

# ***PERFORMING DIFFERENT LIVES in Chaza Charafeddine's series of Portraits***

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## ***Abstract***

*An ongoing system of slavery supported by the Ministry of Labor in Lebanon is seen by human rights activists as a widespread staggering social issue that leaves a growing community of female migrant-domestic-workers in Lebanon with no legal rights to escape abusive employers and poor working conditions while enduring sexual, verbal and physical abuse on daily basis.*

*Within the discourse of power, the Beirut-based artist, Chaza Charafeddine (born 1964) chose to destabilize this dynamic of power in *Maidames*, a series of portraits that depicts a number of domestic workers in Lebanon dressed up as TV celebrities and popular figures in glamorous settings. This paper examines how Charafeddine's portraits attempt to reverse roles by reshuffling the system of visual dynamics to offer an alternative, open dialogue for the purpose of negotiating identities. Play-acting, theatricality and props are evident throughout Charafeddine's portraiture practice. By portraying female domestic workers in assertive poses, confronting their viewer, Charafeddine aims at restoring their individuality. The women's performance in these portraits becomes the subject of the picture. Yet there is an inescapable hint of ambivalence, tension, even perversity beneath their cheery performance. Charafeddine's practice of portraiture raises questions about photography in relation to aesthetics and ethics that will be addressed in this paper. The work will be analyzed at the level of production and perception drawing from cross-disciplinary approaches related to art, sociology, and feminism within the context of the Middle East.*

## ***Keywords***

*Portraiture, domestic workers, Middle East, activism, social control.*

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### *Resumo*

Um sistema contínuo de escravidão apoiado pelo Ministério do Trabalho do Líbano é visto por ativistas dos direitos humanos como uma questão social generalizada que deixa uma crescente comunidade de mulheres, trabalhadoras domésticas migrantes no Líbano, sem direitos legais para escapar de empregadores abusivos e más condições de trabalho, enquanto estão suportando, diariamente, abuso sexual, verbal e físico.

No discurso do poder, a artista Chaza Charafeddine, radicada em Beirute, (nascida em 1964) optou por desestabilizar essa dinâmica de poder em *Maidames*, uma série de retratos que descrevem um número de trabalhadoras domésticas no Líbano vestidas como celebridades de TV e figuras populares em configurações glamourosas. Este artigo examina como os retratos de Charafeddine tentam inverter os papéis, remodelando o sistema de dinâmicas visuais para proporcionar uma alternativa e um diálogo aberto com o propósito de negociar identidades. Encenação, teatralidade e adereços são evidentes em toda a prática de retratos de Charafeddine. Pela adequação de um tipo específico de retratos, no qual as trabalhadoras domésticas estão posando com orgulho e assertivas de sua presença na fotografia enquanto confrontam o espectador, Charafeddine visa restaurar sua individualidade. O desempenho das mulheres nesses retratos torna-se o objeto da imagem; neles, elas parecem adquirir uma vida própria e autônoma. No entanto, há um indício inescapável de ambivalência, tensão e até perversidade subjacente ao seu desempenho alegre. Os retratos elaborados por Charafeddine levantam questões sobre a fotografia em relação com a estética e com a ética, que serão abordadas neste artigo. O trabalho será analisado ao nível da produção e percepção, a partir de abordagens interdisciplinares relacionadas com a arte, estética, sociologia, ativismo e feminismo no contexto do Médio Oriente.

### *Palavras-chave*

Retrato, trabalhadoras domésticas, Médio Oriente, ativismo, controle social.



