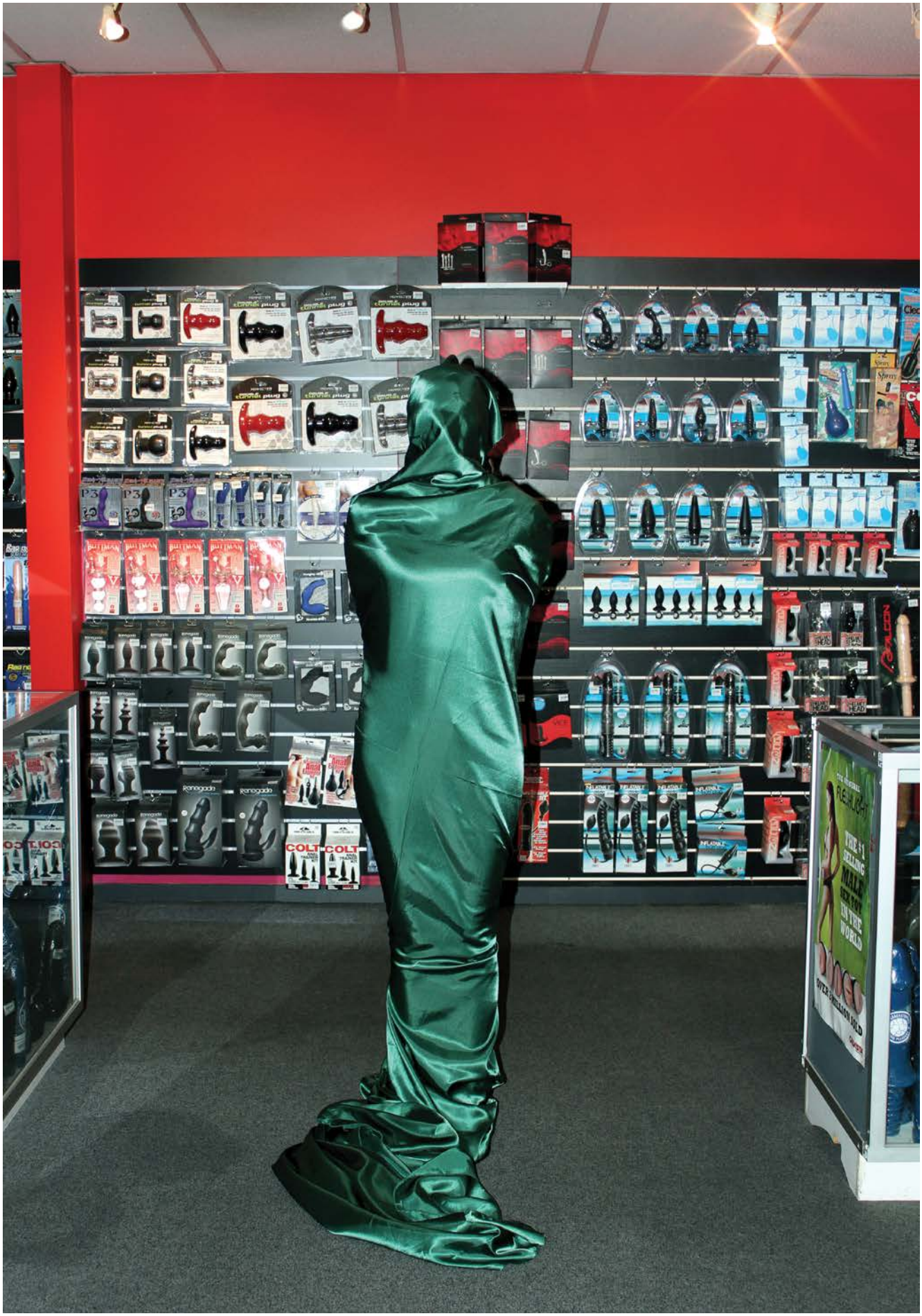

COLT
COLT

ESMA KAZAL

INTERVIEW BY SARAH ILLINGWORTH

Iraq born, Auckland based artist Esma Kazal's practice finds her exorcising and exploring her complex, and at times conflicting, beliefs around gender, equality, sexuality and identity. Engaging her own body as subject in many of her works, Kazal experiments with the tension between revealing and covering, particularly of women's bodies. Makeup is a frequent muse; subverting its usual use, Kazal layers it upon herself, transforming her features into a muddied mass. Most recently, Kazal participated in *A Different View: Artists Address Pornography* in Auckland, New Zealand, a group exhibition addressing taboos in porn. Rather than employ nudity to convey her message, as might be expected in a show of this kind, Kazal posed fully covered in a sex shop, highlighting the contrast between Eastern and Western cultures, and their vastly opposite attitudes to the flesh.

