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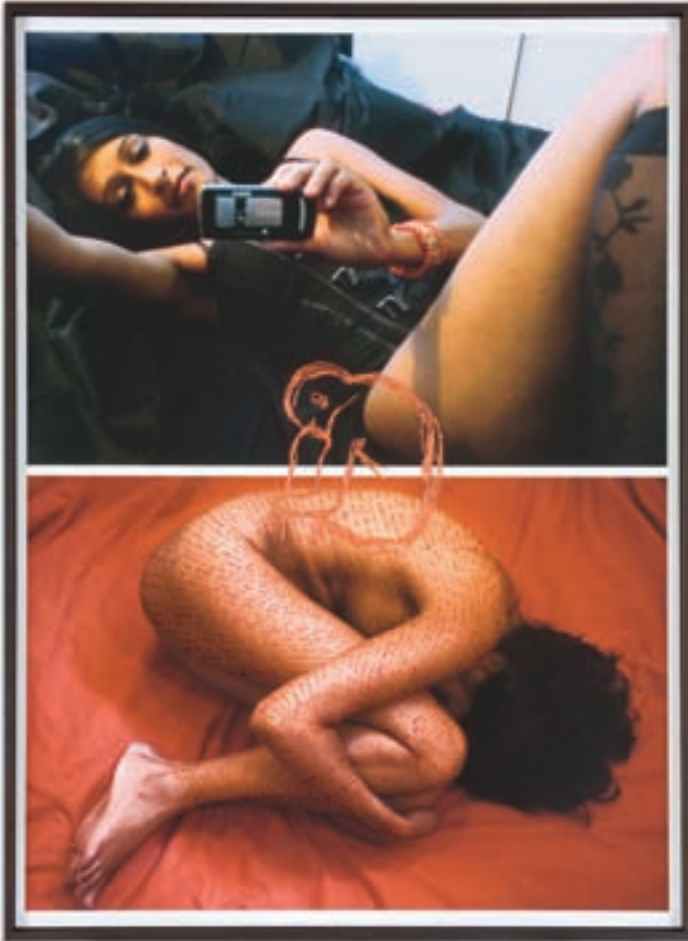
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## **Negotiating identity through the gendered and racialised body of a South African artist**

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**Re: Khan confidential**

Mixed Media (Digital inkjet print on Entrada; India ink, embroidery), 84cm x 61cm, 2008

*The body is the boundary most of us are unable to move against to recover the dimensions of self lost in the process by which we are made to behold to fixed locations, by which are bound in conformity against our will in many facets of our daily lives.*

bell hooks, *Art on my Mind* (2001)

# Introduction

## Fouad Asfour

What is the difference between how one looks and how one feels, and which elements are at the core of this tension? The first and basic lesson of modernised societies is that our outer appearance must not communicate how we feel, and individuals have different shared sources of knowledge and cultural strategies at hand to deal with that. Role-play and masquerade is, and has been, one of a number of devices of playing with the constellation of the inner self and its social face throughout the history of human cultures. While we are living in a time when visual culture determines our lives through a global hegemony of cultural products – which at the same time are constantly negotiated by consumers within their different social and cultural contexts – it has become evident that people quickly embrace any newly available technological device supporting role-play and altering one's self according to pre-defined catalogues.

Furthermore, today, individuals have an unlimited pool of popular cultural references at hand where they can realise their creativity by choosing from the encompassing streamlining of medially informed subjectivities. Still, the psychological tension on how to relate to the other side of reality – the inner self – remains. Contemporary artists chose different ways to undermine and complicate questions about conventional assumptions of the relation between the construction of one's self in society and the underlying psychological processes.

In 24 pairs of mixed media photographic prints, Khan's photo series "What I look like, What I feel like" (2008) juxtaposes introspective interrogations with their corresponding socially contracted identitarian constructions centred around race, gender, class, education and religion. The works question the variable dimensions of how reality is put together through an intimate inquiry of the inner self and its relation to a socially negated public face. Each pair of work offers different perspectives on the performative dimension of how a public expression of oneself is formed and managed, leading to the concept of an 'individual' according to and determined by social constructed conventions – including one's own assumptions about social roles.

There are infinite approaches when it comes to including personal resources, exposing the inner self, when making art. What's common is that the artist chooses which aspects to reveal and what to remain silent on. This choice determines the reception of the art work by the viewer and how a larger audience can relate to it. Khan's works are grounded in her experience of growing up in South Africa during and after apartheid, and result from tensions in culturally coded ideas of individuality versus family, woman-versus motherhood, as well as public and family history. Maybe it is the combination of the intimate and the public which makes the depicted experiences accessible to a large audience.

Khan uses photography as a documentation and extension of her performances, transforming different fields of social interaction which are laid out to be experienced by black female subjects into a number of scenes and situations, and supported by herself dressing up in costumes and the use of props. In an interview, the artist explains that her donning of costumes and enactment of masks during the photo shoots has informed her of the bodily realities of each of the chosen situations: experiencing, for instance, the pain of wearing high heels in "Lonely Socialite Seeks Companion", the violent effect of posing as a "Warrior Princess", the demure pose dictated by wearing traditional dresses, the altered sense of oneself wearing the academic robe in "Apartheid Education" or the heightened sexualised body sense when posing as enticing queen of the night in "Modern, Urban, Westernised, Bitch".