## Introduction

«[W]oman...cannot be seen as a fixed, pre-existing entity or frozen “image”, transformed by this or that historical circumstance, but as a complex, mercurial and problematic signifier, mixed in its messages, resisting fixed interpretation or positioning despite the numerous attempts made in visual representation literally to put “woman” in her place», writes Linda Nochlin in her first essay in *Representing Women* (Nochlin, 1999: 7). Nochlin further explains that the term “woman” has connotations such as “woman warrior” who fights back and resists attempts to subdue the meaning of “woman” or the reduction of it to “some simple essence,” “natural,” and above all, “unproblematic.” Photographs have been used to reflect on the ambiguous status of women throughout history. In 1923, for example, in an attempt to counter fixed interpretations of the Arab woman as passive and to resist restrictions that were often imposed on women’s liberty such as controlling what they wore and the way they appear in public, the feminist and Egyptian nationalist Huda Shaarawi and her peers staged a public unveiling at the Cairo train station to proclaim the veil as the primary obstacle to women’s participation in public life<sup>1</sup>. This provocative photograph challenged stereotypes of the Arab woman often seen as passive, it also resisted the common orientalist reading of the Arab woman as confined to her own culture. In *Maidames*, it is the migrant workers who, through their staged portraits, are using the dress, their poses and gestures to claim their rights in voicing their aspiration to be seen as iconic beauty celebrities, stars and divas. Just like Shaarawi and her peers, yet in a different context, they strive to be seen outside the confines of the household as confident and in control of their bodies, their attire and their image.

Chaza Charafeddine, a Lebanese contemporary artist produced, curated and art directed *Maidames*, a series of 80 x 50 cm portraits — exhibited at Ajial gallery in Beirut in October and November, 2018 — in which female domestic-migrant-workers in Lebanon are enacting who they would have aspired to be. Charafeddine, here, does not only attempt to subdue the meaning of the “woman” but specifically of “domestic-migrant-woman” in resisting her reduction to “some simple essence”, “natural”, and above all, “unproblematic” status in Lebanon. In this way, I argue, she is providing a model to fight back the system<sup>2</sup>. Her *Maidames* project attempts to complicate not just “woman” but domestic-migrant-woman by addressing their fantasies, and their aspirations revealed in their portraits. By voicing their preference to their idols, to who they would have wanted to be if they were not bound to domestic chores, the domestic workers who appear in Charafeddine’s portraits are participating in the production of their own portraits and consequently to Charafeddine’s artistic production and art statement.

In this essay, I examine Charafeddine’s portraits as rhetorical devices while focusing on the representation of domestic-migrant-women in Lebanon, turning them into desirable divas, stars, spiritual and other iconic figures of their choice. I attempt to unpack the implication of Charafeddine’s provocative strategy by locating the barthesian *studium* and *punctum* in pointing on how Charafeddine’s portraits prick the viewer twice, first when looking at migrant workers striking iconic poses such as Marlene Dietrich sitting with her body in a particularly glamorous position — one hand in her pocket and the other holding a cigarette — second by demonstrating how the photograph, within the discourse of indexicality, reveals the part that goes unnoticed at the first sight, uncovered the reference to the “real” person in the portrait.

This paper focuses on politics and power in Charafeddine’s portraits. In my analysis of Charafeddine’s portrait as mediators of social change, I combine art and photography with social theory. Drawing from Nochlin’s extensive writing on *Representing Women*, I attempt to “read” the portraits as a woman and to reverse the



pictorial power relations established in the photograph using critical notions on photography developed by Roland Barthes and later discussed by Ariella Azoulay.

### **Charafeddine on the body, the self, and the photographic mode**

Following her growing concern with the practice of portraiture as an expression of social concern and as a continuation of her interest in expanding the lexicon of photography to notions related to fiction, fantasy, voyeurism, and exhibitionism, in *Maidames*, Charafeddine transports domestic workers to places where they become authors of their own stories while restoring, in this way, their individuality. This body of work follows Charafeddine's portrait production that engages the artist in confronting social realities of her everyday life in Beirut from *Divine Comedy* (2010), in which Charafeddine re-examines the aesthetics of Islamic art by placing androgynous models against Islamic art settings, to *The Unbearable Lightness Of Witnessing: Studies for A Self-Portrait* (2012), a series of repulsive self-portraits in which Charafeddine's violently mutilated face appears struggling to make sense of the uprising conflicts during the Syrian revolution. No less controversial is the *Maidames portrait* series that attest to the provocative nature of Charafeddine's work and her continuous engagement with the body, the self, and the photographic mode.

