Portable Gray

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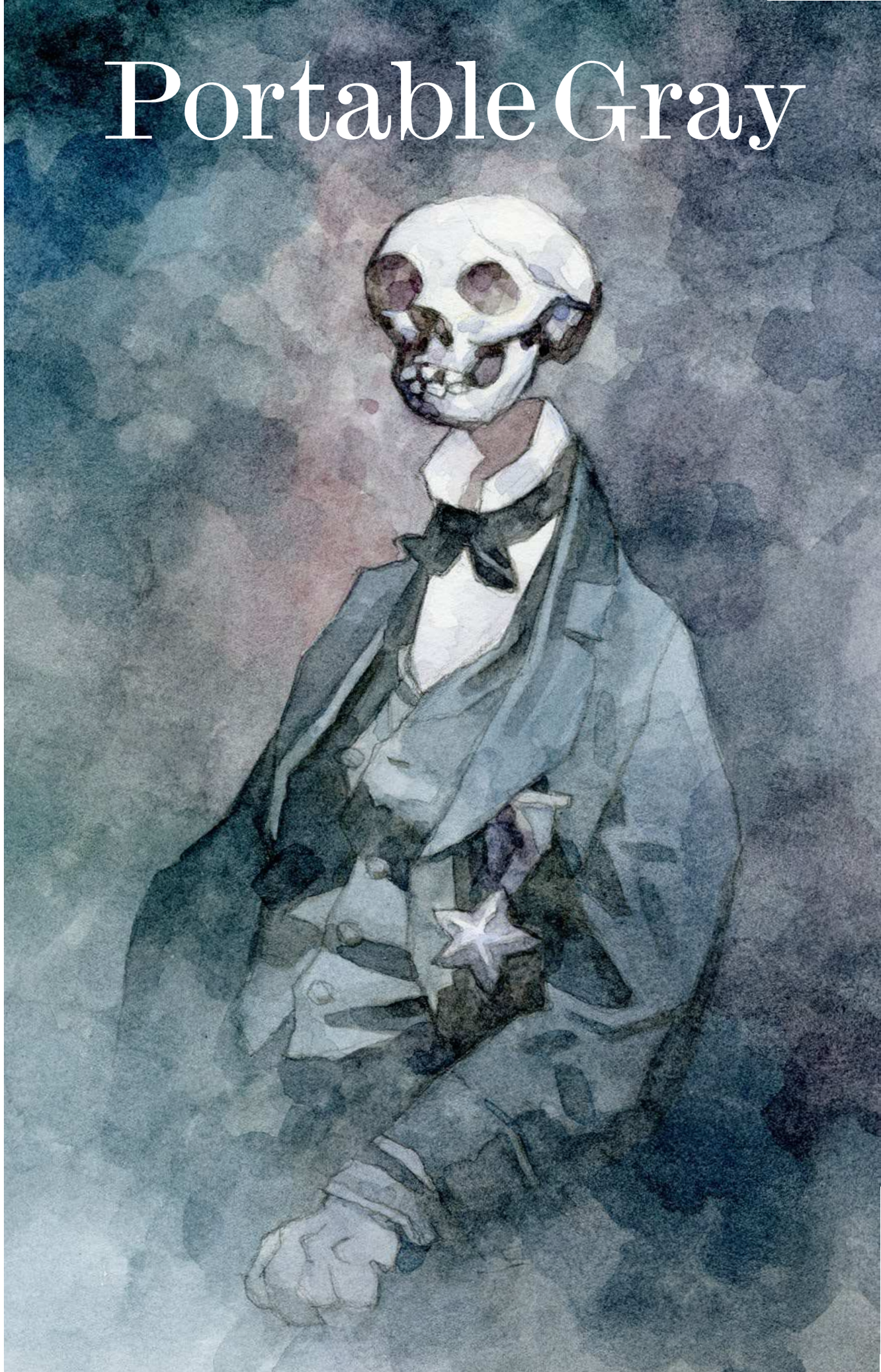

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On the Cover: Mike Mignola, *The Lurking*, 2016. Courtesy Dark Horse Comics

Frontispiece: Mike Mignola, *Tin Star*, 2016. Courtesy Dark Horse Comics

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AE — Yeah, and we've got the streets outside our windows. Protests, demands for racial justice and the overreaching state response. Amidst this, there's the flippant part of me that is looking for relief and can't help but joke, "Shit, there's also the small horror that his art work's not going to sell, what is he going to do? He can't adjunct teach this fall. His gallery might close. Do they have a strong online viewing platform? Will anybody see this show now? The gallery's got to push this really good group show." Thinking through what I'm seeing in the film with my text messages and emails and what's coming through as daily horrors of death, illness, furloughs, racial terror, and economic horror. But through the lens of a film that's about a vengeful guy that's made of bees with a hook.

