



YARA EL
SHERBINI:
A QUESTION
of SORTS?

*Kate Busby finds profound engagement with
the world beyond the inspired prankstering
of the effervescent Yara El Sherbini*

Are there more reasons to shop at Morrisons?

True or False: A Brazilian was refused entry to the UK at Newcastle Airport because border officials became suspicious when she said she only came to see Newcastle city centre.

Jean Charles de Menezes was shot and killed when mistaken for a 'suicide bomber'! On news reports shocked passengers on the tube carriage stated the Brazilian man was 'asian, definitely asian'. Does this suggest that

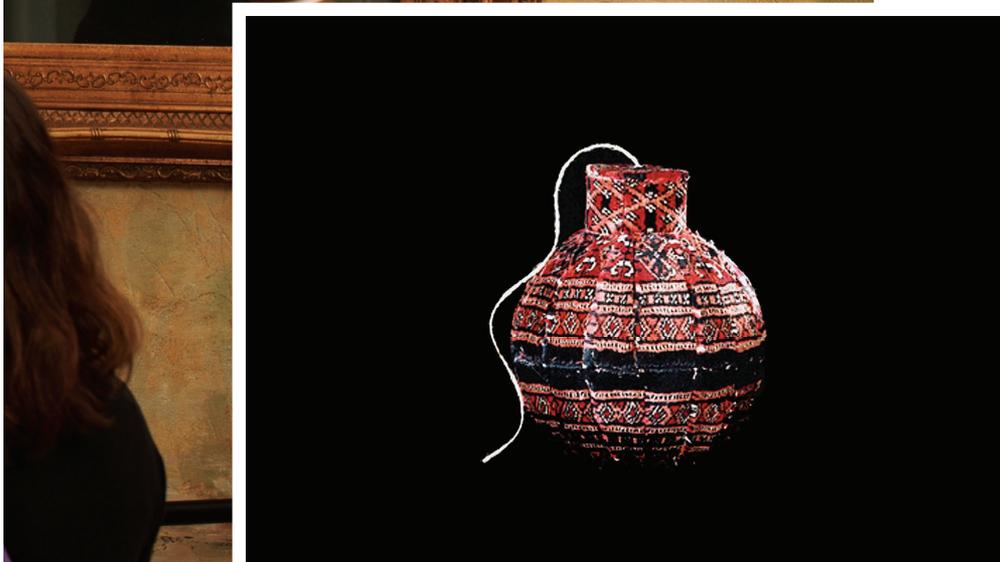
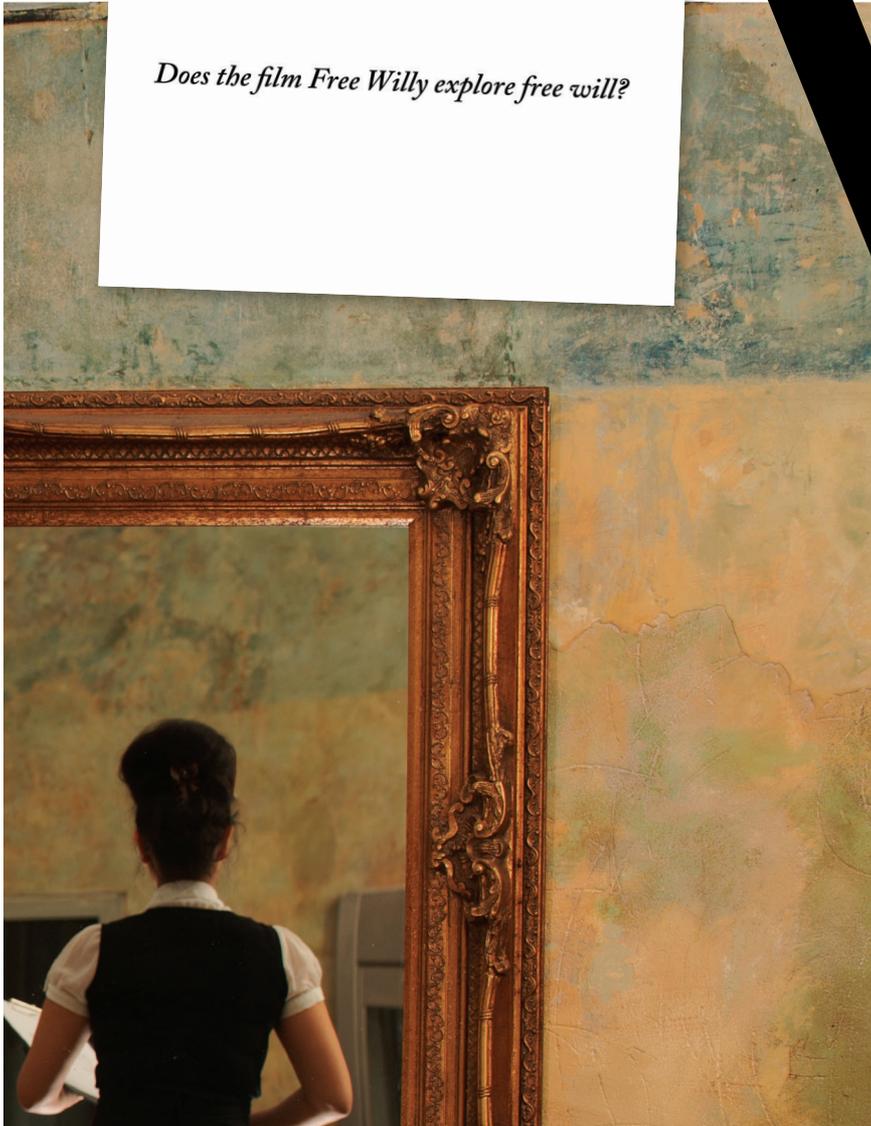
- A. All brown people look the same*
- B. There are people in the world who believe Brazil is part of Asia*