Working in a domestic context while being submissive to their employer, migrant-domestic-workers like Melany, Vera, Bruktayt and Ruby are generally expected by their employers to be unnoticed, inexistent and invisible, yet, in Charafeddine's photographic space, they seem to transcend their daily conditions by their dignified presence.

In figure 1, Melany impersonates a duchesse, comfortably sitting in a royal chair within a Victorian-like heavily decorated interior while, in figure 2, Vera is gracefully looking down at us, waiting for the photographer to take the shot so she can go back to reading her book. These portraits are produced in an era that is dominated by selfies — perhaps the most prevalent popular genre in portraiture



Figures 1 and 2 — Chaza Charafeddine. *Melany* (above); *Miss Vera* (below), 2018. 55 x 80 cm, printed with archival ink on fine art paper and mounted on Dibond paper, 5 editions. © Chaza Charafeddine & Agial Art Gallery.

today (Saltz, 2014). Just like the invention of photography in 1834 changed the way we produce and perceive portraits, selfies have significantly altered the way we perceive and produce portraits today. A new visual genre of portraits emerges, that is formally distinct from all others in history, one that represents different aspects of social interaction, self-awareness, privacy, and public behavior. Just like the selfies, Charafeddine's portraits have their own structure, they aim at communicating a social statement. One aspect that did not change in the production of portraits — painted or photographed —, they come out of the same impulse, as explained in the barthesian reading: portraits are made to make their subjects look at their best (Barthes, 1981: 57). In the same line, Charafeddine's portraits depict migrant-domestic-workers at their best. These portraits raise a number of questions about the practice of photography in relation to aesthetics and ethics that I address in this paper. How are they participatory? How does performance become the subject of these pictures? What do these portraits say and what they don't say (but do reveal)? And how are they destabilizing the social order?

### Staging the Self

What brings together all women represented in Charafeddine's series of photographs, *Maidames*, is that they are all female domestic-migrant-workers in Lebanon each aspiring to live a different life experience for the moment of the photograph while resisting fixed interpretation of their social status. Breaking all barriers to imagine herself by reconstructing her image as a desirable diva, queen, bride, successful business woman, spiritual figure or other icon of fame of her choice, each migrant worker embarks on a journey to construct the ideal woman in her eyes. When asked about their ideal women, most of the domestic workers imagined themselves as Western TV celebrities, actresses, super models, chart-topping musicians, and fearless fashion pioneers who they had seen in the media<sup>3</sup>. By enacting the stars' poses and mastering their glamorous behavior in the photographs, they contradict the image that domestic workers are expected to



conform to. Playing strong, dominant female characters, cunning and clever helps them reposition themselves as determined, confident, self-aware and desirable individual women. The female characters played in the portraits have a few elements in common, they are all independent and self-aware, traits that women of color, and migrant workers were not expected to possess in the context of racist communities in Lebanon. This exhibition aims at showing that each one of the migrant workers in Lebanon exists in her imagination in her own way. Each one represents a self-reliant, dynamic female figure who doesn't have to forgo femininity for potency. Charafeddine, a civil right activist herself, produced these portraits to influence the way migrant workers in Lebanon were perceived. She is sensitive to the way these women were misrepresented and stereotyped in the local Lebanese culture.

#### **Does the portrait have to make the subject beautiful?**

Richard Cockle Lucas, a British sculptor who practiced photography in the late nineteenth century, viewed photographic self-portraiture as a form of “living sculpture” to be enacted before the camera (Weiss, 2013: 433). Lucas utilized the practice of dressing up in front of the camera as an ongoing means of experimenting with photography's capacity to convey human expression, and as an extension of his concerns as a sculptor. According to Lucas, «the photographer must direct his model to take up a particular pose in order to shape the external features of his subject» (ibidem, 435). Since the camera can only record whatever is placed before it, the artistry of a photograph is in the arrangement of the subject.

