



Creative Intervention

I Am

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Contemporary Artist, Saudi Arabia

In my previous artistic work, I have questioned the state of disappearance and active erasing of communities in historical and contemporary contexts, which led me to its counterbalance – visibility – in all its variations. *I Am* explores a gendered history in Saudi Arabia that does not exist because it was discontinued, fractured, or forgotten.

In an oil rich region and a country ranked as the highest exporter of crude oil, half of the Saudi population is currently under serious threat of poverty. Historically, poverty was less acute when women were able to contribute to household incomes. The *Sadu* craft of weaving, for example, was the domain of Bedouin women; men worked the fields and herded camels and sheep. Women weavers wove the walls and floor coverings of their tents and riding gear for animals, and made money for their families by selling these items to other members of their tribes. *Nagsh*, on the other hand, thrived in the mountainous southwest of Saudi Arabia in agricultural, as opposed to nomadic communities. They decorated the interiors of their homes with drawings done by skilled women who were able to move between homes without compromising the homeowner's privacy. These are two examples of social structures that existed in the past that allowed women to earn money and have financial independence, or at least contribute to family livelihoods alongside men.

The fast pace of social change brought on by oil-fueled modernity has, in one generation, made these jobs obsolete for women. Bedouins have been settled and urbanized, and *Nagsh* drawing has all but stopped with the death of the last generation of great artisans who led large groups of women painters. Although their communities historically allowed women and men to be equal earners and financial contributors, today the women of these communities live in poverty or have become totally dependent on the earnings of the male family members.

In 2005, King Abdulla AlSaud gave his inaugural speech as he took the

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throne in Saudi Arabia. He called upon all Saudis, including women, to come together to build and unify the country. This direct invocation of women and employment was unprecedented at the state level in contemporary times. The king's speech raised the hopes and expectations of women's rights activists, but caused conservatives to ask: What kind of jobs are women going to be "allowed" to do? The press and other conservative opinion leaders subsequently interpreted the king's speech to mean that women would only participate in jobs that "suit their nature" as women. This interpretation led me to ask: Who defines my nature as a woman? And what suits it? I explore these questions in the *I Am* collection.

I chose to address women's historical contribution to the economic development of their society and families through the contemporary stories of the women in these photographs, using a participatory art project. I invited women from my community who were ignoring the social debate about women's suitability for paid employment, and were actively pursuing work opportunities. The resulting images were collaboratively designed as a collection of these women's ideas and feelings regarding the social dialogue about their nature and its suitability for employment. The resulting collection of black and white photographs includes a variety of Saudi Arabian women who perform everyday roles in contemporary Saudi society. At the same time, each woman is photographed wearing a piece of traditional jewelry that is placed in an obstructive and unnatural way, with the purpose of questioning cultural traditions that prevent Saudi women from expanding their societal roles.

I Am was produced in 2005, when less than three percent of Saudi Arabian women were formally employed. Today that number has risen to 16%. Regardless of this modest rise in employment statistics, the economic challenges women face have not changed since these photographs were taken. For many years, politicians and religious figures in Saudi Arabia have hijacked the dialogue on women's rights. They have turned women's right to work in the public sphere into an issue that ostensibly threatens Saudi identity, family structure, and the religious principles that underpin Muslim society. Many continue aggressively to speak out against women's right to leave the home, to work, to mix with men, and to gain financial independence.



I Am a Petroleum Engineer (41 x 51 cm; silver gelatin fiber print, 2007)
© Manal AlDowayan; courtesy of Cuadro and Sabrina Amrani Gallery.



I Am a Film Maker (41 x 51 cm; silver gelatin fiber print, 2007)
© Manal AlDowayan; courtesy of Cuadro and Sabrina Amrani Gallery.



I Am a TV Producer (41 x 51 cm; silver gelatin fiber print, 2007)
© Manal AlDowayan; courtesy of Cuadro and Sabrina Amrani Gallery.



I Am a Scuba Diver (41 x 51 cm; silver gelatin fiber print, 2007)
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