‘FROM THE
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'The Quiz Mistress' Yara El Sherbini Commissioned by Artsadmin 30 (Photography by Hugo Glendinning) (far right) 'Carpet Bomb' (Courtesy La Caja Blanca)

Does the film Free Willy explore free will?



When I first meet artist Yara El Sherbini, it is on Skype. The connection is dire. As our voices cut and screens conveniently freeze just as the right words come, any seriousness gives way to peals of laughter at the situation's absurdity. It also forces a certain succinctness to our conversation. 'What you'll find again and again in my practice are questions, tricky questions,' she

explains. 'Sometimes they're discreetly suggested by the work, otherwise I may ask literal questions as a live art piece. 'Actually, I've become known as something of a quiz mistress.'

It seems new territory indeed, a live artist posing as quiz mistress. An example seems timely and El Sherbini happily obliges. 'Here's one off the stack: 'The Keffiyeh; the Palestinian headscarf, is available to buy in Topshop branches throughout the UK. Is this because:

- a. Resistance is the new black
- b. It is a reference to Guy Debord's notion of 'Recuperation' in which radical ideas and images become safe when commodified
- c. Style Magazine voted it as a must-have black and white classic.'

In the wake of her amusing multiple choices, a somewhat discomforting reality emerges. Flirting with the ridiculous, given their context, these answers seem improbable and then again, entirely possible. El Sherbini's transformation of a touchy subject into a quiz question offers it a new reality - an accessible one - and now seemingly tangible enough for further examination.

Represented by La Caja Blanca in Mallorca and based in Amsterdam, the British artist of Egyptian and Caribbean heritage has steadily built her practice over the past decade guided by what could best be described as a lightness of touch. It's a phrase that El Sherbini returns to again and again, as we discuss the particulars of a career that has consistently made use of humour and play, as a means of stimulating and facilitating dialogue.

This 'lightness' does not dilute a topic's potency, far from it. No, the rhythm of the quiz structure, coupled with the shrewd decision to tack on a multiple choice component to questions of infinite possibilities, greets audiences with a good dose of absurdity, which, like a bucket of cold water over the head, serves to wake us up, make us laugh, gasp, or d) all of the above. Whether we react outwardly or not, we are compelled to take a second look with new eyes at the information laid before us.

Take 'Sheikh 'n' Vac' (2005) for instance, a compendium of the artist's jokes published by Book Works that in essence, brings together discomforting political realities with the image of an iconic British household product: Shake 'n' Vac carpet freshener. The analogy continued with 'A Demonstration' - a video piece with the artist offering a how-do lesson in carpet bomb-making, using Iranian rugs, a football and a toilet roll. Her tendency to confront current affairs with equal amounts of subtlety and attack, coupled with a commitment to 'pop the balloon' and bring each issue back down to earth, renders her practice not only one that easily elicits complicity, but offers a significant antidote to relentless media inflation.

'From the start, I've been very much about 'art for change,' she asserts. The quiz-based performances, perhaps her seminal work, see her primarily invested in domestic tropes. 'Universality Challenge' is such a piece, a one-hour durational performance, based on the cult BBC television show 'University Challenge' with El Sherbini in the role of a (possibly) more glamorous Jeremy Paxman. Funded by the Arts

YARA EL SHERBINI



Hole-punching books at the V&A in London (Richard Cobelli)

'IS BLOOD THICKER THAN WATER?' WHAT DOES THAT MEAN ANYWAY?'



Council, the work toured a selection of venues in the UK including Arnolfini Centre of Contemporary Arts in Bristol. It was the Arnolfini that subsequently commissioned El Sherbini's pub quizzes as part of their year-long project 'Breathing Space,' giving life to a new type of question within her practice. These particular events were hosted in local watering holes across the United Kingdom, North America and Australia, with a slightly looser format than 'Universality Challenge' while maintaining the same teasing, provocative character, doing much to blur distinctions between what might be

considered 'high' and 'low' culture.