In his extensive excavation work on Shehrazade Studio in the port city of Saida, where Hashem el-Madani, the owner of this studio took pictures of most of the Saidawi population since the 1950's, Akram Zaatari recounts the following incident. One of el-Madani's clients, a cross-eyed man, blamed el-Madani for not producing a “good” photograph of him. He complained that his eyes appear crossed in the photograph. El-Madani quickly retouched the photo by scratching out the emulsion where the pupil is and drew another one right next to it (El-Madani, 2004: 16).

For el-Madani, «Photography is a service profession. It makes people beautiful and provides them with documentation of their lives» (ibidem, 16). El-Madani continued «A portrait has to make the subject beautiful» (ibidem, 16). Hence, for el-Madani's client, a “good” photographer is the one who fixes his subject's look that should conform to certain predominant social norms. El-Madani seems to agree with his client in his first claim «[photography] makes people beautiful...» but not the second «... and provides them with documentation of their lives». Here, el-Madani contradicts himself, for how can a photograph “make people beautiful” and “document” their lives as it is?

Both Lucas and el-Madani agree that «the photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see» it is rather the photographer's arrangement of the subject (Barthes, 1981: 6). What is important here is to distinguish these portraits from other practices of portraiture such as painting or retouching a photo.

In the *Maidames* series, Charafeddine aims at portraying her subjects as icons of beauty. She uses staged photographs to allow her subjects to deliberate on their multiple identities. These portraits complicate the idea of what constitutes a conventional portrait, or ideally ought to constitute the self, inevitably linking with its political meaning of class, race, and social status. The practice of portraiture is known to be accessible to the wealthy elite and high ranked families. How do we understand these portraits in which migrant workers appear sporting Victorian dresses and glamorous nightgowns, smoking cigarettes and reading books?

We can describe the portraits as products of domestic workers enacting different roles, yet theorists such as Judith Butler would more typically describe their act as performative (1990). As Butler has persuasively argued, sex, race, ethnicity, confessional belonging are not inherently natural though they are embodied (Butler, 1990: 16).

The performance in *Maidames'* series of portraits produces a critical account on the social structure by establishing a shift in the portrait convention in migrant

workers appropriating poses and behavior predominantly conforming to celebrity stars and divas. These portraits, in framing female migrant workers as iconic figures already coded with meaning, do not only reflect the migrant workers' dreams and aspirations but they also contribute to empowering them.

### **The Power of the Image**

The idea of what constitutes a portrait is linked to the power dynamics related to photography as expressed by Roland Barthes when he claims: «once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of “posing”, I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image» (Barthes, 1981: 10). This “active” transformation of the self into an image is about recognizing that the photograph is what makes the subject who she is and preventing her from accepting ever being simply herself. The portrait opens up alternatives for a range of personalities and refuses the «fixed, pre-existing entity or frozen “image” » women are commonly bound to as expressed earlier by Nochlin.

Bruktayt, for example, appears in a number of portraits disguised in different personas, she appears as Michelle Obama, Marilyn Monroe and Marlene Dietrich in three separate portraits.