After all I said about artwork usually avoiding horror, the kind of horrors that visual art's usually been okay dealing with is our systematic horrors. The Vietnam War, Gulf Wars, gentrification, economic injustice, this is the classic conceptual art or classic institutional critique of people like Adrian Piper or Hans Haacke. Now the day-to-day is too nicely mapping within this film, "Oh yeah, gentrification, where has that zombie gotten us? What's happening in the Cabrini-Green neighborhood now? Who is being discarded now? It might be remodeled, but what the hell's happening now?" A lurching and cobbled-together monstrosity.

HW — Yeah, the gothic horror of gentrification. That is funny about the virus, and I think about the fact, just watching TV shows and seeing things and realizing like, "Oh, this was clearly filmed before March 10th." You watch something and you're just like, "Oh, wow, a form of sociability from the before times." You can't help but be struck by that, "Wow, an opening."

AE — People are hugging, fuck! People are hugging.

HW — All these small things. But in terms of just that, even if it's just a nostalgia trip that then makes this reality stand in stark contrast to the one now being portrayed in the film. Now horror almost fulfills a certain kind of promise twice over as escapism. Films are always escapism, but this is an escape back into a time when we could meet. I keep forgetting that we're in a pandemic, which means I haven't slept enough. I have these moments when I keep thinking, "Oh, I'll travel." And then I'm like, "What are you thinking?"

AE — "What? Travel to the other room?"

HW — Yeah, travel, where I have this vision like, "Yeah, I'm going to go to Chicago, I'll see the kids." It's like, "No you're not, you're not going to see anybody."

AE — The smartest or dumbest decision of mine during this quarantine has been to have a self-inflicted David Cronenberg film festival.

HW — Oh yeah, now there's one for you, that's pretty good.

AE — He literally popped into my head. I dropped out of horror when things like *Saw* became the norm because it is just about gore and torture. And that was never my scene. Yes, people get tortured in all horror: slashed, hooked, strangled, raped, eaten, turned living dead, et cetera. But in the classic horror films of the '70s and '80s, it wasn't simply close-up focus on the torture, or first-person gristle. So, "What's the last horror that I really loved? Oh, Cronenberg." Because what the hell, look outside. We've got Trump and his racist bluster and we've got viral panic and systematic collapse. "Could really use some horror right now because I'm actually soaking in it." Have you felt that way, or are you just beat down and over?

HW — More beat down and over, but more what I was saying about escapism. You watch horror and it's always that psychological mechanism, it's the relief of feeling as though your world is safe even though the world in which you've just escaped to is one of higher stress and being chased by a butcher knife-wielding psycho. Suddenly to realize, "Oh, it's all not true." It's predicated on a neo-anxiety or whatever, for me, rather than the horror in a horror, living this horror versus that horror, it's much more like, "Oh, no, I welcome it as escapism. Get out of this horror to an even worse and more urgent horror, that'll make this horror maybe not look so bad."

AE — Such as it is.

Morehshin Allahyari, *She Who Sees the Unknown: Aisha Qandisha*, 2018, still image from HD video. Courtesy of the artist

Morehshin Allahyari is an Iranian-Kurdish artist based in Brooklyn noted for creating striking 3D-printed sculptures, multimedia installations, and animations. Her most recent work explores Islamic and West Asian monsters as figures with whom to grapple with some of the fundamental injustices of our time. The project has been featured at several exhibitions and has a permanent home online at http://shewhoseestheunknown.com. Alireza Doostdar, an anthropologist and Islam scholar, spoke with Morehshin about her project over email.

AD — In "She Who Sees the Unknown," you recast monstrous beings from West Asian legends and folktales into powerful female figures. What was it that drew you to these monsters?

