

BESSMA KHALAF

Statement

My videos look like moving stills and my photographs look like stills from a movie. I find a poetic, densely layered image and I try to push it to increasing levels of absurdity. I was born in Iraq and I emigrated with my immediate family to the U.S. when I was twelve. My art and my sense of the absurd come from the hilarious and tragic experience of moving between these two very different worlds.

I try to control every aspect of my images and so I often put myself in them. Both Iraq and the American west are landscapes drenched in history and myth, and when I stage myself against the land I'm trying to insert myself into those traditions. As I've gone forward as an artist, I'm finding that the space between me as the actor in the images and me as the producer of them, is getting more interesting. For instance, I am the fictional wizard in the photos from my most recent body of work, *Re-enchanter*. I play out a comical narrative involving ancient witchcraft and everyday modern objects. But I am also a real artist from Oakland trying to secrete something mysterious and human about my self, something I may not even understand, through a tradition of exhibitionism and performance. Something unexpected always seems to occur.

In *This Land is My Land*, a work I did for my MFA at CCA, I constructed a 13-foot landscape from cheap baked goods purchased from Safeway, and filmed myself eating through the entirety of it in one twenty six minute take. I tried to construct a narrative that made sense of my wonder as an immigrant from the Middle East to a consumer culture of gluttony and excess; I also wanted to deal with my feelings of being liberated as a woman, but one who was also pressured to conform to Barbie Doll standards of beauty. By sheer accident, I found that I had made a version of "Attack of the Fifty Foot Woman," which tapped into a pool of carnivorous female energy I didn't know was there.

In *Monument*, I sat still on an ice horse in the hot sun for over six hours until it melted and collapsed. Literally, I wanted to film a hero who falls off the horse he rode in on. Figuratively, I was thinking of the heroic military sculptures I grew up with in Baghdad, which had begun to seem like tragic, existential heroes. Writers made reference to Buster Keaton, the endurance performances of Marina Abramovic, and the evaporation of natural resources due to industrialization and excess consumption. Looking back, I see it as a strange public meditation, a quixotic attempt to externalize opaque internal feelings that are doomed to remain mine and mine alone.

In *Tree Painting*, a five-hour studio session, I painted every needle on a dead Christmas tree until the brown corpse shone green. Viewers noted the connection between art and rebirth and wondered if I was serious. I followed that line of thinking to the *Re-enchanter* series, which on the surface is meant to explore the artist as the enchanter of a dead, modernist world. My family is descended from Chaldeans, the seers and oracles of the ancient world, so I felt uniquely invited to create a modern theater of magic. For my costume I selected a wildly oversized hoodie that equally resembles a wizard's cloak, a burka, the costume of a Jedi Knight, and a ghetto kid's uniform. As in all my work, landscape is a dominant concern. I try to present a vision of sunny California infiltrated by the underworld of ancient sorcery and witchcraft. To me, even the nourish, claustrophobic interiors are an anti-California form of landscape.

Once again, however, the photos surprised me. I am present in all of them but I am obscured, barely legible, my pale face peeking out of the hoodie and the darkness. Despite their interest in the past, in magic, in an antique world, they also seem to echo an emotional feature of the digital present, that of wanting to reveal, exhibit and disclose oneself, while at the same time wanting to remain hidden in plain sight through performance.

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Statement cont.

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I have always wanted to set myself on fire, so for my next project, I am going to explore the Hollywood stunt world through the idea of the baba-ghanoush western, a variation on the spaghetti western.

