

## **Haleh Jamali: *Someone who is not like anyone***

*Haleh Jamali was born in Tehran, and now lives and works in Sheffield as a multimedia artist. Her works have been exhibited all around the world, from Greece, to Peru, to Canada (to name just a few), as well as her native Iran.*

Haleh's output, however, resists the pigeonholing of Iranian art. Recurrent themes in her work, namely that of identity, are as present in the psyche of the Iranian diaspora as they are in the West. Her first video, *Someone who is not like anyone*, is more about conception of self than it is about foreignness – immigration is the vehicle of her study, as opposed to the study itself. The video is a reel of Haleh looking face-on at the camera with a neutral expression, while her garments range from a wedding dress to a burqa, playing on clothes as the age-old symbol of identity. For Haleh it is 'the ways in which people create and rewrite their identities through self-expression' that is the real discussion. 'By pushing these ideas towards an extreme I raise issues of a "dual-self" and how one is perceived with and without these changes'.

\*\*\* EMBED SOMEONE WHO IS NOT LIKE ANYONE \*\*\* Caption for video: 'Identity is the way we express ourselves. The conditions that we are born with... people's experiences can change how they see themselves'.

If clothes equal identity, then the multitude of outfits in the video imply a constant rewriting of oneself, so much so that identity becomes impossible to grasp. I am informed that the video is a three-minute loop, and thus when it is played neither has a fixed end or beginning, just as it would be impossible to describe a person in definite terms. The speed of the shot changes makes it incredibly difficult to pay full attention to any outfit, and what most sticks out is what is different, namely, the hijab. But this is only a fraction of the video, and perhaps reflects more on our cultural conditioning than the sequence of images. Ultimately, the lasting impression is what the spectator manages to see most clearly.

The relationship goes both ways, too. Many of Haleh's portraits feature herself; the role of the artist becoming simultaneously that of self-analyst. 'To me my work is a way of expressing myself and questioning ideas about either personal or social identity'. Such self-portraits are mirrors, both literally and metaphorically, Haleh confronting both the spectator and herself with searching gaze, as she stands over the painting with brush in hand.

\*\*\* [http://www.haleh-jamali.co.uk/#!/neither here nor there](http://www.haleh-jamali.co.uk/#!/neither%20here%20nor%20there), Acrylic on board, 60x80cm/zoom/c2315/c1115 \*\*\*

### *Feminism*

Haleh's searching approach to the concept of self is equally a fundamental concern amongst the key twentieth-century feminist thinkers, to whom Haleh often pays

homage. Her portrait *A Room of One's Own* takes Virginia Woolf's essay of the same name, and *Wedding dress hangs there* seems to imply the stifling nature of marriage discussed by Woolf in novels such as *The Waves* and *To the Lighthouse*. Equally, the title of *Someone who is not like anyone* is a reference to Forough Farrokhzad from her 1966 [poem of the same name](#). And so, Haleh says that 'feminist artists and writers have had a great influence on my work either consciously or subconsciously. Virginia Woolf began to explore the inner lives of women and gave credence to their emotions. Forough Farrokhzad focused on women's struggles, and many of the issues they faced, and continue to face. But on the other hand, I believe my scope of feminism has broadened over the years, and I am trying to distance myself from stereotypes that place individuals in groups.' It is perhaps no coincidence that these two artists are defined not only by feminism, but also by their place within the Modernist movements of their respective countries; their work in women's rights is done through intricate handling of the psyche.

\*\*\* EMBED a room of one's own \*\*\*

*Veils of all meanings*

Haleh follows in their footsteps, endeavouring to take a fresh position on any standardised feminist discourse. It is impressive, that while the veil has become an ultra-political emblem, Haleh manages to bring its symbolic potential to light. For her, it is the 'visual response to veiling, unveiling, de-veiling or re-veiling' which is the substance of her work. She is not wrong to do so – the veil has long incited and equalled a fear of the Unknown for the West – an issue that Haleh deals with in the concentrated and static shots of her art. Though she acknowledges the dividing, polemical nature of the veil, this too is used as a tool in her studies: 'the different experiences and historical and cultural knowledge that the visitor can bring to my work can lead to various readings, and that's what interests me the most.'

\*\*\* EMBED DEPARTURE \*\*\*

*Departure*, for example, is less about the burqa than it is about juxtaposition. There are two shots of the woman, the scene employs no colours other than black and white, and the veil is both what reveals and conceals. We only know it is a woman from what she wears – the hijab – whose very role is to hide women's femininity. But ultimately, the video rests upon the spectator's interpretation. As Haleh notes in an [interview](#) with Reorient magazine, 'I showed the piece to a Colombian friend of mine recently, and she didn't even make the Middle Eastern connection – she thought the woman was trying to escape a bubble.' Just like *Someone who is not like anyone*, the video is formed upon a repeated movement – in the former, it is the changing shots, in the

latter, the movements of the woman. The spectator is given plenty of time to watch their reaction develop.

