

Portrait of Promise

Behind the glass window of Outer Space's office lies a cluster of small, intimate objects, including cloth doilies, ceramic plates, hair, teeth, a white tablecloth, and a pitcher. Beside them sits the portrait of a young girl in her school uniform, her hair tied into pigtails. This photograph depicts the artist of this work, Ruaa Al-Rikabi, as a young child; around her, the accompanying objects form the likeness of a venerable shrine.

Portrait of Promise: domesticated yet feral angel 2002-ongoing presents a fragmented portrait of Al-Rikabi across time and space. Over several years, she has carefully chosen objects which speak to poignant personal memories and experiences, to create a work which is ever-evolving and constantly growing as an echo of Al-Rikabi herself.

Each object lies scattered across the central table, or is held by soft, delicate doilies and shimmering shards of stone. Raised onto these tactile platforms, they are given a reverential, deified air. References to the artist's body are present throughout the work. Locks of hair, baby teeth, a dental plaster mould and a tooth whitening syringe allude both to the body and the changes made to it: hair, removed or bleached blonde; and teeth, whitened and straightened. These objects highlight Al-Rikabi's evolving relationship to her body throughout her adolescence, and in particular, her experience growing up as an Iraqi-Syrian Australian within white Australian culture.

The lock of blonde hair, for instance, refers to a previous artwork titled *My Nordic Dream Girl* (2020), which involved her cutting off a lock of hair and then bleaching it blonde. Through this work, she indulges her childhood desire of being a 'blonde girl', and in doing so highlights the Western world's destructive idolisation of whiteness. The tooth whitener, in addition, carries troubling connotations of 'whiteness' as an ideal. In their display, these objects bear witness to these pressures Al-Rikabi once felt to conform.

Several objects celebrate Al-Rikabi's freedom beyond these pressures. A gold pocketknife resting on a doily was given to the artist by her girlfriend, with the argument that, "everyone needs a knife"; a small heap of green cloth forms the remains of a blessed bracelet received by the artist when her mother took her to a Syrian mosque in 2006, which she wore until it fell apart in 2012; an air plant tumbling over the edge of the table was chosen by the artist due to her fascination with its ability to live on its own, without soil; and the small jar beside her childhood portrait contains a note written only to herself.

In these chosen objects, Al-Rikabi celebrates her identity in all its breadth and variety. As Gloria Jean Watkins, an American intersectional feminist author, writes, "[w]e can liberate ourselves and others only by forging in resistance identities that transcend narrowly defined limits."¹ In *Portrait of Promise*, Al-Rikabi declares her freedom from the narrow limits which constitute whiteness, and in doing so liberates herself.

– Zali Matthews

This essay accompanies Ruaa Al-Rikabi's *Portrait of Promise: domesticated yet feral angel* 2002-ongoing which was shown as part of *As We Stand*, curated by Georgia Hayward at Outer Space 2021.

¹ bell hooks, *Art on My Mind: visual politics* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 8.