

CALIFORNIA

Photojournalist Wesaam Al-Badry on the Dignity of Suffering

January 4, 2019

By Emily Wilson



Wesaam Al-Badry, *Burberry #XV*, 2018.

Bright, sherbet colors form the palate of Wesaam Al-Badry's newest exhibit, a series of portraits that features Muslim women in traditional garb—with a twist. Instead of the usual neutral-toned veil, the women don designer scarves, made by brands like Gucci and Chanel, that have been repurposed as high-fashion niqabs.

Al-Badry, who was only seven when he fled Iraq with his family during the Gulf War, relocated to a Saudi refugee camp before finally settling in Nebraska. Now in his early 30s, he has a BFA in photography from the San Francisco Art Institute and is pursuing a masters in new media UC Berkeley's J-School, where he's learning about the art of investigation. As he says, "I wanted to be the source of my artwork. So it's me. I find the story, and I create the work."

In addition to his current exhibit, which is part of the Contemporary Muslim Fashions show at the de Young Museum, Al-Badry recently designed a billboard to encourage civic engagement in the midterms. While his fashion series has gotten a lot of attention on social media, he says it's not about the personal fame but the visibility of the work itself—something he calls his "Nebraska mentality."

In between trips, to North Dakota to photograph an indigenous family involved in protests against the Dakota

Access Pipeline and Paradise to photograph the aftermath of the Camp Fire, Al-Badry sat down with us to talk about his work. This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

What was life like as a young boy in a Saudi refugee camp?

I was there from the ages of 7½ to 11. As a child you process the world differently—to me it was this adventure. You don't really comprehend what war is and what death is. I played all day. But it changes you—in one year, you become like 20 years old because you have to learn how to maneuver through the world and negotiate your space. You're sharing space with 40,000 people, so how do you become yourself?

I know it wasn't fun for my parents. I know it wasn't fun for my mom at all. I'm still trying to process it, and that's something you never really process—you and your whole family are stripped away from your identity.

How did you become interested in photography while living in the camp?

Photographers came and everybody praised them as these heroes, these saviors coming in to tell our stories because our story gets out, we get help, the U.N. comes in, we get identification cards so we can go to see the doctors or get food. But there is that other thing—you grow up and realize not all journalism is what you think. There is exploitation and voyeurism behind the lens. At an early age, I understood I didn't want to be the kid with the runny nose in

the photograph.

I traded a kid for a camera—a button up shirt, I believe, and a bag of marbles. The story started that way. I learned composition and to frame my image. People posed for me. I was just taking pictures of everyday life, everything I saw around me. I just wanted to photograph everything—I don't think I had a concept. I just wanted to be a photographer.

From Saudi Arabia, you and your family relocated to Lincoln, Nebraska. What was it like being Muslim there?

I was never afraid. I identified as a Muslim twice in my life. One, when Trump took office and two, when people in the Iraqi community in Lincoln were afraid to go out. I was at that age then going to bars and having a drink, and I was like, fuck it. After living under a dictator, I'm not going to live in fear anymore. I learned that from my mother.

What inspired you to pursue a BFA in photography?

I believe you need both hands to clap. I think art and journalism can coexist. Artists need journalist to create art. Journalists go out there and take risks to tell you something happening in the world. Artists turn around and create work about it. Artists need journalists because there is another way to see the world, there is another way to understand it. I love being part of both of them. To me it's just natural—you can be both.

What did you gain from your time at the SF Art Institute?

It's a conceptual fine arts school. It was the polar opposite of what I'd been doing, but I loved it. I did struggle my first semester, but I'm always open to ideas. If you're going to challenge me and show me something, I will listen. And it's beautiful the way professors become your friends and mentors—they become your advocates. Then through that you build a community and then you're introduced to critical theory and feminist theory. Then you learn about identity and politics.

I always had those big ideas in my mind, but I didn't know how to get them out. You learn to channel your creativity with these critical thinkers. You learn to ask, what the hell is your image saying, and what are you trying to say? That's fucking important. What impact does your image have? You have to be careful so you're not voyeuristic.

After getting a BFA in photography, you're now studying journalism. How did you make that switch?