Instead of elaborating the technical options to render a perfect photograph, she uses the medium in a painterly way. In each scene, the artist is seen in the middle of performing a certain role rather than posing for a perfect photographic shot. Also, the photographs are not shot in ideal light conditions and do not make ideal use of focus, aperture and shutter speed in an aestheticising way. Therefore, the images rather resemble snapshots or glances at an ongoing event, which gives the images a feeling of immediacy and intimacy. This feeling of matter-of-factness is heightened by the rough quality of the cotton rag paper the images are printed on.

Furthermore, additional layers are added to the prints through embroidery, embossing, drawings – traces of manual labour left on the surface, thus destroying the immaculate surface which photographs are expected to have. Through embroidery

technique, iconic symbols are superimposed and propose a wide approach on other perspectives through which the juxtaposed images can be read. While these icons bridge the antagonism of the opposed images, they also inform about the conditions of production of the artist herself and lead towards cultural and social contexts which constitute the background of the field of introspection and placement of herself in the social fabric. This second layer of iconic symbols could also be seen as the artist's attempt – sometimes ironic and humourous – at undermining the seriousness of the addressed tension of negotiating one's psychological strategies to deal with situations as a social being.

While introspection is the main source of Khan's approach in conceptualising her work, the depicted situations and conflicts relating the way one feels in a society with realities and disparate demands which cannot easily be complied with, could be seen as a universal human condition. At the same time, these complex realities are usually not out in the open or acknowledged by society. South Africa as a multicultural society has few strategies and practises at hand when it comes to dealing with oneself in relation to the Other. And while the history of the apartheid regime still looms large in South Africa, forces of normalisation are already at work to level antagonisms resulting from its history.

Khan's artwork gives voice to and asserts dissenting and complex situations of individuals being exposed to conflicting constellations. By performing a variety of stereotypical social roles and situations she engages in an activist dialogue with her environment, making visible the condition of being a black woman in South Africa today.



**Fuck the World**

Mixed media (Digital inkjet print on Entrada; embroidery), 61 cm x 84cm, 2008

*Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves or figments of their imagination – indeed, everything and anything except me.*

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952)

# Being the Subject

Sharlene Khan interviewed by Véronique Tadjó

**I have often heard you say that you were a black woman. Yet, when I look at you, I see a young woman of Indian origin. What is the meaning of being black for you?**

The term 'black' here refers to a non-white woman as it was used in South Africa during the apartheid. It concerns the previously disadvantaged groups, namely Indian, African and Coloured women. 'Black' with a capital 'B' is an official racial designation for black South Africans.

When I went to London for the first time with some South African students on a month's bursary, I started to question my identity. What I missed about my own country was not the Indian stuff but the popular dimension of township life and languages. Street life is a part of our culture. The street became my focus, the engagement people have, the dynamics they create. It led me to question my Indian identity, its 'authenticity'. I realised that I am an Africanised Indian who is also westernised. Understanding this africaness is important. Thinking of African-American literature, Third World literature, I see that we share an understanding of race and gender

oppression. You add class into the mix and you have three levels of identity that govern your existence.

**Is it because of this multi layered identity that you are such a versatile artist? You do painting, photography and you also design a range of clothing that you call 'art pieces'. How do you see yourself as an artist?**

I conceive of myself as a painter. The other forms of media: sculpture and print making, I struggle with. At the same time as I have grown as an artist, I have become confident in articulating my ideas in different media to best express what I want to explore – it is always the idea which dictates the form for me. This is the case with photography for this exhibition – I dare not call myself a photographer, as I simply use the 'aim and shoot' approach. I think I have a good sense of visual composition. At the moment I am tempted to do a video piece but in fact I always go back to painting. I don't see other forms as taking anything away from painting. Painting is an urge, a need. I don't have that sense with

other forms. They are more about ideas. In painting, there is something that is intuitive. I respond to it. I won't however continue with the fashion, for example, because it was an idea at that particular time [in 2004]. It is out of my system now. People wanted me to commercialise the garments I made as art pieces. I was morally challenged. It was against the entire premise of what I was doing, which was making a statement against the fashion industry (the more 'yuppie' fashion district promoted by the Joburg City Council often at the expense of those who already use that space).

Unfortunately, you never know whether people get your message or not, but you do your best morally and with integrity to the subject. But I have had attacks on my work. I have been told that I was exoticising my street subjects for money and exhibitions.

**How do you deal with such negative criticism?  
And how can the South African art world be more  
conducive to creativity?**

When I received this criticism, I was a student and in different circumstances. I did not know as much about the art world. I wondered why people said such things, but as you grow as an artist, you realise such questions have to be raised about the representations of others. If you feel that such criticism is unfair, I think you also have the right to stand up and say so.

South Africa is a complex society. It makes for interesting subject matter which artists are exploring post-apartheid in the wide and individual spectrum. But the biggest struggle is when you inherit apartheid structures which have not evolved and opened up. We have a lot of private institutions but are sorely lacking public spaces which can cater for all sorts of groups of young and conceptual artists. There are too few public art exhibition and project spaces for a big city like Johannesburg.

**When you did fashion pieces you were your own  
model and in your photography you stage yourself.  
What dimension do you think it adds to your work?**

I have always brought elements of my identity into my paintings: henna, sewing, Biblical scripture, my poetry. My paintings are my interpretations of the people I engage with, but it is also where I situate my identity. It was easier to express strong identity issues for me in poetry and in my fashion performance.

But in the photographic exhibition which took three years to complete, it is extreme and to the point of satire. It was not about one-off renditions of myself – the images had to play off each other in the series as a whole. Cindy Sherman's (as well as Sophie Calle's) works were of course an influence on me and I struggled for a long time thinking about how I could use masquerade in staging

photographs that would reference the Sherman inspiration but would also be a departure from it. It is only when I put two photos together to create a dualistic image, sewed, drew and embossed into the photographic prints that I could imagine it working.

