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'Muslim Women,' Sans Context

by Jessica Dawson, December 21, 2007

"Muslim Women in Germany," a new photography exhibition soon to reopen at the Goethe-Institut, proves much less straightforward than its simple title suggests.

Upward of 3 million Muslims live in Germany; more than 2 million of them are Turks. Many are guest workers who arrived in the 1960s (hired to do menial jobs the Germans wouldn't) and their children and grandchildren.

In recent years, the Turkish minority's increased visibility has been met by escalating resentment. Recent mosque-building projects provoked anxiety and xenophobia; hundreds of thousands of Turkish retirees requiring medical care have put strains on resources already limited by reunification.

So when the Turkish flag figures in a number of the photographs at Goethe, it signals a loaded issue for many Germans -- an issue the Institut should handle with care.

Yet prudence didn't guide the show's curators. This wide-ranging selection of photographs of Muslim women is almost entirely devoid of context. Some pictures could be a photojournalist's investigation of Muslim identity, some could be frank attempts at capturing the country's minority relations. But we don't know for sure. And neither does the Institut.

We've lost these pictures' context because they are stock images ordered from an agency. We don't know why many were taken, or where, or for what purpose. Culled from the portfolios of four photographers belonging to the photo agency Ostkreuz, the pictures fulfill the Institut's order for photos of Germany's Muslim women.

What the Institut received includes many straightforward documentary-style pictures. Anne Schoenharting enters homes and apartments where she photographs women tending to children, preparing meat and performing other domestic chores. Maurice Weiss finds women engaged in political rallies. Jordis Antonia Schloesser captures women on the street and at private parties.

Yet the handful of pictures by Nicole Angstenberger hanging in the Institut's lobby look vaguely advertorial. Her pictures show beautiful young dark-skinned women in a nondescript living room, looking as if they're getting ready for a wedding. Or, rather, looking as if they're in an advertisement depicting women getting ready for a wedding.

When I asked Goethe staff to explain the context of Angstenberger's photos, they couldn't say.

The Institut says the exhibit is part of an ongoing look at ethnic tensions in Germany, presumably to further tolerance and dialogue. Yet choosing work solely for its content -- Muslim women -- smacks of cursory selection by religion and gender.

Though I assume the slight was unintentional, the Institut's approach to the curating of this exhibition was superficial at best. At worst, its method perpetuates judgments based on outward characteristics and traits -- the kind of attitude that begets tensions in the first place.

A highly selective group of works by the region's better-known female artists hangs in Bethesda's Osuna Gallery. Longtime dealer Ramon Osuna chose the 32 artists on view using highly personal criteria: They are artists he's shown over the years, associates and friends of those artists, and artists recommended by dealers he respects.

The resulting show functions something like a yearbook -- one work represents each artist. Many of the pieces are recent efforts, though a few were made decades ago. There is no effort to capture any particular moment in District artmaking, nor is there a focus to the variety of media on view. The result is a disjointed and difficult-to-navigate exhibition, one that illustrates the limitations of building a show solely around the sex of its makers.

A few themes do emerge. One is female artists grappling with modernism. Nan Montgomery offers a large-scale canvas that answers the austerity of Barnett Newman's famous "zips" -- the long lines of paint that intersected his paintings vertically. Montgomery's vertical line begins as an abstract line near the bottom of her canvas and morphs into the long stem of a flower near the top. Likewise, Francie Hester works in abstracted forms on aluminum panel that speak to both Robert Rauschenberg and the encaustic panels of District artist Robin Rose.

The female body plays an important role here, too. Annette Polan produces a self-portrait that playfully straddles painting and sculpture even as it evokes the history of self-portraiture, Marcel Duchamp and femininity. Yuriko Yamaguchi offers a bronze work that appears to be an oversize shriveled fruit but turns out to be the sum of so many small breasts.

Two male nudes in the exhibition turn the conceit of their female counterpart on its head. Manon Cleary combines portraiture's capacity to bring out a sitter's personality with an object lesson in the male body in her late-1970s oil portrait "Big J." Bernis von zur Muehlen offers a twist: She's posed a naked man on studio cloths in the tradition of an odalisque. Yet the man she's chosen must be in his late 70s or 80s -- every wrinkled imperfection is in full view.

Muslim Women in Germany, at the Goethe-Institut, 812 Seventh St. NW, Monday-Thursday 9 a.m.-5 p.m., Friday 9 a.m.-3 p.m., 202-289-1200, closed Dec. 21-Jan. 7, reopening Jan. 8. Exhibition runs to Feb. 29; www.goethe.de/washington.

Washington Women in the Arts: A Selection, at Osuna Art, 7200 Wisconsin Ave., Bethesda, Tuesday-Saturday noon-5 p.m., 301-654-4500, to Jan. 5; www.osunagallery.com.