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The young photographer-artist becomes the first Muslim woman to appear nude in *Playboy*—on her own terms and through her own lens. Pulitzer Prize-winning photojournalist **Lynsey Addario** explores the significance of Yumna Al-Arashi's work

For 65 years, the contours of women's bodies have been splashed across the pages of *PLAYBOY*. As a little girl, I remember stealing away with my older sisters to my uncle's top-floor apartment in our family-run hair salon to stare at the glossy images of naked women spread across triple-page folds. We laughed giddily as we wondered when our bodies would develop into such delicious and desirable shapes. Sometimes the woman in the photograph fondled herself, looking directly into the lens; other times she glanced back playfully from behind, her legs spread apart just enough. Her hair, tossed over one shoulder, looked either fresh out of bed or reminiscent of Farrah Fawcett's. The message to me was simple: A sensual woman was always ready for sex.

So some might find it surprising that this series of fully nude self-portraits for the magazine is by a Muslim: Yemeni American photographer Yumna Al-Arashi. But that seeming contradiction is exactly what drives Al-Arashi as a visual artist. She began her career as a photojournalist but transitioned to art and fashion after growing disillusioned with the confines of documentary photography, including a sense that Western viewers preferred Muslims, particularly Muslim women, to be portrayed as one-dimensional, oppressed and miserable. "She is always holding a dead baby or crying in the desert, or her home has just been bombed," says Al-Arashi, describing a typical image to me.

As a photographer working for Western media outlets, Al-Arashi worried she was perpetuating the fallacy that Muslim women exist only in a boundless landscape of helplessness, war and devastation. It bothered her. "We are so dynamic," she explains, "and we are all so different—just as any other type of person is. I felt I could use my voice to show another side rather than portray the same negativity."

For years, Al-Arashi has used the body—hers and her friends'—as a subject in her photography and videography. "It conveys so much emotion that a normal portrait doesn't," she says.

In her 2017 photo series *Shedding Skin*, Al-Arashi captures women inside a *hammam*, or traditional bathhouse, in

Lebanon. It evokes intimacy and sensuality and succeeds at peeling away layers of misconceptions about Muslim women. Although not every woman featured is Muslim, the mere notion of Middle Eastern women agreeing to be photographed naked proved groundbreaking.

When conceptualizing a shoot, Al-Arashi lets her surroundings and mood guide her vision. "For me, a nude self-portrait feels like a diary entry," she says. "I can't plan a diary entry. I can't plan the emotions." She works primarily in private spaces—at times difficult in her current home city of London—and shares the results on social media and in articles and exhibitions. Her photographs are evocative, sensual, playful—and a bit withholding: Information in the frame is often hidden by vegetation, a curtain, a billowing scarf or a body of water in which she's strategically immersed.

Al-Arashi claims her self-portraits are "the complete opposite of sexual," so she was understandably surprised when *PLAYBOY* approached her with this unprecedented assignment. "If they'd asked to feature me as a model in *PLAYBOY*, 100 percent I would have said no," she says. "As an Arab American, a Muslim and a woman in general, our bodies are often not our own. Having a female editor ask me to portray myself the way I wanted to be seen is really badass and history-making. It's usually a man photographing a woman in an objectifying way. But the idea of me interpreting the way I would like to be seen in *PLAYBOY*, understanding what that means and who the audience would be: If the audience is male, what do I want to show them as a woman taking photos of herself the way she wants to be seen? How do I want to communicate my nudity and my body? How do I want to talk to the male gaze for the first time?"

Her nude self-portraits, shot in the Philippines, succeed perhaps where her photojournalism failed. She is expanding the perception of Middle Eastern women by showing a portrait we rarely see: an Arab American Muslim woman unveiled, confident and in control of her image. On her Instagram feed is a scene from northern Yemen featuring Al-Arashi, swathed in a black abaya and black hijab, set against a spare, moon-like landscape. The caption: "A self portrait in Yemen. Don't underestimate women. We made you."

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
YUMNA AL-ARASHI





