

FASCINANS AND TREMENDUM

AIDAN SALAKHOVA'S SOLO EXHIBITION IN MOSCOW MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

CATALOGUE TEXT

I.

In the given space of MMOMA drawings, paintings, sculptures, installations and videos of Aidan Salakhova evoke the idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk (the total art-work) through their opulence and their conceptual and artistic scale. The intention of the artist to create a relational and associative environment for the viewer in order to give them a possibility to shake off their potential alienation and enter into a ritualistic experience is another dimension that relates this exhibition to the spectacle, one of the prerequisites of the Gesamtkunstwerk. Even if this term has been used with caution since Modernism as its concepts and aesthetics are based in 19th century Romanticism, it covers/ includes many components and elements of today's relational aesthetics, such as the fusion of different art and culture forms, the conviction that art brings new modes of politics, morality and senses of future to the global world, and that it is a way of bestowing societies with alternative thinking and with mental and spiritual power.

Today's Gesamtkunstwerk fulfils the foremost urge to deal with capitalist wealth and power and their influence on today's global culture and arts. Instances of the total art work in Modernism related to the idea of creating new forms of art in industrialized capitalist and socialist systems has been experienced and practiced in Bauhaus and Russian Constructivism, and found its Late-Modern and Post-modern forms in Installation art which is being related to the Gesamtkunstwerk¹ by art critics and curators. Salakhova's works, having a potential to create multifaceted/protean installations, deserve to be qualified as Gesamtkunstwerk.

Art is commonly evaluated as a commodity within the late capitalist system and as a mediator for the society of spectacle and presumed to have lost its traditional or Modernist meaning, intentions and purposes. However, in their endeavour of producing a corpus of work from drawing to an accumulation of paintings, sculptures, photography and video, the

¹ Nicolas de Oliveira, Nicola Oxley and Michael Petry, 'On Installation', *Installation Art*, AD, 1996, p.7: '*Many artists and critics have referred to the activity as an expression of the concept of Gesamtkunstwerk, a total work of art, as it appears to borrow from vast spectrum of disciplines. Its history, while often ill defined, grows out of the individual narratives presented by architecture, painting, sculpture, theater, performance. It comes as no surprise that, even in its contemporary manifestation, installation continues to express its former allegiances.*'

quest of the artists for the dramatic impact of the Gesamtkunstwerk seems not to have changed. With her insistent way of producing drawing, painting and sculpture, Aidan Salakhova gives the impression that first of all she is one of the artists who still believes in the power of traditional art forms and techniques to visualize ideas and observations, or to make analysis, deconstruction or simulation of the order of things. Furthermore, she is an artist who reckons with the dissimilarities and the notions of perception of the viewer and therefore provides different visual techniques and compositions.

The art historical perspective in Salakhova's work is remarkable in its resourcefulness and in its unificatory span. *Nothing is more natural to art history than to draw parallels between periods of culture and periods of style,*² says Wölfflin. From this point of view Salakhova's corpus of work opens a deep perspective into art history, laying claim to occidental and oriental forms, various techniques and an inventory of visual styles. We can recognize the smooth perfection of the Greek and Hellenic sculpture in her sculptures, the narrative complexity of Orthodox icons and the poetic descriptions of Persian Miniatures in her drawings and mixed media paintings, all of which, according to art historians, have similar conventions such as perfection, divinity, dignity and sublimation. Looking from the perspective of Wölfflin when he was describing the Italian Renaissance, the viewer:

*... may find an existence satisfied in itself, extending beyond human measure, but always accessible to the imagination. With infinite content, the mind apprehends this art as the image of a higher free existence in which it may participate.*³

Today's art criticism evades using these kind of sublimating descriptions, but Aidan Salakhova's work, from Wölfflin's perspective and with its purposeful art historical references, needs to be described in this way.

This corpus of work, displaying art historical canons, forms and aesthetics, can also be strongly related to Erwin Panofsky's explanation of iconography and iconology.⁴ According to him, the first reaction of the viewer is:

simple identification through familiarity.

² Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, Dover Publications, 1950, p.9

³ Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, Dover Publications, 1950, p.10

⁴ Ross Woodrow, <http://w3.gril.univ-tlse2.fr/Proimago/LogiCoursimage/panofsky.htm>.

In Salakhova's case, the viewer can identify the work according to his/her knowledge and experience of these familiar forms of art and of the figure of the veiled woman, which is the central motive. The next appreciation guides the viewer to iconography, which is:

the linking of artistic motifs with themes, concepts or conventional meaning.

Portraying this repetitive figure of veiled woman, Salakhova employs the composition and narration used in miniatures as well as in icons. In this case, these works simultaneously display different layers of art history, contemporary art practice and the socio-political identification of women as well as to conventional meaning of the veil and female body politics. The third level of the viewer's perception is:

most contentious and iconological.

At its many aspects, the intrinsic meaning or substance of her work is highly contentious, as will be tackled in this text. It is worth quoting Panofsky directly here, as he explains this intrinsic meaning:

It is apprehended by ascertaining those underlying principles which reveal the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion - qualified by one personality and condensed into one work.⁵

The basic provisions for her work are linear and the painterly, which are presented in this exhibition with simple pencil drawings, with more elaborate drawings that focus on the black veil and the hands and with similar oil paintings, even if she glorifies this figure in Carrara marble and also addresses today's perceptual habits with digital techniques. This production is, by various means, advocating prevailing languages of drawing since Prehistoric cave drawings, the fact that every image or object should be drawn before it becomes something else and that technical developments cannot replace drawing. These drawings and paintings, as the visualization of the most primary idea comprise occidental and oriental rendering of images and give guiding infrastructure to her reliefs and sculptures as well as video work that is related to the content and subject of this major series.

The exhibition in the given spaces of MMOMA has been designed and installed in three parts according to the visual and conceptual elements of the works: The Body, The Hands and the Objects. Upon entering the museum, the viewer is confronted by three sculptures – the central figures of her work - depicting covered and exposed female bodies. From these three rooms, the viewer is free to choose his/her way into the concept of the Hands or to the Objects, all related to the existence and identity of these figures. The culmination point of the

⁵ I.e.

exhibition are two videos which show her performances that are female hands either moving in different forms of expression or caressing male bodies, projected at the end of the left wing of the museum. These videos build a bridge between traditional and present art making.

II.

The figures in Salakhova's drawings, paintings and sculptures are mainly covered in black cloth, with a few exceptions showing naked bodies or body parts. She has chosen black and white Carrara marble for her reliefs and sculptures. This is the juxtaposition of the black veil to the purity of naked female body. Apart from her intentions to refer to art historical modes and aesthetics, these covered figures and the intensive use of this black cloth has historical and contemporary religious and socio-cultural connotations that we should look at here in depth.

Eurocentric language defines this black cloth as "the veil", which has a mysterious and oriental implication. In post-colonialist discourse, Edward Said has diagnosed it according to the words of Franz Fanon:

*to the European, the non-European world contains only natives and the veiled women, the palm trees and the camels make up the landscape... .*⁶

It is now an object of dispute, not only in the Western world, but also between Laicists and Islamists in related countries. It is considered by the West as a sign of the suppression and obedience of women, a position which has been critically discussed by Fethi Benslama in his comprehensive essay.⁷ In the Islamic world the chapter of the veil was opened during the Iranian Revolution in the late 70s, where, as in Turkey from 1936, it was banned, spreading to the Islamic world along with socio-political debates, questions of democratic rights and the role of women in public space.⁸

This black cloth/veil has slightly different meanings in Islam, Christian and Jewish traditions: It is argued that, in Islam, it is more for modesty and protection rather than a sign of male authority over women, as practiced in Christianity, or a sign of class distinction concerning married women as in Jewish traditions.