How did you approach your contribution to *A Different View: Artists Address Pornography*?
My idea in participating was that, from the start, I didn't want to use nudity. Because I thought, the easiest thing, in a porn show, would be to use nude images. So I decided to challenge myself and to go about it without objectifying the woman's body. Because, to me, images that contain nudity are very powerful but they kind of prevent you from thinking about anything else, apart from what's in the image itself. So that was my idea behind the works in the show. People talk about sex in Western culture all the time – it's everywhere. It's so opposite to Eastern cultures, where sex is not talked about at all. So I decided to use materials like silk or satin to cover myself, to put a barrier between myself and that kind of culture. Instead of revealing, I'm covering my body. Ever since I started making art works I've been interested in the idea of revealing and covering. Maybe it's because of where I come from – women have to be covered up. Whereas here, it's sort of different.

When did you move to New Zealand?
I came here when I was 14 years old, in 2002.

So, old enough that your norms were shaken up.
Yeah – definitely, definitely. Because, when I was growing up, back in Iraq, I was expected to behave like other women, because I was just becoming a woman myself. I was expected to, you know, not wear what kids wear. So, not wear short clothes, just all the things society expects you to do as a woman in the Middle East. Then, when I came here, it was so different. Girls were hanging out with boys, people would talk about sex, they would swear in the street. At the beginning, when I came, I acquired some of these things – like I started swearing [laughs]. You know, it was just as a teenager – things that you'd learn at school. I kind of liked that freedom. I think that's when my ideas for art started developing. I felt like I needed to break free, from what I was living in – that's when I started playing around with ideas of revealing or covering women's bodies, and compared how women are looked at in Western and Eastern societies. And myself as a Middle Eastern in a Western society. All those ideas started coming to my mind. In my initial projects, back when I started, I started playing with makeup and then that's when I started painting myself. But I didn't do it in ways they would do in magazines. I tried to be excessive, so either put on makeup excessively, or put it on in ways that you don't normally.

What was the thinking behind that?
I was thinking about self-esteem, women hiding themselves behind something – whether it's makeup or clothes. And just how people perceive them, when they're hidden, so that was my idea behind that. I was concerned about people's gaze on women, when they did these sorts of things.

Esma Kazal, untitled

Did your involvement in *The Porn Project* inspire any new reflections on this?
Recently I began to realise that my culture's not all that bad. I began to miss some things about my culture. So instead of resenting it completely, I began to realise that 'this is a part of me no matter what I do.' So I can't really try and get away from it. So I tried to bring that into my work for this show, and that's actually one of the reasons I decided not to use nudity. Because I thought, if I was ever to display this work in a Middle Eastern country, I would have to respect public opinion over there. And of course nudity is not allowed. So that was one of the reasons.

In one of the shots from the show you're in a sex shop. So would that be ok? Even though you were clothed, and covered?
I'm hoping that it would be ok. I used the covered body in the shot to try and create a balance between the two cultures: the sex shop is a very Western gesture, the covering up of the female body is classified as Eastern. This balance is something that I'm still working on.

Did you go to art school in New Zealand?
I did a Masters in Fine Arts.

How did you find the Western school environment?
I really found it challenging in my second year. Because I was just doing abstract paintings [in first year] and all that. So I didn't even know what my art was about. I think it was the end of second year when I started kind of realising, or thinking through my work a bit more. That's when ideas about the female body as an object, the gaze on women, revealing, hiding, censorship, all those sorts of ideas, started coming to mind.

How do you deal with clashes between Western culture and your own?
I've often thought of using a different name to make works under. But something inside me tells me that, whatever happens, I'm gonna face it. It was suggested that I should use a different name for *The Porn Project* but I thought if I use a different name that I'll be hiding under something, hiding myself, and I didn't want to do that. So it's complicated.

And it's not just about not wanting to be honest, it's about respect too – because you don't want to be disrespectful to your family and your culture. It can be a really hard thing to work out.
Yeah. But I think now I realise that this is something I'm always going to be facing. Again, it comes back to people's gaze, because I'm a woman, in a Middle Eastern society, people are always going to be looking and having expectations of me. So it's like I have this socially constructed role that I have to follow, you know? That's a really big idea, in all of my works actually. I only realised this recently. It's still playing with the same ideas, you know, but it's just nice to see how much – like, I think I've come a long way, in my practice, but I'm still playing with the same ideas of gender, and sexuality a little bit.

