

Donna West Brett and Martine Natat Antle

CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS OF THE ARAB DIASPORA:
INTRODUCTION



This collection of essays brings together scholars from a range of disciplines to consider the practice of contemporary artists from the Arab diaspora. While there was no overarching approach to the topic, within the diverse subjects and artistic practices presented—from installation art, photography and performance art, to sculpture and film—several concerns are raised across the contributions. These include matters of identity, location, sexuality, gender, stereotypes, and representation, but also mobility, migration, cultural difference, and cultural norms. These disruptive tensions are present throughout the bodies of work presented here, most pertinently in terms of the spaces that are engaged in the diasporic position of being neither here, nor there.

In exploring these shifting spaces, Donna West Brett considers the withdrawal from representation that disrupts the social and the ontological qualities of a photograph, and causes a subject to hide, disappear, or be occluded from vision. Brett positions the work of Australian Lebanese Cherine Fahd and Paris-based artists and partners Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige as being concerned with the withdrawal of the self and its representation through concealment or disappearance, both personal and political, real or desired.

Cherine Fahd is an established artist and academic in Sydney, whose contribution considers seven Australian artists from the Arab diaspora. Fahd presents an examination of the diverse conceptual and aesthetic approaches employed by these artists in their exploration of identity and place within a global world. Fahd argues that while a number of artists are concerned with issues of politics, identity, nationhood, and displacement, this is not the case with all. These

*Donna West Brett is Lecturer in art history at the University of Sydney.
Email: donna.brett@sydney.edu.au*

Martine Natat Antle is Professor Emerita of French at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. Email: martine.antle@gmail.com

considerations are, of course, far more nuanced than at first apparent. The art practices presented here are diverse in their concerns, materials, methodologies, and concepts with the artists drawing on their cultural backgrounds—both Australian and Arabic—to create artworks that explore these marginal and complex identities.

In her essay, Florence Martin analyses the cinema of the Maghrebi diaspora in Europe and traces its evolving narratives and structures through the history of immigration in films. These developments are framed by the analysis of Mohamed Amin Benamraoui's *Adios Carmen* from 2013 in the wider context of diasporic production. In contrast, Martine Antle investigates how women artists of the diaspora challenge the expected norms in terms of the ways in which they represent the body and sexuality. Antle questions to what degree these women artists have actively challenged masculine hegemonies and the ways in which they create and re-inscribe new configurations of the body in contemporary visual art.

Renowned Australian curator Rachel Kent, chief curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, has contributed an interview with Kader Attia, a Paris-based artist of Algerian descent. This interview continues the investigation by Fahd into the in-between spaces forged by artists of the diaspora, which informs their work. For Attia it is not the country you leave or the one you go to that is the most important thing in a life, but rather the journey. This journey for Attia has brought him to the core of his artistic concerns such as memory, injury and repair, or conversation and refugees, informed by philosophy, culture, literature, and art.

This collection of essays positions artists of the Arab diaspora as conveying complex, nuanced, and wildly diverse renditions of difference that reframe the accepted norms of such practices. The editors extend their gratitude to the authors and artists for their support of this exploration into the diverse world of diasporic contemporary artists, whose Arabic heritage informs their identities, and whose art posits questions that re-situate the diasporic subject.