

cinéwomen

women's cinema & performing arts

A woman with dark hair tied back, wearing a red lace-trimmed top under a light grey blazer and tan pleated trousers, stands on a city sidewalk. She is waving her right hand towards the camera. In the background, a city street with cars and trees is visible. She is holding a pink bag in her left hand.

**LEERON REVAH
AMELIA ARNOLD
ELODIE FOURNOT
CHRISTINA JEKEY
JULIJA PROSKURINA
TESSA GARLAND
KAITLIN CREADON
RAH ELEH
ERISS KHAJIRA
CLAUDIA PICKERING**

rah eleh

Oreo (France, 2015)



Women
Video, Independent
Cinema, Avant-
garde, Filmmakers
Cahiers

experimental cinema

"Oreo," 2014, is a Youtube tutorial parody which was completed as part of Artslant's Georgia Fee Residency in Paris. Youtube tutorials have become a common way to disseminate and obtain information about many things including beauty. I use this model to address contemporary political issues and to stimulate dialogue surrounding racism and white privilege. I strategically use humour and the tutorial approach to seduce the viewer and as a communicative tool. Globally, people spend money and time trying to approximate European beauty ideals. Individuals are bleaching their skin, reconstructing their eyes, noses and even changing their eye colour at the risk of going blind, to pass as White. The character Oreo addresses the very complex issues surrounding one's claim to Whiteness, passing as White, societal imposition and internalization of white supremacy. People are intrigued with the performative elements of the work, the high pitched voice and the use of humour. These character traits are important but there is a poignant undertone and a challenging script that is often overlooked and relates to my experiences as an Iranian-Canadian woman. I was raised in a predominately White-catholic-francophone community and since a young age, I was conditioned and socialized by visual culture and narratives of Western cultural imperialism to approximate Whiteness, an endeavour that is

unattainable. Critical race theorist bell hooks makes an important distinction between internalized racism and internalized white supremacy:

White supremacy is a much more useful term for understanding the complicity of people of color in upholding and maintaining racial hierarchies than the term "internalized racism." "White supremacy" enables us to recognize that black people are socialized to embody the values and attitudes of white supremacy.

Albeit, Hooks is addressing experiences relating to the black community but I approached this video considering this important distinction and my own experiences with having internalized white supremacy. I was often labeled "whitewash" or "Oreo" when I mimicked White standards. It took years of unlearning in my adult life to embrace and celebrate my differences. Oreo's relationship to Whiteness is one that is unique to the experiences of the Iranian diaspora. While I was researching, I came across an article by Alex Shams about the 2010 US National Census, a campaign asking Iranian-Americans to ethnically identify. Most Iranian Americans identified as White because of our lineage to the Aryan race. During the Pahlavi regime and until the revolution in 1979, nationalistic ideologies of racial superiority were imbedded in this generation of Iranians.