«In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art», Barthes further explains (ibidem, 13). That is precisely what Charafeddine plays on in *Maidames*. The migrant workers' photographs, while questioning what is expected of a portrait and the power of the image, allow the subject to dream of herself as a different self or to reconstruct her alternative self while sending across other messages, that of identity in terms of race and class divide. Photography implies the act of seeing and “seeing” has a dynamic of power in who sees and who is being seen and how. When these portraits were framed and displayed on the walls of Ajial gallery — a prestigious gallery in Beirut

that focuses on artist from the Arab world — for artists, art collectors, intellectuals and the wider public including the migrant and the migrant worker's *madames* (employers) to see and reflect on the migrant workers' ubiquitous visual presence in the frame of their portraits<sup>4</sup>. These portraits when seen by the migrant workers are perceived in a different way than when seen by the migrant workers' employer. While the migrant workers can use their portrait to negotiate their identities through the characters they are enacting, these same portraits maybe perceived as threatening to their employers as they eliminate the gap between the migrant worker and her employer. By doing so, the portraits empower the employees and present them as confident and determined individuals who know their rights and are ready to defend them. The discomfort that these portraits produce when seen by their employers is not to be dismissed as it questions the employer/employee power dynamics. It presents the migrant worker as the desirable star-like figure thus inverting roles. In the *Maidames* series it is the domestic worker who is desirable not her employer. In another reading, the same portrait takes on another dimension when seeking to eliminate the social gap between the migrant worker and her employer. In her choice of being portrayed as a celebrity figure, the migrant worker shares the same fantasy as her *madame*. Charafeddine's portraits seen in this way put the *maid* and her *madame* on equal par. This is also expressed in the title of the series, *Maidames*.

Furthermore, the function of the portrait is altered again when the condition of its visibility changes when seen in the context of the art gallery, a new spectator position emerges. The contemplative act of the gallery visitor/spectator watching the portrait as art tries to make sense of the conditions of its fabrication and eventually possibilities for intervention in what it frames.

### How are Charafeddine's portraits participatory?

Ariella Azoulay's account on how photography can be the primary mediator in the social and political relations among citizens as well as the social relations among citizens, and the power dynamic between them resonates in Charafeddine's *Maidames* series of portraits in which ten migrant workers, Ruby, Bruktayt, Mahlit,



Renka, Judith, Melany, Vera, Hana, Kumari and Nadine were seeking to become equal citizens by means of photography. During the time of their individual portrait photo-shoot, they were the decision makers in what to do with their bodies and how to perform their fantasies. This collaboration between the photographed and the photographer stands for the agreement, the civil contract of photography as Azoulay puts it, a kind of an official contract signed by both parties.

Though the portraits are not selfies in the sense that they are not produced by the subjects using a smartphone and they are not inscribed into a network for the purpose of being liked or linked to hashtags, they visually communicate the aspiration of their subjects to be not only visible but also desirable. They are not shot at the subject's hand length, yet it is the subject in the photo who has chosen to be represented impersonating the celebrity of her choice. To avoid misunderstanding and produce a participatory work, involving the model in decision-making and control over her portrait, Charafeddine compiled a number of celebrity portraits in a catalog that was shared with the female workers who agreed to take part in the project. Melany, Vera, Bruktayt, Ruby and the others made their choices and based on their selected persona Charafeddine developed the artwork in constructing their new selves and the related background while being assisted by a large crew that consisted of the technical director and lighting, the costumes and set designer, the makeup artist and the hair-dresser.

### **How does performance become the subject of the picture?**

Play-acting, theatricality and props are evident throughout Charafeddine's portraiture practice. Melany, Vera, Bruktayt, Ruby and the others seem to acquire an autonomous life of their own. Each of them becomes the author of her story within the imaginary person she has chosen to be. It is not only the makeup and the dress but it is the pose, the attitude, the behavior and the presence that assert the meaning generated by the act. Her presence in the portrait as the glamorous or spiritual figure of her fantasy is testimony of her engagement with theatricality that involves exploring ways that her styled body performs for the camera's gaze.



Figure 3 — Chaza Charafeddine. *Bruktayt with Hat and Cigarette*, 2018. 100 x 70 cm, printed with archival ink on fine art paper and mounted on Dibond paper, 5 editions. © Chaza Charafeddine & Agial Art Gallery.



Figure 4 — Chaza Charafeddine. *Vera in Red*, 2018. 55 x 80cm, printed with archival ink on fine art paper and mounted on Dibond paper, 5 editions. © Chaza Charafeddine & Agial Art Gallery.





