

Waar is Aïcha?

In my studio at the Van Eyck last summer I tried to produce images that make sense of a world that I share with young women who choose to join ISIS, leaving Europe to begin a new life in Syria and Iraq. The paintings are an attempt to bridge a gap that exists between me and them, to find to represent their radicalization, and sometimes their return. They are also to help me understand why I want to make this work.

I follow around two hundred Twitter feeds belonging to women aligned with ISIS, whether in IS territories, or in Europe. The Internet does what it does best and folds the geography and time between us. I start to notice when they wake up and go to sleep, the languages they hop between, phrases they enjoy or use to fit in, bursts of anger, moments of vulnerability behind the opacity of the ‘ninja’ niqab.

I worry I’m becoming a fan-girl, impressed by their audacity, their ongoing battles with social media censorship, and their new politicizations of the domestic realm. Their awareness and understanding of cyberwar, swarming, agile warfare, and propaganda, means we can’t reduce them to naive teenagers. The determination required to make the trip, in your teens, to a place as unknown as IS territory, and the possibility of never being able to come back, is still a rarity in an age of clicktivism.

Am I challenging the narrative of the academic research of think tanks that take a similar interest in this phenomenon? I have no boundaries imposed by an institution that funds and uses my research to their own ends. I can talk to whomever I want, and in whatever manner I think is appropriate. Above all I speak with transparency. I don’t use VPNs, I don’t change my name (its already a pseudonym), and I never try to entrap these women into revealing anything that would compromise them. Somewhere, mutual respect and trust must grow. Through my research into the “grey belt” that runs across Northern Europe, through Brussels, Liege, Maastricht, and Aachen - places that have become associated with extremist sleeper cells, recruitment and youth frustration - I come across Aïcha.

Aïcha
is just metres away from
where I sit in my studio. But she wasn't
so close a couple of years ago.

In 2013, aged 18, Sterlina Petalo of Maastricht converted to Islam and changed her name to Aïcha. She spent more and more time online, chatting to ISIS fighters and other like-minded people, and apparently developed a crush on the media-savvy Omar 'Israfil' Yilmaz, who starred in many propaganda videos and openly chatted with admirers on Kik and Twitter. He liked posting lots of pictures of guns and kittens, which made him a cuddly kind of soldier.

Aïcha's behaviour obviously set off some alarm bells, because the authorities removed her passport in order to stop her travelling. However, she defied this ban by using her ID card to take the train from the Netherlands to Turkey, and beyond into Syria, in February 2014

By the end of the same month she had married Yilmaz. Although everything started out well, the marriage didn't last long, and they divorced soon after. Aïcha goes off the radar for several months, although she has some sporadic contact with her family. She is said to have remarried, this time to a Tunisian fighter, and relocated to Raqqa.

After hearing nothing for several months, Monique Verbert, Aïcha's mother, tried to make her way to Syria to find her, but she was unable to cross the border. Soon after, Aïcha contacted her mother and told her she wanted to come home. They were reunited on 17th November but were briefly detained at the border as Aïcha had no passport. When they finally arrived back in the Netherlands a couple of days later, Aïcha was arrested and taken into police custody on suspicion of "crimes threatening state security."

Aïcha was released on bail on 25th November, under certain conditions outlined by the court. These conditions were not made public, but we know that one requirement was that she was not allowed to speak to the press. In May 2015 she was tried and charges of participating in jihad were dropped due to lack of evidence.

Sterlina, Lina Lina, Aïcha, Sinbad Hoofd Callemijn. She, like many of the girls I follow, uses several avatars in the online world, and the real one. I know from speaking to her lawyer that she still goes by Aïcha since her return to Maastricht. I follow her on Facebook and try and deduce her whereabouts more precisely, as she 'Likes' the Turkish supermarket just minutes from my own front door, and discusses drop-off points for kids clothes to be donated to charity in the centre of town. She is so close, but still unknowable.

