

HIM VIS-À-VIS HER

Asmaa Al-Shabibi writes on Sama Alshaibi's *vs. The Brother*, a work in which the Iraqi/Palestinian artist tackles themes related to the region's male-dominated culture.

In the spring of 2011, Sama Alshaibi, a visual artist of Iraqi and Palestinian descent, embarked on a project that would culminate in *Vs. Him*: a multimedia series investigating Middle Eastern masculinities in relationship to, and in contrast with, a female protagonist. It was amidst the sweeping changes and political turmoil of the Middle East that Alshaibi chose to question the collective's deep-rooted patriarchal psyche and the impact that the new-found voice of the Arab youth would have on the male-dominated societies. Delving into prototypes of masculinity and patriarchy, Alshaibi staged performances featuring herself as the protagonist to portray the contemporary Middle Eastern male in his various roles, often with absurd humour and 'generalisations'.

In a two-channel video piece called *vs. The Brother*, Alshaibi portrays the prototype of the 'brother' vis-à-vis a 'sister' to explore contemporary Arab youth. Facing high levels of unemployment and with very few future prospects, many in a generation of young Arab men are stripped of dignity, sexuality, motivation and hope: repressed men either drowning in apathy and malaise or finding their masculine outlets in risky and destructive ways. In their search for passag-

es, one of the most popular pastimes of young Arab men – from the streets of Jeddah in Saudi Arabia to Ramallah in Palestine, where the video was shot – is the practice of daredevil car stunts. In *vs. The Brother* Alshaibi exposes this widespread trend, staging the 'doughnut' spins of a lone driver and his silver sports car. At one point the driver (incidentally, a friend of the artist and a passionate stuntman), steps out, his car continuing to make an unmanned full turn before he jumps back behind the wheel. The machismo energy, a symbol of an angry and disenfranchised youth, is contrasted in the screen below with the graceful flowing movements of an airborne dancer. Suspended by a thick black silken rope, she spins closer and then further away, at times enveloped by the cascading veil-like fabric and at others breaking free from its clutches. In this piece, Alshaibi singularly juxtaposes the young Arab man with his female counterpart. Although he may be politically and economically crippled, from the perspective of the female protagonist he is free to enjoy his masculinity. He is liberated, wild and reckless, whilst in the meantime she struggles against the stifling restrictions of her gender. The Arab man's freedoms are of course not only relative but also superficial, and can

Facing page: Nine video stills from Sama Alshaibi's *vs. The Brother*. 2011. Video clip. Edition of three. Image courtesy the artist and Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai.

be seen as an illusion and escape from his futile predicament. In many ways, both protagonists are trapped by the norms of their societies and the narrow roles into which they are expected to fit. Their circular movements highlight not only the futility of their quest for change but also the perpetual cycle of their own personal struggles. Alshaibi questions whether these deeply entrenched gender patterns will ever break down, even at a time of such dramatic political change.

On one hand, this hypnotic work is highly charged, yet on the other it is graceful and melodic. Its significance is in its unique approach to the exploration of gender. Much has been said about the situation of women in the Arab world, but very little on the plight of the contemporary Arab man. Alshaibi's aim is not to describe or judge the status quo, but to be more assertively prescriptive by creating an encounter in which gender equalities are challenged and provoked. 