Figure 5 — Chaza Charafeddine. *Ruby with the Oud* , 2018. 80 x 55cm, printed with archival ink on fine art paper and mounted on Dibond paper, 5 editions. © Chaza Charafeddine & Agial Art Gallery.

In figure 5, Ruby is playing the *oud*, sitting with a turban on her head in an oriental setting<sup>5</sup>. In figure 4, Vera is standing glamorously in her red dress, her head is slightly leaning backward one hand on her hip the other gracefully held upward to show the diamond bracelets around her wrist, and, in figure 3, Bruktayt is sporting a hat and holding a cigarette, sitting legs apart and looking straight to the view finder. All three are reclaiming their individuality, their interests and aspirations in their portraits. Ruby dreams of becoming a musician, Bruktayt, an actress, and Vera, a diva. To reinforce the message, Charafeddine re-used the strategies employed by painters and photographers to highlight the desirable aspect of her models, the angle, the context, the pose, the hand gesture and most importantly the assertive gaze that confronts the viewer. However, these portraits are not about Melany, Vera, Bruktayt, Ruby and the others who are depicted in Charafeddine's portraits as much as they stand as a voice for all migrant workers in Lebanon.

### What do these portraits say?

These female workers represented in the portraits, left the confines of their employer's domestic space to enter the ephemeral – yet eternalized by the portrait – fictional spaces. Roland Barthes claims «what founds the nature of Photography is the pose» (Barthes, 1981:78). The poses in these portraits offer a way of talking about the anti-essentialist gestures of performance. When shared with the wider public, the portraits become a tool for communication or a means to construct social identity. These portraits remind the viewer of the humanity of the workers, that they have lives outside of the domestic space, and that they have aspirations that transcend their daily domestic chores. To employers who mistreat their domestic worker(s), these portraits are an open dialog about their shared aspiration to become desirable selves, sexually attractive, spiritual or glamorous. And finally, to the domestic workers, these portraits provide them with the possibility to restore their identities, gain power, confidence, and control over their bodies. However, to the general viewer, the portraits are far more complex than that, they make racial difference, deviance, and moral superiority visible. They generate intricate codes that resonate with viewers, *prick* their sensibility (again, echoing Barthes), and help negotiate a sense of a dignified individuality to female domestic migrant workers in Lebanon. As mentioned earlier, Charafeddine's portraits prick the viewer twice, first when looking at migrant workers striking iconic poses and dressing up like celebrity stars. The second prick is when the spectators looks closer to the portrait and discovers the part that went unnoticed at the first sight. *Punctum* and *studium* are the two threads that, together, constitute the materiality of photographic language: on the one hand it is contingency and chance on the other it is predictability and regularity (Barthes, 1981: 5). The *studium*, as explained by Barthes, points directly toward that affective field opened by the image, a field that evokes enjoyment (ibidem, 26). If the *studium* is about the here-and-the-now of the photograph, in Charafeddine's *Maidames* series, it is about as-if-they-were journey of queens, pop stars, and other celebrity icons. Domestic workers are represented using an image-repertoire (or *studium*) of

drag queens, glamour, and fame. The *punctum*, however, another barthesian term used to indicate an interruption in the watching act is in the detail that captures the domestic workers' gaze. Barthes says that the *punctum* is what he has added to the photograph, however, in the case of Charafeddine's portraits, the *punctum* is what is *already there* but was not made visible as the spectator is distracted by the more appealing props in the portraits (ibidem, 27). As we look at Charafeddine's portraits we might miss the point of it.