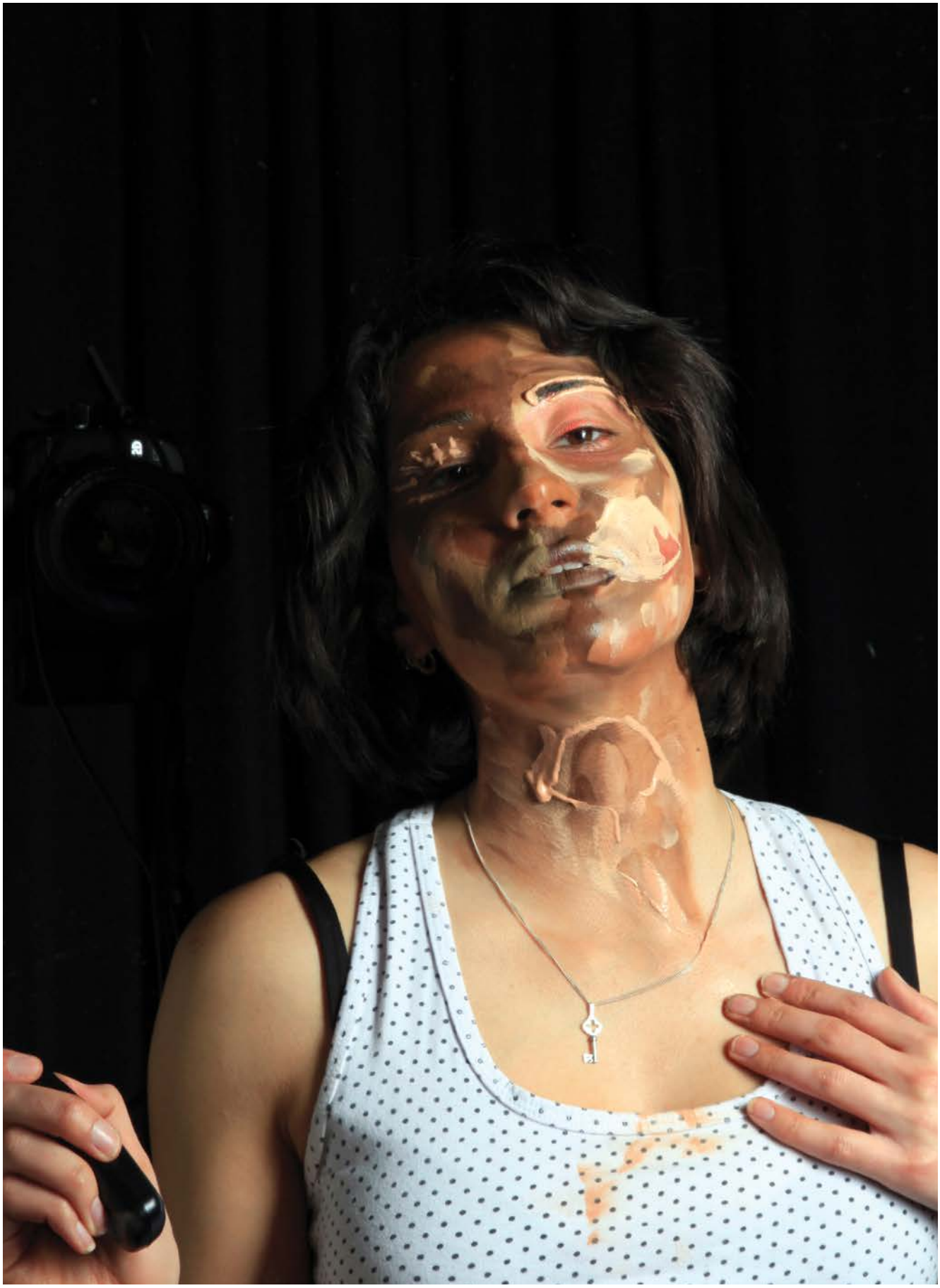
Would you exhibit in Iraq if the opportunity came up?
Yeah, definitely. I still need to figure out ways to make works that show the struggle or imbalance without disrespecting any religion or culture. I still want to have powerful works, and part of my work is challenging people. But I have to figure out ways of doing that. I've always been thinking about exhibiting in the Middle East but I will definitely not go up there and try to rebel against the culture, or disrespect anyone. But, again, I don't want to play it safe.

It's a hard balance.
That was my challenge at the beginning of this year, I realised how the hell am I going to find the balance? Now I've got to a point where I've realised that I don't want my work just to be about women, or fighting for women's rights. I want it to somehow be about fighting for human rights, because of what's going on in my country. So I'm actually finding it really hard to balance between those two. I always go back to using my body in the works. I don't know why. But I've decided now [not to worry about it], that maybe one day I'll get to a point where I'll realise what my next step is, but at the moment I think I still need to carry on.

Why did your family leave Iraq?
Well the situation over there was getting worse under the Saddam regime and prior to America's invasion of Iraq. At the same time, we received threats to convert to Islam because my religion forms a minority in Iraq. So my brothers fled first, then we followed. Later, in 2002, we came to New Zealand as migrants because my uncle was already here.

Despite that, do you miss it there? It was your home.
This is something I'm struggling with as well, and I've talked to a lot of people who are not from New Zealand, a lot of migrants. We all have that same thing, of not feeling like we belong 'here' or 'there'. I have a New Zealand passport, not an Iraqi passport. So they treat me as a foreigner. I don't feel like it's my home even though I live here. I'd like to go back one day to work out whether I want to live there [and get that closure].

It might be a timing thing – all of a sudden you'll just feel ready. And who knows what you'll have to say in that moment.
Yeah, definitely. So I'm waiting for that. Sometimes I'm terrified. Then I think, I've been through a lot, so I'm not going to let myself be terrified.



Esma Kazal, untitled