MA — Thinking about ancient female figures, I've always been more interested in monsters, dark goddesses, and jinn than angels and earthy goddesses that I think feed back into patriarchal expectations of womanhood. In my own upbringing in Iran, the image of the good innocent religious or traditional woman was always linked to being angelic. An example of this was the Prophet Muhammad's daughter, Fātimah al-Zahrā. As a young non-religious girl, I was much more interested in the "bad girl" figure, the non-religious, slightly anarchist, sometimes *slutty* and always intimidating. The power I felt in this combination was something I also admired in similar women figures; from girls I chose to be best friends with in high school to feeling empowered watching Madonna's "Material Girl" music video or Cyndi Lauper's "Girls Just Want To Have Fun" on MTV via illegal satellite dish. I felt rage against a system that admired womanhood that was linked to being a good obedient wife and a sacrificing mother. So for the adult me, the monstrous, the dark goddess, the jinn became opportunities and figures for turning around patriarchal power structures. I wanted to embrace this monstrosity rather than feeling comfortable throwing myself into the figure of the angelic/good/nice woman.

When I was researching my "She Who Sees the Unknown" project, I looked for forgotten or underrepresented tales and stories of monstrous female or queer figures of West Asia and North Africa, especially from the Islamic era. In a process I call "re-figuration," I try to re-imagine and tell new stories for an alternative to these modes of being and becoming. In this way, the horrifying, dystopian, monstrous figure becomes a position for resistance and empowerment. Through exposing the fear, the feared, and the fearless, my monstrous figures and their stories break boundaries toward an altered, more equal world for now and the future.

AD — You said that as a teenager you felt rage toward patriarchal notions of womanhood. Are your monsters rageful creatures?

MA — I think that in creating each figure, I channeled a personal and then collective rage I/we (a specific we depending on each story) have had toward a certain topic into a series of stories that expose the experiences that have led up to that rage. So, in the story of Huma, that feeling relates to being frustrated with the domination of climate crisis narratives told to us by the global north and white-washed solutions promoted to us by those who are unable to see beyond themselves. Huma comes to create a kind of justice for those who will be most affected by the climate crisis: the poor, the downtrodden, and especially those living in the global south. These are people whose voices have not been considered in the techno-solutionist positions advocated in the global north (like Elon Musk's suggestion of leaving the earth and colonizing another planet. Because who will go and who will be left behind?).

In the story of Aisha Qandisha and The Laughing Snake, this rage against patriarchal systems is positioned to take back our power, our reflection in the mirror, and our rights for anger, ours as in women, women from West Asia, women of color, etc.

In the story of Kabous, her nightmarish, paralyzing possession of humans is turned into memories and experiences of war (specifically the Iran-Iraq war). These become dream/nightmare-like VR experiences of intergenerational trauma in connection to my mother, grandmother, and my imagined human-jinn daughter, through whom we can desire a different future for birthing and kinship.

In Ya'jooj Ma'jooj this rage is turned into the embrace of the otherness that has led to these creatures being walled out and banned by a xenophobic system. Not only do Ya'jooj Ma'jooj embrace their otherness, they take the label they have been given, "chaos" ("bad people" as the Trumpists say), to do what they are known for: coming back and breaking through the wall built to keep them out. And this is what will bring about the end of time, as the Qur'an warns.

AD — Your poetic re-figurations of jinn seem to be about remaking the human, too. Is there something specific to jinn that helps us imagine human beings otherwise?

MA — Rosi Braidotti writes in *Envisioning the Future: Science Fiction and the Next Millennium* (2003) that the monster is a borderline figure that "blurs the boundaries between hierarchically established distinctions, between human/non-human, Western/non-Western, and so on." I was drawn to this non-binary, in-between potential of the monster. The more I looked into these figures in ancient and Islamic stories, the more I came across the figure of the jinn. In Islamic culture and teachings, jinn are known as supernatural creatures. According to the Qur'an, jinn are shapeshifters made of smokeless fire who occupy a parallel world to that of humankind. Together, jinn, humans and angels compose the three sentient creations of God. Unlike angels or devils who only obey or disobey, jinn have the power of choice and will, similar to humans. So this borderline quality of the jinn, their similarity to humans, as well as their popularity not only within the Islamic texts but also the Islamic cultures, makes the jinn a perfect figure and a perfect body to enter through. Jinn-related stories are the perfect storyline for possession and decolonization, learning and unlearning and so on.