In the historical background of our territory, during Anatolian Civilizations before Christ, in Byzantium and during the Ottoman Empire, some upper class women who are mostly depicted veiled in different forms are recorded as having an episodically central role in

⁶ Edward Said, *Freud and the Non-European*, Verso and Freud Museum, 2003, p.18

⁷ Fethi Benslama, *The Veil of Islam*, translated by Emiliano Battista and Sigi öttkandt

⁸ Azadeh Namakydoust, 'Covered in messages, The veil as a political tool', *The Iranian*, May 8, 2003.

society. I will refer here to a historic event between the 8th and 9th centuries during the period of iconoclasm in Byzantium that will allegorically correlate orthodoxy and the position and identity of women in the collective memory of our societies. In Byzantium, women of all classes opposed the official politics of the state and played a militant role in maintaining the worship of icons. When in 726 or 730 the great icon of Christ, which was displayed on the Chalky Gate of the Great Palace, the women rebelled and demonstrated in the streets of Constantinople. The two empresses Irene and Theodore restored the worship of icons around 850. What was the reason for this attachment to icons? Even if we can see Madonnas in the icons and female figures in frescoes and mosaic depictions, it is stated that the women of Byzantium had a very limited role in the society and they were confined to their homes and daily occupations, as it is supposed to be the case in today's fundamentalist Islamic societies. Having icons at home thus seems to be the only private way to worship the religion. As a result, iconoclasts are understood to have taken an anti-feminist view, even questioning the role of the Virgin Mary!⁹ These restrictions of Orthodoxy –the most influential model when İslam appeared on the borders of the Byzantine empire- have been transferred to this new born religion. A significant perspective in Aidan Salakhova's work draws our attention to this Byzantine framework and its influences.

The original term for this black cloth however is very explicit: It is 'hijab'. Hijab is a sort of curtain that divides two things from each other. In the Koran, this word means curtain; it is advised to talk to women behind a curtain (Koran XXXIII, 53). Pertaining to the other world, the people of paradise and the people of hell are divided by a curtain (Koran VII, 44) which seems to indicate 'araf' (al-a'raf), the place where one's sins are purified.¹⁰ It is the Muslim 'sheol', the Hebrew word which means grave or abyss. It is the equivocal space between heaven and hell where good and evil are the same and souls of the people wait to be absolved. Derived from these interpretations, the hijab covers the body of the other (the female body) and from the gaze of the other (the male gaze) and it is a sheath of purification. This white and the black that dominate the works of Aidan Salakhova is also a manifold element of polarisation which corresponds to the enigmatic and candid, to the conspicuous and modest, to purification and contamination and, no doubt, to the division of paradise and hell.

In today's traditions and circumstances, the black cloth covering women leaving only their face and hands invokes the tradition of radical İslam in Western minds, whereas other ways of covering the head such as a veil loosely covering the head or a scarf tightly wrapping the head indicate more tolerant İslam. From the position of women in the Islamic

⁹ Nevra Necipoglu, Women in Byzantium, Gösteri, December 1993, p. 110-114.

¹⁰ İslam ansiklopedisi, 5/1, İstanbul milli eğitim basımevi, 1967, p.472.

world, these last two forms of veil are favoured and they are ambiguously identified with tradition, honour, femininity and liberated womanhood.

With her images of black veiled women Aidan Salakhova claims a relation bridging the forms of the veil from Mesopotamian vestals, to Byzantine women and the images of Orthodox Icons and up to the present connotations of the veil. She evidently does not anticipate relating it merely to Islam women. Her intention is not to create a simple association with today's polarisations and disputes about applications of the veil as a sign or a political tool, of manifestation of enlightened or chauvinistic opinions, of an element hiding or revealing the conscious or subconscious of male hegemony. She is utilizing this signifier as a means to scrutinize and to question the systems that manipulate and exploit the female body and identity in different forms but, in particular, as an object of voyeurism. These systems are largely constructed by neo-capitalist consumption ambitions, camouflaged in the showcase of religion and tradition but evidently anchored in patriarchal desires. In relation to a visual/formal component of the covered or exposed female body, she invites the viewer to analyse and solve the codes of a patriarchal subconscious, neurosis and perversion. These codes are astonishingly similar in all cultures from the past to the present and exactly this correspondence is a reason to renounce any kind of discrimination.