#### What they don't say (but do reveal)

Looking closer into the portraits, we notice the disturbing reality these portraits highlight, there is an inescapable hint of ambivalence, tension, even perversity, beneath Melany, Vera, Bruktayt and Ruby's cheery performance. Despite their effort to look glamorous, confident and cheerful, the look in their tired eyes reveals something inner to the difficult condition of their real life outside the photograph. The intensity in their look proclaims their daily torments and unsettled living conditions that contradict the codes of the image. It is as if Charafeddine, on purpose, left traces that reveal their real life, to create tension in the photographs. The models' rough and dried skin hands were not manicured, their wrinkles and dark skin complexions were not erased or lightened and their tired eyes were not retouched. In addition to leaving traces of their lives intact in the photo, Charafeddine did not hide marks, or other indication of the use of props such as fake hair and eyebrows. Artificiality is particularly important in this series as these props emphasize the constructed nature of identity and of stereotype. Charafeddine's portraits' success lie in the tension established between the obvious signs of glamour and other desirable codes and the less obvious but still visible references of the model's poor living conditions. Inevitably, the production of tension, the fact that not all attributes to desirable bodies are represented in the photograph prompts the viewer to step outside the boundaries of convention governing Melany, Vera, Bruktayt and Ruby's race and class representation to

discover portraits, loaded with contradictions and excess, that offer alternative selves for the domestic workers while simultaneously presenting a critique of the image of the idealized woman in certain societies.

The photograph is no longer about women performing star personas, spiritual figures and other iconic figures. It is rather about migrant workers who left their families behind to immigrate to Lebanon in order to make a living and support their families back in their country. Working as live-in maids in Lebanese households with unlimited working hours and no breaks, their responsibilities range from cooking to watching the kids to cleaning and managing the household. In their portraits, they are lending their gaze, voicing their aspiration for a life lived in a different way.

Every photographic experience stands for a social agreement between the photographer and the photographed. «Among the users of photography there is a silent agreement over the duality of photography, which is concerned with the way in which the medium of photography links the photographer and his object», explains Azoulay (2005: 43). Both the photographer and the photographed, in the *Maidames* project, assumed that the photograph testifies to what “had been there” yet the photograph can only be a product of a partial version of what appears to the eye of the spectator. The spectator is therefore required to reconstruct what has been there in accessing what is not immediately manifest but can be made visible in the same photograph. Azoulay claims that a photograph is a social agreement, «in order to understand this agreement, it is necessary to interrogate the conditions that brought about its achievement among people who were unfamiliar to one another» (ibidem, 41). The real conditions that brought about these portraits are the domestic-migrant-workers in Lebanon’s stories of wretched lives, poverty and displacement. The women that we see masquerading in Charafeddine’s portraits have different lives that are not made visible in the photograph. What distinguishes photography from painting is that with painting, the painter can hide, cover with



paint or manipulate the portrait, similar to the way el-Madani has retouched the crossed eyed man in his (painted or retouched) photograph. Charafeddine's portraits are not retouched, which turns them into *evidence* or scientific documents that reveal Bruktayt, and the other women's real life conditions. Charafeddine's camera was there to register reality and these portraits confirm how reality is different from us. The focus of Charafeddine's *Maidames* series of portraits is this duality between real life and fantasy that destabilizes the social order. If the unusual, unsettlingly reconfiguration in the portraits is understood as a source of deviance than deviance is what Charafeddine wanted to explore in these portraits.



## NOTES

- 1 More on this event in Beth Baron's "Photography and the Press" in *Egypt as a woman: Nationalism, gender, and politics* (2005), pp. 82-104.
- 2 The *Kafala* system is supported by the Ministry of Labor in Lebanon. It is a system of slavery that requires domestic workers to have a sponsor in their country of employment who is responsible for their legal status and who controls their mobility.
- 3 Prior to the photo-shoot, Charafeddine conducted a series of interviews with a significant number of migrant workers in Lebanon showing them a catalog of media celebrity figures to select from.
- 4 Domestic workers in Lebanon refer to their employers as *Madames*.
- 5 The *oud* is a short-neck, pear-shaped stringed instrument commonly used by musicians in Arab cultures.

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