

Images - Courtesy of the artists. **Writer** - Lizzy Vartanian, arts writer and curator.

Thana Farooq and Nadia Gohar: The Passport Photo

Analysing identification imagery in two diverse projects

'Honest,' stripped back and free of any elaborate editing, the passport photograph is something that nearly every citizen of the world has. The identification image pictures its subject from the neck up. They are required to stare straight into the camera. Natural make-up only, accessories are not permitted. Serving not only as an identity document, but also as an object that grants its user permission to travel, it is a divisive image, just as it is an opportunistic one. In their recent work Thana Farooq and Nadia Gohar use the passport photograph to question its power and politics.

In 2017 Yemeni documentary artist Thana Farooq, who is currently based in the Netherlands, started *The Passport Project*. The series consists of a book of portraits, letters and testimonials—all from people who are blocked from travel because of their country of origin and whose passport therefore becomes a barrier and, most of the time, it is these people who need to move more than anyone else: refugees, asylum seekers and stateless individuals. The black and white portraits lack light, the images seem extremely honest yet they carry an air of sadness: 'I aimed to capture my subjects in the same way they were being looked at behind customs screening,' explains Farooq, 'This was my point of departure, which resulted into photographing people behind a milky pane of glass.'

Farooq's subjects are stripped of any sense of personality. This has been taken from them

in their minimalistic, reductive portraits. In contrast Nadia Gohar, an Egyptian artist based in Toronto, also uses the passport photograph in her work. Unlike Farooq however, Gohar's images are colourful and full of character. Gohar is her own subject in *Self Portrait (Passport Photo Do's & Don'ts)* (2017). In 25 passport-sized photographs Gohar is pictured in a number of ways. Sometimes she is wearing bright make-up, in others she is wearing glasses or loud jewelry. In some occasions the background of the image is dark while at times it is bright, like a kaleidoscope exploded inside the frame. In the bottom right corner however, is the 'perfect' passport photograph. Gohar looks straight to camera, none of her face is covered, her ears can be seen and the party make-up is gone. She has been stripped of her character yet, of all the images, this would be the only one that would be accepted by the Canadian passport guidelines.

Both Gohar and Farooq question the power of the passport photograph with both removing the 'human' element from the identity image. Gohar places her portrait in small plastic bags, as though the photographs are some kind of scientific specimen or a piece of evidence. Whereas in Farooq's *Passport Project*, the intimacy she finds in the letters she asks her sitters to write to her are protected in a book away from prying eyes. The portraits—that are often presented separately—create a border, not just for the individuals, but from the viewer exposed to them.



From top left, clockwise: Thana Farooq, *Invisible*, *The Passport Series* (2017) 84 x 60 cm

Nadia Gohar, *Self Portrait (Passport Photo Do's & Don'ts)* (2018) 25 x 30 cm

Thana Farooq, *The Passport*, *The Passport Series* (2017 - ongoing) 15 x 17 cm Courtesy of Chiara MacCall