I found a correspondence between Benslama's ideas and Salakhova's concept and intentions. In his essay Benslama¹¹ he analyses the veil from several viewpoints. First of all he explains that the veil is not a sign of ostentation like a crucifix, as it has been decided by the politicians, but it is something through which the feminine body is partially or totally occulted. This body would otherwise indicate too much; and this excess of meaning is masterfully reflected in Salakhova's works. This negation of the body of the woman paradoxically elevates her into a forbidden or sacred thing; precisely this is also the current paradox in patriarchal societies that is accentuated in her work. The male gaze together with all the consumption system at the same time scrupulously elevates and degrades the female identity.

Here, according to the epistemological milieu and implications of this work, it becomes appropriate to interpret the character of this overall patriarchal stubbornness according to different perspectives.

Even if the work of Salakhova is formally focused on female figure, its conceptual scope marks the male gaze. This symbolic scope gives us the opportunity to question the figure of the Father. The father in a Freudian sense is described in *Totem and Taboo*. He:

¹¹ Fethi Benslama, *The Veil of Islam*, translated by Emiliano Battista and Sigi öttkandt.

squashes the desire of everyone, dominates desire, and annihilates it.

This might be the case in today's few radical authoritarian regimes, but we should consider the Lacanian Father to be more real today. He is the one

...who accomplishes normalization, the humanization of desire in the paths traced by the Law, and that supposes in effect that he had ceased to misrecognize the function that the object a takes in his desire.¹²

With its visual references this work also gives us the opportunity to examine the veil from Lacan's "there is no sexual rapport" point of view. This indicates the impossibility of normalisation under the circumstances of political and neo-capitalist systems in western and non-western territories endlessly marketing and framing the female body. Salakhova, being precisely aware of this intricacy of today's sexual rapport, based her work on fundamental symbols such as phallus and vagina as most of the objects borrow these forms. Moreover, thorough the employment of these symbols the work calls our attention to the archetype of woman:

Due to structural reasons, the archetype of a woman will be identified with a dangerous and devouring big Other, the original primal mother who can recapture what was originally hers, thereby recreating the original state of pure jouissance. That is the reason why sexuality is always a mixture of fascinans et tremendum, that is a mixture of Eros and death drive. This is the explanation for the essential conflict within sexuality itself: every subject longs for what he/she fears namely the return to that original condition of jouissance.¹³

It is precisely this conflict of fascination and fear towards that condition of jouissance that Salakhova guides the viewer through the rooms of MMOMA.

In conclusion, with the determination to deconstruct the complexity, neurosis and perversity of the global image of covered and uncovered women, Salakhova reflects her definitions through this corpus of work using corresponding visual elements. Here, her approach could be explained as a quest for the real or her warning concerning the death drive which she

¹² Jacques-Alain Miller 'Objects a in the analytic experience'. Presentation made in Rome, July 15, 2006, on the theme of the next Congress of the WAP. This text originally appeared as "Les objets a dans l'expérience analytique" in *La Lettre mensuelle*, 252, Novembre 2006, p. 8-12. English translation by Thomas Svolos.

¹³ Paul Verhaeghe, 'Neurosis and Perversion: Il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel', *Journal of Center for Freudian Analysis and Research*, 6, Winter 95, p. 39-65. Presented at the CFAR in London, May 1995

anticipates will be resolved within the social order.¹⁴ This quest or commitment is not a naive approach to the viewer. She is aware that she is challenging the status quo, established public opinion, the game played in the name of political and social order. The grandeur of the impact of the work on the public gaze may denote the fact that:

This return of the real, however, should not be imagined as an exogenous shock that undermines the smooth functioning of the system. Rather, the destructive forces of the real emerge from within: the Lacanian subject is the subject of jouissance and will do everything to make sure “to sustain and advance” her “particular relationship to enjoyment” (McGowan, 2004, p 3); the subject will “sacrifice anything and everything (even life itself) for [that] particular Thing” (p. 5). This is the logic of what Freud called the death drive.¹⁵

III.