Being the subject you don't have to worry about the problem of representing others. In these photographs, it was me being in control of every aspect of it. I took most of the pictures myself, sometimes with the help of a friend. You are aware that once you are in front of the camera you become an object and I tried to use that as a basis to consciously explore a range of stereotypes associated with my race, gender, class, education, sexuality, etc. My body became the medium through which I could perform, and, through the masquerades, question identity constructions – sometimes even 'well meaning' ones.

For instance, in the piece titled "Vulnerable", the mirror allowed me to achieve a stronger sense of intimacy and a sense of control as well, which allowed me to question the idea of vulnerability – am I really vulnerable just because I am naked in the picture and can't control the gaze? (Sometimes, gender studies can seem one-dimensional).

The exhibition as a whole opened up a flood of ideas I have had for a long time. By complicating your identity you realise how many you have.

### **Is there not a danger that you won't have any identity at the end of the day?**

Human beings are complex and we can draw from different identities – this multiplicity tends to be simplified by modern societies due to a number of reasons, one of which is to create one artificial national identity which makes the exclusion of Others possible. What I am talking about is the sum of all these parts. I really don't believe you can exhaust identification until there is none left (neither do I believe that such sentiments benefit people of colour). If someone asks me to identify myself I'll say that I am a South African woman of colour.

I think labelling and categorising are part of the human condition that allows us to speak of particular things but during apartheid, we were conditioned to speaking of things mainly in relation to their racial categories. Behaving and being 'an Indian' was imposed on you and it is something I've learned to question. Many diasporic communities also tend to cling onto racial/cultural/ethnic identifications. I don't like people reducing all the influences that have shaped me.

### **How can you be sure that you are totally accepted as a South African today?**

There is no security of belonging, but as a South African, I belong here. India doesn't regard me as its own, I don't have an Indian passport, I don't know its history,



**Never, never and never again . . .**

Mixed media (Digital inkjet print on Entrada; embroidery), 61cm x 84cm, 2008

or speak any of its languages. South Africa is the only 'parent' I have ever known, all my affiliations lie here. But South Africa is, at the same time, also the source of my conflicts, especially with regard to its racism. The first poem I ever wrote was sparked off by hearing a Zulu man saying on the radio that he wished an Idi Amin Dada could have been born here to rid South Africa of its 'Indian problem'. It pulled the rug out from under me. But even with the questioning, you accept you belong here – I mean I have never thought of any other place as my home.

### **Do you think education holds the key to a better society?**

Yes – and no. I think education is a right for everyone and not having enough of good quality education severely disadvantages you. But I also think that our westernised education systems don't always provide you with the answers you need for your everyday (black) life and dealing with issues like gender, xenophobia and racism. South Africa should have been spearheading a comprehensive discourse of racism, yet there is more of an attempt to forget. You are forced to learn more about Foucault and Freud in the humanities at universities, rather than the works of black intellectuals who can help you understand the social and political forces that shape yours and your communities' lives. Education has to be able to enrich your life in such a way that you have some control over the quality of your life and are able to break free from

oppressions – if that isn't happening, and it often isn't, then education is nothing but a means by which we attain qualifications for higher paying jobs.

There are a few works in this exhibition that deal with questions around education. For instance, the work "Postgraduate Beggar" talks about the racial inequalities that are still being perpetuated in the country. It speaks about the fact that even though I have two Masters degrees in Fine Arts, I have struggled for years to get a job as a lecturer, that often black candidates have to hold a PhD to get employed and that there is still often only one black lecturer in most fine art departments around the country. The graduation pictures speak of the hope of employment, economic and social change one feels on completion of your postgraduate degrees, which subsequent unemployment erodes daily.

Other works in the series deal with issues around race and education, with the relevance of education in public and private realms. I think that there isn't much said about educated black women, for whom tertiary education is both a personal liberator and communal burden, as they dutifully support entire families on their wages, sacrificing daily in order to put someone through school, through college, to pay towards rent and groceries. I think such young black women suffer internally and that because they are educated, they are forced into silence around



## Postgraduate Beggar

Mixed media (Digital inkjet print on Entrada; embroidery), 61cm x 84cm, 2008

such issues. It often looks like while a young black man will leave university and for a few years contribute towards his family and then establish his own, and other young adults leave university and have only their own needs to cater for, many young black women continue for the rest of their lives to juggle their finances to help out their wider family, while trying to establish their own and often sacrifice much to do so, without the slightest acknowledgement.

Even with education, many such women still live under stereotypes of being responsible for the welfare of a larger society and to behave in any other way is to be 'too western' or too individualistic. I think such issues of education are seldom spoken about because education teaches us to bear such burdens silently and with shame.

**In the Marat photo (“Never, never and never again”), there is a high sense of betrayal. Do you feel betrayed by your society?**

When times are hard, people sometimes feel their only way 'out' is to kill themselves. I remember growing up with stories of the many Indian women who killed themselves during my parents' generation – by burning, drowning or hanging – as the only way to get out of their problems. This is contrasted with the image of a political figure that gets murdered. What I am trying to say is that

victimhood or suicide (which symbolises forced silence) is not an option for me. I won't be silenced. You have to keep fighting. The most hurtful part of being outspoken is being told 'thank you for saying that' around buffet lunches, in the bathroom or over the phone. But nobody wants to be seen around when you've said something that questions the status quo.

So yes, at such times it does feel like betrayal. But reading the struggles of great people like bell hooks and Toni Morrison is inspirational at times like that.