There's a big gap that nobody knows about. At 18 I got a job in a meat packing plant. So, from 18 to 25, I worked factory jobs. At the meat packing plant, I did asbestos removal—I'm federally certified, I did Tricon snow removal and rebuilt train axles, and I did a shitload of laying concrete. I don't really tell people, but I'm comfortable now saying it. That's the fabric I come from. I come from a poor working class.

That's what I love about telling stories of the working class—it's not like I'm an alien. I know what it is to work paycheck to paycheck to pay bills. I know about coming to work hungry and people helping you—this person would give you a Twinkie and the other a slice of their sandwich and the other a piece of cheese. That's who I am and my way of maneuvering. Nobody, to me, is a subject. I don't photograph subjects, I photograph people. I don't tell subjects' stories—I tell people's stories.

Were you still doing photography while working those jobs?

I was daydreaming about projects I wanted to do. But I didn't really get serious until I took classes at a community college from a professor, Barbara Hagen. Barbara was like, "Listen, you have concepts and visuals, but you can't make a good photograph, so you need to learn your basics." She's one of the reasons I do what I do. We're still friends today. Then I worked for CNN and Al Jazeera, doing video. It's a whole village—it was a motley crew of people who were like, "We see this in you, and we want to help you."

My first project, which is offline now, was portraits of Iraqi war refugees. It was a homage to the women who raised me. I always had the theme of land and home and family and immigration and identity. The Iraqi diaspora was always in my mind.

You've taken photos of people in difficult circumstances. How do you make sure to respect their dignity?

There's the thing I always believe in: How would I want to show my mother in an image, and how would I want to be seen in an image? If I can hit on those things, then I think I've respected people because nobody wants to look weak and pathetic. I'm always cautious of how I portray people because there are those long-term relationships and when you see that person, you want to know you did right by them. For me it's all about resilience and empathy and human dignity, and I operate in that manner. I'm not interested in the fetishizing of somebody's misery.

How did your work come to be part of the Muslim fashion show at the de Young?

I donate a print every year to SF Cameraworks. They were nice to me when I was first here—they gave me a show. Julian Cox was an outgoing curator at the de Young, and he saw my work there. He called and was like, "We're putting a show together about contemporary Muslim fashion, and I would like you to come to meet with the curators."

I met with the curators of the show, and I said, I want you to understand what my work is about. My work is a critique of Arab consumerism and Western fashion houses. I want you to understand my work is not adding to exploitation and cultural appropriation. And they said OK, we respect that, we have other artists in the show who are also critiquing.

What was your initial reaction to the idea?

First I was like ehh. What do you mean a Muslim fashion show? I was worried about it. You're cautious because you don't want to exploit, you don't want to fetishize. But the curators did an amazing job. They took a risk because the Muslim is seen as the other in American society.

To me the most important thing is that it's the first of its kind—a major exhibition of Muslim fashion. In the Trump era, you have a Muslim contemporary fashion show while the Muslim ban is in effect. Think about that. In a way, it's a soft protest—you're pushing, but in a creative way. Nobody thinks Muslims have fashion; everybody thinks Muslims wear burkas. They seem to forget Muslim culture extends from the tip of North Africa all the way to southeast Asia.

How did you think of having women wearing fashion scarves as niqabs?

I called one of my friends—I was just playing around. I was like, "Hey, Louis Vuitton just made just a prayer rug, and he's asking for \$2,600." He was like, "Buy it, buy it, buy it—here's my American Express, just buy it." I said, "Dude, I'm joking—you're fucking ridiculous." Then it sparked something in me. Franz Fanon said about the African buying back his identity. Then I was walking in the hall with my friend talking about the French burqa ban, and I said, "Man, would they accept it if it were made by Hermès?" And that was it.

What are you working on now?



Wesaam Al-Badry, *Gucci #II*, 2018.

I'm working on a few projects now. I'm going to Paradise—this will be my third trip. It's more of environmental piece with no humans in it. Then from there I'm going back to Standing Rock with the same family I've been working with for three years. I just received the Dorothea Lange Fellowship, so that's what's going to help me fund it.

After Standing Rock, I'm going to Lincoln to work on my family's stories, and then to Mississippi. I'm working on my own things.

I like to work on a lot of projects. There's that love and enjoyment in it. I don't see it as a job. I'm going to go to a place that's 20 degrees below for a week, then I'm going to go to another place that's 15 to 20, then I'm going to go to a place that's 70 to 80 degrees, but this is an important thing—it's important to tell stories.