Salakhova is not alone in her quest and commitment. Since early Modernism, women artists of Western countries have challenged the status of women and patriarchal orders mainly related to the dictums of their religions in their societies more with their avant-garde positions than with their works, which reflected the aesthetics, modes and styles of their times. Expressionist and Cubist paintings of women artists for example do not directly reveal their revolt, but ensured an almost equal position next to the male artists. Within the Dada movement, however, the woman artist could reveal her disapproval or rebellion by using the power of performance which has since had a long, elaborate and effective history of development. Most of these 20th century women artist have aroused interest with their biographies. Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* of 1550, the first comprehensive biography of artists, had the intention to preserve the names of the artists and link them with their works; the written word was a means to remember them.¹⁶ Modernism has transformed the mythic association of artists with divine powers into conventions about the nature of genius.¹⁷ Picasso, with abundant biographical publications about him, is the ultimate example of this deification. Among women artists, the biographies of Georgia O'Keefe, Dorothea Tanning, Ana Mendieta, Louise Bourgeois, Marina Abrahamovic have been decisive in interpreting

¹⁴ Ceren Özselçuk and Yahya M.Madra, *Psychoanalysis and Marx.sm: From Capitalist-all to communist non-all*; <http://www.surplusthought.net/ymadra/psikanalizvemarksizm.pdf>

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Laurie Schneider Adams, *Methodologies of Art*, p.110

¹⁷ Laurie Schneider Adams, *Methodologies of Art*, p.110.

their works. Self-portraiture may be another link to illuminate the identification of the work with the life of the artists. Cindy Sherman and Shirin Neshat are the most famous current examples.

In most cases, the work of the women artists who has been dealing with the veil, chador or other Islamic conventions related to the identity of women is also assumed to have direct connection to the artist's biography or autobiography. In defining the formal elements of a work, one can count on the data of artist's life to some extent. This may be the case for artists from Islamic countries who have witnessed the conditions of religious restrictions directly or indirectly. However, women artists of Islamic origin have mostly produced art works that deal with dogmas, taboos and prohibitions in Western countries or for in international art institutions, galleries and exhibitions rather than in their home countries. Therefore they have been labelled as 'diaspora' artists throughout the 90s.

Within this framework, Salakhova's aim and vision can be compared, for example, to Cindy Sherman's rather than to Shirin Neshat's. First of all, in the simulated photographs of Cindy Sherman, the image does not reflect nostalgia for Hollywood but mirrors the bare facts of the universal male gaze and deconstructs the strategy of male film directors. In Aidan Salakhova's works, in which her hands represent her self-portrayal, the application of art-historical canon does not reflect nostalgia either; it is a creative way to indicate that:

*the system of classical culture survived intact until the twentieth century and it continues to exist today, although it is disintegrating before our very eyes.*¹⁸

Moreover, Salakhova may be dissociated from Neshat because she is not an artist from a veiled background. Her intention is neither to reflect a diaspora identity which she never adopted, since Azerbaijan was part of the Soviet world, nor to challenge the despotic patriarchal systems directly through the techniques, forms and aesthetics of post-media visual material. She deals with various aspects and facets of historical, modern and post-modern identity-position and status of women in Western or Eastern traditions for an extension of appreciation that can deconstruct the prevailing categorizations. The biography of Aidan Salakhova reveals both a multi-cultural story triggered by 20th century Modernism expanding from Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan to Russia and an exposure of self-portrayal in a hermetic form represented by the performance of her hands. Her socio-political and cultural position between Christianity and Islam, between Soviet Modernism and global adoption of visual art within relational aesthetics marks her with a priority of shifting her concentration

¹⁸ Boris Kagarlitsky, 'Market, State and the Crisis of Classical Culture', Thinking Worlds - The Moscow Conference on Philosophy, Politics, and Art, p.150.

and awareness from one pole to the other, as well as advocating for an awareness of different stages of art history.

