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## Nermine Hammam joins the **Dress Code** **exhibition at Dubai's Art Sawa**

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Egyptian artist's image from her new Ma'at series appears in a unique collective exhibition of works by celebrated contemporary artists from the Middle East and Arab world

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The Dress Code exhibition, which opened on Wednesday 19 October at Dubai's Art Sawa gallery, is a collection of works that project the artists' unique styles and artistic messages onto clothing as a reflection of his/her society and the artists' interpretation of its norms. This unique project includes works by some of the most celebrated contemporary artists in the Middle East and Arab world.

Imbedded in clothing, the display includes indications of a person's gender, income, occupation, social class,

political, ethnic and religious affiliation, and attitude towards comfort, fashion, traditions, gender expression, marital status, sexual availability and orientation.

Historically we can “read” a society’s evolution through its attires, its dress codes, in particular those of women. A woman’s attire will tell us something not only about the climatic environment but more importantly the socio-economic and cultural environment, the value system, and the roles and positions people identify with in their societies.

“Clothes also convey other social messages, including the stating and claiming of personal and cultural identity. Clothing establishes, maintains, or defies social group norms, and speaks to comfort and functionality,” commented Amel Makkawi, co-curator of this project and founder/director of Art Sawa.

Participating artists include: Ahmed Al-Bahrani, Ghassan Ghaib, Mahmud Al-Obaidi, and Zena Assi from Iraq; Issam Barhouch from Lebanon; Lebanese-Canadian Marya Kazoun; Rachida Azdaou from Algeria; Algerian French Samta Benyahia; Fadi Yazigi from Syria; Fatma Bucak from Turkey; Naiza H Khan from Pakistan; Emirati Sumayyah Al Suwaidi, and Nermine Hammam from Egypt.

Nermine Hammam is the only artist from Egypt participating in this exhibition. She exhibits a unique image from her new series, Ma'at. Named after the ancient Egyptian goddess of truth, order and justice, Ma'at is a series of seven 'archetypical' women, which pay homage to iconic figures such as Frida Khalo and Egyptian singer Om Kolthoum, in a work that represents “all the women I admire or wanted to become.”

In one image, the ‘woman as child’ dominates the centre of the canvas, looking at us with a directness of gaze well beyond her years. Her face is a composite of the artist's face; colour has been applied to the surface of the photograph giving it an unreal quality.

Her outstretched arms, based on Iranian miniatures, are the symbol of the goddess Ma'at. In her hands, the soldiers become toys, drained of their relevance when confronted by the power of the feminine. She is dressed in tattered combat gear, with a gun strapped across her shoulder. But while her attire is militant, her pose is one of surrender and she wears a halo for spirituality and a branch of peace. Radiating below her tiny booted feet are symbols of male energy so necessary for forward propulsion.

According to Hammam, this image emerged from a simple dress pattern provided by the organisers of the Dress Code Project: "I began projecting elements deeply personal to myself onto this template, until a consecutive series of women, or expressions of the feminine, began to emerge from this initial work. I called them Ma'at because they embody that fine balance between masculine and feminine energies inherent in the archetypal Woman. They are a modern reincarnation of the ancient Egyptian goddess, carrying within them

the elements of order and balance but also power."

Taken together, the images of Ma'at series forms a sequential and symbolic narrative of the emergence of Woman, from child until final maturity and spiritual fulfilment. The work showing at Art Sawa is "the first, and the most personal and unique of the series...in creating it I looked inside, layering and building onto one another many different aspects myself."

According to Hammam, the use of military symbols is a rejection of war and of the constructs of armed conflict. Peering through the tattered army fatigues are tiny fragments of Sufi text. These extracts of Ibn Al-Nafari's poetic conversations with God are illegible and only partially revealed through the tears of the dress: "the text appears in fragments, reminding me that my protagonist is choosing to reveal only part of her secret to me. It may take me a lifetime to fully understand the message she conceals and in doing so, fully embody her."

The exhibition is co-curated by Martina Corgnati and Amel B. Makkawi.

The Dress Code Project opened on 19 October and will run until 19 November 2011.

Art Sawa, Dubai, street 14, from road 323.

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