I also wanted to work with creatures that are at a distance from Western figures like the zombie, the freak, or (in the context of feminist movements) the witch or the cyborg. In these ficto-feminist modes of storytelling (or worlding and re-worlding as Donna Haraway puts it) my female/queer figures offer a space for the "othered" and the "underrepresented." For the immigrants, for women of color, for womxn and queer people of West Asia, and hopefully for every other dreamer and revolutionist.

AD — Why did you call the project "She Who Sees the Unknown"?

MA — The project gestures to the possibilities of seeing beyond: a practice of rituals and access to knowledge beyond the wisdom of humans. Every jinn and every story I have written or rewritten acts as a portal of imagination as well as invasion of and access to something unknown to us at this very time. So the jinn in my projects are anti-patriarchy, anti-capitalism, anti-white-supremacy, anti-racism, anti-xenophobia, and anti-ableism. In my re-figuration of them they are able to be better than human, more than human, multi-species, and all other shapes in

Morehshin Allahyari, *She Who Sees The Unknown: The Laughing Snake*, 2019, 3D-printed sculpture.
Photo: Mario Gallucci (2020). Courtesy of the artist

between, while bending some kind of reality, turning around and fucking up the current status quo.

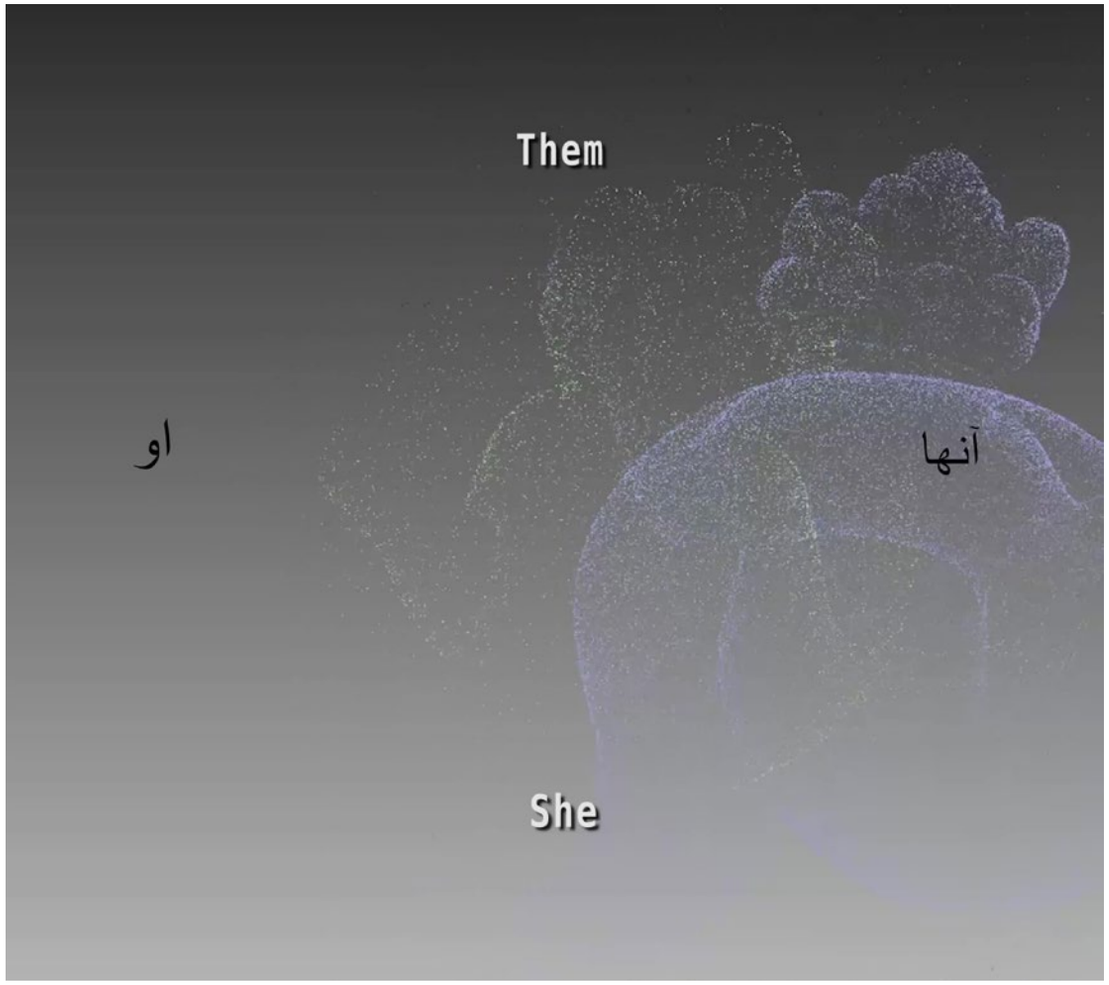
AD — The way you work with the unknown makes me wonder if there were things that surprised you as you moved through the project. Were there things that emerged that you had not expected? Are there things that you still can't quite figure out? Does any of it scare you?