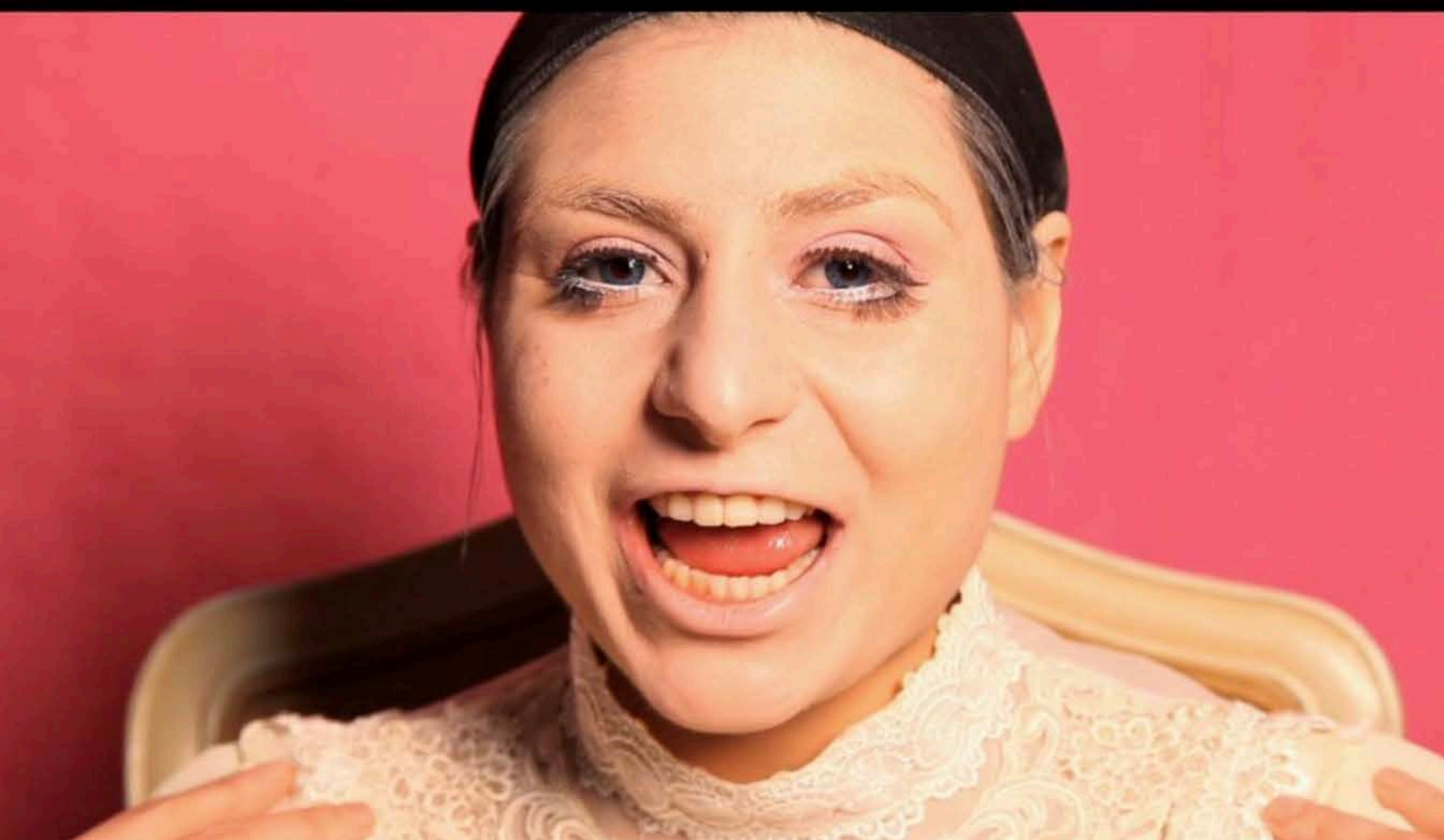
Many of which migrated to the West holding on to these ideas of white superiority. In the West, claiming whiteness does not save us from racial based violence and systematic racism. Since the 1979 Hostage Crisis and more recently 9/11, Iranians have been lumped in a racialized category of terrorists and seen as threat to the occident. In this work, Oreo claims that she is White because she is Aryan and refutes her friends accusations of conforming by saying: "I am Aryan and you tots hate white people." This reverse racism rhetoric is commonly used by those who occupy positions of racial privilege, to silence people of colour when they are confronted. After I completed Oreo, I was in Vienna doing a residency at the Studio Das Weisse Haus. There I created a video about LGBT Iranian refugees and expats. I met an Iranian gallerist from New York that began enquiring about "where I was from," she could tell by

my thick English accent that I was not raised in Iran. I told her that I was currently making a transition from Montreal to Toronto, and that as a woman of colour, I experienced a lot of racism in Montreal. The gallerist and her friend turned to me appalled and said "You identify as women of colour?!" I was taken aback because they appeared offended. I asked them if they identified as white and with a hostile tone they replied that they don't identify with a race, they are Iranian. This was a pivotal moment because it was the first time I had encountered an individual that made such a claim and I was reminded of the 2010 Census. I started to meet more Iranians that either identified as white or as "Iranian" and refused to accept a racialized identity or consider themselves a minority. The gallerist also told me that she is from Iran and only left in her adult life. I realized that her experiences having been

raised in Iran meant that she could identify with a dominant group. Our experiences and relationship to race was very different. Prior to coming to Paris, I knew that I wanted to confront France's legislations surrounding the veil. During this period, Quebec was trying to pass a similar law and there was a cross-cultural link that was urgent to address. The veil, a garment worn by women to show religious affiliation in Islamic countries is a contentious cultural and political issue and has been the subject of political repression and cultural appropriation. In the video, Oreo is instructing the viewer to remove their veil as to assimilate to western culture. During my process of contextualizing the work, I wanted Oreo to resonate with many cultures but I also wanted to address the racism that was specific to Paris. While I was researching the script, I came across many people who nonchalantly