**Is humour a survival tactic for you when faced with so many challenges? It seems to colour your photos . . . Some of them are funny.**

It is black comedy. At times, it is farcical but at other times it is subversive. It can be literal. I have needed a sense of humour in order to survive and get on with life, and appreciate the craziness of things. As an adult it serves me as a strategy. I like to take the piss at myself and at my art practice because however important you think art is, you know for a fact that it is possible to live without the type of art that is propagated in contemporary art. Besides, if you didn't have a sense of humour in South Africa, you'd spend your days either being angry or crying at a whole lot of things.



**Intellectual**

Mixed media (Digital inkjet print on Entrada; embroidery), 61 cm x 84cm, 2008



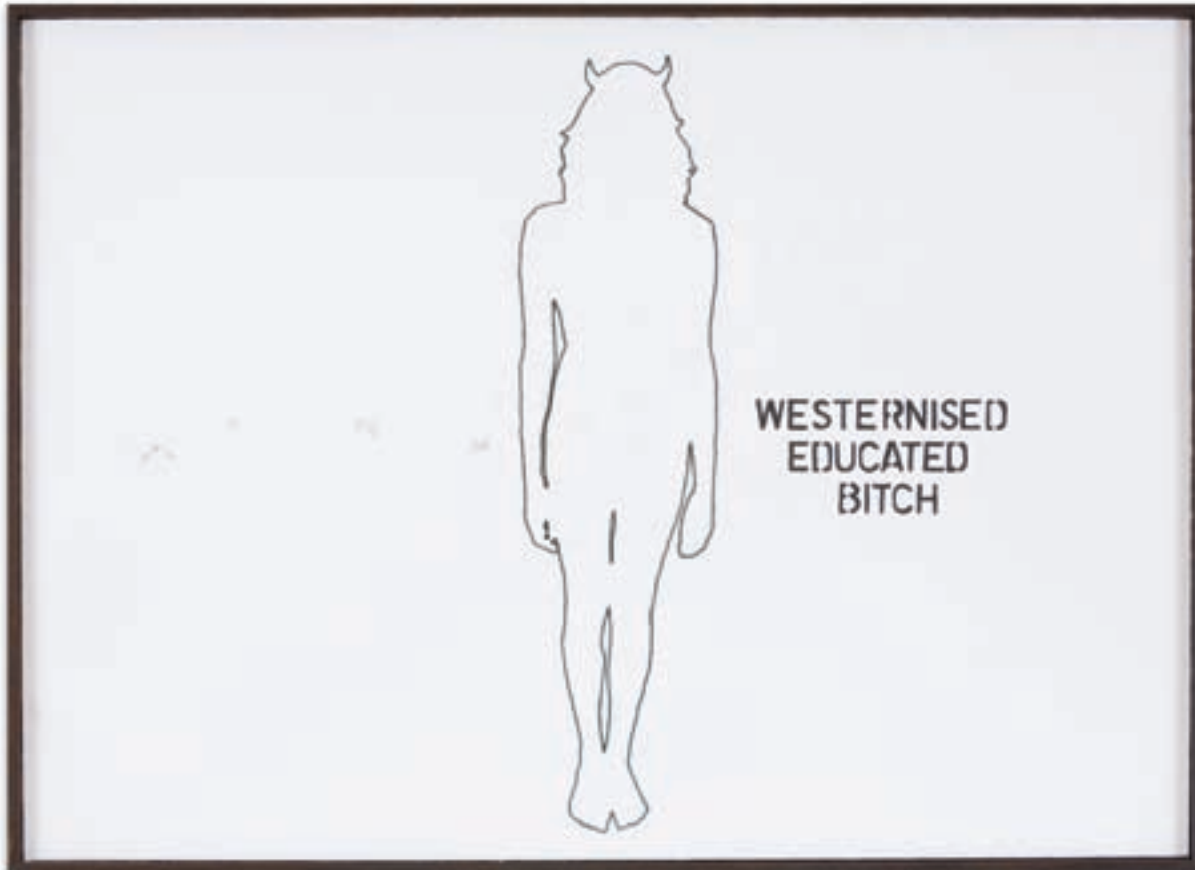
**Apartheid Education**

Mixed media (Digital inkjet print on Entrada; embroidery), 61cm x 84cm, 2008



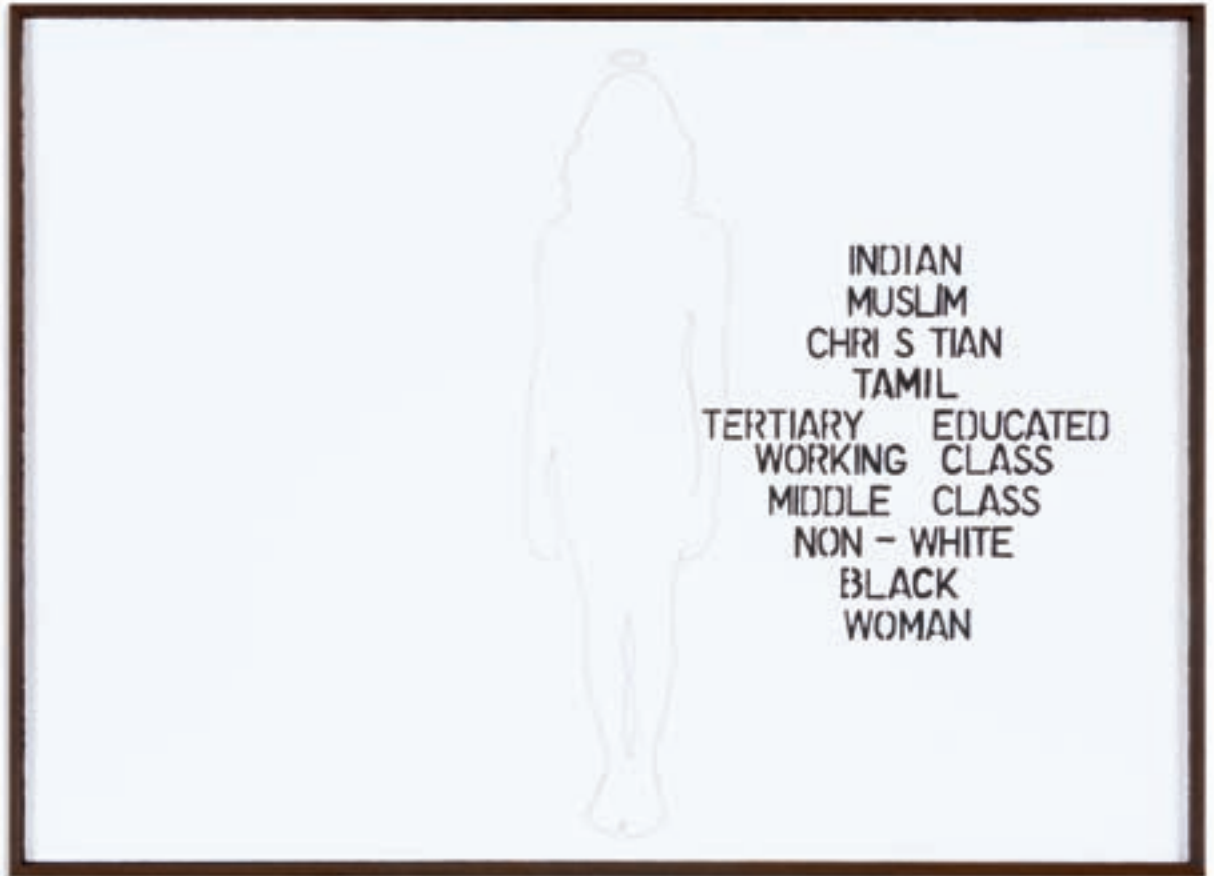
**Undergraduate Child**

Mixed media (Digital inkjet print on Entrada; embroidery), 61cm x 84cm, 2008



**Westernised. Educated. Bitch.**

Mixed media (Embossing on Hahnemuller; acrylic paint, embroidery), 61 cm x 84cm, 2008



**Black Woman**

Mixed media (Embossing on Hahnemuller; acrylic paint, embroidery), 61cm x 84cm, 2008



**Lonely Socialite Seeks Companion**

Mixed media (Digital inkjet print on Entrada; embroidery), 61cm x 84cm, 2008

*Both of them wore transparent robes revealing skin as white as honey, their eyes filled with light, like the eyes of houris . . . Her hand was still on the door. She pulled it behind her and it closed. She returned to the earth saying, to herself 'There is no place in paradise for a black woman'.*

Nawal el Saadawi, *She has no Place in Paradise* (1972)

# Negotiating identity through the gendered and racialised body of a South African artist

Dina Ligaga

*On 4 September 2008, I had the opportunity to attend an exhibition of one of South Africa's young artists. The exhibition entitled "What I look like, What I feel like" was not her usual work on urban immigrants, the work that has occupied her imagination for a while now. It was on an interesting theme - her.*

*As a literary theorist, my approach to reading Khan's work is obviously informed by my literary background which influences how I read texts, including, of course pictorial representations. It is for this reason that I viewed Khan's work with interest. The entire exhibition was autobiographical, in which the artist was the centre of a series of narratives on various issues that have influenced her life as a black woman artist in South Africa since her moving to Johannesburg in 2003. Also, having followed recent discussions by and about the artist, I immediately realised that the exhibition also acted as a collection of responses to her various critics.*