This Modernist background is worth defining. Throughout the early and late stages of Modernism woman artists of Muslim countries have followed the dictums of Modernist movements and mainly contented themselves with figurative and abstract paintings, while a few of them dared to compete with male sculptors. In comparison to their contemporaries in Western countries they were not treasured as avant-garde, but as participants of a state programmed Modernism. Emblematic for Modernism through visual art is the Westernization program of the Ottoman Empire and the foundation of the Academy of Fine Arts (Sanayi-i Nefise, 1881) which opened the way to upper class families to allow their daughters to be educated in art. The women painters who emerged through the Westernization program of the Ottoman Empire were the earliest examples in the Muslim World. These painters were not directly involved in politics, or in social commitments, but should be mentioned as creative pioneers in the long history of women emancipation in Turkey. However, in the self-portraits of Müfide Kadri, Mihri Müşfik, Hale Asaf ,with and without veil, we can observe the dilemma of identity problems.¹⁹ They mirrored their veiled and unveiled identity in their own images. In these self-portraits, we observe this dilemma in the discrepancy between tradition and modernization. During the first half of 20th century the women artists in Turkey played their role as elitist members of a Modernist society, as if emancipated through the law, but unable to scrutinize or criticise the suppression of tradition and the lack of real equality. This was also the case in neighbouring Muslim countries and in Arab territories, where, during colonialism, art academies were opened, one by one, and women painters appeared.

In the same period, however, from 1920 to 1970 in Western countries women artists are remarkably productive and, with their exemplary work, paved the way to emancipation. In the Islamic world the equality and rights of women have been regulated under the influence of colonisation, if also within the democratisation process in the second half of the 20th century. Turkey's 1923 revolutionary transformation from an empire to a republic has been a radical model for the world of Islam. The struggles that women have to wage to secure their political, economic and cultural positions in still predominantly patriarchal societies are much more difficult compared to that of men.

Since the early 90's women artists of the Islamic World with backgrounds in cultures of veiling, mostly living in the West though recently living and working in their home countries,

¹⁹ In the exhibition "*Under my feet I want the world, not heaven!*" at the Berlin Academy of Arts on the occasion of the *Next Wave* cultural exchange program between Berlin and Istanbul, 2009.

have become leading players in international exhibitions²⁰. The veil has been the fundamental theme and concept of their work in photography, video, installations or performance. Shirin Neshat, Zineb Sedira, Jananne al Ani, Shadafarin Ghadirian, Ghazel, Mitra Tabrizian, Shirin Aliabadi and Shirin Fakhim are the most prominent artists dealing with the identity, position and manipulation of women in Islamic countries. From the 90s on artists Şükran Moral, Sermin Sherif, Özgül Aslan, Nilbar Güreş and Canan from Turkey have also produced notable and arresting works in this connection. The common concepts and forms in these works is that they did not directly address the general categorization, but created an awareness of not judging the veil according to its relations to a Western mindset but according to its meaning and associations with local and individual forms. In all the countries where veiling is a religious, social or political issue, Post-modernism was an ally for female artists; yet it has never been easy to change the status quo. Opening up the field of the social for hitherto excluded subjects – among them are women of all classes and professions – dominant meta-narratives have to be challenged, and not only the modernist gaze of the audiences needs to be transformed but also the institutions need to be reconfigured. Without doubt, such a vision of a pluralist society is yet to be realized.

IV.

Aidan Salakhova's capacity to position herself in between beliefs, traditions and cultures is cleverly reflected in her work in series. Thus the figures of Aidan Salakhova are *in between*: They can maintain their ambiguous position in every kind of cultural environment, Orthodox, Christian or Islam. In one sense, with their historical, traditional, vestal appearance they nourish dominant opinion that chooses to accept sexually repressed and modest women and that expects women to maintain their traditional roles as mothers. Nevertheless, in another sense, erotic insinuations of nudity with hands holding uncanny objects they personate the sexually liberated, aggressive women who can resist the constraints of the dominant culture, creating their own counterculture against the mainstream.