BESSMA KHALAF

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Born: 1978, Baghdad, Iraq

Lives and works in San Francisco Bay Area

EDUCATION

2007 MFA, Photography, California College of The Arts, San Francisco, CA

2003 BA, Photography, San Diego State University, San Diego, CA

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2012 *Re-Enchanter*, Steven Wolf Fine Arts, San Francisco, CA

2009 *You're Not There*, Steven Wolf Fine Arts, San Francisco, CA
Garden, Keys that Fit Gallery, Oakland, CA

2005 *Betty Doppelganger Does The Big Fake*, Magpie gallery, San Diego, CA

2003 *Kill Them Both*, The Farm Art Space, San Diego, CA
America, Permanent Holiday, Flor Y Canto Gallery, San Diego, CA

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2012 *Hi-Jack*, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, NY
Visions Form the New California, 18th Street Art Center, Santa Monica, CA
Playback, Queen's Nails Annex, San Francisco, CA
DocumentO, Krowwork Gallery, Oakland, CA

2011 *California Continued*, Smith Anderson North Gallery, San Anselmo, CA
Art Pad SF, Steven Wolf Fine Arts, San Francisco, CA

2010 *Time After Time: Actions and Interactions*, Southern Exposure, San Francisco, CA

2009 *Live and Direct*, Ping Pong Gallery, San Francisco, CA
Artists' Films Series: Omer Fast, Harun Farocki, Brian Conley, and Bessma Khalaf,
CCA Campus, San Francisco, CA

2008 *Detourned Menu: Food in the Form of Activism*, ISE Cultural Foundation, New York, NY
Value Max, Steven Wolf Fine Arts, San Francisco, CA
East of the West, Somarts Bay Gallery, San Francisco, CA

2007 *LTC Plus One*, M1 Gallery, San Francisco, CA
Cream from the top, Arts Benicia center gallery, Benicia, CA
CCA 2007 Centennial Graduate Exhibition, CCA, San Francisco, CA

2006 *Detourned Menu: Food in the Form of Activism*, The Lab, San Francisco, CA
Immediate Future: The Murphy & Cadogan Fellowships in the Fine Arts, San Francisco Arts
Commission Gallery, San Francisco, CA
Awesome: The Contemporary Sublime, PlaySpace Gallery, San Francisco, CA
Trucker Hats vs. Sideways Haircuts, Club Six, San Francisco, CA
2005 *Juried Biennial*, William D. Cannon Art Gallery, Carlsbad, CA
Closer Apart, Limbo Fine Art, San Diego, CA
Love, Lust & The Politics of Dancing, Limbo Fine Art, San Diego, CA

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CV cont.

- 2003 *Verwood and The Cinder Girl*, The Farm Art Space, San Diego, CA
New Photography: New and Old Ideas About Old and New Subjects, The Muse Gallery, San Diego, CA
The Machine Shop Show, San Diego State University, San Diego, CA
- 2002 *Henpecked Heidi*, Everett Gee Jackson Gallery, San Diego, CA

AWARDS / SCHOLARSHIPS

- 2012 The Vision From The New California Award
- 2006 The Murphy and Cadogan Fellowship in Fine Arts
California College of Arts Scholarship
The Byron Meyer Scholarship
- 2005 California College of Arts Scholarship
The Byron Meyer Scholarship

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 2012 Helfand, Glen, *Bessma Khalaf at Steven Wolf Fine Arts*, *Artforum*, May
- 2011 Bowles, Nellie, Art Pad SF Review by Nellie Bowles, SF Chronicle May 19th
Projections part 1 and 2, in *Zyzyva*, spring issue 2011
- 2009 Helfand, Glen, Bessma Khalaf at Steven Wolf Fine Arts, *Artforum*, October
McCrystal, Carol Anne, *Review: The Garden at Keys That Fit Projects*, *Nightmare City Magazine*, fall issue
Reed, Aimee, *Bessma Khalaf at Steven Wolf Fine Arts*, *Daily Serving*, November
- 2006 Kluth, Mary Ann, *Bessma Khalaf, This Land Is My Land*, *Stretcher Magazine* December
- 2004 Kendricks, Neil, *Anxiety Alley*, *The San Diego Union Tribune*, July 29th
- 2003 *Verwood and The Cinder Girl*, *The Farm Press*

RESIDENCIES

- 2012 Kala Art Institute, Berkeley, CA
Queen's Nails Annex, San Francisco, CA

GALLERY REPRESENTATION

Steven Wolf Fine Arts, San Francisco, CA