**Lili Almog’s Language of the Gaze**

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What is the meaning of covering and revealing a woman’s body? Which body parts does a culture worry about covering? How does this covering affect those who look at the covered body? What role do imagination and reality play in the practices of covering and revealing?

In his essay “The Look” the French philosopher Jean-Claude Sartre (1905 - 1980) discusses the relationship between the observer and the observed object. Sartre’s essay follows the argument of Czech-German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859 - 1938) in his essay “Philosophy as a Strict Science” on the relationship between the self and the other. Husserl argues that the subject’s gaze nullifies the other who is in front of him, denies him his identity and thus makes him an object. Sartre argued the opposite, that it is the observer who becomes an object by virtue of his own gaze. The act of looking nullifies the self. Thus, at the heart of the drama of the gaze is the other, the person being observed.

The images of women created by photographer and artist Lili Almog in the book before us lie precisely along this seam, between observer and observed, between object and subject, between self and other, between what is and what is not. Historically, it was always the male gaze that was directed at the female body, in both reality and art. These photographed images depict the barriers that exist between the female body and the world. These barriers are sometimes a product of choice and sometimes a product of compulsion. In either case, these barriers change the landscape, affect it, and evoke a wide range of emotions in the viewer. The covered body is simultaneously an aesthetic accessory, a prison or obstacle, and a statement to the world.

While covering the body attempts to make us forget what is beneath it, the nakedness, it emphasizes what is beneath the covering even more. The covering is intriguing, stimulating, and appealing. The viewer of the image becomes a compulsive voyeur, because awareness of the covered nakedness burrows within his consciousness during the viewing: his own covered nudity facing the covered nudity of the woman in the photograph at which he is looking. Observing Almog’s photographs increases the observer’s awareness of his own naked body, vis à vis the covered bodies in the images. Therefore, the viewers create a powerful emotional dialogue – an internal dialogue in which they are confronted with social ethics and religious practices that are often foreign to them. Both the artist and the viewers give birth to themselves as observing subjects via the covered female figures. At the same time, they confront their awareness of the woman presented before them, who sees but is not seen. Moreover, the observers become partners in concealment, partners in the secret. The artist dresses and undresses, covers and reveals. Thus, the viewers become secret partners of the photographed women, as they make a contract about what is not shown to him: a bare foot, an exposed face, an outstretched hand.

Therefore, it is specifically the images that portray a woman with her face uncovered that are strange in the world constructed in this book. In this world, a covered woman’s gaze towards those who look at her is hidden, but this does not mean that it does not exist. On the contrary, a woman who sees but is not seen can be threatening. She is a quiet observer of the world, without revealing her attitudes and feelings towards the objects of her observation. Does she see who is looking at her? Is she happy? Satisfied? Or perhaps miserable and sad? Is she forever in a world that she watches and longs to be part of? In all of these images, the women’s facial expressions are camouflaged and obscured. This may produce fear and aversion towards her. At the same time, it empowers her.

One series of images in the book plays with radicalized ideas of nudity and coverage, through an intertextual dialogue with classical works of art. For example, the statue of Venus is portrayed with her upper body naked while folds of cloth cover her pelvis and legs. Almog presents a negative image of the statue, showing a woman whose upper body is fully covered but her legs are bare. In both cases, the vanishing point is the female pubic area, to which the gaze of the observers is directed. In fact, as viewers of these images, we all function, repeatedly, as voyeurs of what is supposed to be hidden but is actually made far more present through being concealed.

These images illustrate and reinforce the fact that despite all the efforts to conceal the female body, no matter how much of it is covered, that will never be sufficient to diminish the inherent erotic desire of the encounter between the sexes. This encounter is so threatening to culture in general and to certain individuals in particular, that various limitations enforcing female modesty characterize most major religions. These limitations and laws of modesty are remarkably similar to each other, producing a strong visual identity that makes it difficult to discern to which religion each image belongs. In fact, the only authentic photographs in the book show Jewish women.

The human imagination has always been fascinated what one wants to see but cannot. At the center of this obsession is the nude female body. No wonder, then, that covering and revealing the female body is so prevalent in stories, legends, and myths, as well as in the visual arts. In fact, such cultural expressions are more about looking than they are about the body itself. One ancient folk tale tells of a king who imposes three apparently impossible tasks on the daughter of one of his subjects. She must come to him when she is satisfied and not satisfied, clothed and unclothed, riding and not riding. The girl gave this some thought, then she appeared before the king cracking seeds, wearing a fishing net, and riding on a sheep so small that her feet were touching the ground. Then the king knew she was the wisest girl in the kingdom and asked her father for her hand in marriage.

