

Yumna Al-Arashi

The 99 Names of God, 2018
Montañas, 2019

April 2–30

Sited on the east side of
the Independent Building
at the intersection of
Broadway and Kingsway,
Vancouver



Yumna Al-Arashi
Still from *The 99 Names
of God*, 2018
16mm film, 4:19 min.
Courtesy of the Artist

Yumna Al-Arashi
Still from *Montañas*, 2019
16mm film, 4:20 min.
Courtesy of the Artist

Presented in partnership with
grunt gallery, organizers of the
Mount Pleasant Community
Art Screen

Curated by Chelsea Yuill,
Capture Photography Festival

Holy Terrain: Films by Yumna Al-Arashi

Chelsea Yuill

Yumna Al-Arashi's short films are parallel views, elsewhere. In *The 99 Names of God* (2018), Al-Arashi brings us to the Islamic practices in the Middle East, and in *Montañas* (2019), we see the climbing Cholitas of Bolivia scaling the Andes mountains, some of the highest peaks in the world.¹ These films build awareness and offer resonance as Al-Arashi weaves together and celebrates specific types of Islamic and Indigenous womanhood, ritual, and landscape. With a background in social inquiry, which she studied at the New School in New York City, Al-Arashi's Arab American perspective effortlessly blends intimacy, beauty, and mysticism within the documentary tradition. Her portraits of self and others become a form of poetry and resistance that nurtures a stream of under-recognized images that disarm the Western canon of film and photography.

Chelsea Yuill

Whether you're in Yemen, North Africa, or Bolivia, your practice seems to be propelled by a curiosity around women that are on the edges of the colonial gaze. What inspires you to approach a subject and community, and what is your process in creating a film?

Yumna Al-Arashi

From an early age, my motivation was to combat a gaze that felt unfair, whether it be a colonial gaze, a male gaze, a post-9/11 American gaze. I often look to my own female lineage – the women in my life, my maternal ancestors. Although my gaze is inherently Western, since I'm an American, I still have a connection to Yemen and North Africa, so it's a push and pull between both sides. I think that combination of diaspora offers an interesting perspective, a necessary one to speak and to see from, because I've always had to submit to the American ideology or be completely non-, the anti-. My work always tries to find where I fit between all these things. When I went to Bolivia to create *Montañas* with the Indigenous Aymara and Quechua women commonly known as the Cholitas, there was a question of ethics that came up in my mind, because it wasn't my idea – it was an idea from *Vogue* Mexico & Latin America. I continued with the *Vogue* story because I knew I was reusing the privilege of that space in a way that was empowering and life-affirming for the Cholitas while offering visibility to many people within and outside Latin America. Bolivia didn't receive



Yumna Al-Arashi
Work from the *Face* series, 2017
digital photograph
43.18 × 50.8 cm
Courtesy of the Artist

Vogue until recently, so the fact that the Cholitas were on the front cover of the twentieth anniversary issue, and weren't selling fashion but were telling their story – for me that was epic.

We spent days with the Cholitas before we pulled out our cameras. That process of sitting with them and witnessing their life and thinking about, “How can I tell their story without speaking on their behalf.” I was writing everything down from our interviews and piecing it together like a puzzle. It turned into this beautiful poem, and they were part of the process completely. The voices that are speaking in that film, that is all them.

I think ethics is a constant everyday question of oneself and one's motives. I'm always considering the ways the camera has been used over time, how it continues to be used as a form of violence. Rather than taking someone's photograph, I want to make things with people. I want them to use my camera just as much as I am.

CY

Landscape plays a significant role for you and the communities you engage with. When watching your work, I sense both landscape and people are living monuments to be seen in reverence. Can you expand on how landscape is an important element to your artistic vision?

YA

I don't think there's any work of mine that doesn't incorporate landscape or femininity. When I say femininity, I'm not speaking of the heteronormative female body, I'm speaking of nature and the earth – things that in my opinion are feminine.

