

Sumter Co. Gallery

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directly than an untouchable celebrity or distant historical figure could. The work begins as an intimate acknowledgement of an individual and is subsequently transformed into a set of symbols poised for the viewer's investigation."

Thomas's background would not seem to predict him becoming an artist. He was raised by a single mother in a working class neighborhood in Chicago. In 2009 he earned a BFA with an emphasis in painting and drawing from the University of Wisconsin – Whitewater. He went on to receive a Master in Fine Arts from the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill in 2013. Both Thomas and Taj are active members of the tight knit Durham artist/activist scene and have exhibited together on a few occasions.

Saba Taj is a queer, Muslim-American mixed-media visual artist and activist whose work centers around identity and challenging Islamophobia and sexism. Taj has struggled with her Muslim identity, and its seeming contradictions with the other parts of her persona but has come to embrace it as an essential part of who she is while rejecting monolithic interpretations of what it means to be Muslim. Over the years, her explorations of identity have grown increasingly intersectional, confronting Islamophobia's connections to systemic oppression rooted in anti-black racism and imperialism.

Her brightly colored portraits of mostly Muslim women in hijabs, smiling and enjoying quintessentially American things, makes a statement, imbued with humor, about how a hijab/head dress does not exclude Muslims from everyday "American" activities nor make them any less American.

When asked what it's like to produce art during a time of Islamophobia in America, Taj notes that her entire life as an American has been a time of Islamophobia, and it is something that she directly confronts in her work. Early on, she felt a responsibility to use her art to explore Islamophobia, but more recently has found that simply by being a socially engaged Muslim and gay woman of color in America, themes of systemic marginalization emerge in her work because that is embedded in how she grapples with her own identity.

Taj maintains that her identity certainly affects the way she think about herself as an artist, and how she is received as an artist. She feels empowered by making art, and hopes that the figures she paints are imbued with that sense of power. The most important thing for people to take away from her work is that identity does not operate on binaries - it is fluid and hybrid. Saba Taj thinks of art as a way to control the narrative and representation of Muslim Americans, and also as an act of resistance in a world that threatens to diminish people because of who they love and what they believe.

Taj was recently interviewed in *The Guardian* in an article about Muslims in the South: "It's been especially challenging to be a Muslim this past week. While Americans of all creeds and faiths were rallying across the country opposing Trump's immigration ban on travelers and immigrants from seven Muslim-majority countries, news broke about a mosque shooting in Quebec. I think right now, like many folks in America, I am balancing a lot of different feelings. There is fear for what this administration is going to do, and how that will impact me and people I love."

"Our safety, our survival, is routinely threatened in the name of some hypothetical greater safety that does not include us," continues Taj. "What they are trying to keep safe is white supremacy, what they are trying to protect is their own power. I'm scared about hate crimes, about healthcare, about same-sex marriage and reproductive rights

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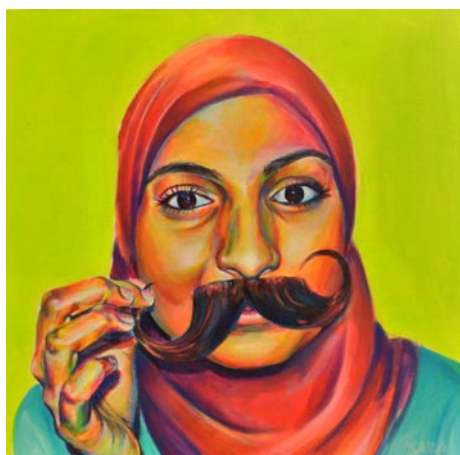
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Work by Saba Taj

being negatively impacted, about Muslim registries, and deportations. It is a really sobering time, seeing how power is operating in this country and how important it is that we get organized so we can take that power. I've been in North Carolina my entire life. There are a lot of challenges and fears, but I love that I am born and raised in the south. As I've gotten older, I feel more deeply that this is my state, and that makes me dedicated to stay here and make it better."

Taj received a BA in Art Education, North Carolina Central University, Durham, NC, in 2011, and her MFA in 2016 from University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. She is a founding member of Durham Artists Movement and along with her partner is a part of an active resistance movement against Islamophobia and Homophobia in NC.

For further information check our SC Institutional Gallery listings, call the gallery at 803/775-0543 or visit (www.sumtergallery.org).



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