

Zineb Sedira

*'This multiple consciousness affords you a particular space when you are negotiating your place in relation to others. It's a space which is often referred to as 'in-between'. I don't like to see it as a negative place rather I see it as an active site of exploration that speaks of different histories and locates identity to a place which is endlessly remade through our negotiation of boundaries - this obviously presents challenges to those who are and who are not familiar with this sense of perspective.'*¹

How to negotiate different worlds is the overriding question in Zineb Sedira's work, worlds that collide and conflict. It is precisely her Algerian heritage and her experience of living in London and France that gives Zineb's work insight into these different worlds. The work shifts from the political to the emotional; from a sense of history to the present; from East to West and through them both. Her use of Islamic pattern and the veil can be clearly identified as an element drawn from her Algerian parentage yet the work is constantly reminding us that she is working as an artist living in the West. Zineb talks of 'the veiling of the mind' as a significant metaphor in her work and while she also uses the veil literally, it becomes a device to embrace all women. For example, 'Self Portrait or the Virgin Mary' (1999) where she is photographed from behind wearing the *haik* (the Algerian veil), refers through the title to the French Catholic tradition - the cult of the Virgin Mary and the self-sacrifice of women. A conflict is set up between the visual image and the title, which challenges any Western viewer to question their understanding of the female condition as well as their perceptions of Arab women. In fact the reference to parallel debates are clear in much of her imagery. Her use of body parts such as mouths, hands and eyes are directly connected to the Islamic prohibition of representing the body while at the same time reframing the Western feminist theories of objectification. The hands, eyes and mouths, employed in several of Zineb's works, refer to the absent body, but that body is known through the detail - the shift of the gaze; the motion of the hand, reveals the condition of the people who inhabit those hands and eyes - and the power that confers to the ostensibly absent whole reinforces the presence of those people.

Invocation of ritual and heritage give rise to a meshing of present and past as the self seeks to understand itself as independent of, yet still within the background of, one's birth. The video works are quietly potent and emotionally charged, with ambivalence keenly felt. In the piece 'Don't Do To Her What You Did To Me' (1996-8) the poetry of the imagery is bound to the simplicity of the form. Ink is dropped into a glass, followed by a written talisman with an image of a woman. This mixture is then stirred vigorously several times and drunk. Even without any knowledge of the ritual involved, the video conveys its message clearly - the ink spreading like blood through the water; the paper disintegrating as it is stirred; the image of the face breaking up, staring at the viewer in pieces. Imbibing the ritual becomes a defiant action but within the logic of the video necessary and compulsive. It is such a sense of necessity and compulsion combined with the visibility and invisibility of the Arab body and the experiences of women which makes Zineb Sedira's work so engaging.

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¹ Zineb Sedira, interview with artist by Edith Marie Pasquier, 1997