Chosen

Presented by Galerie Camille

Nour Ballout
Shterna Goldbloom

Table of Contents

Exhibition Statement 7

Who's Invited, by Sascha Crasnow & SJ Crasnow 11

Shterna Golbloom 17

Nour Ballout 31

Muslims in North America 35

Transitions | Transformations...45

Exhibition Statement

"Chosen" is an exhibit by Shterna Goldbloom and Nour Ballout that seeks to bring together cultures and experiences that often seem opposite or contradictory: Jewish and Islamic religions and traditions, and faith and queerness. Both queer artists from religious backgrounds, Goldbloom and Ballout pull from their different faith experiences and upbringings to ask how art can be a space for conversation, community building, and reimagining spirituality. The exhibit begins with two tables, one for Ballout's Ramadan iftar dinner table and the other for Goldbloom's traditional Shabbos table. The table, both an art piece and a performance space, is also the place where the two works reclaim long-held customs and rituals of breaking bread and building kinship. Placing the two tables side by side blurs Jewish and Islamic cultures, disrupting false lines between religions, nation-states, peoples, and genders.

When Goldbloom and Ballout first met they quickly found home in one another's shared experiences of family and faith. Both grew up in religious families and communities, Goldbloom in the Lubavitch Hasidic sect in Chicago and Ballout in a religious Shia family in Beirut and later Dearborn Michigan. While in many ways these experiences were not comparable, Ballout and Goldbloom connected over the difficulties they faced while grappling with the contradictions of fundamentalism, the allure of religious communities, and as queer individuals in their environments. Both Goldbloom and Ballout have explored these themes through the medium of photography, sculpture, and performance art. Ballout began their training in photography in Detroit at Wayne State University, and then continued their education within an MFA program at the School of The Art Institute of Chicago. There they explored lookind as both a site of resistance and violence, developing a practice that negotiates the tension between the both in a single photograph, in attempts to achieve new possibilities in liberation themself from the gaze. Goldbloom studied fine art photography at Columbia College, and then continued their training at an MFA at the Rhode Island School of Design. There, they produced a thesis photographing Queer Jews who grew up religious, and reproduced the images on recycled sacred Torah scrolls, reinserting those forgotten individuals back within the Jewish canon.

With “Chosen,” Ballout and Goldbloom bring together their individual art practices to take these themes further, asking not only about their own religious backgrounds, but the way that their respective faiths have been pitted against one another. Both Goldbloom and Ballout use their art practice to trespass and challenge taboos. Placing the Ramadan iftar and Shabbos table side by side invites the viewer, and dinner guest, to find surprising points of connections between the two meals. But rather than collapse differences between the two cultures, traditions, and religions, “Chosen” is interested in keeping distinction alongside connection. In a space that’s traditionally meant for family—the ritual meal, and the dinner table—this exhibit poses a new set of questions, a dinner table conversation for the gallery. As the title suggests, Goldbloom and Ballout probe what it means to be chosen: for Jews, for Muslims, and particularly, for queers from religious backgrounds who are often forced to find community and tradition in chosen family.

Ballout’s work is intimately concerned with the process of photography. For Ballout, taking the photo is not solely in the hands of the photographer. The photographer and their subject are collaborators, challenging who we think owns the photograph, and if an image can be truly owned. Because once the photograph is displayed, the viewer becomes a collaborator too, whether they seek to be or not. The act of viewing Ballout’s work is an invitation to participate, resembling the chosen nature of queer families and communities. In “Chosen,” Ballout literalizes these questions. Before embarking on photographing, Ballout shares space with the sitter. They break bread together, establishing a connection. This act invites the viewer to consider how artists can photograph ethically, respecting the sensitive stories they portray and including the sitter in the work. The artistic choice, in addition to the choices of faith and family, is central to Ballout’s photography and performance.

