

THE RED CHADOR
STRANDED

ANIDA YOEU ALI





ARTIST STATEMENT

by Anida Yoeu Ali

The Red Chador: Stranded is the latest solo exhibition in the newly reimagined series, following the 2017 disappearance of the original chador garment in Tel Aviv, Israel.

The Red Chador is an ongoing series of silent public interventions and documented performances that challenge perceptions and fears of the “other” in response to a rise of Islamophobia, misogyny and racism. For Ali, *The Red Chador* is more than simply an item of clothing; she is her alter ego, an allegory for the hyper-visibility of Muslim women and a means to activate critical conversations on otherness. The Western Gallery exhibition relates through installations, photographs and videos of the artist’s encounters with an unsuspecting public through small acts of interventions performed around the world. Exclusive to this exhibition are images from her recent performance, as accompanied by six other colorful-sequined chadoras, in the city of Bellevue on the twentieth anniversary of 9/11.

Premiering at the Palais de Tokyo, Paris, in 2015, *The Red Chador* has since appeared across the globe including performances in Hong Kong, Malaysia and several cities in the United States. Like much of her work, Ali’s performance-installations evolve over time, often adapting each iteration as an original engagement to a political moment and community site. In 2016, particularly disturbed by American attitudes and policies that perpetuate religious intolerance, Ali took to the streets in her red-sequined “Muslim” headdress in an act of defiance and resistance on the day after Donald Trump was elected the 45th U.S. president. In 2017, the original performance garment disappeared while Ali was in transit from Tel Aviv back to the United States. The artist publicly mourned the “death” of *The Red Chador* in Philadelphia, Phnom Penh and Adelaide, and in 2019 the work was rebirthed in Honolulu along with a spectrum of colorful-sequined chadors. The artist invites viewers to wander, witness and experience something many have yet to see: Muslim bodies in unthreatening numbers, and specifically Muslim women in all their brightness and glory—standing tall, proud and visible—existing full of life and fabulousness!

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Kate O'Hara

Umbrella Studio Contemporary Arts

The reopening of international borders, post-COVID-19 pandemic closures, once again enables artists and audiences to be engaged in a globalised dialogue about who we are, ways of being and where we are going at this paradigm-shifting juncture. In this, we are so pleased to welcome Anida Yoeu Ali into our exhibition program and to host Studio Revolt as our artists in residence which will result in a new commission for our PUNQ Festival in 2024.

The Red Chador series speaks to compassion, self-reflection, bravery and the breaking down of barriers which divide us. These are shared concerns of Umbrella. Unpacking the ‘Other’ in Gurambilbarra (Townville), home of the largest military base in Australia and one of the largest growing refugee populations in Australia, will have a deep resonance.



INDEXICAL PRESENT

by Hafthor Yngvason *

Anida Yoeu Ali initiated *The Red Chador* project in 2015 in response to intensified islamophobia in the United States and Europe. The work was originally commissioned as a 12-hour performance at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo killings. Since then, Ali has performed the work, cloaked in a red chador ("Muslim" headdress), in cities around the world, including Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur, and Washington D.C.. In 2017, she announced the "death" of *The Red Chador* following its enforced disappearance at the Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv. In response to the loss, Ali memorialized the chador through published obituaries, performative eulogies, and mourning rituals that took place in Adelaide, Melbourne, Phnom Penh, and Philadelphia. In 2019, Ali "rebirthed" *The Red Chador* as an act of resilience and resistance.

Anida Yoeu Ali's art is an unusual blend of the complex and the concrete. Her work constitutes a "multi-layered discursive construction," as one writer has put it, i.e., it

communicates through several discourses, and various media, at once to "formulate oppositional interpretations of Muslim identities, interests, and needs."¹ This multimedia richness was palpable in Ali's exhibition at the Western Gallery, where large-scale photographs, sculptures, and new media came together in a unified installation. But what also emerged was a strong sense of the focused presence and resolute directness of Ali's performances. Their concrete and corporal quality is perhaps best captured by what the artist and philosopher Adrian Piper calls "indexical presence," by which she means "the concrete, immediate here-and-now." To Piper, the indexical presence offers a minimalist "aesthetic strategy for drawing attention to the concrete, specific, unique qualities of individuals".² This is an important aspect of Ali's art also. During performance, Ali is *The Red Chador* herself. The Red Chador is not a garment worn by an actor; it is a person—a Muslim woman or, to be precise,

1 Martina Pfeiler, *Challenging Islamophobia through Intermediality: Anida Yoeu Ali's Performance Art*, *European Journal of American Studies* 15-3, 2020, Special Issue: Media Agoras: Islamophobia and Inter/ Multimedial Dissensus. p.1

2 Adrian Piper, *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Selected Writings in Meta-Art, 1968-1992*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: MIT Press, 1996), p.257

a first-generation Cambodian American Muslim refugee—distinguished by the unique individuality of a spiritual, ethnic, gendered, and social being.