referred to the convenient store as "Arab." While Oreo is putting on her contacts she states: "I bought this from my local Arab." I wanted to highlight the term that is so common in the Parisian lexicon and address the apparent economic apartheid and the racialization of this position. Oreo has been exhibited at the Cutlog Contemporary Art Fair in New York city, Vienna at Studio Das Weisse Haus, and it has been selected by MUU Galleria in Finland for Performance Voyage 5, a touring exhibition that has began traveling across Europe and North America to fifteen different galleries and countries. For information about the tour: <https://www.facebook.com/performancevoyage> For purchasing inquiries please contact my representative gallery PDA Projects <http://pdaprojects.com/Georgia-Fee-Artist-Residency>





interview

The embrace of the imagination has always specific political implications. To quote the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, every work of art is a step toward a "minoritarian history of the world" (Toward a Minor Literature, G. Deleuze and F. Guattari). Rah's experimental cinema blends a heady mix of philosophical ideas, parody, and overt allegory. In her work Oreo she highlights the boundary between identity and the perception of the Self, developing her own highly individualistic visual language. We are glad to present Rah for this year's CinéWomenEdition. Rah, how did you get into experimental cinema and performance?

I have always been interested in performance because of its interdisciplinary nature; growing up I took dance and theatre classes so the shift to performance art was a natural one. Further, video and performance were prominent art forms in the feminist art

movement; a movement that predominantly dealt with issues of identity politics. My artwork is inherently political and I use a "post-colonial-feminist" approach so conceptually these medias are relevant. The narrative quality of these art forms and their ability to be read through gesture captivates a diverse audience. One does not need to speak English to understand Oreo, there is a visual language that transcends speech. Additionally, through performance and experimental video I can document the Self, as the other and challenge the insolent depiction of Iranian women that is perpetuated through western visual culture. I am my primary model, therefore, I am drawn to video because I can perform both in front and behind the camera. I can also use video as a tool to document my live performances and this documentation becomes the art work.

We want to take a closer look at the genesis of your work: how did you come

up with the idea for Oreo?

The first video I created using the tutorial approach with a fictional character, Fatimeh, was called "Oriental Tutorial." This was my first attempt at strategically using humour as a communicative tool. My original proposal for Artslant's Georgia Fee residency in Paris was a make-up tutorial with Fatimeh. When I started doing my research for the script there was a lot of controversy surrounding Bill 60; a Quebec legislation attempting to ban the veil and religious garments to promote secularism and "religious neutrality" in the public sector. I noticed many parallels to the France legislation that had been implemented years ago; a legislation which obviously targeted specific ethnic and religious groups. This commonality was important to address. That being said, I wanted the work to be more than just a critique of these legislations surrounding the veil. During this time, it was New York fashion week and designers were getting

criticized for using white models in black face. An article by Jezebel was discussing the diversity in the models through a pie chart illustration: "African, Latinos, Asians and Other" these umbrella categories symbolically annihilated many other ethnic groups. There was a common problem underneath all of this discussion surrounding the veil and fashion week and that was racism. This became the pressing issue. Further, I had read an article by Alex Shams about the 2010 US national census asking Iranians to ethnically identify and many Iranians claimed that they were White. I have always identified as a person of colour so it came as a surprise to me, that other Iranians in the diaspora, were identifying as White. Lastly, I wanted the character to embody postmodern characteristics relating to representation and similarly challenge the notions of purity and authenticity.

In your Director's statement, you discuss the influence of the Western



cultural imagery and "ideology", a fundamental idea behind Oreo. How has your history influenced the way you produce art?

I was raised in a predominately White-catholic-francophone community. Since a young age, I was conditioned and socialized by visual culture and narratives of Western cultural imperialism to approximate Whiteness, an endeavor that is unattainable. Any deviation from that norm was met with hostility and violence. Another aspect of my history that influences my approach, is that I come from a very politically active family and I was always surrounded by politics and activists. Therefore, my relationship to activism started at a very young age but the indoctrination of White supremacy undeniably took its toll on my sense of self worth. I wish I had the privilege to make works that are apolitical but for me it is about a greater social responsibility. I tackle important and relevant issues with inclusivity and accessibility in mind. I want

the work to resonate with many cultures and transcend national boundaries. Growing up in a colonial society and existing in a system that alienates non-whites, I had to insert myself in the cultural narrative and my identity and body became a site for intervention and reclamation.

Your sense of humour gives your films a playful yet utterly subversive sensibility, reminding us of Cindy Sherman's early work. How did you develop your irreverent style?

