

A Review of Rasha Kahil's Photographic Practice

Helen Karam

Rasha Kahil¹ is a young Lebanese-born photographer/visual artist who graduated with a B.A. in Graphic Design from the American University of Beirut in 2004, and later pursued an M.A. in Communication Art and Design at the Royal College of Art in London, which she completed in 2009.

She is currently based in London but her work has been exhibited internationally at the Royal Academy of Arts (GSK contemporary), at the British Film Institute, and at the Slick contemporary art fair in Paris, as well as in Beirut where she is represented by the Running Horse Gallery, a contemporary art space.

In the summer of 2011, the Running Horse Gallery displayed 20 photographs from her series of self-portraits titled "In Your Home", one of her most controversial and interesting projects. In the photographs, Kahil appears naked in a domestic

environment: a bedroom, under the sink, a kitchen, a garage, etc. The work was conceived intuitively in 2008 when Kahil was left alone in a friend's apartment in Berlin. She took out her camera and explored the surroundings by shooting still-lives and random shots. Then, using the furniture as a makeshift tripod, she put the self-timer on, stripped bare, and furtively took snapshots of herself naked in the kitchen and the bedroom. The friend later returned home unaware that Kahil had violated his private space with her naked body. This act of trespassing another's privacy with her own body was thrilling and exciting for Kahil and she pursued the project secretly from 2008 through 2011, spanning different cities and different homes. Whenever left alone in someone's home, even if only for a few minutes, she would take out her 35 mm camera and shoot self-portraits of her naked body appropriating the domestic space.¹

Her work is provocative on many levels. First, it is not common to take pictures of people's private homes and publish them without their knowledge. Moreover, it is very unusual to stand naked in such a setting. In her public display of these photos, the private, represented by the intimate spaces and her naked body, are juxtaposed with the public and the line separating art from life is blurred. The artist invites the audience to peer into a stranger's personal space (a reflection of the stranger) but also into her own private body; thus turning the private and mundane (ordinary) into public and sublime. "I am interested in the instances of tension that exist within ordinary moments"²



In Your Home, c-type prints, 90 x 60 cm, 2011

By turning the camera on herself the artist becomes at once the photographer and the object of the lens: “The lens is my mirror, my eye”. She challenges the conventional masculine/feminine representation in mainstream media since the images are not intended for a masculine gaze. Her body is not idealized; it is portrayed as is without artifice. There is no manipulation or calculation on her part – “there’s no time to think of the light, the composition, or the pose”.³ Nothing is set up. It is a spontaneous shot. She is as she is. In most pictures her underwear lacks sophistication – there’s no see-through lingerie or sexy stockings. In other pictures the position of her body conveys rigidity or shame; the photos are not sensual and in some pictures she boldly looks into the lens facing the viewer. The naked body is not put on display for admiration; it is rather banalized and thus made universal.

Her work can be compared to that of Cindy Sherman who dealt with the performative aspects of the body, femininity, and sexuality. However, while Sherman’s images are staged and portray different stereotypes of women using a lot of make-up and props, Kahil’s work is spontaneous and raw and retains an element of honesty. Kahil does not hide behind a disguise, she rather bares it all – she is a genuine reflection of herself. Kahil’s nudity might be seen as a form of exhibitionism and might be considered shocking by some. However, the emphasis is not on the naked body which is “the only constant, a repetitive pattern throughout the series”⁴ but rather on the private homes which hold a personality of their own. Even the title of the photographs is set as the address of the unknown host highlighting the importance of the space in the artist’s journey. It is not the artist’s intent to be provocative in her nudity but rather to document the journey of a body through a spacial and temporal element. The images take the form of a diary and capture a transient moment in a “body’s” life which parallels the transient nature of human relationships. It commemorates the displacement of a body in a social setting, its coming-and-going. Her look in the pictures seems

to simply say: I am here or I was here. It captures a fleeting moment in time.

The artist’s point did come across in her exhibition. The work was warmly received by the Lebanese press and was not dubbed as sensationalist or taboo. The work was also chosen by ArtForum as a critic’s pick for the Beirut exhibition.⁵

The art scene in Beirut is becoming diversified, embracing new art forms and moving away from the portrayal of the war to more contemporary issues such as feminism or individuality that are closer to heart in the modern world. This could reflect the fact that Beirut is becoming more modern itself. As Kahil explains in one of her interviews:

Beirut is quite a liberal city, probably one of the most liberal in the Middle East. It has a thriving art community and a lot of artists have dealt with the issues I have dealt with, so what I’m doing isn’t ground-breaking in that sense at all. I think sometimes it is hard to share my ideas because the last thing I want to be is shocking or sensationalist so I want to be able to show my work in Beirut, in a gallery space and having people respond to it in a positive way. The fact that I could do that there, is a sign that I am able to do what I want without people just dismissing my work for being nude or shocking for the sake of



In Your Home, c-type prints, 90 x 60 cm, 2011

it. In Beirut, there may be people who don't agree with my work but there are people in London who don't either.⁶

The positive reviews that Kahil received for her work are in stark contrast with the death threats hurled at the young Egyptian blogger Aliaa Magda Elmahdy who posted a nude photo of herself on her blog and on Twitter as a protest against the ban on nude models in universities and books. On her blog Aliaa Elmahdy writes:

Put the models who worked at the Faculty of Fine Arts until the early 1970s on trial. Hide art books and smash nude archaeological statues, then take your clothes off and look at yourselves in the mirror. Burn your self-despised bodies in order to get rid of your sexual complexes forever, before directing your sexist insults at me or denying me the freedom of expression.⁷

In the controversial photo, Aliaa poses nude in a full-frontal position wearing only black thigh-high stockings and red ballerinas. She does not stand demurely, but is rather bold in her stature: her right leg rests on a wooden stool as if asserting power and she stares directly into the camera as an act of resistance and rebellion. The photograph sparked outrage in the conservative Muslim community and her blog was bombarded with a wave of insults and death threats, with some labeling her a "prostitute" and others calling her mentally-deranged.⁸

Both Arab artists Kahil and Elmahdy have used their naked bodies in their self-portraits as a form of expression; however the first was praised while the other was shunned. Does this reflect the state of women in the respective societies? This alone does not explain why Kahil's art was accepted while Elmahdy was not. There are other factors to consider when looking at the diverging reactions in the Arab community. The setting of the photographs, the context in which they were represented and which allows for interpretation of the work are important. Kahil's work was exhibited in a contemporary art gallery, targeting a specific audience. Even though Beirut has witnessed a rise in the art scene, art is

still confined to an elitist circle that includes the art collectors, critics, amateurs, and the artists themselves. The interest in the art scene is limited to a specific group of people and as such the exposure of the artist is limited to the people who frequent those settings and who share similar interests. Kahil's work probably went under the radar of the extremist fundamentalist groups that exist in Lebanon. She may have remained unknown to many of the fundamentalists who would have violently objected to her work and censored it (the issue of censorship in Lebanon is still critical).

By contrast, Elmahdy's photograph gained notoriety through the pervasive use of the Internet and the social media, mainly Twitter and her own blog. As such, it was able to reach a larger audience. It is also important to note that Twitter played an important role in the Arab revolutions and is used by many Egyptians. Moreover, the content of the photographs should be closely examined with regard to the extent of the nudity and how much flesh is shown. In all of her pictures Kahil never exposes her sex. She wears underwear covering her pubis; only her breasts are bare. This might be a form of censorship. As the artist explains in one of her interviews, she sometimes practices self-censorship. In comparison, Elmahdy exposes herself stark naked. Her stance is bold, defiant, and shameless. Her legs are parted to further reveal her most intimate part. This revealing representation of the female form in itself is quite shocking and provocative considering that most images in mainstream media depict nude women in a somewhat modest demeanor with their sex hidden and their legs tightly together.

Though it is refreshing to see the work of an artist as Kahil exhibited in Beirut, more women artists should be encouraged to express themselves freely without suffering from any form of censorship, especially self-censorship. Performative art and the feminist nude can play an important role in shaping society and in serving as a tool of enlightenment and modernization.

Helen Karam teaches at the Lebanese American University.
Email: helen.karam@lau.edu.lb

ENDNOTES

- * For more information on Rasha Kahil's biography see <http://www.rashakahil.com/info.html>
1. See Wilson-Goldie, K. (2011, July 15). While you were away? Nothing at all. *Daily Star*. Retrieved March 20, 2012, from <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Culture/Art/2011/Jul-15/While-you-were-away-Nothing-at-all.ashx#axzz2Y4kXchTj>
 2. See Kahil, R. "In your home". Interview by Florence Thireau. (July, 2011). *Time Out Beirut*. Retrieved March 20, 2012, from <http://www.rashakahil.com/timeout-iyh.html>
 3. See Kahil, R. "In your home". Interview by Florence Thireau. (July, 2011). *Time Out Beirut*. Retrieved March 20, 2012, from <http://www.rashakahil.com/timeout-iyh.html>
 4. See Kahil, R. "Rasha Kahil: In your home". Interview by Nathalie Lasance. *Dazed Digital*. March 20, 2012, from <http://www.dazeddigital.com/photography/article/11856/1/rasha-kahil-in-your-home>
 5. See Kahil, R. "Rasha Kahil in your home". Interview retrieved March 20, 2012, from <http://ninunina.com/2011/10/24/rasha-kahil/>
 6. See Kahil, R. "Rasha Kahil- In conversation". Interview by Donell Merritt (4 Nov. 2012). *Sang Bleu*. Retrieved March 20, 2012, from <http://sangbleu.com/2012/11/04/rasha-kahil-in-conversation/>
 7. For more informationa about Aliaa Elmahdy see <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/aliaa-magda-elmahdy-nude-blogger-hits-critics250498> and Mohamed Fadel Fahmy for CNN. Egyptian blogger Aliaa Elmahdy: Why I posed naked-CNN.com November 20, 2011. Retrieved March 20, 2012, from <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/11/19/world/meast/nude-blogger-aliaa-magda-elmahdy>
 8. See Rawi, M. (2011, November 18). Foolish act of bravery? Egyptian activist risks her life after posting full frontal nude shot online sparking outrage among Muslims. *Mail Online*. Retrieved March 20, 2012, from <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2063201/Aliaa-Magda-Elmahdy-blog-Egyptian-activist-posts-nude-photo-online-sparking-outrage.html>