

# Women's Artistic Inquiry Questions Church and State

## VISUAL ARTS

### Two Women in One

Installations by Jamelle Hassan.  
At Presentation House Gallery  
until March 17

### Memoria

Drawings by Monique Fouquet.  
At the Diane Farris Gallery  
until February 26

• BY ROBIN LAURENCE

In this second wave of postwar feminism, women artists continue to address the issue of their own identity, in terms both theoretical and actual. The process of self-definition seems to involve extrication from and then relocation within a complex cultural fabric, a fabric whose strands

include religious, economic, and ethnic systems. That these systems are charged with the potential for both repression and creative self-realization is the source of much artistic enquiry.

Jamelle Hassan is a Canadian artist of Lebanese descent, living in London, Ontario. In the past, her work has addressed some of the philosophical complications of growing up in a proudly Lebanese community, within a much larger Anglo-Saxon society. One of the great freedoms of her situation has been that she can construct art out of both worlds, couching Arabic and Islamic references within an essentially western (gallery-oriented) form and practice. Her current show at Presenta-

tion House Gallery includes two earlier multi-media installations and a new work in progress.

In *Trilogy...*, Hassan juxtaposes autobiographical incidents of harassment (by an obscene telephone-caller and a U.S. customs official) with references to Salman Rushdie and the crisis of Islamic condemnation of *The Satanic Verses*. A demand by the customs officer to know whether the pre-Columbian art Hassan was carrying was "pornography" resonates scarily against representations of fertility/goddess figurines and a quotation from a 12th-century Persian romance in which "woman" is characterized as "faithless", "perverse", and "destructive". The installation thus evokes millennia of misogyny, in which

Islam joined forces with Judaism and Christianity in suppressing goddess worship and the political and economic position of women (misogyny being an important tool to these ends). Notions of text, exile, colonialism, goddess-banishment, and censorship versus intellectual freedom are what link Hassan's own experiences with the photographs, here, of public burning by English Muslims of *The Satanic Verses*. They're what link personal trespass with larger political repression (censorship as a tool of colonization/marginalization), pitting Western notions of creative licence against Islamic orthodoxies and suggesting the uncomfortable matrix in which Hassan must (re)position herself.

*Meeting Nasser* poses

enlargements of a historic photograph (a young Arab girl's servile presentation of flowers to Gamal Abdel Nasser, the great Egyptian revolutionary and leader) behind a tediously artless video (a little Lebanese-Canadian girl's reading from a censored text by Egyptian author Najib Mahfouz). Again, Hassan positions her art within a complex of censorship, colonialism, and the marginalization of women. An adjunct photo of Hassan as a young girl holding her baby sister is an apparent reference to the domestic realm of the extended family, wherein Arab women exercise an element of enduring (but invisible) power.

The censorship link is extended into Hassan's most recent work, *Two Women in One*, which includes more ref-

erences to Rushdie, Mahfouz, and other suppressed Arab writers and texts, together with video and photographic representations of the inscribing of brass plates, men and boys at prayer in front of a mosque in Cairo, and Israeli soldiers patrolling a desolate camp in the Gaza Strip. The artist's notebook and graffiti scrawled on the wall make concrete Hassan's political agenda: "struggle", "radical", "exile", "Islamic code", "construction of the self through history", "the disenfranchised woman". What is striking, especially while watching the video that forms part of the installation, *Midan El Hussein, Cairo, 1990*, is the difficulty she faces in situating her art within a culture whose principal religion so conspicuously excludes women from its public practice.

Exclusion from religious power and practice is one of the subtexts of "Memoria", Monique Fouquet's exhibition of beautiful and evocative drawings at the Diane Farris Gallery. Fouquet, like Hassan, employs cultural elements from her childhood in an attempt to identify and define her adult self. A long-time Vancouver resident, Fouquet has distanced herself from the homogeneously Roman Catholic and Francophone society in which she was raised (she grew up in Quebec City). However, the religious and folkloric images that float up from her memory and inform her art are more difficult to exile.

In her most recent body of work, Fouquet uses domestic rather than liturgical objects to construct scenes of ritual that both parallel and parody Roman Catholic ceremonies she witnessed in her childhood. Through the considered placement of secular elements (a pair of hands, stainless steel bowls, water, dishcloth, obscured light), each *mise en scene* blurs the line between mystery and contrivance, numinousness and theatricality. In the placement of hands and draping of cloths, there is a sense here of conjuring tricks being performed—evidence of Fouquet's youthful feelings of wonder and resentment at the manipulation she experienced within the context of religious ritual. There is also a sense of inadmissibility, not simply because of the arcane knowledge needed to perform the "drama", but because the drama's priests were (and still are) men. Fouquet says that from a very early age she was aware of her exclusion from the possibilities of ceremonial performance, and sees this as paradoxical to the sense of community the Church generates.

Latin titles for the drawings reiterate the former use of Latin during mass—more magic, more mystery, more exclusion. *Potentia, Luceo, Sanguis* (power, light, blood) allude to divine presence and transubstantiation, and it is amazing how the very simple acts and objects Fouquet renders can be so invested with (and conversely, stripped of) ritual meaning. The disillusionment in Fouquet's drawings and the discomfort in Hassan's installations convey something of the struggle of finding a place for oneself within determinedly patriarchal and misogynistic systems of faith and power. ■