

*Mosaic Fountain* by Syrian-American Artist Michael Howard. *O My Lord, Increase me in Knowledge* painted by Syrian-American Artist [Reem Taki](#). *Parade Float* in collaboration with Syrian-American Artist [Amanda Assaley](#).

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The lights were off, the doors were open. After their annual Halloween Party, I went in to do research, taking pictures and videos of the Moslem Temple in Southfield, Michigan. The walls of their “Temple” are lined with new and old photographs of old white men wearing fez (dark red hats), men dressed as clowns, men dressed as Cops-and-Robbers, men dressed as Cowboys-and-Indians, men dressed as Arabs. What an endearing boys club. These men fund hospitals and host parties. What could be wrong with that?

In their temple shaped like a tent, in this funhouse of mirrors and American flags, a framed naked Playboy centerfold captures my attention. Their mixing of exotic settings, desert landscapes fashioned with Arabs and camels collide with contemporary American stereotypes and the misrepresentations of women. US nationalistic imagery in the Wild West-themed room conjures up images of settler colonialism gone mad. This mismatched mirage inspires a confusing sense of absurdity found only in a collection of Shriner memorabilia.

The Shriners, formerly known as the Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine, a fraternal order organized around the principles of “fun, fellowship and the Masonic principles of brotherly love, relief and truth,” was established in 1870 by founders Walter M. Fleming, M.D., and William J. Florence. Taking many drawings and notes at a party given by an Arab diplomat in Marseille, Fleming built his sect of Freemasons, The Shriners, on the pillars of festivities and frivolity. In Arab Middle Eastern history shrines, however, comprise buildings that often house the tombs of prophets, imams and other notable religious figures and have become symbolic spaces for culture, religion, politics, and national identities, due to their sacred and holy status to believers.

Appropriating Arab, Islamic and Middle-Eastern props, characters, images, names, spaces, architecture and tropes for their secret society, rituals and public parades, Shriner parades feature exaggerated and overtly orientalist Arab characters and themes. Steeped in these images for the past year, I wonder: How do the Shriners see the use and consumption of such images of the Arab subject? And more importantly how do these images serve the U.S.’s endless war with and in the Middle East?

As a foreigner, I’m constantly asked to make sense of Palestine for the American or European audience. But as a Middle Eastern, Arab, Muslim artist, am I allowed to play with and to make sense of US-American culture? To show its absurdities back to it?

## Qais Assali: Costume Party at the Moslem Temple (2019)

Am I allowed to enter and partake in the house of mirrors, the fun house of clowns, black face and blatant racism toward the Arab world laid bare and unexposed? Can I out this culture? Can I become a Playboy bunny using my circumstance, my labor, and political body to deconstruct the white supremacist, patriarchal American male gaze that looks at me with the same desires to distort and dehumanize my culture for its own pleasures.

In the Shriner's vision of America, the Arab, Muslim, Middle Eastern body--like so many Arab noses at a party store--is an object to be consumed, costumed, worn, and discarded. How can the Arab/Muslim community of Dearborn persist, resist, and conceal itself right out in the open while the Shriners parade a grotesque Arabesque float just a few kilometers away? This question came to me as I drove the straight line between Dearborn and Southfield, back and forth from the "Temple" to the Mosques. What does it mean to make a work connecting "Moslems" and Muslims? I met with local Arab and Muslim artists from Dearborn's diaspora of Syrians, Iraqis, Lebanese, and fellow Palestinians to discuss the Shriners and the local communities' thoughts, interests and concerns.

From Moslem to Muslim. From the Middle East to the Midwest and back again, I asked myself if I was exaggerating or over-sensitive to the offensive images on the walls of this boys' club. I asked colleagues and friends if I was overreacting or blowing things out of proportion. So I blew up the proportions, scaled up the archive of amassed images and the research into their "temple". Temples to or for what? I went in to out them. To blast their secrets on a billboard, a float. But failed. The billboard was rejected by the advertising agency. The depressed float can't protest in the streets and the offensive billboard can't shout its recriminations.

Making a conversation between old fashioned Orientalism and contemporary Islamophobia, my rejected advertisements can't echo the muted political potentials of Dearborn, any more than they can represent my own--or anyone's--struggle for voice. The misrepresentations produced by hyper-capitalism, advertising and mass media, the exports of U.S. culture that I consumed as a Palestinian raised in a state of diaspora in the Arab Gulf, these caricatures, this cast of characters in white America have now become my family in the US. When trying to invoke the spirit or voice of Ginger, an actress who I found in the Playboy archives, I failed, yet again, only to find Penny Gardner, whose story of labor organizing, whose career as faculty in Gender and Women's Studies at Michigan State University, and whose harrowing stories as a single mother supporting three kids as a Playboy bunny in Baltimore, captured the entire spirit of this work.

