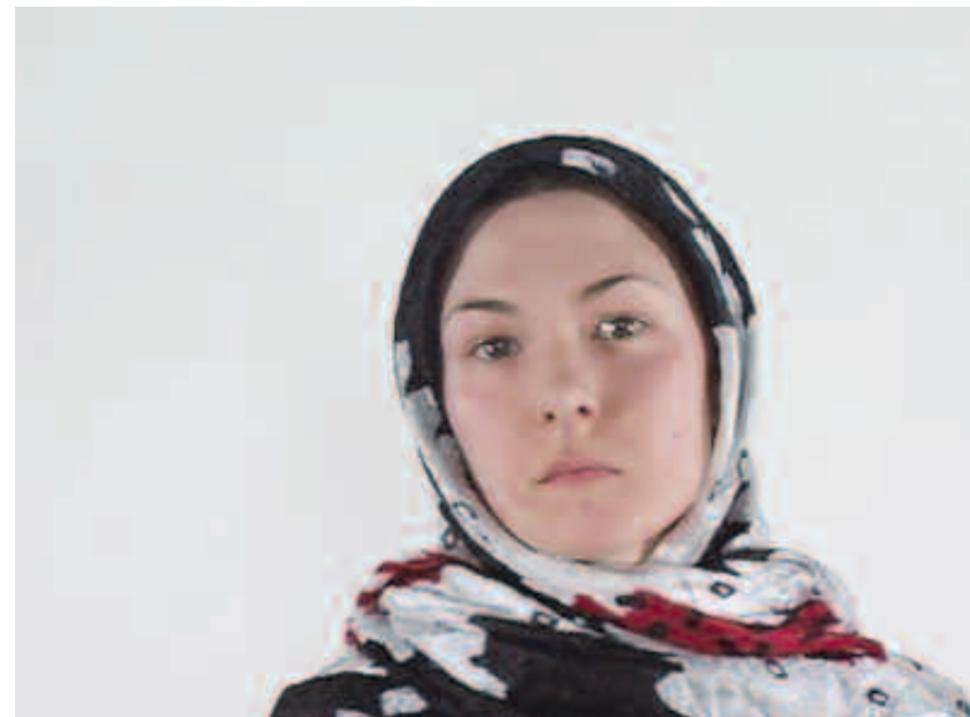


Tara Butt

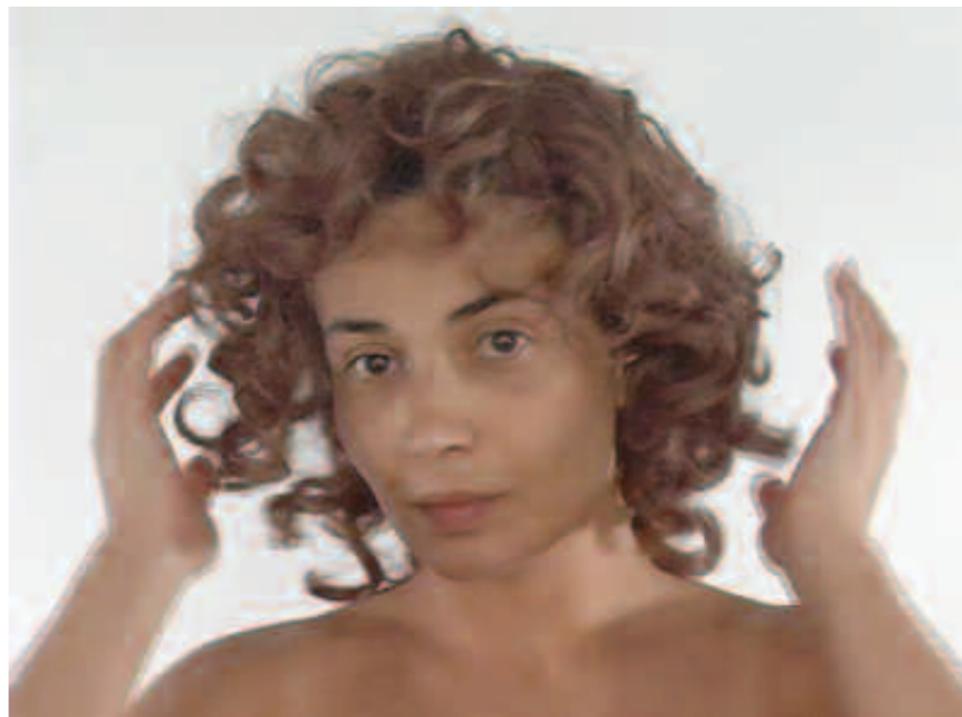
Tulu Bayar: Confluence

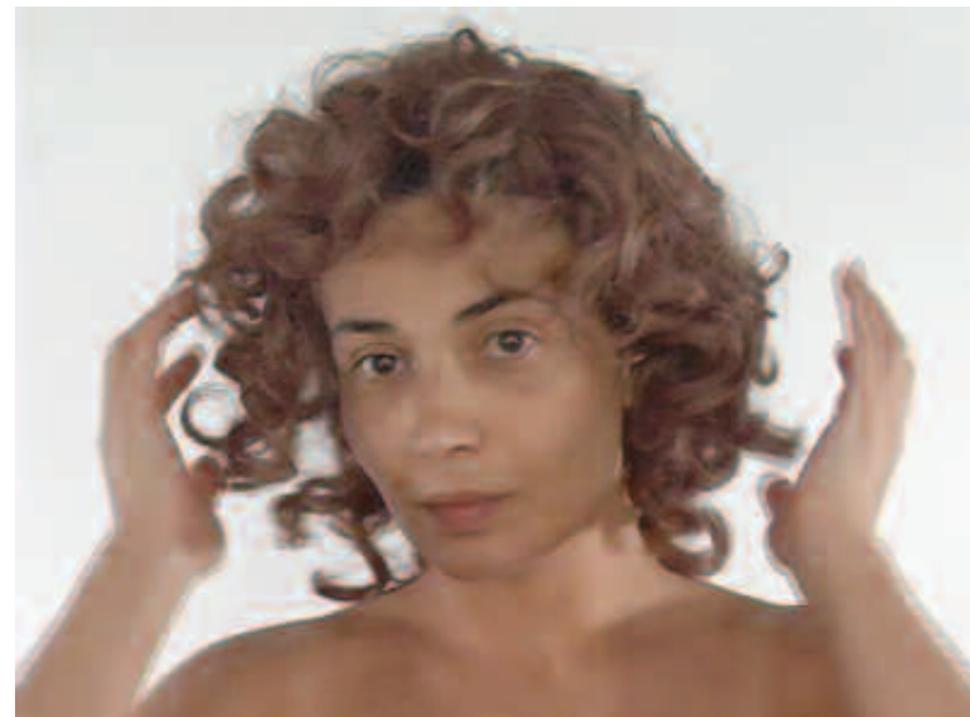












Biographies

Jane Brettle is an artist based in Edinburgh and an Associate Senior Lecturer in Contemporary Photographic Practice at the University of Northumbria. She has exhibited and published both nationally and internationally, most recently in 2007 at The Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh; and in 2006 at the Kunsthalle Palazzo, Liestal, Switzerland and the National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh. Her work has been commissioned by the National Galleries of Scotland, Visual Art projects, Photo 98, the Northern Centre for Contemporary Art, Eastern Arts and Visual Art Projects. She has received major artists awards from various organisations including the Scottish Arts Council, the Gulbenkian Foundation and numerous Trusts and Foundations. Jane Brettle's work is in several public collections including The Deutsche Bank Art Collection, and the National Galleries of Scotland and in private national and international collections.

Tulu Bayar holds a BA from the University of Ankara and an MFA from the University of Cincinnati. Bayar has participated in numerous solo and group exhibitions at venues both in the US and Europe including the Center for Photography at Woodstock, NY; 825 Gallery in Los Angeles; Artemisia Gallery in Chicago; Elgiz Museum of Contemporary Art in Istanbul; Camac Centre D'art in France; Galerie Image in Denmark; D-21 in Germany; Current Gallery in Baltimore; Contemporary Art Center in Cincinnati; Ankara Photographic Arts Center; Pittsburgh Filmmakers Media Arts Center; The Center for Fine Art Photography in Colorado and The Society for Contemporary Photography in Kansas City. Bayar also has received various artist-in-residency grants, most notably from the Camac Centre D'art funded by Tenot Foundation in France and the Center for Photography at Woodstock funded by the Andy Warhol Foundation and the New York State Council on the Arts. Bayar has been teaching photography and multimedia courses as an Assistant Professor at Bucknell University for six years.

