

JOWHARA ALSAUD

Witzenhausen Gallery - Amsterdam

By Catherine Somzé

As autumn's fine art season begins in Amsterdam, the tendency is toward social commentary and political statements. Nieck de Bruijn, owner of Upstream Gallery in the Pijp, stated that, "As a result of the financial crisis, many artists demonstrate a need to address social and political issues with their work; the trend is definitely towards the political." Against this background of 'engaged art' revival, Witzenhausen Gallery seems to be making a more politically-minded turn this season as well, presenting work by Amsterdam newcomer, Saudi Arabian photographer and draughtswoman Jowhara Al Saud.

The exhibition "Your Friends and Neighbors" at Witzenhausen Gallery showcases a selection of seven large-scale C-prints out of a series of works that has been travelling throughout the world. Since Al Saud's nomination for the Aperture Portfolio Prize in 2008 and the increasing interest in Middle-Eastern contemporary art sparked by the Dubai art boom, her photographs have been exhibited in the Middle East and elsewhere with increasing frequency over the past two years.

Her photographs are highly recognizable and easy on the eye. They are graphic, minimalist, and reminiscent of Julian Opie's neo-pop figures. They combine drawing and photography in an ingenious, yet seemingly effortless, manner. At first glance, the photographs look like collages. It is as if Al Saud had rapidly drawn or pinned down strip-like figures onto random surfaces, such as

a postcard, a cardboard box, or a notebook. In the work *Airmail*, two friends hug each other against the white background of a blank envelope. And in *Summer Wind*, a girl holds her hair while the boy who sits next to her is reading a book. Above them, mysterious codes have been drawn.

Yet Al Saud's signature production process, a form of photographic etching and tracing, is far from casual and has nothing akin to doodling. She uses the negative of what will become the background in the final work as a tracing paper, then etches the contours of friends and family featured in a mug shot placed underneath the negative. But Al Saud takes care to leave out the face of the beloved ones captured in private. The work is utterly moving by virtue of the discrepancy arising between the intimacy of the poses and the anonymity of her defaced characters.

Her work, she says, is in part a reaction to censorship as it is practiced in Saudi Arabia, where fashion images are crudely altered with black markers to lengthen skirts and sleeves, and faces on billboards are sometimes blurred out. Whether or not one associates Al Saud's visual language with that practice, it results in a paradoxical fact. It gives portrait photography a new lease on life, by undermining its very fundamentals. ■

(September 4 – October 2, 2010)

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Jowhara Al Saud, *Airmail*, 2008, C-41 Print, 20x24", 30x40". Courtesy of the artist and Witzenhausen Gallery (Amsterdam – New York)