*Briefly, Sharlene Khan's exhibition "What I look like, What I feel like", is a series of photographs, each telling its own story, yet together forming an intricate narrative of how she sees herself, especially as an artist in South Africa today. Khan chooses to juxtapose two photographic images that tell a related story about how she thinks others view her in one photograph against how she views herself as an artist and a black woman. Her work rotates around questions of gender and power, education and unemployment, and unequal race and class relations in post-apartheid South Africa. The displays are at once personal and public. Personal because the artist uses the opportunity to speak directly about her feelings towards how specific groups have viewed her in the last few years during her struggles to make a mark in South Africa as a young, black, female artist and her outspokenness at the lack of racial transformation in the visual arts sector. She also refers*

*to several (publically) controversial racial landmarks in her career. In the following interview, I attempt to engage with the artist about the autobiographical nature of this exhibition and the need to expose herself through her visual media.*

**Firstly, this exhibition differs significantly from your work over the last nine years that has engaged with informal trade in South African city centres. What challenges did you encounter while putting this project together and in relation to depicting yourself instead of Others?**

My pre-occupation with the depiction of poor, unemployed black people having to make a living on the streets in whatever way possible was also about myself. Having had the short experience of selling pillows door-to-door when I was young, left a lasting impact of empathy for anyone engaged in this type of economy. Depicting Others has its own challenges of not exoticising African Others, of not proffering stereotypes to the art market, of representing Others for a quick buck – but still it was easier to deal with other people rather than with myself. I had found it easier to write poetry about my thoughts and feelings than using visual media, and when it did happen, it did so organically. I felt the need and urgency to do so – but mostly the courage to expose myself to the public, to put my naked body in front of the camera, to show my vulnerabilities, my pettiness, my weaknesses, my anger.