What does it mean to have a billboard and a float in one space? How is a float a billboard? What is being advertised in a parade? What does it mean for me to do research in a place called a Moslem Temple and to dance there? How can I or should

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I become a part of it, to embody it, to use my senses to understand and laugh at this locale? What does the Mystic Order of the Shriners have to do with a Playboy Bunny? What does orientalism have to do with sexism? What does it mean to include other artists in a solo show? What is lost and gained in the American dream for the local Arab artists, artisans and shopkeepers embedded safely within the rich diaspora of their relocated cultures and community here? I have found no answers in my investigation. But while engaging these communities and questions through my practice and time in Michigan, through the making of this show, I have found an endless fountain of knowledge.

### Works info:

Tongue in Cheeks, Inkjet prints, pages of *Parade to Glory* on velvet, 2019

The Terminology of the Desert, Inkjet prints, pages of *Parade to Glory* on velvet, 2019

The Password of a Shriner, Inkjet prints, pages of *Parade to Glory* on velvet, 2019

Fraternity and not a Business, Inkjet prints, pages of *Parade to Glory* on velvet, 2019

Temples of Baby Smiles, Inkjet prints, pages of *Parade to Glory* on velvet, 2019

Second World War Activities, Inkjet prints, pages of *Parade to Glory* on velvet, 2019

Illuminati, Inkjet prints, pages of *Parade to Glory* on velvet, 2019

The Aura, Inkjet prints, pages of *Parade to Glory* on velvet, 2019

Moslem is Family, Vinyl Billboard, 17 x 9 ft, 2019

Parade Float, Mixed media, collaboration with Syrian-American Artist Amanda Assaleh, 2019

Fountain, Glass Mosaic, commissioned by Syrian-American Artist Michael Howard, 2019

O my Lord, Increase me in Knowledge, Arabesque Painting by Syrian-American Artist Reem Taki, 2019

Turath aw Hadara, Video (17:30 min), Collaboration with Filmmaker Jose Luis Benavides, 2019

Moslem is Family (second billboard rejected), takeaway, Inkjet print on paper. 2019

Collection of books & magazines, inkjet prints on transparencies

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### **Doubling Displacement:**

#### **full list of programs of screenings, exhibitions, performances, and talks.**

Exhibition Opening: *Costume Party at the Moslem Temple*

March 15 @MSU Union Art Gallery, 6pm

Albie Sachs in Palestine

March 18 @Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center, Ramallah, Palestine, 6PM (Palestine time)

Conversation & Screening with activist and former judge on the Constitutional Court of South Africa, led by MSU's Middle East Studies Librarian Deborah Margolis.

Artist Lecture

March 20 @MSU Broad Art Museum, 7pm

Symposium "The American Dream: Building Understanding and Inclusion in a Multicultural World", Organized by Council of Graduate Students

March 30, MSU Union, 10-11pm

Palestine "With a New"

April 1, Presentation @MSU Library, 4th Floor Green Room, 5PM

April 1, Screening @MSU Library Digital Scholarship Lab, 360 Room, 6PM

Becky Gaines and Michael Dean will talk on the museum's archives, artifacts, press, stories of New Palestine, Indiana.

Storytelling

April 5 @MSU Broad Art Lab, 4PM

Through storytelling & time-based, a group of students and faculty artists are presenting, screening, and performing on their daily-life performance as artists in the local and global "community".

Will the Real Moslems Please Bow Down?: Identity Problems in Depression-era Detroit

April 8 @MSU Union, Lake Huron Room, 7PM

Lecture by Dr. Sally Howell, Director of the Center for Arab American Studies and Associate Professor of history at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. [Link to YouTube](#)

Palestine "With a New" Screening

April 10 @MSU Library Digital Scholarship Lab, 360 Room 5-7PM

Education in the Context of Occupation Panel Discussion

April 12 @303 International Center, 3-5PM

"Education under Siege" conference, organized by MSU Muslim Studies Program

Non-Geographic, Non-Political Dialogue, Pop-up Exhibition

April 19 @MSU Museum, 9AM – 5PM

Pop-up Exhibition for Critical Geopolitics in Collaborative Practices course

Palestine "With a New" Screening

April 22 @MSU Library Digital Scholarship Lab, 360 Room 5-7PM

Non-Geographic, Non-Political Dialogue, Book Launch

May 3 @MSU Union Art Gallery

Book launch for Critical Geopolitics in Collaborative Practices course. Featuring a publication on Assali's students collaboration with artists/designers working at MSU and in Palestine.

Palestine "With a New" Screening

May 7 @MSU Library Digital Scholarship Lab, 360 Room 5-7PM

Non-Geographic, Non-Political Dialogue, Exhibition

May 16 @ Arab American National Museum, Dearborn, MI