Portraiture is also central to Goldbloom’s work, much of which features portraits of Goldbloom in religious and biblical drag, experimenting with their own image in unexpected forms. By placing themselves in the work, Goldbloom continually challenges the accepted narratives on which Jews, of which genders, belong in Jewish communal, and public spaces. More recently, Goldbloom has expanded to include the manipulation of sacred objects in their work, blurring the lines not just of who can belong, but what it is that gets passed on and made holy. In Goldbloom’s most recent exhibit, “Havruta,” Goldbloom photographed lush and distorted pines, visualizing a study about Israel’s occupation of Palestinian land, and destruction of ancient Olive trees in the West Bank. In “Chosen,” Goldbloom reclaims Jewish traditions wielded toward violence by the Israeli state, placing them in a context of queer chosen community.

The blend of Goldbloom and Ballout’s work, art practices, and communities come together in “Chosen” to create a unique exhibit, one that is part photography, performance art, protest art, and community building. “Chosen” will feature photographic and installation works from both artists. Included in the frame are portraits, stills, and abstract work, depicting the stories of people who fit between the usual gender and religious categories, landscapes, and those who linger at the borderline. It celebrates the experience of being undefined and living in contradictions. Both tables will be used to reimagine customs and rituals of iftar and Shabbos meals. Ballout instalations explore themes of customs, diaspora, and chosen family. Beyond the work itself, Ballout and Goldbloom align in their process, in the care they show the people they photograph and their stories. “Chosen” is the culmination of their work, friendship, life experiences, and fantasies for the future.

Who's Invited?

by Sascha Crasnow & SJ Crasnow

Dinner tables are at the center of Chosen. The dinner table is a gathering place for family—the families that we're born into or those we have cultivated ourselves. In thinking about images of family dinners, one that comes to mind is that of Norman Rockwell's Four Freedoms series, Freedom from Want. The painting features a white-clothed dinner table adorned with crisp white flatware, silver cutlery and salt and pepper shakers, and the typical culinary features of an American Thanksgiving dinner—from the can-shaped cranberry sauce to the large turkey. At the head of the table stand an older white man and woman, both gray-haired. He wears a suit and she, a blue floral print with white apron overlaid, a garment which surprisingly reveals no trace of the kitchen labor that must have gone into preparing this meal. Nine other figures, visible only by their heads and an occasional hand, line the two sides of the table, smiling at each other as if in a joyful conversation. In this classic scene of the American family, everyone is white.[1] The man and woman at the head of the table embody stereotypical heteronormative gender roles—she places the turkey on the table for him to carve. While Thanksgiving is not a religious holiday, the Christian nature of American nationalism, especially in a less racially and religiously diverse 1940s U.S., implies a white, middle-class, Christian family. A man in the lower right corner of the image gazes away from the rest of his tablemates to look out and up at the viewer—a gaze that, depending on one's relationship to the white, middle class, heteronormative scene that Rockwell portrays, might be read as inviting you to sit down, or singling you out as an interloper.

For those whose identities and lives exist outside of the prescribed bounds of hegemonic normativity, an invitation to participate in "traditional" rituals and their accompanying normative expectations can be anxiety-provoking. Some are no longer welcome to participate in these rituals with their families of origin at all. These realities drive some to seek out their own, chosen, families. The dinner

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[1]Hank Willis Thomas, Emily Shur, Eric Gottesman and Wyatt Gallery reimagined this series in 2018 as part of the Four Freedoms project and reflected the greater diversity of the contemporary United States.

table, as a "traditional" symbol of family, brings both Ballout and Goldbloom to it as a site to create their own spaces for community. Creating tables for Iftar and a Shabbos meal respectively, the artists engage with notions of chosen family, innovated ritual, and what it means to invite someone into the sacred spaces of your community.

