

**Aline Thomassen *The Ideal Muslim Woman***  
**By Roel Arkesteijn, GEM**

A seemingly carefree Mediterranean world radiates from Aline Thomassen's watercolours, drawings and paintings. Deep orange-brown earth tones are alternated with an exuberant colour scheme. The works are populated with (semi-)nude female figures with Mediterranean features who are involved in mysterious actions. They are hidden under impressive mounds of hair, twist themselves into extraordinary postures, or touch orifices that appear on their bodies like sores. The women seem unfazed by the surprising situations and stare self-confidently from the images. The context offers the viewer just as little footing: if there is a surrounding environment indicated, then it is made up of nothing more than a colored background.

The universe called up by Thomassen turns out to be less idyllic and pleasant than it at first sight appears to be. Sensuality alternates with a sense of the ominous. The female figures possess a disturbing physicality. They are not merely the object of their amazing physiques, they are also conscious of the observer's gaze. Their often confrontational postures and their by turns penetrating and averted gazes put the viewer in the unmistakable position of voyeur. The format, too, plays an important role in how the works are experienced: the small drawings and watercolors, due to their intimate measurements, presume a sense of personal involvement; the monumental paintings and large, recent watercolors represent through their own materiality a certain physicality. In some of the paintings and drawings the physical experience of the work is further heightened by the use of incarnadine watercolor as a background, calling up associations with bloodshot skin.

However much her work is based in the art of painting, it comes as little surprise that Aline Thomassen has a strong predilection for performance and video art – media in which the expressive possibilities of the (individual's own) body have an important place. She has an affinity with the evocative, personal, charged

performances of the Cuban-born artist Ana Mendieta, who died young, and for whom the female body served as an inexhaustible source of inspiration. Following her studies at the Royal Academy for Visual Arts in The Hague (1984-1989), Thomassen started painting portraits and figures, often with a strongly personal slant. After her first trip to Morocco in 1994, the body became increasingly important as a theme within her work. She found a powerful form of counterculture amongst Moroccan women, created in order to survive in a society dominated by hierarchy and tension. In this subculture, physicality plays an important role not only in forms of interaction, but also in use of language. The codes used within the culture of women seem to be a good match for Thomassen's preoccupations. Since that first stay, she has returned to Morocco again each year for several months at a time to stay with Moroccan families and spend time with the women. Once back in the Netherlands, the small watercolor impressions she made in Morocco serve as the basis for large-scale paintings and watercolors. At the end of the 1990's, Thomassen used heavily diluted paint to make large oil paintings on canvas. Since the paintings, all in all, had the character of watercolors, the artist has recently exchanged the oil paint and turpentine for meters-large drawings in watercolor and chalk on paper.

In the last few years, the studies made by Thomassen during her trips to Morocco have gained increasing independence as works in their own right. Thus in 2004 she presented the project 'I travel in your head - visual correspondent Morocco'. For three months she stayed in Tangier as 'visual correspondent' and via a weblog ([www.itravelinyourhead.com](http://www.itravelinyourhead.com)) sent new drawings to the Netherlands on a daily basis. Watercolors of the intimate lives of women were interspersed with observations about daily life in Tangier. The musician Lázaro Tejedor provided fragments of sound from Morocco for the images.

In her work, Thomassen allows the world of North African women to melt into her own experiences in a strange and inimitable way. Her drawn-in the figurative as well as literal sense-- female figures are impossible to experience as images of real women. Their puzzling

anatomy and their peculiar postures elicit too much surprise for that. Rather, they form constructions: carriers of emotion and existential perception. In Thomassen's recent, meters-large watercolors, for instance, many scenes feature mother and child. Some of the scenes show a symbiosis between the two, and evoke the Madonna representations that we are familiar with from art history. However, things are not all rosy in the paintings. Sometimes the idyllic scenes are cruelly disturbed. One of Thomassen's amazons has lifted her child by the ankle so that the child dangles helplessly with its head pointed downwards. Other mothers turn away from their children and turn their backs to them. The ambiguity of such harsh scenes leaves the viewer in confusion.

The penetrating and uneasy images that Thomassen presents refuse to reveal themselves completely. She continuously upsets our patterns of expectation and makes us confront the ideal images of women that we have formed from, amongst other things, the media and art history. Her militant women live their own lives, averse to our *a priori* assumptions.