I try
and reach out: through her
lawyer; her mother; commenting dis-
creetly on her feed. Just little things to open up a
window so that she knows I'm here and I'm interested,
so that I'm not just a voyeur. Because it often feels that way
before contact is made, and I'm trying for something more akin
to a dialogue, even though the paintings won't use words. Is this ab-
straction enough to avoid the legal restrictions that surround her?

I start to look more carefully at the photos in her Facebook feed, those she has taken herself at home, and those from Syria. These days its mostly memes, slogans and gifs, nothing really personal. A year ago there were a few photos from when she was away but even these don't give away many clues: A close-up on a can of Pepsi (she craves sugar, as many IS girls seem to yearn for Nutella and talk about it constantly); a non-descript Syrian rooftop sunset (another favourite share on blogs and feeds); pictures taken by another person (I think her sister) presenting her new self under the veil. Its like she zooms in and out again, micro to macro, but it's impossible to gain any focus in the middle ground. Impossible to make her out.

All of these pictures are still up online and available for anyone to see, as she hasn't used any privacy settings to protect her identity. If I was her lawyer I might have suggested a little more caution from prying eyes. Like mine. There isn't much difference between what I see here and the Twitter accounts I follow – and they get shut down all the time. Except perhaps there is: a slight, almost indiscernible shadow, that suggests that someone else is watching this account, checking its content for breach of a possible condition of release.

The images these girls post have been screen-grabbed and spliced together with stock images of women-in-niqabs-walking-down-dirt-roads-in-dusty-landscapes for BuzzFeed and Daily Mail articles which try to tell a picture-based story. But the images seem to evade this: they aren't meant for distribution or propaganda; they don't contain the information we need to extract. They are throw-away content, something that perhaps would never circulate if it wasn't for the lack of anything better to latch onto. They will disappear, lost in newspaper archives, server shut-downs, and the failing memory of computer hard disks. So how does one make paintings about this subject without relying on or reproducing the pngs and jpegs that circulate constantly online, and the idea of the image which is reproduced by them?

I take a lesson directly from Aïcha's own photos, the pointers that lead the imagination towards what we think happened, because honestly, we don't really have any idea. Those images, like the experience itself, are ungraspable. They are slippery.

My
paintings also try for a story
that isn't there, or can't be told for legal
reasons, but they deploy the language of the ani-
conic, which goes deep beyond the surface layer of in-
formation. Rather than trying to communicate an experience,
they create a record of these transitory times, these ephemeral
journeys, and acknowledge that there are limits to our knowledge, to
our understanding.

The pattern that fills these paintings is based on the return key, familiar from every keyboard on the planet. This key has a history and a double meaning. Its name means to come back, to start over, to make a new space and a new start. It also means to enter, to confirm, to OK. Coming home can also be a change in direction – although not necessarily a moral or philosophical about-turn. Its about recognizing that things change and maybe you don't want to be where you thought you did, and maybe that's OK too. Because when we are young, we all make some pretty radical choices. It doesn't mean we have to follow them for the rest of our lives.

I'm glad Aïcha is back with her family, who clearly love her dearly. I'm also glad she didn't face charges for her decisions, and is able to re-enter society and forge new links with it, without compromising her religious convictions and community. I hope one day I will be able to share these paintings with her.

Navine G. Khan-Dossos
Athens, December 2015

Navine G. Khan-Dossos (b. 1982) is a visual artist, based in Athens. One of the preoccupations of her practice is the complex relationship between Islam and the West. Khan-Dossos approach to her research is rooted in a traditionally 'western' History of Art education, whilst her painting is based on a rigorous training in the philosophy and crafts of Islamic art. Her interests include Orientalism in the digital realm, geometry as information and decoration, image calibration, and Aniconism in contemporary culture.

During 2014 – 2015, she has been a participant at the Van Eyck in Maastricht.

She has exhibited and worked with various institutions, including The Museum of Islamic Art (Doha), Witte de With (Rotterdam), The Delfina Foundation (London), Leighton House Museum (London), The Benaki Museum (Athens) and the A.M. Qattan Foundation (Ramallah). She has published work in *The White Review* and *The Happy Hypocrite*.

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