

Single Saudi Women: London exhibition confronts stereotypes

By Karen Dabrowska



Wasma Mansour's exhibition *Single Saudi Women*, looks like a collection of ordinary photographs on display in a non-descript gallery near London's busy St Pancras International Railway station.

The Hardy Tree Gallery is a small two-room venue with white walls. The first display is of 20 colour photographs of bookshelves, curtains, a table with food, a chair and a bed. In the second room the photographs feature a collection of hand bags and then there are the photos of the women themselves, all facing away from the camera.

But the ordinary photographs of ordinary women in ordinary flats have an important aim. It's a stereotyping busting exhibition showing single Saudi women as they live in London.

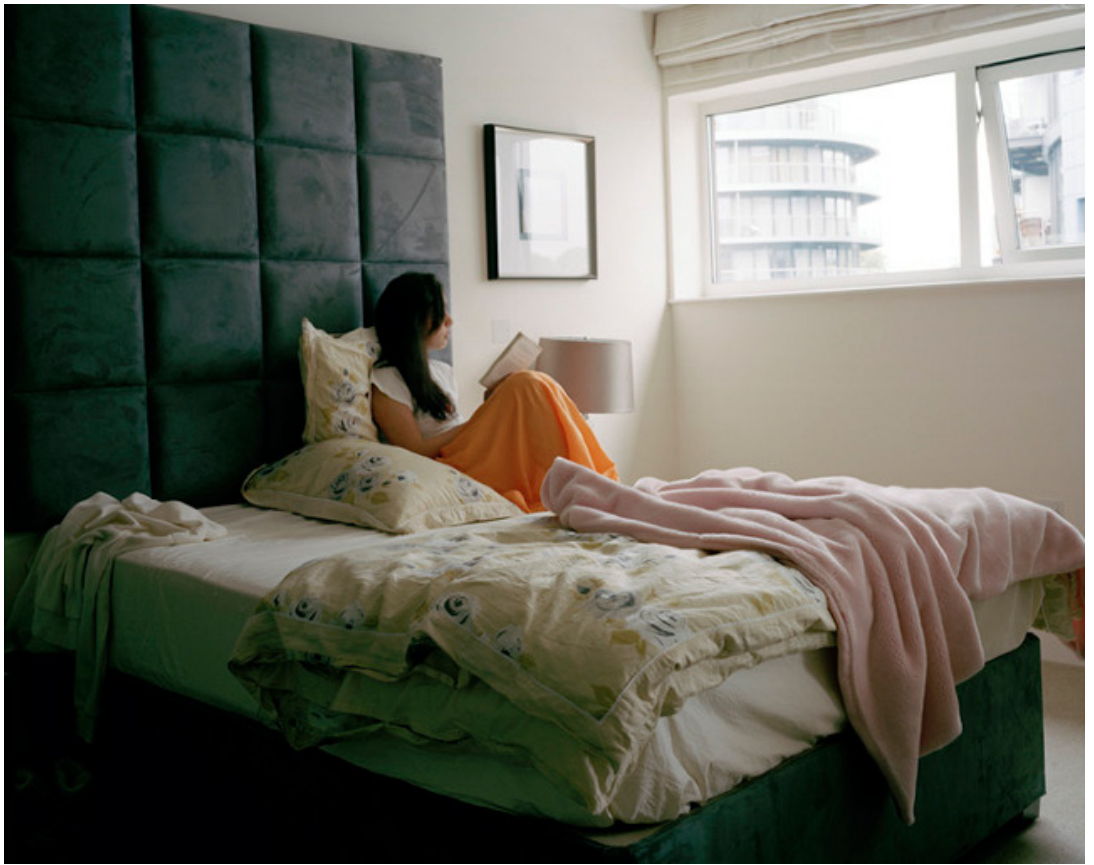
One striking image taken in a

woman's living room shows a host of family portraits. One photograph stands out in particular despite being at the back – it shows a young woman at her university graduation.

'My interest lies in the spaces around people, and what that space reveals about them,' explains Mansour explained. Her Single Saudi Women project is part of the London Festival of Photography.

The project is the culmination of a four year practice based PhD in which Mansour travelled the length and breadth of the UK, finding Saudi women who were willing to





participate in her work. And participant, or musharikaat as it translates, is the operative word for Mansour. She explains further: 'It's a privilege for me to have been given access to these women's lives and to their stories. I'm very much indebted to the women for allowing me in. They are willing participants, very much a part of the process and not just subjects or sitters.'

At the heart of Mansour's work is

the need to convey who Saudi women really are, rather than the stereotypical Western perceptions which have accumulated around them. In a contemplative series of intimate images, Mansour builds up a portrait of each participant; images of random objects on a kitchen table, a veil in a plastic bag, neatly folded clothes on a chair and a dress laid across a bed. For one woman, there is an anonymous photograph to draw



the viewer inside her private life and reveal clues about her identity and sense of individuality.

“It could be argued by some that my choice of apparatus is politically motivated,” Mansour explained. “Especially since issues concerning Saudi women’s visibility have been a subject of heated debates of two opposing and equally hegemonic headings: ‘liberation’ and ‘domination’. I should clarify that the position I

hold both as photographer and citizen belongs to neither camps. The hope and aim of my project from the outset is to bring forth an alternative, and more encompassing, view of what it means to be a single Saudi woman. “Unlike previous attempts utilized to ‘interrogate’ Saudi women, I considered the potential of a multi faceted approach, by giving the women I’ve met and worked with the opportunity to discuss and





reveal their identities through their narratives, their spaces and their things. My personal investment in this endeavour was encouraged by the diversity of experiences I have encountered, and to illustrate that even through photography, I was able to capture the many realities and the plentiful negotiations that are worked out on a daily basis. The challenge was to aesthetically narrate the multifarious ways in which Saudi women assert their subjectivity and to create images from

interacting with their worlds. The objective, therefore, has been (and still remains) to represent that rich world in a plethora of settings and spaces, and hope to transmit some of its texture and flavour.

On finishing her PhD in November, Mansour is planning to return to Saudi Arabia to continue the project. "I originally began photographing Saudi women in Saudi, but it was impossible to get the film processed quickly enough, as I had to send it out of the

country. I only had four years to complete my thesis so decided to relocate to the UK where there would be no issues with developing. But when there are no time limitations, I will continue with my original plan.”

The London Festival of Photography, of which Mansour’s work is a part, is a not-for-profit event bringing photography to the forefront of London’s cultural scene. Only in its second year, the mostly free festival offers a diverse programme of exhibitions,

workshops, talks and screenings concerned with work from well renowned photographers such as Martin Parr and Chris Steele-Perkins, as well as up and coming photographers and student practitioners such as Mansour. Grace Pattison, the festival curator who invited Mansour to present her work, explains: ‘The festival was curated around the theme Inside Out – Reflections on the Public and Private. We want to show photography as a tool for documentation and expression.’”