In their photographic works, both Goldbloom and Ballout play with notions of belonging and invitation. Two photos depict similar scenes that evoke upshernish or the ritual cutting of the hair of a Jewish boy for the first time around three years old.[2] In one of the photos, three, presumably Hasidic, men surround a child. One attends to the child's hair, another offers a phone screen to distract the child, and the third, who is dressed in a traditional black hat and suit, holds the child.[3] While all three adults in the photo are wearing protective face masks commonly worn because of COVID-19, the man holding the child has a look of joy on his face that reaches his eyes. In the second photo, two adults – one who is non-binary and the other a woman– stand near the child. While the other photo depicts a bright room, this room is dark with light shining on the face of the child and the foregrounded adult. These adults do not wear facemasks—possibly indicating that this is a private family space—and both have light, serene smiles on their faces. The adult who brushes the child's hair has visible tattoos and piercings along with a stark haircut, unconventional aesthetics often associated with queerness. The other adult stands in profile, foregrounded so that their face and arm frame the photo. This framing along with the low light in the photo create a feeling of an enclosed space, like a cocoon. Perhaps this is a queer space, safe from dominant norms.

Even making these assumptions, the trappings of these juxtaposed photos, in one "traditional" and the other potentially "non-traditional," might lead to binary conclusions that flatten complexity. For example, assuming queerness and liberty in one photo and cis-straightness and restriction in the other, or even that one shows what is "traditional" and the other shows what is not, are assumptions based in binaries. These narratives can oversimplify the messy reality that queerness is present in many places we do not expect, that what is considered "traditional" is constructed rather than natural, and that liberty and restriction are often in tension with one another in any given community. Goldbloom is aware of these complexities, and upshernish itself embodies the tension that surrounds the concept of "tradition." Despite its categorization as a "traditional" ritual, which is often conflated with a timeless existence, the ritual (like Hasidic Judaism itself) has a historic origin. It has been traced back to at least the 16th century, though it is not believed to have become a popular Jewish practice until the 17th century. The reality that traditions are not timeless leaves open questions about how and why these traditions arose, about who created them, and about who the traditions include or exclude. These questions are posed to the `viewers of these works with the potential to reveal more about the viewers than those who are depicted.

Ballout similarly engages viewers in a push and pull, inviting them in, yet denying full access. For their photographic series of queer Muslim Americans, they spent time in residency with their sitters, collaborating on the photographs they ultimately produced. Their sitters invited Ballout into their sacred spaces, their homes, and allowed their images and their lives to be shared with the public. However, knowing the precarious position that Muslims, queer folks, and particularly queer Muslims occupy in America, Ballout denies full access to the individuals they photograph. For example, in one photograph from the series, a couple appears in bed, turned toward each other presumably in intimate conversation. While the viewer can make out that there are two figures in a private moment, identifying details of the subjects are denied–the focus of the camera rests on a piece of fabric that hangs partway over the doorway, rendering everything beyond the threshold a blur. As viewers, we are given access to witness the reality of queer Muslim intimacy, but denied full inclusion, a protectionist mediating measure.

Using blurring, positioning, and even layering glass over images, Ballout obfuscates what is depicted, denying the viewer access, and therefore control over, the narratives being told about their sitters. This denial of full access is also true when Ballout is the subject of their own work, as in their documentation of their

[2] Upsherin is the Yiddish word for the ritual used by Ashkenazi Jews, while Sephardi Jews call it halaqah, which comes from Arabic.
[3] The Popsocket on the back of the phone has a yellow sticker that says "Messiah" in red Hebrew lettering and has a blue crown. This imagery indicates the belief that Chabad-Lubavich Rabbi, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, is the messiah (he died in the 1990s). The question of his messianic status is divisive in Chabad as well as in other Jewish communities.