MA — Absolutely. At first I really mostly thought about the project as a series of sculptures and videos, but through the next three years of work, a lot shifted and changed. Even my own artistic knowledge and abilities. After a year of working on the first two figures, Huma and Ya'jooj Ma'jooj, I decided that I wanted to build installations for each in the style of shrine-like spaces. This is something I had never done in my art practice, but this project made me really want to consider and reconsider the placement of each sculpture in an environment that would be made special for that very figure. And that's what I started building. The more this project grew, and the more attention and support it received from different institutions for different aspects of it, the more I felt the urge to define a home for each figure in which the audience could enter to experience something beyond the real and ordinary. I am talking more about practical and technical things here because I think it's important and interesting to share what it means to work with material and subjects that are in one way or another known as powerful metaphysical beings. It surprised me how much care and love I ended up wanting to put into this project, how many hours I was willing to spend to research, 3D model, 3D print, post-produce the sculpture, or write the narratives for each figure and turn them into different visual experiences (from video to VR to web-art).

As I mentioned, I am not a religious person and I am also not spiritual. But this project really made me realize that the love I felt for creating could blind me into believing things I hadn't thought I'd believe. For example, two of the sculptures broke in transition from an exhibition in Europe. So I had been sitting on these two broken sculptures at my studio for two years. I first thought about burying them, but I live in New York and couldn't find a place for burial that would be allowed. I also couldn't bring myself to destroy them or throw them into the trash. That idea just scared me. I didn't want to dishonor the jinn even if these were some 3D-printed sculptures of them. So finally this past week, when I went upstate I brought them with me with the idea of burying them somewhere in a forest not too far from the house we were staying at. But even the forest felt like a bad idea. My partner convinced me that some white person will somehow find and dig these out. He said: "These white people (referring to a whole neighborhood of white people in upstate New York) will find these eventually when they might be worth a lot of money. Do you want that?" (obviously my partner is biased because he thinks I will be a big deal and everyone will want to dig out my sculptures and sell them for millions, haha). But the idea of these sculptures ending up in the hands of historically known colonizers really made me cringe. My partner suggested that we burn them in a fire the same way I had told him I wanted to be treated when I die. So we did that and while they burned, I watched them with so much fear but also a hope for their forgiveness; that they would understand this choice and wouldn't be mad at me for it. I also just learned that it takes so long for resin to burn.

I know this all sounds weird. But this is just to say that when you create beings this powerful and important, you end up really seeing life in them in ways that might not be imaginable at first. This relationship I have built with them is precious and important to me, and probably one of the most surprising aspects of this project.

AD — I'm curious what happens to horror when it is re-figured. On one hand, it seems that you project the horror of specific anthropomorphic monsters outward, onto patriarchy, colonialism, climate change, and so on. In this way, the monsters are transformed such that they are no longer the manifestations of horror themselves, but instead beings who conquer horror, or help us process it. On the other hand, your figures look terrifying. The ambience of your VR installations is unsettling, uncanny. It gets under the skin in the way that monsters do. This makes me wonder whether the horror of the monsters has really been displaced or inverted. It seems that you wanted to maintain their capacity for horror. The monsters are not supposed to help us domesticate horror, but somehow inhabit it.



Morehshin Allahyari, *She Who Sees the Unknown:Ya'jooj Ma'jooj*, 2017, still image from HD video. Courtesy of the artist

MA — I don't think I ever realized how terrifying the figures I have recreated are until some months ago when a friend's child (he is five) came into my car and was scared of the sculptures of Huma and Aisha that I had put in the car to transfer to my studio.

