Artistic and curator Rabbya Naseer argues that, whether intentionally or not, a woman’s biography inevitably becomes part of her work. “People expect certain kinds of stories from you,” she said, referring to the preconceptions that accompany women, particularly those of color. Therefore, her motivation for organizing the group show “Promises to Keep” at New York’s Apexart, which featured 12 women artists from her home country of Pakistan, aimed to probe the relationship between identity and representation—or, in some cases, misrepresentation.

The trope of femininity as expressed through domestic labor recurred throughout the exhibition. Salima Hashmi’s *Humda Hubalna* (1970) originally appeared on Pakistani television as a comedy sketch about “how to boil an egg”—the punchline being that the woman on screen talks circuitously around the subject but never actually offers any real instruction. Hashmi knowingly assumed the character of a soft-spoken housewife as part of the humorous ruse, which permitted the politically charged nature of the skit to escape the strict censorship of the time. Juxtaposing the egg, a biological symbol of womanhood, the goat testicles that Hurmat ul-Ain embroiders in *Great Sacrifice* (2011) alludes to an allegory about fatherhood. The video demonstration and a live performance at the opening, by Parsons students Gabriela Corretjer and LeChann Moore, re-enacts the preparation of a religious feast known as Eid al-Adha, which commemorates Ibrahim’s sacrifice of his son Ismail. By drawing attention to acts of female labor typically associated with the celebration, such as cooking and sewing, the artist reclaims the otherwise masculine story.

We see another domestic act being publicly performed in a two-channel video by Ayesha Jatoi, who launders clothes as a form of protest and display of grief. The fabrics are dyed red in *Clothesline* (2006), and as she hangs them on the monument of a fighter jet, they drip as if soaked in blood. In *Residue* (2016), the garments are white, indicative of mourning, and the laundering was performed in the wake of a school bombing. Both performances utilize an innocuous-seeming chore to make statements against acts of war. Supplementing Jatoi’s work, the text of a well-known Urdu poem *The Dawn of Freedom* (1947) by Faiz Ahmed Faiz recalls the turmoil of the Partition, and thus draws a line from a history of violence to the legacy of British imperialism.
Examining the gender roles left behind by that imperialist legacy, *White as Snow* (2008), a collaboration by Naseer and ul-Ain, critiques the Brothers Grimm tale *Snow White* and the canon of a woman waiting for her prince. Non-Pakistani audiences, however, might mistake the recitation of phrases such as “my mother is a housewife” as a reinforcement, rather than a mockery, of the clichés about oppressed, Muslim women. Similarly, the image of a woman in a black burqa has become so contentious that those viewing *Maryam* (2006), a self-portrait by Amber Hammad, might fail to see anything beyond politics. To counteract this stereotype, Hammad has rendered herself as the Islamic version of the Virgin Mary—seen holding her actual baby, and with a book of erotic art and a box of wet wipes at her feet. By choosing a figure revered in both Christianity and Islam, and portraying her in a contemporary setting, the artist ultimately underscores how motherhood transcends cultures and geographies.

In a nod to the age of social media and nonstop documentation, Lali Khalid’s *Songbirds Flying Home* (2017) uses the camera as a tool for exploring subjectivity. Photographs taken inside the artist’s house and of her young son appear no different from what you might find on Instagram. But these seemingly quotidian moments are interspersed with more performative gestures, such as when Khalid pairs two photos of herself holding up signs that read, “Yes, I am a Muslim” and “No, not a Terrorist.” Here, Khalid confronts the inescapability of being “othered” and reasserts control over her own narrative.

“Promises to Keep” returns again and again to the concept of “performing an identity, performing these self-portraits.” But far from existing in a vacuum, the 14 works reveal how public perception can shape each performance. In acknowledging the relationship between artist and viewer, Naseer’s curatorial endeavor not only transfers some of the burden of representation but also challenges us to reconsider our cultural biases.

“Promises to Keep” is on view at Apexart, New York, until July 29, 2017.

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