transition. In their video work, included in the exhibition, Ballout appears on a beach topless, their torso marked by both tattoos and the scars from their top surgery. Ballout takes sand from the beach and rubs it over their chest, accompanied by the audio of their voice saying "she brought me here to heal" repeatedly–the phrase overlaid so it sounds like many voices–a cacophony of sound that at times renders the sentiment difficult to parse. Additional obfuscation comes from the fact that the framing is cropped such that Ballout's torso is the only part of them visible–their head and everything below their mid-torso denied to the viewer. This framing and Ballout's positioning on a beach elicit the ludicrousness of the regulation of what kind of gendered bodies are and are not deemed "inappropriate" when their shirts are removed. The beach becomes a place to heal from gendered notions of one's own body, both internalized and those that are projected from outside by those who witness, assess, identify, and categorize one's body. The role of water in cleansing rituals in all Abrahamic religions (wudu, mikvah, baptism) also comes to mind. The repetition of statement and gesture, as well as reference to "traditional" Muslim purification (wudu) suggests an adapted ritual–a cleansing of sorts with the sand. Wudu is traditionally performed with water, and salt water is notably permissible, however, if water is not available sand may be used for ritual purification instead. In using sand when water is readily available Ballout makes a consciously unconventional choice in defiance of "tradition." In opting for sand instead of water, Ballout queers the ritual– choosing their own cleansing and healing process rather than the one normatively prescribed.

Ballout remarks in the opening of the show's press release, "I am nostalgic for a body I've yet to inhabit."[4] This sentiment of longing for a body that one has not yet lived in is relatable for many trans folks. There is a desire for belonging in oneself that is both related to community but also firmly embodied. For individuals whose identities bridge communities that are often seen as in conflict with each other—such as queer and religious communities—the challenge is finding home in liminality, in the inbetween spaces. Perhaps the notion of doykayt, a Yiddish word meaning "hereness" is helpful in this respect—the notion of finding home not in a fixed geographic site on a map, but as something that moves with you—home as embodied experience.[5] While doykayt references a particular Ashkenazi sentiment, the broader concept of "diaspora" could also be thought of in this way–as a "hereness," rather than as a scattering from elsewhere. Part of embracing "hereness," is embracing relationships, and community; it is finding one's chosen family wherever one goes.

In the works that make up this exhibition, Ballout and Goldbloom invite viewers to witness their families. But they are also protective of them. The invitation allows access in part, not whole. We are invited to the dinner table, but a version of Rockwell's figure cautiously eyeing us remains. This time rather than making sure we will not disrupt normativity, a queer gaze keeps the viewer at bay as a protective gesture, guarding these families against anyone who might wish them harm.

[4] A play on Eduardo Galeano's "I'm nostalgic for a country which doesn't exist on a map."

[5] "Doykayt" was articulated by the left-wing Jewish Labor Bund.

Shterna Goldbloom

Ever since I was very small, my mother met the sunsets on Friday night with a crisp tablecloth, tall candlesticks, and a spread of purple cabbage, challah, and eggplant. Waving hands over the candles seemed to physically usher in a peace, like the whole house warmed up with Shabbos. When I was young they taught me this was called the "Shabbos spice," angels descending upon our home to greet the Shabbos queen with us. I've since realized that the warmth I felt as a child was the way the people of my life would wind down together week after week, year after year. Over time, our home contracted and expanded, as children left and returned, sometimes bringing new friends and chosen family with them, but our Friday nights stayed constant. We flocked to the table, laughing at our bullshit weeks, razzing on each other, celebrating joys, sharing in griefs and heartbreaks, always with the same warm challah, eggplant and cabbage sprinkled with craisons and pickles. Shabbos began to feel like a hug I carried in my arms and could wrap other people in, wherever I went. Moving across cities and visiting new homes and communities, I've carried the Shabbos I knew to the spaces I didn't, challenging the traditions I knew to see how far I could stretch them. Shabbos has always been a way for me to connect with my family, but with this exhibition, I wanted to explore how Shabbos could take me beyond the people and life I knew to find moments of overlap with the people I've chosen to make family with too — the queers, rabbis, artists, and heretics I want to break bread with.

Nour Ballout

“I’m nostalgic for a country which doesn’t yet exist on a map”
Eduardo Galeano

I’m nostalgic for a body I’ve yet to inhabit

WARNING
DO NOT
TOUCH POOL
EQUIPMENT

Thank you to the Aaron Family Foundation
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