

'Multitudes' Exhibition – Celebrating Contemporary Female Artists from the MENA region

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As part of *Arab Women Artists Now (AWAN)*, an annual festival and celebration of contemporary female artists from the MENA region, *Multitudes* is the first exhibition from emerging curator Joud Halawani Al-Tamimi. The exhibition aims to increase understanding around Arab women's realities and concerns while providing an alternative, more nuanced narrative around the Arab region and its peoples. We asked Joud a few questions about her work and the importance of this exhibition.



Tell us a bit about yourself

I'm a Palestinian/Jordanian journalist and curator. I have completed my BA Politics and Economics and MA Near and Middle Eastern Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies. It is at SOAS that my serious interest in the arts was triggered. I completed a module titled Politics of Culture, which revealed to me the extent to which the arts are effective means of engaging and negotiating with existent power structures. Simultaneously, I was growing more and more disillusioned with political systems around the world and their false promises of real political and social change. Thus, I decided that the best way for me to engage with social and political issues is through arts and culture. I started studying courses at Sotheby's and University of the Arts London to increase my knowledge of art history and curation. All of this then culminated in me curating 'Multitudes' exhibition for Arab Women Artists Now Festival that is organised by Arts Canteen. My primary areas of interest and research, which reflect upon my curatorial practice, include the politics of identity and gender in the Middle East.

Why is it important to showcase work by Arab women artists? Why now?

Now, more than ever, Arabs are being misrepresented and demonised. They are increasingly the victims of attacks

that stem from sentiments like racism and xenophobia. Meanwhile, Arab and Muslim women's bodies and garments are more than ever being used to justify the racist discourse that reinforces the clash of civilisations narrative and posits the Arab world as backward and regressive. In this context, showcasing work by Arab women is a mean of reclaiming the narrative surrounding Arab women, while increasing British society's overall understanding of the Arab region and its peoples.

How did you go about selecting artists and their art pieces?

First I select artists whose pieces are relevant to the discourse and concept of the exhibition. Then I make sure I have a mix of both established artists and more emerging ones, as I believe it is very important to provide a platform for young talents whose very significant voices are often unheard in the context of a highly competitive art world. Last but not least, I try as much as possible to include artworks that are in dialogue with one another rather than going for pieces that put forth the same line of argument. The ultimate aim for me is stirring conversation.

If these artists were men, would their work have been received in the same way?

I believe it is generally a good idea to include men in the dialogue surrounding gender in the Middle East. However, in the context of an exhibition that is about Arab women's narrative, bodies and experiences I think it would be very problematic to have men speaking on women's behalf. It would have been a continuation of an already existent problem that is excluding women from a conversation surrounding issues that concern them first and foremost. I think and hope that it would have provoked a very bad response from audiences.

If you could showcase the exhibition anywhere in the world, where would you like to take it next?

I would like to take it to Donald Trump's America. The current socio-political context in the US is the embodiment of everything that this exhibition strives to subvert and undermine.

Organised by Arts Canteen, [Multitudes](#) runs until 18 March at Richmix.

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