My upbringing as an activist has certainly contributed to my style. I am very resistant and Oreo says all the things that is unacceptable for me to say. I take these issues very seriously but it is important to have a sense of humour. Oreo's character is sarcastic, exaggerated and perverse and through this hyper-racialized appropriation of whiteness, the gestural performance subverts and destabilizes the hegemonic norms of whiteness. The character's tone is

accusatory, she accosts the gaze and puts the viewer in an apprehensive and self-reflective position while using humour. My works are about identity construction and the unequal distribution of power, these are tough issues to tackle, so I use humour because it is simultaneously assertive and approachable.

Human experience is often the starting point of your filmmaking. What draws you to a particular subject? Could you take us through your creative process when starting a new project?

I am drawn to subjects that are immediate and urgent. I also like to tackle issues that are relevant to contemporary discussions, medias and apparatuses. My process involves research and I am often influenced by text rather than other works of art. I also do a lot of filtering, for Oreo, I rewrote the script several times. I really appreciate getting the work critiqued and discussing the work with a vast audience because I am interested in how the work

translates in different spaces. My process is both strategic and intuitive. Some days I embodied the character, much like an actor and performed all my daily tasks as Oreo. Those days were the best for writing because the character took over and the script flowed more naturally.

We would like to focus now on Ululate, a performance that is more than just open for interpretation. A peculiar aspect of this work is the fact that throughout the piece you observe long pauses of self-reflection. We are fascinated by your use of temps mort, in which the viewer project his own emotions. Can you introduce our readers to this 6-hours performance?

Ululation was a durational performance at Xpace in Toronto and was curated by Kate Barry. In one word, Ululation was about transformation but there were multiple layers to the performance and temps mort was a dominating aspect. I am interested in stillness and tableau vivant. I appreciate



the simplicity and the powerful nature of the gesture. For the viewer, sitting through *Ululation* could be an agonizing experience, for some it was emotional, for me it was emotionally and psychologically very taxing. My performative works are about existing in a liminal space and the body is always at the forefront of the work so self-reflectivity is important. My performances are an offering and are about access. I did a similar piece recently called *NW25* where I stood in a room unclothed with the shade of my foundation *NW25* painted on my body and the spectators were encouraged by a facilitator, to enter into discussion about my body, race, and performance, while I remained silent and still. In *Oriental Barbie*, I stood on a plinth for three hours as a live mannequin and gave the viewer full access to representation.

During these performances, I depend on my body and my presence to make a statement that I cannot vocalize. In many of my these works, I am revealing and concealing parts of identity and sharing intimate details of my experience. I am in a position of voluntary submission and these are the times in my work that I feel the most vulnerable.

Can you introduce our readers to the multidisciplinary nature of your work?

I started my practice as a photo-based artist but aforementioned my previous explorations in performance art led to creating predominantly performative and video works. I most recently started creating digital collages, light boxes and multiple channel video installations. Each media is very unique but regardless of the medium, my works are about a greater message that contributes to wider societal and cultural discourses. I am also interested in experimenting with new medias and 3D technology. I am fascinated by these new technologies and I wish to further explore these mediums.

Your art is rich of references. We have

previously mentioned Cindy Sherman, however your visual imagery seems to be closer to the films of Věra Chytilová. Can you tell us your biggest influences in art and how they have affected your work?

Cindy Sherman is certainly an influence but my biggest influence is Ana Mendieta because her work captures the anxieties of being an exilic artist and I have a profound visceral and emotional response to her work. I am also inspired by Orlan, Vanessa Beacroft, Martha Rosler, Eleanor Antin, Elke Krystufek, Shirin Neshat and Cosima Von Bonin. Each artist is very different but their engagement with stillness, body mutilation, masquerade, abjection, and the playful nature of their works has been a source of inspiration. Further, all of these artist's address issues of race, gender and the many intersections that contribute to social inequality. There are many artists I am inspired by but also several scholars and comedians. *Oreo* was responding to specific articles and current events but I am very active so I seek inspiration from many sources.

Thanks for sharing your time, Rah, we wish you all the best with your artist career. What's next for you? Have you a particular film in mind?

Thank you for your time and interest in my work. I have many upcoming projects. I will be doing a performance in Rosendale New York this August, *Oreo* is currently touring with MUU Galleria in Finland for *Performance Voyage 5* and will be touring many Nordic countries, North Africa and North America until December. I will also be making a short film in Istanbul and then continuing the *Oreo* series. I anticipate having more work and creating a live performance with this character by the end of the year.