Reina Lewis is Artscom Centenary Professor in Fashion Studies at the London College of Fashion. Her publications include: *Rethinking Orientalism: Women, Travel and the Ottoman Harem* (IB Tauris 2004); *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation* (Routledge 1996); *Gender, Modernity and Liberty: Middle Eastern and Western Women's Writing* (co-edited with Nancy Micklewright, IB Tauris 2006). She is series editor (with Teresa Heffernan) of *Cultures in Dialogue*, which brings back into print travel writing by Middle Eastern and Western women from the last two centuries.

Acknowledgments

Jane Brettle would like to thank The Pakeeza Muslim Women's Group, Lynn McCabe, the Community Learning and Development Worker and staff at The Prentice Centre, Edinburgh.

The participants in *Beyond Black* are as follows:
Nasreen Akhtar
Nasim Azad
Hosnaera Begum
Tara Butt
Nasreen Farghana
Shabnam Hussain
Tania Islam
Tasnim Rafiq
Rubeela Umar

For the soundscape in the gallery installation, many thanks to Scott Wilkins and Emma Robertson and to the production team Issam Abdullah, Xu Fang, Gift Makunganya, Shengui Song, Li Wan. Thanks also to the North Edinburgh Community Learning and Development Team, Black Community Development Project and Telford College

Finally Jane would like to thank Northumbria University for their generous support.

Tulu Bayar would like to thank Ercan Kul for the original score and Laurie Rombaut for her energy and commitment in making *Confluence* possible



This catalogue is published on the occasion of the exhibition

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Belfast Exposed Photography

29 September to 7 November 2007

Belfast Exposed Photography

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www.belfastexposed.org

Published in an edition of 500, September 2007

Editors: Karen Downey and Jane Brettle

Design: Tonic, Belfast

Print: W&G Baird Ltd

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