**Why did you choose to be the subject of the entire exhibition?**

The exhibition started off with me wanting to comment on people's reactions to me, often based on stereotypes of me as a woman of colour against how I feel internally. It became an avenue to expose the various masks we assume on a daily basis and to make visible the many personas we enact within public and private spaces. Over the course of the last two years it became my own personal forum to voice my views on the racism I have experienced in the South African visual arts arena. After writing an article about the lack of racial transformation in the visual arts ["Aluta Continua: Doing it for Daddy", in: *Art South Africa* 4.3, March 2006], I become person non-grata in the South African contemporary art world. Despite the numerous exhibitions that I have had, I have almost never had an exhibition listed, let alone reviewed. I have sat at scholarship and job interviews and been interrogated by the white powers about THAT article rather than any of my research.

The only time I am mentioned is when I am insulted by some young white writer. With such an overwhelming reaction by the controlling white hierarchy, I had to find my own forum to make my voice known, to speak about the various racist acts that I have faced for speaking out against white privilege. It was my attempt to fight back at my silencing.



**Warrior Princess**

Mixed media (Digital inkjet print on Entrada; embroidery), 61 cm x 84cm, 2008

The work “Anybody but Sharlene” for instance is meant to reference these experiences and depicts a Che Guevara-style image of me juxtaposed with an image of me in a martyred St Sebastian-like pose. The Che image is meant to show how I am often viewed as a rebel, a troublemaker. The martyred-me is a sign for vulnerability, for being prepared to die for my beliefs. The arrows which piece my body reference some of the racism I have endured, but the fact that I bleed is meant to show that I am not immune to hurt and being scarred by these experiences. The words “Anybody but Sharlene” refers to a quote I heard from someone about my status in the visual arts world. The embroidered thumbs-up sign is a symbol used during the anti-apartheid struggle as a sign of defiance and basically shows my stance that even though I may be paying with my career for speaking out about inequalities, I will not stop. Others in my country before me have paid with real blood – mine are only metaphorical.

**In several of your presentations, you were quite keen to engage with many layers of your identity as a woman. Can you speak a little about this?**

Not just any woman – a black, urbanised, tertiary educated Indo-African woman. That is very important to me. I don't live life as just any woman. I have a racialised, gendered body and an outlook affected by westernisation,

urbanisation, by living in South Africa, by being of Indian descent. These are not factors to be separated at will. As such, I am faced daily with a society that looks at my race, gender and class as markers of how to interact with me. South Africa is still an incredibly racist, patriarchal society and having never established a proper discourse on racism or patriarchy, one is faced with a society within which black people, and black women specifically, are at the bottom end of the hierarchy.

In the exhibition, I question expectations of me as a potential mother, as a ‘good’ woman, as a tertiary educated woman, as a Muslim/Christian woman, a rebel-rouser, a demonised woman, a sexual person. I am not any of these things, but bits of these things on any day, and I question how these layers of identity, as you put it, are often spliced, foregrounded and used to stereotype and compartmentalise – as well as to often subjugate – me. The exhibition tries to visually complicate these different parts of my identity and, furthermore, to undermine and mock some of these stereotypical roles.

The work “Mother” for instance, talks about our naturalised role as mothers-to-be. We're always told how beautiful pregnant women are, what a miracle it is to have another life form within your body, that when the time comes, you will know what to do in motherhood. But what if you don't?



**Doing it for Daddy**

Mixed media (Digital inkjet print on Entrada; black cloth, stick-on felt, embossing, embroidery), 61 cm x 84 cm, 2008

As a woman in her early 30s, I often have people asking me when I am going to have children and not to leave it too late. And while I would indeed like to have children, I don't feel ready for the realities of it - of losing sleep and work time, of having my body change and catering to someone else all the time. Being a mother in a city with no extended family support is not as easy as we're told and women who feel like I do are made to seem a bit monstrous (hence the embroidered image of the evil Chucky doll).

As a woman, you are judged not only for your own child and household, but for the state of the nation as well [laughs]. That's a huge responsibility when you want to only make art!

### **What was the reaction to the exhibition?**

When I made the works, it really was in response to my own life experiences and was, in some way, therapy for me. I wasn't sure how the gallery-going audience was going to react to the works, but the very mixed audiences who've seen the show thus far have really engaged with the works and there have been so many different interpretations of the works. It really was quite exciting for me as an artist to see the audience actively participate in coming up with such diverse readings of the works and relating it to some of their own experiences. People often felt they had to come up personally to me and tell me

how they saw themselves or someone they knew fitting into a particular representation. I feel that the impact and value of the works really lies in such engagement.

In the Sunday Independent, a young white writer used the opportunity to dismiss the works as focusing too much on victim-hood saying, "What has become abundantly clear from this exhibition is that the racial polemic that has preoccupied her writing has filtered into her art, colouring her engagement with the politics of visuals". What is so evidently racist about such criticism, is that firstly they assume that they know what the 'correct' politics of visuals are, that I am just not 'getting it right', that we – black people – don't know how best to represent our concerns and identity conflicts.

This is an ongoing issue in white South African writing about art. The notion of victim-hood is an interesting one – here the writer makes me out to be a victim in an exhibition that speaks out against my silencing and invisibility. This idea of victim-hood is one that is classically colonial (and racist), and lets the white writer disregard what you have to say and allows them to stand in on your behalf and write about you as they know best. In an extremely autobiographical exhibition, the writer has not seen fit to speak to me about a single artwork or experience depicted, but says "Khan says this" and "Khan says that", using the 'Death of the Author' argument to arrogantly remove themselves from engaging with the



artist. And while it is indeed her prerogative to not engage me on my work, it is equally fair I think that the writer then claim her own authorial voice and say, “this is what I read into the work, this is what I think she tried to say”, and therefore claim her own subject positioning in relation to reading the work.