The Red Chador performances are public events, but they are, at the same time, intimate acts of discreet interventions. Ali often walks silently for hours along main streets and alleyways, sidewalks and beach fronts and appears at historic sites and everyday locales such as train stations and bus stops. This is where she encounters most of her audience, in people engaged in their daily pursuits.

In this, *The Red Chador* shares a certain kinship with Piper's "Catalysis" performances from the early 1970s. Like Ali, Piper engaged directly with the public by walking quietly down a city street, riding the subway, visiting a department store and other public venues. And just like Ali, Piper confronts xenophobia in her art, not as "an abstract, distant problem that affects all those poor, unfortunate other people out there," but by "focusing on the specific, unique, concrete qualities of individuals".³ Xenophobia, Piper argues, "arises in the most basic relations between human beings." It "begins between

3 Ibid. p.257



you and me, right here and now, in the indexical present".⁴ This is the idea behind her performance: "Artwork that draws one into a relationship with the other in the indexical present trades easy classification—and hence xenophobia—for a direct and immediate experience of the complexity of the other, and of one's own responses to her".

Given these parallels, it should not be surprising that the public response to Ali and Piper's work is also similar. Both artists have been perceived as antagonistic and their work labeled agitational. But here their differences become more telling. In *Catalysis I*, Piper went for a rush-hour subway ride wearing clothes that she had soaked for a week in a reeking mixture of vinegar, eggs, milk, and cod liver oil. Piper has described her performance as "aggressive" and unsuspecting audience may have found it repulsive.⁵ But there is nothing in *The Red Chador's* appearance that may be described that way. Ali progresses through public space in a quiet and gently humorous way, dressed in a festive sequin chador. Still, public opinion finds *The Red Chador's* presence undesirable.

The mere sight of a chador seems to conjure

4 Ibid. p.248

5 Ibid. p.163

the same reaction in American and European cities as Piper's reeking clothes.

Ali's work may be distinguished by the intimacy and immediacy of a live performer, but the unique, concrete personal qualities of *The Red Chador* are often met with easy classifications that completely disregard evidence of her individuality and complexity and calls to mind yet another quote from Piper: "At the same time that I existed in and for that audience, I became aware of the extreme disparity between my inner self-image and the one they had of me."⁶ As she conspicuously and unapologetically challenges the public perception and fears of the Other, Ali finds her displacement constantly reinforced. Her hybrid Cham Muslim and American identity is persistently found at odds. Ali was born in Battambang, Cambodia before her family fled to the United States after suffering atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge regime but to many of her audience, she is not that person—she is simply the Other.

The striking discrepancy between Ali's deferential and personal performances and the hostility they often invoke, brings us back to the "multi-layered discursive construction"

6 Ibid. p.220

of her work. This construction is not limited to Ali's use of multi-media but takes also to the way her performance communicates through different points of encounters. The hyper visibility of a bright red chador is provocative, and it challenges those with strong opinions and preconceptions to assert themselves. At the same time, Ali counters this response through the highly personal nature of her performances and, in particular, an invitation, signaled by the sparkly sequin garment, to share in her affirmation of her identity. In a talk about the public response to her various performances, Ali talks about exchanging "empathy and energy and a shared moment of understanding," with her audience. There have been individuals who "did not want to engage" and others who "had a wonderful reaction." Some have responded with "anger and a fear" and others with "tenderness and gentleness." There is a sincere sense of hope when Ali says of kids who had observed a hostile response to a performance: "Their joy and their love disarmed it for everybody else."

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This essay was reprinted with the permission of the author. It was originally published in Anida Yoeu Ali's exhibition catalogue *The Red Chador: Genesis I* held in 2021 at Western Gallery, Western Washington University.

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Umbrella respectfully acknowledges the Wulgurukaba of Gurambilbarra and Yunbenun and the surrounding groups of our region - Bindal, Gugu Badhan, Nywaigi, Warrgamay, Bandjin and Gudjal - as the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we gather, share and celebrate local creative practice. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging. We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as the first people of Australia. They have never ceded sovereignty and remain strong in their enduring connection to land and Culture.

Performance and concept by Anida Yoeu Ali. All images courtesy of Studio Revolt. | Cover: *Water Birth, The Red Chador: Genesis I* (detail), 2019, Kaiona Beach, Honolulu, Hawaii, USA, Digital colour print with archival pigment ink. Photograph: Masahiro Sugano. | Page 1: *(Untitled 99) The Red Chador* (detail), 2017, King Street Station, Seattle, Washington, USA, Digital colour print with archival pigment ink. Photograph: Masahiro Sugano. | Page 3: *Rainbow Beach, The Red Chador: Genesis I* (detail), 2020, Waikiki Beach, Honolulu, Hawaii, USA, Digital colour print with archival pigment ink. Photograph: Masahiro Sugano. | Page 5: *Bus Stop, The Red Chador* (performance still, detail), 22 November 2015, Hartford, Connecticut, USA, Digital colour print with archival pigment ink. Documentation: Pablo Delano.

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