Through this *ambivalent* configuration Aidan Salakhova creates a twofold conspiracy for the viewer. Uncanniness and sexuality is both repressed and desired at the same time. Here, this repression and desire is heightened with veiled sexuality and the uncanniness communicated by the veil. The woman Aidan Salakhova portrays is resistant to repression and desire through the adoption of all kinds of unmentionable sexual signifiers, advocating motherly and sexual liberation.

²⁰ The exhibition "Veil-Veiling, Representation and Contemporary Art"(New Art Gallery Walsall, UK and other institutions 2003-2004) initiated by Zineb Sedira and curated by the team Zineb Sedira, Jananne Al-Ani, David A. Bailey and Gilane Tawadros comprehensively covers this production as well as its historical background. Catalogue: edited by David A. Bailey and Gilane Tawadros, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts / iNIVA, London, England, 2003.

Evidently, religious or uncanny and erotic objects, the graceful and erotic hands and the ambiguous use of the hijab are reminiscent of the “other culture”, even if they are also signifiers of many rituals and traditions. With these religious and erotic implications that still determine the identity of women in the subconscious of the societies and with the ultimate presence of the hijab, Salakhova artfully employs one of the most emblematic topics of discrepancy between the so called West and the Islam not, however, directly targeting the stereotypical prejudice of the West, but intending to ‘*reveal all there is to reveal*’. In Zizek, all there is to reveal is pornography:

As it is ordinarily understood, pornography is the genre supposed to ‘reveal all there is to reveal’, to hide nothing, to register ‘all’ and offer it to our view.

Salakhova clearly does not want to relate the veil to pornography but positions it in relation to the substance of enjoyment and the antinomic relation of gaze and eye as indicated in Zizek:

It is nevertheless precisely in pornographic cinema that the ‘substance of enjoyment’ perceived by the view from aside is radically lost — why? Let us recall the antinomic relation of gaze and eye as articulated by Lacan in Seminar XI: the eye viewing the object is on the side of the subject, while the gaze is on the side of the object. When I look at an object, the object is always already gazing at me, and from a point at which I cannot see it.²¹

What Aidan Salakhova intends is - to say it again with the words of Zizek - the relation of the viewer to the veil is split between fascination and ironic distance. Zizek describes the nostalgia for 40s film noire:

We are fascinated by the gaze of the mythic ‘naïve’ spectator, the one who was ‘still able to take it seriously’, in other words, the one who “believes in it” for us, in place of us. For that reason, our relation to a film noir is always divided, split between fascination and ironic distance: ironic distance toward its diegetic reality, fascination with the gaze.²²

²¹ *In the scopic field, everything is articulated between two terms that act in an antinomic way — on the side of things, there is the gaze, that is to say, things look at me, and yet I see them. This is how one should understand those words, so strongly stressed, in the Gospel; they have eyes that they might not see. That they might not see what? Precisely, that things are looking at them.* Slavoj Zizek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, p.68-69

²² *Ibid.*

V.

In the drawing, painting and relief series Salakhova is leading our gaze to the hands, which are the only visible body parts other than the face under the hijab. The silky white hands with exquisite stirring gestures convey the spirit and sagacity of the women more than their face and that is exactly what Aidan Salakhova is intending. The wisdom of these women is in their hands which hold various objects that refer to signifiers of world beliefs, religions, taboos and traditions: minaret, book, mollusc objects, and body parts. In the classical canon hands always intensely create a visual communication and convey important messages. Similar hand gestures can be seen in Medieval and Renaissance paintings and icons. Even if hand gestures are culture-specific and have different meanings in different cultures, here we have to understand that these hands have an explicit function. For example, in Buddhist teaching the gesture of hands have similar meanings such as fearlessness, protection, spiritual teaching, meditation and gift giving and bestowal. Salakhova's hands, from one viewpoint, demonstrate these features as well as tenderness, compassion, sagacity; from the other, however, passion and lust. These hands grasp a destiny or a vocation, which can be explained through critical theory, in particular with the meaning of the hand that has been discussed by Heidegger and Derrida:

