



Source: Ed O'Loughlin, 'The eyes have it. Muslim women win role in Palestinian body politic', *The Age online*, 24/01/06.

Tags: [art](#), [chance](#), [intimacy](#), [film](#)

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I wasn't quite sure if I betrayed myself in front of her. I was for once pleasantly relieved to be able to hide behind the lens. Usually I liked to set up a shot and then keep a dialogue with the model, engaging them, eliciting from them the reactions, smiles and quirks of facial features that make for fine photographs. But not on that day. That day it was as if the roles had been reversed, as if it were she behind the lens gently instructing a camera shy young model on how to sit, how to smile.

'Don't look so serious.'

'Can you smile a bit more? Relax your shoulders.'

I was the one laughing nervously, unaware of my relation to the space, sweating more than usual—way more than usual—and all the while she sat calmly. The shadows from the window fell across her skirt in perfect lines and then following the pattern up, the illusion shattered as the bend in her body revealed the distortion of the masquerading shadow.

Years later and even though I took this photograph, I still get seduced by this illusion of lines that lead up to the skivvy; the grace of her neck coming from her ballet dancer's back held firm by arms resting as a feline. Then the sharp curve of her jawline, lips small but not thin, petite nose rounded at the end and her eyes—pools in whose thick molasses I still find myself flailing—looking as far to the right as they possibly can, staring right out through the lens and piercing my innards. I never thought that it was possible to fall in love with such haste, with the aid of only a few gentle words, the feeling accentuated by a surety that they weren't reciprocated.

'Would you move a little to the right?'

'Like this?'

'Yes that's fine, and can you spread your skirt out a little on the right there? Perfect, now just turn your head a little more towards me and bring your chin up a tiny bit...Wonderful.'

And so we went on like that for some hours. She changed outfits many times and we spoke quietly as we changed locations, taking photos in every corner of the room. At some point I stopped sweating and began to relax. She told me about her wedding planned for later in the year and a chicken casserole recipe that I promised I would try and now cannot remember. After she left I went to the darkroom and began to print. The skirt photo turned out to be my favourite and after looking at it for the first time, its power palpable even in the red light, I walked out to the settee upon which she had sat. Rain had come and was singing a rhythmic lament against the panes. The reflection of the drops running down the window had destroyed the clarity of the lines. I felt an immense wave of sadness and I groaned audibly from an imaginary penknife digging through my breastplate, sliding through

muscle and ribs and stopping, sated as it parked itself slowly in a chamber of my heart. I went to the bathroom and vomited. And then masturbated. It was nearly dark by then and I let the cold sweat dry sitting on the toilet, choking back the bitterness of my freshly risen lunch, cheered dully by the knowledge that I had captured the brief moment where light, shadow and subject combined in such a way.

From afar, she seems to be smiling, almost a cheeky smile, suggesting the possibility of cracking into something larger and more welcoming but the closer one moves to the picture the divide between what her mouth says and what her eyes are holding back is fully illuminated. I sometimes wonder about all the hours I have spent looking at her picture and other things I might have done in that time. At the end of a particularly hard patch, Arabella walked out after finding me sitting in the study, dawn rising around me with the picture sitting large on the desk. Unfortunately she was neither the first nor the last.

At a society party ten years later, our paths crossed again and we spoke for 15 minutes about her new movie. She bubbled excitedly about how much she had loved the skirt picture and what a lovely day that had been. 'Peaceful' was a word she used and I laughed inside and agreed outside as she made me take down her address so I could send her some more prints.

'Shall I send them to your agent?'

'No, no don't be silly! Then I shan't ever see them, I will forget and the agent will forget and then they'll sit on top of a pile of mail and then they'll be obscured and then who knows how long before anyone ever looks at them. No you must send them to the house and if you're over my way please let me know. You and your wife must come for casserole.'

'Oh yes, the casserole...'

'...'

'Well I shall do, lovely to see you again and erm...Good luck with *Charade*.'

'Thank you. It was delightful to see you too. Goodnight.'

I did send the photos some months later and promptly received a card of thanks, again urging that I visit if I found myself in New York. A year later I was again in Manhattan with a spare day and rang the phone number under the address, the paper crinkled and faded from its long journey through the confines of my wallet since the party. On the first try, the number rang out. Later that night I tried again but hung up when a man answered, cursing my own irrational behaviour.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Declan Kelly.*