AD — Those are scary sculptures!

MA — He was terrified! He complained to his mom that he wanted them removed from the car. So we had to put them in the trunk where he couldn't see them. The same kid came to my exhibition *She Who Sees the Unknown: Kabous* some months after and insisted on watching the VR piece. Both his mom and I warned him about the content but he insisted, and to my surprise, he loved it! Obviously there was a lot he couldn't understand in terms of the text and context, but he was drawn to the creepy visuals of the hemam scene to a point where he wanted to watch it twice.

To extend this to the adult audience and my own transformation of these figures, I want them to do both of these things. To give us goosebumps at times but also make us want to want them. To intimidate us while also making us want to befriend them and join their army. To fear and honor them at once. We as creators have often turned to horror as a genre to investigate and explore the hardest and darkest questions. As an artist, that means that I had to find a space to both be close and continue to hold a gap between myself and what I create. In writing the stories of The Laughing Snake and Aisha Qandisha for example, at times I "become one" with them in order to use their power to take revenge, to heal, and to feel strong.

Those stories then further expand into a more collective experience of street harassment in Iran as well as an embodiment of rage and anger of womxn against toxic masculinity.

AD — I found your laughing snake the most unnerving. Snakes are frightening as it is. But there's something really creepy about a snake that laughs at its own image, and laughs so hard that it dies. Your visual depiction of the snake gives me goosebumps, but I also feel a strange attraction to it: I want to see the sculpture up close, to feel the texture of its body, look into its eyes. How did you come up with this image?

MA — I came across the story of The Laughing Snake and the Mirror from *The Book of Felicity* and *The Book of Wonders*. The illustration shows a female snake in a beautiful landscape looking at a group of men who are holding a mirror in front of her. But unlike the myth of Medusa who turns into stone when she sees herself in the mirror, the Laughing Snake laughs hysterically until she self-destructs. I wanted to turn this story around, to embrace the monstrosity, to change this image and the structure. So through writing a new story about The Laughing Snake, I chose to show that she is not laughing at her own reflection but rather at her reflection *within* the world she lives in. Her laughing and her death are powerful gestures to take her reflection back. And so I use that to tell real personal stories about the past and present of my life and an imagined future. Stories about sexual experiences in Iran, the ownership of a female body in a patriarchal culture and society, and laughter as the rejection of that history, and a way to re-imagine a different kind of world for the women of West Asia. The power of this work is to remind women, femmes, the people of West Asia that our figures and our stories, fictional and actual, matter—not just for the present but for claiming an alternative future that is not exclusively white or Western.

AD — When you were talking about the unknown and the beyond, you mentioned ritual. Where is ritual in your work? Was there something ritualistic in the creation process? Do you expect that your audience will experience your creations through something like ritual?

MA — I think the most practical example of this is a series of performances and events I did in addition to the art installation and visual components of the work. These were a series of performances in the form of rituals I did with Shirin Fahimi, who is an artist and a dear friend. It was called "Breaching Towards Other Futures." We combined her research on Rammali or Ilm al-Raml (the science of sand) with my work on the figure of Aisha Qandisha. In the performance, Shirin adopts the character of a rammal with the ability of prophecy as a woman and I move back and forth between myself as the narrator and the character of Aisha Qandisha, who is known as a Moroccan jinn of the water and is able to open up her human victims to other demons and jinn by possessing them and creating a crack on their chest that leaves the possessed open to her will and guidance. Once possessed by her, the only way to not go insane is to listen to her and participate with her. In our performance, we use the methods of rammali which includes opening "doors" to different dimensions into the future (future-telling and future-saying) and discussing our own experiences of rejection and hardship with immigration, promising a better, more inclusive future. In part of this ritual, we say:

> The future we want to live in, and as we are promised, is a future open in all directions, it is knowable and it is our intention of the present to see it, and tell it, and be in it. It is a future for non-male, non-cis, non-white, non-western. A future for all those people who have at one time or another been considered less than by the social systems that oppress them. This is a practice, a lecture, a performance, and a ritual for re-configuring reality toward other futures, so that we can collapse the political notion of linear space and time as an act of resistance.

The audience sits on the floor around us, with us in the middle. They participate with us in imagining and building these worlds and rituals.

Kadir Nelson, July 11 & 18, 2016 Cover, *The New Yorker*. © Conde Nast