*The hand's essence can never be determined, or explained by being an organ which can grasp. The hand is infinitely different from all grasping organs—paws, claws, or fangs—different by an abyss of essence.*²³

Here we understand that the hand is the essence of being human. However, in Derrida's essays:

*The hand is monstrosité (referring to monstrousness and to the demonstration).*²⁴

Can we identify the graceful hands in Salakhova's works as monstrous? They definitely demonstrate the capability and potentiality of woman by means of revealing love and compassion. Yet, the patriarchal or male gaze is inclined to stigmatize these hands as monstrous because the objects they hold are allusive of the uncanny and sexuality. With

²³ Adam Roberts, 'Is SF handwritten?' *Writing Technologies 2* [Special issue on Heidegger, writing, and technology; guest edited by James Holden] 2.2, 2009, 55-69, ISSN 1754-9035, http://www.ntu.ac.uk/writing_technologies/index.html.

²⁴ Ibid.

appropriate pleasurable and graceful gestures, these hands open many chapters for debate. These objects may refer to the phallus as the signifier of symbolic castration.²⁵

Salakhova bestows on her images and figures insignia that indicate power, which we can expand on with Zizek's words:

*From the traditional rituals of investiture, we know the objects that not only 'symbolize' power but put the subject who acquires them into the position of effectively exercising power.*²⁶

However, the paradox is that these external objects at the same time castrate the women, as:

*castration is the very gap between what she immediately is and the symbolic mandate that confers on her this authority.*²⁷

VI.

Two other provocative aspects in Aidan Salakhova's work distinguishes it within the vast production of contemporary art works that have questioned and challenged the use of the veil and the appropriation of the female body, namely the pleasure and narcissism that undeniably radiate from these works. Philosophers and critics argue that these terms, pleasure and narcissism, frequently used in popular and sexual culture, are essential in the human psyche. In an broadcast interview Derrida answers questions about pleasure and narcissism through which we can interpret the pleasure and narcissism reflected from Aidan Salakhova's work:

Derrida says:

*...Pleasure can accumulate, intensify through a certain experience of pain, ascesis, difficulty, an experience of the impasse or of impossibility... and ...to have this pleasure, I suppose one must, at a given moment, stand at the limit of catastrophe or of the risk of loss.*²⁸

In today's neo-capitalist patriarchal societies with their open or disguised religious dogmas and patriarchal ideologies and practices, the female body is either the object of desire and

²⁵ Slavoj Zizek, 'Organs without Bodies', On Deleuze and Consequences, Routledge, 2004, p. 87

²⁶ Ibid. p.87

²⁷ Ibid, p. 87

²⁸ In the program prepared by Didier Cahen for France-Culture, 'Le bon plaisir de Jacques Derrida', shown on March 22, 1986 and published with the title 'Entretien avec Jacques Derrida' in *Digraphe* 42, December 1987.

object of voyeurism of consumption culture or object of socio-political hegemony. In this ongoing dilemma, there are perpetual moments of catastrophe or risk of loss in the positions and identities of women as well as in opening the discussion about the use and abuse of human body. The concept and intention behind the works is to indicate this risk, but at the same time incorporate the pleasure of approaching the problem through art works which provide a distance of relief to the hegemonic or stereotypical verdicts of popular or consumption culture. These works propose a mental and spiritual experience with this risk.

What Derrida speaks about in the same interview is, then, the crucial aspect of Salakhova's work. He defines narcissism as a '*comprehensive, generous, open, extended narcissism...a welcoming, hospitable narcissism, one that is much more open to the experience of the other as other.*'²⁹

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²⁹ Ibid.