

BOOK REVIEW

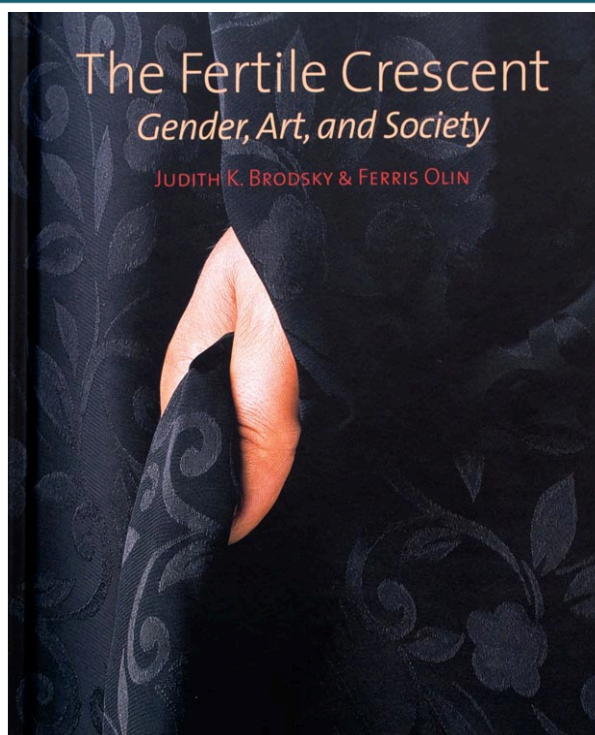
The Fertile Crescent: Gender, Art and Society

Five years in the making, the highly anticipated 256-page volume *The Fertile Crescent: Gender, Art and Society* was published by Rutgers University Institute for Women and Art and distributed by D.A.P./ Distributed Art Publishers in November 2012.

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The cover of the book 'The Fertile Crescent: Gender, Art and Society', Cover photo: Parastou Forouhar, Freitag (Friday), 2003 / Photo of the spread by Islamic Arts Magazine

The book is a captivating, timely, and comprehensive overview of the work of contemporary women artists of Middle East heritage who are described by the authors and essayists as living in "unavailable intersections," their "precarity" making them impossible to pigeonhole by simple national or religious identities. The work of these multi-generational, multi-national artists examines and reveals from their global perspectives matters of gender, homeland, geopolitics, theology, and the environment.

This stunning volume is accompanied by an unprecedented fall 2012 multi-venue exhibition (and accompanying events) also entitled *The Fertile Crescent* took place at Rutgers and Princeton Universities, the Institute for Advanced Study, the Arts Council/Paul Robeson Center for the Arts in Princeton, the West Windsor Arts Council Galleries, three public libraries, and other locations in New Jersey.

The *Fertile Crescent* book is focusing on 24 artists from the various countries that comprise the area (see list below), among them artists well known in Euro-American countries such as Mona Hatoum, Parastou Forouhar, Shirin Neshat, Sigalit Landau, and Shazia Sikander, but also artists whose work is primarily known only in the Middle East. These artists address the status of women in the Middle East today, drawing from such themes as orientalism, cultural heritage, colonialism, globalization, surveillance, regional conflict, identity and the impact of multi-national geographic existence, and the iconography of the veil. The essays dissect the artists' work and investigate the theoretical, historical, and political sources that have shaped their creative achievement.

Through painting, photography, performance art, multi-media, sculpture, and film, the artists deconstruct stereotypes of Middle East women, challenging the commonly held Western view of Middle East women as oppressed, the sexual objects of men, with their bodies hidden under veils, while acknowledging existing social and theological restrictions that have caused many of them to leave their homelands. The work is political, but goes beyond immediate confrontations to present a collective view of this region of the world that is nuanced, thought provoking and illuminating.



The spread from the book / photo on the left side: Huda Lufti, *Crossing the Red Line*, 2011 / photo on the right side: Huda Lufti, *Marching on Crutches*, 2012 / Photo of the spread by Islamic Arts Magazine



The spread from the book / photo: Zeina Barakeh, Passport details from the series Third-Half Passport Collection: M.E.Transit, 2012 / Photo of the spread by Islamic Arts Magazine



The spread from the book / photo: Ayana Friedman, Staged shot for the performance 'Red Freedom', 2008 / Photo of the spread by Islamic Arts Magazine

The authors in this volume address multi-nationalism and the interaction of Middle East countries with Euro-American cultures, resulting in U.S. and European relationships that are sometimes congenial and at other times problematic. The book also addresses the Middle East's cultural diaspora in black Africa and South Asia. But above all, the book addresses the political and theoretical issues that inform the work of these artists.

In her essay The Art of Revolution in Egypt: Brushes with Women, leading gender specialist **Margot Badran** who has been living in Cairo, introduces to the West for the first time some of the most exciting and timely art emanating from women artists in Egypt. The work comments on the status of Egyptian women after the revolution of January 25, 2011 and reflects their reaction to the events in Tahrir Square and their disappointment in the lack of recognition of women's rights by the new order.

The curators of the exhibition and authors of the book, **Judith K. Brodsky** and **Ferris Olin**, write in their essay about unavailable intersections: "The artists in the exhibition are representative of a complicated state of affairs. They consider themselves inheritors of the culture, values, and beliefs of their individual countries while often living elsewhere, and they deem themselves as also belonging to the nations in which they reside." In her essay, Kelly Baum introduces the concept of "precarity." She writes, "Thanks to the institutionalization of misogyny and the ubiquity of conflict, ethnophobia, American imperialism, and state-sponsored oppression, 'precarity' is a daily experience for women and Middle Easterners. This is especially true for Middle Eastern women and women of Middle Eastern descent, whose gender, religion, and ethnicity compound the prejudices to which they are exposed."

Essayist **Gilane Tawadros**, who a decade ago, organized the exhibition, *Veil*, one of the earliest curatorial efforts to address gender in contemporary Middle East art, deals with the issue of "unavailable intersections" and "precarity." She writes "The work confounds our efforts to name, to define, to circumscribe geography, hinting at the difficulty of corralling a multitude of histories and cultures into a single geographical designation: "Middle East," "Orient," "North Africa," "Fertile Crescent," "Near East," "Levant."

The core Fertile Crescent artists are: Shiva Ahmadi (Iranian), Negar Ahkami (American/Iranian), Jananne Al-Ani (Iraqi), Ghada Amer (Egyptian/American) and Reza Farkhondeh and (Iranian), Fatima Al Qadiri (Kuwaiti), Monira Al Qadiri (Kuwaiti), Zeina Barakeh (Lebanese/Palestinian), Ofri Cnaani (Israeli), Nezaket Ekici (Turkish), Diana El Jeiroudi, (Syrian), Parastou Forouhar (Iranian), Ayana Friedman (Israeli), Shadi Ghadirian (Iranian), Mona Hatoum (Palestinian), Hayv Kahraman (Iraqi), Efrat Kedem (Israeli), Sigalit Landau (Israeli), Ariane Littman (Swiss/Israeli), Shirin Neshat (Iranian), Ebru Özseçen (Turkish), Laila Shawa (Palestinian), Shahzia Sikander (Pakistani), Fatimah Tuggar (Nigerian), Nil Yalter (French/Turkish).



The spread from the book / photo: Shadi Ghadirian, The series 'Butterfly', 2011 / Photo of the spread by Islamic Arts Magazine