Face is a project I did where I travelled to Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria to photograph North African Indigenous women with tattoos. The tattoos inked all over their bodies were images of moon faces, complete knowledge of their crops, stories about their lovers, and their children. As gateswomen who move between realms, these spiritual markings offer protection on their journey. When I looked at the architecture, particularly the houses – this is something I never found in the literature – I saw the same exact symbols on their faces as were on the houses. I started to see how the tattoos honour the power of these structures, whether it's a woman's body, a home, the earth – her ability to protect and be protected.

As a dying matriarchal tradition, I saw the landscapes dying too. The places around the equator are the ones that

are first being affected by climate change. So, my theory for the ending of this tradition, including climate change, is the result of the monoculture within monotheism. It steals so much of our beautiful diversity and culture and knowledge and care and understanding of the earth and of ourselves.

CY

I admire your unapologetic use of “beauty,” which is a term that many contemporary Western artists have focused on dismantling. During my research, I recall you mentioning feminist theorist Audre Lorde's essay “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” so perhaps that word – “erotic” – is more precise. Could you speak to the ways you approach beauty and eroticism in your work?

YA

Audre Lorde writes how the erotic has been weaponized against us to make us feel uncomfortable in our bodies, ultimately to diminish our inner power. There is something that happens in the body when experiencing something beautiful. I could not for the life of me make something that didn't feel like it speaks to the feminine in me. I experience beauty in terms of colour and composition, structures being beautiful, the way that shapes form together, the way that nature is blooming. It takes my breath away. Anything I've cared about has never really been given the space of “beauty,” so I think I use it as a way to say, “Fuck you, this does have value.” Why not reclaim the image to occupy and create spaces of beauty, whatever it is?

CY

There's a lot of symbolism in your work that at times is rooted in spirituality, knowledge, and fashion history. Could you tell me more about the dates, the metal star-shaped device, and the bowler hats?

YA

In the Middle East and North Africa, dates are the fruit of the land. Prophet Muhammad said one can get all the nutrients one needs in life by eating seven dates a day. It's a bit of a stretch, but he was alluding to respecting and taking care of the land: if you take care of it, it will take care of you.

The second object you mention is a nautical star map invented by Muslim scientists during the Golden Age of Islam. This era birthed the foundations of the math, geometry, and astronomy that we know today. I think that

era was one of the most psychedelic eras, since they were seeking something bigger, something beyond representation. The way they began using astronomy and geometry during this time is incredible to me. I love how Islam is so anti-image: there is no iconography of god, prophets, or people in the stories.

As for the Cholitas, the story of why they wear the bowler hats is rooted in British colonialists coming to South America to build railroads. The Western version of appropriation is often the only one we focus on, since it's so problematic, but I also think that humans do that – we see things we like, and we fashion it the way we feel. The British completely changed the lives of Indigenous Peoples in the Andes mountains, so why not take a part of them and their style as a marker of that history?

CY

What were some surprises you had during the process of making *The 99 Names of God* and *Montañas*?

YA

When I was making *The 99 Names of God*, I fell in love with Islam in a way that I never thought I would. Growing up as a Muslim in America was a negative experience. Once I stepped away, I reconnected with how much Islam speaks about letting go of the ego, and I realized how much we're dying for this in the West. There was a moment when I was at a mosque with my producer; we were filming around the outside area, and there was a call to prayer. She said, “Hey, I'm going to go pray. Do you want to come with me?” It was something I hadn't done since I was a child, but I knew all of the prayers by heart; my body remembered. There was one point where I had my forehead to the floor and I just started sobbing. I thought, “This is so beautiful. I love it. I don't understand how I've avoided this for so long.”

In *Montañas*, I was moved by the Cholitas' story. For decades they served international climbers as cooks, maids, and porters in the Andes, until recently they said, “Actually, this is ours. We're the rightful caretakers.” I was like, “Wow, I'm surrounded by these badass women who have taken back full control of their territory.”

1. Historically, the Spanish term “cholita” has been used to discriminate against women of Amerindian ancestry. Recently, the Indigenous Aymara and Quechua women of Bolivia have reclaimed its meaning as one of dignity and respect. Paula Dear, “The Rise of the ‘Cholitas,’” BBC News, February 20, 2014, www.bbc.com/news/magazine-26172313.