This folk tale metamorphized, and was later linked to an historic event which supposedly took place in the 11th century, in which Earl Leofric, ruler of the English city of Coventry, agreed to reduce taxes on the townspeople on the condition that his wife, Lady Godiva, would ride naked on horseback through the city streets. According to one version of the story, Lady Godiva was not completely naked, but rather, like the girl in the folk tale, she wore a transparent dress that revealed her body while hiding it. The story of Lady Godiva goes on to tell that the townspeople, who had great respect for their rulers, did not dare to watch her parade of humiliation. Only one Peeping Tom peeked at her nudity and immediately went blind as punishment for dishonoring the ruler’s noble wife. These stories, of course, echo the command given by King Ahasuerus (a main character in the biblical Book of Esther) to Queen Vashti to come naked to his banquet, so that his guests could look at her. Vashti is killed for her refusal, which opens the way for Esther to take her place as queen.

These stories and legends bear silent testimony to the lives of the people who preserved the traditions in their collective memory. Did they invent stories about naked women because in reality they only saw women who were covered? Is nudity a deviation from the norm of the acceptable, conformist, decent, and modest? What about the nude women in paintings from the Renaissance through early modern era? Do these paintings express a male transgression, which creates an alternative to the conservative reality and group norms of modesty? These stories and works of art raise many questions about the nature of the relationship between the observing eye and the observed object, the central question being, who is actually at the center of the great drama of looking.

Even the Hebrew Bible mentions women wrapped in veils: “In that day, my LORD will strip off the finery of the anklets, the fillets, and the crescents; of the eardrops, the bracelets, and the veils;” (Isaiah 3:18-19 NJPS translation). As early as the second century CE Jewish law records that: “Arab women go out veiled” (Mishnah, Tractate *Shabbat*, Halacha 6, Mishnah 6), referring to custom of women in the East to cover themselves in veils. Interestingly, there is no explicit commandment in the Qur'an and Hadith for women to cover themselves, aside from the statement that the wives of the Prophet Muhammad were covered. The conclusion that all Muslim women should be covered is derived from this (Qur'an, Sura 33, verse 53). In fact, the norm of women being covered as an expression of virtuous modesty comes from Persian and Byzantine-Christian cultures.

At the same time, it should be emphasized that in Judaism in particular, modesty is not synonymous with a dress code. The virtue of modesty refers to personality characteristics and patterns of behavior, rather than appearance. Similarly, covering a bride’s face to hide it from the groom during the marriage ceremony is an ancient practice, mentioned as early as the book of Genesis (29:25) in the story of Jacob’s marriage to Leah instead of her sister Rachel. If Leah’s face had not been covered, the switch could not have taken place.

A sculpture by Raffaello Monti titled “A Circassian Slave in the Marketplace of Constantinople” (1851) shows a woman with her face covered. This recalls the Biblical story of Tamar (the wife of Judah’s son, Er), who disguises herself as a roadside prostitute and covers herself with a veil so that Judah will not recognize her (Genesis 14: 14-15). This veiling indeed characterized women who engaged in prostitution in ancient times.

These references from Jewish and Muslim sources place the covering of women between the positive and the negative, between the forbidden and the permissible, between strength and weakness, between protection and vulnerability. Rather than attesting to a religious obligation for women to be covered, they strongly suggest adherence to social norms and folk customs.

Today, the Western world is increasingly exposed to covered women, especially migrants from Western Asia and North Africa to Europe and the United States. Covered women are increasingly seen in the public space, sometimes arousing surprise, sometimes curiosity, and sometimes anger. On the one hand, a covered woman protects her privacy in the public space, but she is also highly prominent in this space, to the point of expropriating her privacy. The covering is designed to protect her from being seen, but in fact it exposes her to people’s gaze. A contemporary woman who is fully covered woman must deal with this paradoxical situation in the public space.

The photographed female images in Almog’s book are a continuation of a series of works she created in 2017 on the subject of women and boxes. The idea that women are imprisoned and framed within the norms created for them by others acquires even greater depth and an additional dimension in the current collection, because the photographed women are at a crossroads and confronted with two historical phenomena. One is the Western tradition of painting and sculpture, which has set naked women as an ethical and aesthetic standard – from statues of goddesses in ancient cultures, through Renaissance art to modern art. On the other side of this crossroads stands the surprising shift in the year 2020, when the global Coronavirus pandemic created a new kind of covering – facial coverings that are a medical necessity, not a religious, cultural or ethnic obligation. The face masks and protective covers of medical staff, as well as closures and restricted movement isolated everyone, not only women, in the concrete and wooden boxes of their houses and closed citizens within the borders of their home countries. This type of concealment ushered in a new kind of dialogue concerning the symbolic world of the body and gaze, object and subject.

The images that complete Almog’s series of photographs are of women who are covered due to the Coronavirus pandemic. These represent the contrast between colorful, thriving, and harmonious nature and the covered body that is visually alienated from its surroundings, a black hole of commandments and conventions. This illustrates the primordial, timeless contrast between nature and culture - the contrast that has always defined us as individuals and groups. The global pandemic, according to Almog, is therefore an opportunity to ask ourselves anew how women cover themselves and for what reasons.