I remember reading feminist philosopher Christine Battersby, who argued that Barthes' theory has been used unfortunately to silence women at a time that their voice was coming to the fore, and increasingly, I think this is becoming true for black people in general and black women in particular, when they are using different forums to say exactly what they think, which is not what many people (especially those in charge) want to hear. The coloniser baas will always be horrified by the inner thoughts of the 'house negro'.

**Do you see yourself as an activist through your work?**

Activist, no. Honest (to myself at least), always.

**Some of your pieces, for instance, the one titled “Doing it for Daddy” touches on religion. How does your religion affect how you see yourself?**

It is an interesting thing about the “Doing it for Daddy” work as many people liked the work because they thought it was about some commentary on Islam. But the truth is that it has nothing to do with Islam. The first photograph

shows me standing in my underwear, with an outline of a Burqa sewn around me, and is meant to reference my life. I grew up in a Christian-Muslim home, within a Tamil family, and rarely felt stifled by my Indian cultures, but since writing the article on the dominance of white women in the visual arts in South Africa – the title of which was “Doing it for Daddy” based on an article by feminist scholar bell hooks, I feel I have been silenced officially – which is what the second photograph shows (me covered in a black burqa, with only my eyes, hands and feet visible). I have felt free growing up amongst various religions and cultural spaces within my family space, but it is racism that has taught me about being rendered invisible.

**I was particularly intrigued by the piece titled “Princess Warrior” in which you have a severed head of a white woman in your hand, and on the other, a bloody knife. This image is juxtaposed with a picture of you nauseated. Can you explain what these photographs meant?**

[laughs] This is another work which is read in so many different ways. The image of me dressed up in army gear, holding a severed white woman’s head was meant to indicate how many white people have come to view me as being on a perpetual crusade against whites. The second photograph shows me in my pyjamas, sitting on the

toilet in the morning, wiping my nose. It was just meant to show that I wake up in the morning, vulnerable like everyone else, trying to get through a day. I don’t wake up all Malcolm X-ish thinking how I can destroy the white race. Nobody can live like that, and you certainly can’t be creative like that. But I have often been, unfortunately, reduced to this representation in South African visual art circles.

**Sometimes, as women, we feel particularly vulnerable about our defects and imperfections, mostly because other people draw our attention to them. In one or two of the photographs, you deal with these anxieties, from examining your physical imperfections, to dealing with issues of motherhood and so on. Was your work directly speaking to women across the board and what was the intended message?**

The work was speaking about my womanhood, and the contradiction of having people look at you and say ‘you’re pretty’ and yet when you look in the mirror all you see are your imperfections. That was a hard exercise [in the work “Perfect”], marking all my physical embarrassments for all the world to see my mental pettiness (e.g. acne scars, moustache, uneven lips, bald spot).

But it’s not just women who relate to physical worries – although I didn’t create the work thinking about the

gender of my audience, many women told me they were surprised at how the male audience reacted to the work, calling it 'brave' and 'courageous'. We're living in an age of body consciousness for both men and women, and now even young children. Personal insecurities seem to rule the day.

**You constantly have the figure of the clown in various photographs. Was this image significant in your work?**

Yes, in very different ways and both as a tragic-comedic figure. I have always been extremely skinny since I was a child, and was often teased about it and it has been the insecurity that has pursued me into adulthood. As a child, I felt I had to invite a 'larger' personality to fit in, to be noticed and to stand out. So I learnt to play the clown, to play the fool, to make people laugh. If they were laughing with me, then at least it didn't feel like they were laughing at me. And yet I am aware that even as a 31 year old woman, I still play the clown when necessary, often to negotiate an unpleasant experience.

Playing the clown is the most obvious form of performance and one knows that the person behind the mask simply can't be happy all the time. And yet, so many times a day I do find myself behind one guise or the other, while all the time attempting to be 'real'.





**Perfection**

Mixed Media (Digital inkjet print on Entrada; india ink, embroidery), 84cm x 61cm, 2008



One final question about your work “Black Woman”, which has an outline of you with a halo above your head sandwiched between a list of identity labels painted on your right and your name embossed on the left. All of these elements seem to be signifiers for other things (‘Indian’, ‘Muslim’, ‘Christian’, ‘Tamil’, ‘Tertiary Educated’, ‘Working Class’, ‘Middle Class’, ‘Non-White’, ‘Black’, ‘Woman’).

What is the story behind this work?

In this work, I state my name ‘Sharlene Khan’, as a signifier for a lot of different elements of my identity that are foregrounded at any particular moment. You are no closer to knowing me from all these ‘general’ symbols and yet these labels often define how I move around and am accepted in different circles, while also hinting at social hierarchies.

They are labels I negotiate daily, sometimes as baggage, but often enough to my own advantage in today’s multicultural, postcolonial society.