### *Immersion*

'You can call the viewer spectator, subject or performer! In my opinion they can be all three'. Much of Haleh's work is concerned with the relationship between action and reaction. 'I started to think about this more consciously when I first exhibited *Someone who is not like anyone* with its installation. A surrounding chamber made out of transparent black fabric through which the viewer can see a distant video image; a series of portrait images on a different plane. The painting was at the entrance of the installation, and the intense gaze of the portrait image invited the viewer to find out what dwelled behind the surface. When the audience entered, they confronted a glass bin, which held a reflection of the changing projected photographic portrait and the viewer. The glass served as a mirror, and encouraged the viewer to recognise that, as with the changing portrait image, they too might be identified as "the Other". The audience was afforded contrasting experiences through the softly billowing fabric that surrounded the installation and through the sharply slashed surface of the painting.'

\*\*\* a slideshow of the installation\*\*\*

'In *Maral*, portraiture was used to examine the multi-faceted and often complex relationship between the subject and the viewer. Through the gaze of portrait, she reveals her sense of herself as an individual in front of the eyes of the viewer. By adding the viewer as the forth wall, I am trying to reverse the portrait and viewer. The viewer becomes the subject itself and is surrounded by portraits as if *they* were observing the viewer.'

### *Inclusivity*

Despite the themes of alienation and 'Otherness' that Haleh deals with, her work as a curator is characterised by a real commitment to exchanges of all kinds. As her work as curator of the Edinburgh Iranian Festival, her aim has been to encourage 'dialogue between Iranian and non-Iranian artists'. Equally, cultural discourse has been formed inside herself when living in Britain. 'For sure, I've been influenced by Western art. Everything I see and experience influences my art in some way, whether directly or indirectly. But I don't think prior knowledge of Iranian history is necessary to understand my work. I would love to keep my work open to interpretation so people with all different backgrounds can perceive it differently and add to my work'.

\*\*\* video from ed festival \*\*\*

Indeed, Haleh's work avoids the typical East/West binary in favour of a more nuanced portrayal. *Mirage*, though featuring characteristic landmarks of Tehran such as the

Azadi tower, is drawn with Western-style realism, and the black-and-white palette is far from the colourful tones of Persian miniatures. Immigration is not just seen through the filter of her own personal experience, but also through a psycho-analytical screen. For her, the real crux of the issue is 'how one identity shifts to another as a result of immigration and other circumstances and how an individual can move between the two... How we can reconstruct or reclaim our identity, making decisions on what to keep... and what we let go.'

And so, *Mirage* is certainly understandable simply through the evocative atmosphere that Haleh paints. There is clearly an affinity, a longing, between the cityscape and the woman whose body is gently merged with it. The wistful expression on her face makes clear that this is a work about nostalgia, about a paradise lost, a sentiment that can be understood from the point of view of a lost childhood, friend, or country.

\*\*\* Embed Mirage \*\*\*

### *Grassroots*

Despite her training abroad, Haleh is certainly of the opinion that the art scene in Iran is no less present than in the West. 'Both the mainstream and the underground contemporary art scenes in Iran are growing fast and facing an overhaul in global presence... Art galleries promoting both established and emerging Iranian artist could even advocate cultural exchange between nations.' Her views on censorship are also far less polarised than in the Western media. 'Navigating from restriction can become an art in itself. It can encourage artists to become more creative and innovative in coping with obstacles.' This stands in stark contrast to the frequent criticisms made of the Western art market, accused of stasis and vapidness, being swamped by moneyed collectors only interested in their remuneration as opposed to artistic value.

Haleh's life in Iran is equally present in her work, though her pieces are far from the stereotype of diaspora art that does nothing but reproduce history. 'Nostalgia can have a positive effect of self-awareness and realisation. It's more about longing for a period with happy associations. Though my *Distance* series is not necessarily about happy issues, I was still recapturing my past or people I was very close to and their circumstances.'

### *Advancing*

And what for the future? Haleh is now working on the project 'Translating the Street' with the Alternator Studio in Liverpool, for which Haleh has stayed at the Iranian K&N grocers in Birkenhead, 'liv[ing] the life of two grocers for a week... looking at how the mundane tasks of daily life can be seen as significant.' This seems to me a symbolic moment in Haleh's work – her art has relied on a myriad of translations for

years. When looking at one of Haleh's works, there is a translation between Haleh's cultural references and that of the viewer's; between the literal value of the piece and the spectator's translated meaning; and equally, between one moment captured from Haleh's life and the meaningful symbol for all that it becomes.

*The exhibition for 'Translating the Street' will take place in the respective shops on 5<sup>th</sup> March.*  
[See an interview with the artists here](#)

[See Haleh's website here](#)