'I conceived the quizzes partly in response to the humourless, didactic performance art that I often saw while studying my MA at the Slade (School of Art, London)' she says. 'It may have been brilliant work but I didn't find it accessible. As an artist, I feel I have a responsibility not to impose, but rather find out how to engage an audience. In that sense my questions don't force any one way of thinking - they don't suggest that what you're witnessing is even an

artwork. 'I always give answers to the questions I ask, but nothing is ever straightforward,' El Sherbini continues. 'Ultimately, I am questioning 'truth' and examining how any piece of information is packaged, delivered and received by people. Humour becomes a way of engaging with a so-called 'fact' that deserves more exploration than a quiz question typically allows. It offers a sort of horizontal entry point into the work, if you like.

'I mean, just imagine going to your local pub quiz and hearing the question 'Is blood thicker than water?' What does that mean anyway? And how would you answer that?!

From televised contests that leave no trace, to informal gatherings in public spaces, El Sherbini's work embraces the ephemeral. She does not encourage documentation of the live pieces because 'it changes the nature of the engagement.' This has proven problematic, if only in terms of archiving and re-presenting past works, a fact that she readily admits. 'My practice is not necessarily visible in a way that you could point and say "this work is by Yara El Sherbini." It's mostly all about process and experience.'

In 2009, she exhibited 'A Rather Trivial Pursuit' at Lombard-Fried Projects in New York as part of group show 'Girl Effect.' The work was simply left in the gallery as an open invitation for visitors to play, or bookable slots were available. Again, while audience participation completed the artwork, those moments of completion within a gallery setting, were fleeting and arbitrary.

Then there was her commission at London's Victoria and Albert Museum in 2012, 'The End of Conflict in the Middle East' as part of the National Art Library's initiative to archive contemporary and modern Arab, Turkish and Iranian art and design. Over a period of two hours, El Sherbini invited visitors to rather epically 'end the



Middle East conflict' by hole-punching a book entitled 'Conflict in the Middle East' from cover to cover, eroding it into non-usage and eventually, non-existence.

'It was playful experience, though not laugh-out-loud funny,' she remembers. 'People were coming into the V&A's library unsure of what exactly they were going to experience, but open to this idea of symbolically putting a conflict to rest.'

'Visually the project was interesting because it raised the question, how do we receive knowledge? We are taught to deconstruct knowledge through the practical deconstruction of matter, so the taking apart of the book is a physical guide of a mental journey - knowledge taken apart, challenged, then broken to make something new. And at the end of the day, the residue of so much knowledge is a mound of confetti.'

Currently she is exhibiting a wooden sculpture of a weather house and a series of smaller reproductions produced during a residency at ZKM | Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe, Germany that runs until February 2014. The prototype, entitled 'Weather House for the Current Climate' is bristling with puns: modelled in the style of a traditional German weather house, the kitschy trinket is an enduring symbol of national leisure-time culture. El Sherbini tampers with this by provocatively adding a doner kebab shop to the ground floor of each structure, with miniature figurine customers placed inside or outside the shop, 'depending on the weather conditions.' The reproductions were introduced into the local Christmas gift market economy, where they were actually sold to shoppers, with the remainder exhibited in the ZKM gallery space, alongside documentation of the intervention and sale of receipt.

And their destiny after that? Unknown for the most part, but it would not be too far a stretch to imagine that some may grace the mantelpieces of local Karlsruhe homes, the unusual additional detail



undoubtedly raising a few eyebrows.

'The weather house was an accessible object that opened up a discussion about national representations,' she explains. 'The house is an authentic emblem of German living, a post-war modernist building above a doner kebab shop. Visually it questions the traditional symbolism of the national culture, while suggesting today's reality of constant intercultural exchange. Demographics alter the fabric of any society but all too often our national symbols have yet to catch up.'

The artist's growing concern with cultural representations finds its home in objects and systems that symbolise power and control. Whether it is her use of the Royal Festival Hall's Tannoysystem to broadcast reflective questions ('Public Address,' 2012) or her presentation of a gallery's temperature control mechanism on a plinth following the censoring of a project for being 'un-democratic' ('Another Form of Regulation and Control,' 2012), in each instance, these unusual and benign manifestations express the same urgent concerns. All carry humour. All are extremely connected to the moment, generating new awareness of a given situation and provoking, in a wider sense, ideas about how an intervention might be slotted playfully and accessibly into the daily stream of information distribution, so as to make it self-reflexive, and thus, ready for play.

Forthcoming projects include 'Reproducing the Current Climate' as part of 'Rain, Snow and Hail - From Weather to Climate Change, at the LWL Industrial Museum, Germany, from July 2013- Feb 2014 and a solo show in early 2014 at the New Art Exchange in Nottingham. **HBA**

A BRITISH ASIANMAN
 A BRITISH CHINESEMAN
 A BRITISH BLACK CARIBBEANMAN
 WALK INTO A BAR
 THE BAR MAN LOOKS AROUND AND SAYS
 'WHERE'S THE OTHER'