

# Thoughts on the bare naked Arab

BEIRUT: “After greeting me she started taking off her clothes saying, ‘My husband told me yesterday that you are painting a picture and that you have been kept from completing it due to not understanding a portion of the body. So here I’ve come to put myself at your service.’ No sooner had she said this than she was completely naked.”

As the story goes, Moustapha Farrouk had been working on his 1929 oil “The Two Prisoners” (Al-Sajinan) when he’d stumbled upon his misunderstanding of how to render the feminine thigh.

“The Two Prisoners” is an odalisque, a form of Nude especially common in the orientalist fantasies of 19th-century European painters. In Farrouk’s version, the seminude female figure lolls on a fabric-draped diwan, gazing out the window along with the caged bird sitting on the windowsill. His title suggests the artist wants to hitch the orientalized Nude to a progressive political agenda.

How Farrouk found himself in his studio that morning, confronted by a European friend’s wife volunteering to model for him, nude – as recorded in his posthumously-published memoir “My Road to Art” – makes an entertaining anecdote.

“Well I started shaking,” Farrouk writes of facing the now-unclothed woman, “but I got up and closed the door, afraid that someone might come in and find us in this state. ... I undertook my work until I was finished. As a matter of fact, it pleased her. Then she put her clothes back on and left after I had thanked her for her favor.”

You might hear a double entendre written into the final sentences of Farrouk’s recollection – as if something more than mere mimesis had

passed between the artist and the model. It's a useful reminder of the fictive-performative facets of memoir. Depending on what questions you're asking, the slipperiness of self-recollection can make the form more and less useful as an historical document.

In "The Arab Nude: The Artist as Awakener," the expansive, thoughtful exhibition Kirsten Scheid and Octavian Esanu have curated for AUB galleries, you don't have to read Farrouk's recollections.

Beaming from a low-contrast AV monitor hung in the upstairs gallery of the AUB Rose and Shaheen Saleeby Museum, Farrouk's memoir is read with bespectacled relish by artist and writer Walid Sadek. A former painter who matured into a figuration dissident, Sadek has made use of Farrouk's oeuvre in several of his own pieces of visual art.

"The Arab Nude" is an intriguing and highly informative show – more interesting, arguably, than some of the individual works that comprise it.

Two years in the making, this exhibition was postponed to correspond with AUB's 150th anniversary celebrations. Sprawling over two spaces – AUBRSSM, Sidani Street and the AUB Byblos Bank Art Gallery, Dodge Hall – it amasses original paintings (and reproductions) and sculptures by Arab artists, but especially artists active around Beirut during the late Ottoman, French Mandate and early independence years.

Complementing these works is photographic documentation of inaccessible work and textual documentation that provides a nuanced layer of social and cultural context for the practices of artists like Omar Onsi, Cesar Gemayel and Moustapha Farrouk and the much-younger Saloua Raouda Choucair.

"The Arab Nude" is an academic exhibition. The accompanying pamphlet subdivides the show into 11 themes – commencing with "Looking at Looking" and concluding with "Resistance to the Nude."

The scholarly lineage of the show echoes through the 30-odd pages of curatorial notes in the air of regret at the paucity of non-Lebanese Arab work on show. It's also evident in its argumentative curatorial approach.

An anthropologist by trade who has devoted extensive research to the art of Arab modernism, Scheid argues that the artists of the post-Ottoman moment wanted to use the genre of Nude as a technology to advance modernity.

The show commences with "A l'exposition," a small (45 x 37.5 cm) oil by Omar Onsi that dates from 1932. As Scheid persuasively points out, it depicts an exhibition of Onsi's work. It centers on six female figures and a little boy, their backs to the onlooker as they move to a Nude of women bathing. All are fashionably attired in the manner of well-off Beirut Sunnis of the day.

"This picture was one of things that made me want to get into this research project, and one of the reasons I wanted it right here," Scheid begins. "We start with a picture of people looking because I think the Nude as a genre sets up a circularity. People instantly realize that they could also be the subject of the painting – something a picture of a fruit salad might not instill in quite the same way.

"I wanted to recreate the frisson of bringing those images in. Not the frisson of, 'Oh my god, it's a Nude!' But an awareness ... that these pictures foregrounded that you could be seen, even as you're seeing, and that how you're seeing might say something about you to the people around you – or to yourself that you didn't know before."

A different spirit marks how the two spaces deploy the Arab Nude. The show's 11 themes shape how the work on Sidani is deployed. This half of the show is dominated by canvases, and textual excerpts – either the volumes themselves or as read (with subtitles) by figures from several AV screens. The lower gallery of AUBRSSM is also projecting a loop of "La

Marche au Soleil,” a European film advocating nudism that was projected in Beirut’s Olympia theatre in 1934.

The AUBBBAG exhibition is more impressionistically arranged – not inappropriate given the gallery’s Khan-like space. It is here, too that the curators have concentrated the show’s statuary and photography.

“I wanted to include sculpture because of their place in Islamic culture,” Esanu reflects. “Paintings exist, but sculptures ... We found some with the help of [Agial gallery founder] Saleh Barakat.

“It’s really very hard to trace the provenance of many of these works. But then the idea of this exhibition, at least in my view, is to inspire student scholars who are interested in this subject. A lot of the artworks here require considerable research.

“In this space I try to play with the masculine and the feminine. Because, you know, the Nude as a genre of art is a projection of the masculine imagination. Most of the time the artist is male. Most of the time the subject or object of the observation is female.

“Our initial idea was to try to play between two discourses anthropology and art history, to make the two disciplines interact with each other. The photography I guess stems from this idea of mixing art with archival material.”

Back at AUBRSSM, Scheid gestures at an untitled oil, a Nude, dated circa 1890 by Habib Serour (1860-1938). Standing with her back to the onlooker, the model appears to be leaning on a shoulder-height plinth, her right leg crossed.

“Serour was Farrouk’s teacher,” she smiles. “Legend has it his wife refused to sit for him [in the nude] and didn’t understand why he’d want to do this perverted thing. So he got the maid to do it. Then his wife left him. So he

married his maid. I guess that equalizes the power dynamic, or something.”

“The Arab Nude: The Artist as Awakener” is up at AUB galleries through Aug. 1. For more information, see

[aub.edu.lb/art\\_galleries/current/Pages/arab-nude.aspx](http://aub.edu.lb/art_galleries/current/Pages/arab-nude.aspx).



*Omar Onsi. Emrou el-Kais, 1932, oil on canvas,  
80cm x 64.5cm. Raed Bassatne Collection, photo  
courtesy of AUB Galleries*

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