**Race, class, gender**

Mixed media (Digital inkjet print on Entrada; embroidery), 61 cm x 84 cm, 2008



*That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and  
lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever  
helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place!  
And ain't I a woman?*

Sojourner Truth, *Ain't I a Woman* (1851)



## Mother

Mixed media (Digital inkjet print on Entrada; black cloth, stick-on felt, embossing, embroidery), 61 cm x 84cm, 2008





**Modern. Urban. Western. Bitch.**

Mixed media (Digital inkjet print on Entrada; embroidery, embossing), 61cm x 84cm, 2008





**Pisces**

Mixed media (Digital inkjet print on Entrada; embroidery), 61cm x 84cm, 2008



**Abused**

Mixed media (Digital inkjet print on Entrada; embroidery) 61cm x 84cm, 2008



**Factotum**

Mixed media (Digital inkjet print on Entrada; embroidery, embossing), 61cm x 84cm, 2008



**Ain't I a woman?**

Mixed media (Digital inkjet print on Entrada; embroidery, embossing) 61cm x 84cm, 2008



*You may shoot me with your words,  
You may cut me with your eyes,  
You may kill me with your hatefulness,  
But still, like air, I'll rise.*

Maya Angelou, *Still I Rise* (1978)



**Anybody but Sharlene**

Mixed media (Digital inkjet print on Entrada; embroidery, embossing), 61 cm x 84cm, 2008





## **Memento Mori**

Mixed media (Digital inkjet print on Entrada; embroidery, embossing), 61 cm x 84 cm, 2008



# Biography

Born in Durban in 1977, Sharlene Khan completed both a BA (Fine Arts) and MA (Fine Arts) at the University of Durban-Westville and a second Masters degree in Fine Arts at the University of the Witwatersrand. She has participated in group exhibitions and international residency programmes locally and internationally. Her work for over nine years has focused on street trade in South Africa. Although primarily a painter, Khan's paintings are often presented with a range of media such as embroidery, ink and charcoal. Khan has also been extensively involved in various mural projects as a muralist, coordinator and researcher. She is also a free-lance writer and curator.

## EDUCATION

University of Durban-Westville (1998) B. A. (Fine Art)  
University of Durban-Westville (2002) M. A. (Fine Art)  
University of the Witwatersrand (2006) M. A. (Fine Art)

## WORKSHOPS/RESIDENCIES

**2009** Rockefeller Bellagio Centre Creative Arts Residency, Bellagio, Italy  
**2005** Nouison International Residency, Pujols, France  
**2003** International Residency at the Townhouse Gallery, Cairo, Egypt  
Thupelo International Workshop, Cape Town  
**2002** Fordsburg Artists Studios International Residency Programme, Johannesburg  
Caversham Press Residency Programme, Pietermaritzburg

## SOLO EXHIBITIONS

**2009** *Other Stories*. Right on the Rim Gallery, Arts on Main, Johannesburg  
*(B)lack* and *What I look like, What I feel like* Polokwane Art Museum, Polokwane  
**2008** *(B)lack*. AVA Gallery, Cape Town  
*What I look like, What I feel like* Gallery MOMO, Johannesburg  
**2007** *(B)lack*. KwaZulu-Natal Society of Arts (KZNSA), Durban  
*Walking the Line*. BAT Centre, Durban  
**2006** *Previously Disadvantaged*. Gallery MOMO, Johannesburg  
**2004** *Walking The Line*. University of Witwatersrand Downstairs Theatre, Johannesburg  
**2003** *Two for One Rand*. Goethe Institute, Johannesburg  
**2001** *Durban at Work*. Master's degree work, Kwa-Muhle Museum, Durban

## GROUP EXHIBITIONS

**2010** *The New Order Beauty*. Palette Art Gallery, Delhi, India  
*Art from Southern Africa* Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ), Eschborn, Germany

**2009** *Bring me a leave of grass from the edge of the image*.  
Artist studios of the atelierfrankfurt, Frankfurt, Germany

**2008** *Urban Concerns*. BildMuseet, Umea, Sweden  
*Living Legacy*. Kizo Gallery, Durban

**2007** *The Hourglass Project Personal Vocabulary* House  
Museum and Resource Centre of African American Art,  
Atlanta, USA

**2006** *MTN New Contemporaries*. Johannesburg Art Gallery,  
Johannesburg

**2005** *Feb Group Show International 2005* Bayer ABS  
Limited Gallery, Vadodara, India  
*Les Arts De La Coexistence?* Migrationculturelles (MC2a),  
Bordeaux; Musée des Arts derniers, Paris, France

**2004** *The ID of South African Artists* Fortis Circustheatre,  
Scheveningen, Netherlands

*Community (Re)Production*. Gallery Ancienne Couronne,  
Biel-Bienne, Switzerland

**2002** *State of Being*. Fordsborg Artists Studios,  
Johannesburg

## CURATORIAL PROJECTS

**2008** *Esikhaleni Spatial Practices*. Africa Cultural Centre,  
Johannesburg (Joburg Art Fair event)

**2004** Coordinator and co-curator of the exhibition *The ID  
of South African Artists*, Fortis Circustheatre, Scheveningen,  
Netherlands

## PUBLICATIONS

**2008** "Gatekeeping Africa", in: *springerin* Vol 1/2009,  
Vienna, Austria

**2007** "Gatekeeping Africa", in: *Artlink* Vol 27. 2, Adelaide,  
Australia

**2006** "Aluta Continua: Doing it for Daddy", in: *Art South  
Africa* Vol 4. 3, Cape Town

**2004** *The ID of South African Artists* Exhibition catalogue.  
Scheveningen, Netherlands

"Jug and Water" in: *Money Funnel*. Exhibition catalogue:  
Claudia Shneider, Kunsterein Recklinghausen and Rupert  
Walser Gallery, Munich, Germany

"Sophie Peters", "Gabisile Nkosi", "Rookeya Gardee",  
"Usha Seejarim", "Berni Searle", in: *10 Years, 100 Artists*  
(edited by Sophie Perryer). Bell Roberts Publishing, Cape Town

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