

Doa Aly; Reflecting on subconscious behavioral patterns

3 video works at Darat Al Funun

The first time I saw Doa's video *The Girl Suspended in Walking* (2009) at Istanbul Biennale I was not sure I understood the piece. I had had the chance to meet Doa in a residency at Makan earlier in 2009 while she was producing her film, and was excited to get the chance to see it. Perhaps it was the long marathon of the biennale that made it difficult to engage with the work. Then, early in 2010 her work was on show at Darat Al Funun in Amman where they were also showing one of her earlier works *A Tress of Hair* (2008), the more recent *Sequence One-In Four Movements* (2010), and a series of drawings on paper.

The video works have a sense of timelessness, and aside to very low unobtrusive bass sounds, the videos have no voice or musical elements in them. For *A Tress of Hair*, subtitles narrate the story while the figures move across the screen in a mechanic timely choreography as if tranced and hypnotized, controlled by repetitive deliberate movements that reoccur throughout the length of the work. Four women and man. The man it seems distressed and trying to get the attention of a woman who is locked in her own world and moves mostly alone. While the remaining three ladies move in synchronicity. The man moves least and repeats a lonely set of hand gestures.

Indirectly, the four women narrate the story of how the girl -they hope- may somehow snap out of her world if she has a child. The movements of the single woman mirrored those of the group; clockwork and mechanical movements that were occasionally broken as she peered through a doorway at her distressed pursuer. At one point the woman and the man come together in a rather disturbing entangle where she, lying down on a chaise-lounge, her head twisting in his lap. I am not sure if he convinced her of being with him, but my impression is that he could not get her out of her world and into his. She seemed to be uncomfortable and her twisting head giving the impression of turmoil and indecisiveness. It came across as if the couple were momentarily in conversation, the woman was attempting to say something she was not able to.



In *The Girl Suspended in Walking*, again a lonely woman seemingly trapped in her own world, inching slowly in a sliding repetitive foot movement that slides her across the floor of a beautifully lit old room. At intervals a man dressed in a black suit mirrors her choreography as if joining the woman in her dream world.

In this work, there are other characters -two men who may be twins dressed in silky purple- are working intently on a drawing board. Are they the jesters or the magicians? We later see that they are drawing an image of the woman (we had seen earlier) on a circular wooden board, which they then roll away in another old deserted building. In this work the narrative does not seem very clear. But similar to *Tress of Hair* the performers move at the same pace and repeat their deliberate and sometimes synchronized movements throughout the work. And after watching a second work by Doa I was curious to the re-occurrence of the circle. Whether this occurred as a physical form, or presented in the choreographed movements of the performers, either way it metaphorically gave the impression of a clock, essentially completing a turn, only to repeat it again.

In both video works, *The Girl Suspended in Walking* and *A Tress of Hair*, I felt that the audience was placed in the position of the voyeur peering into a space and place that is very personal, somewhere they were not meant to be. The light in both films also complemented the dream-like timelessness, and added to the fictive setting. Actually for some reason the fairy-tales of Narnia and the Witch, the Lion and Wardrobe came to mind.

Finally, I sat -after several previous attempts- to watch the *Sequence One-In Four Movements 2010* which is perhaps the most abstract of the three video works, and is purely dependent on repetition lacking in any narrative. One man in a dance leotard is repeated four times performing the same choreography, but not always totally synchronized. In horizontal form, they are set against a background of repetitive pattern. Three figures face to the right, one faces to the left. Throughout the 8 minutes of the work, the figures carry out a set of leg movements only; slow and deliberate. In this work there is more a feeling of being suspended in time, and we get less of the immediate magic and dream like space created in the other two video works. But at some point the memento of the work formed a hypnosis. It seems that by allowing enough time for the rhythm of the work to set in, the initial frustration or incomprehension subsides. The figures continue through their movements and at some point one figure turns to the opposite direction, and we have two figures facing each other. After a synchronized set of movements, the work comes to an end.

In the exhibition statement it explained that the videos are "(an) ... investigation into deviant behavior, studying its transformation from the subjective to the projected image when exposed to different situations and contexts...the human body expresses the conflict of moving from the old self to the new one"¹. Can this be read in the final outcome of the work *Sequence One-In Four Movements* when the figures become symmetrical, identical, conformist?

¹ http://www.daratalfunun.org/main/activit/curentl/ahlam_doa_raed/d.htm

Overall the works seemed reflective of an inner preoccupation with the human subconscious, intimate behavioral patterns, dynamics of relationships and time. I asked the artist about her obsession with (what I personally read) as the clock/time or the circle that these are presented most clearly in the movement of the women in *A Tress of Hair*. It is also seen in the spherical drawing board used as a prop by the twin boys in *The Girl Suspended in Walking*. Doa explained that in her works "the tempo in the choreography is timed with the pace of human breathing"². This tempo works for both the performers and the audience. On the one hand, the tempo allowed the performers to relax and retreat into their own world, becoming more oblivious to the camera. On the other, this tempo also absorbs the viewer as their own breathing patterns synchronize with the timely motions of the choreography.

Perhaps at first, Doa's videos do not give themselves up so easily to the viewer. For me *A Tress of Hair* was the entry point into attuning with the subtle layers that bring the work together. Maybe the narrative played a part in making it easier to understand the absurdities and intimate readings into the human mind. Clearly, from the artists' statements a certain quietness is needed to allow oneself the time to synchronize with the rhythm of the work.

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² Conversation in the artists' studio, Cairo March 5th 2010