

# DIVA

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## THE NAKED ISSUE

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# INTIMATE GAZE

**ART** Arab-Muslim, lesbian, daughter, partner: acclaimed young artist Estabrak is caught between worlds. But the struggle to unite her many identities and the friction between her culture and sexuality are the inspirations for her work, currently showing at Tate Britain.

**Words Patricia Curmi Video stills Estabrak**

**D**espite her thick London accent and Hoxton styling, there's a palpable sense that Estabrak belongs to somewhere other than the grey, rainy streets of North London. This is surprising, since the remarkable artist left her homeland to come to the UK when she was very young, and has only the stories her family tell her to remember it by. 'Does that make sense?' she asks repeatedly as she talks, and you believe that she desperately does want people to 'get' her, to see past the labels and catch a glimpse of who she really is.

At 21, Estabrak is the youngest artist to feature work in the Tate Britain gallery's thought-provoking new *imagine art after* exhibition. The Iraqi-born artist has produced some of the most blisteringly honest and, at times, painful art you're ever likely to see on screen, and it's clear she's being eyed eagerly by the art establishment as a future star. Breda Beban, curator of the exhibition at the Tate, refers to the strength of the characters and stories told by the young artist.

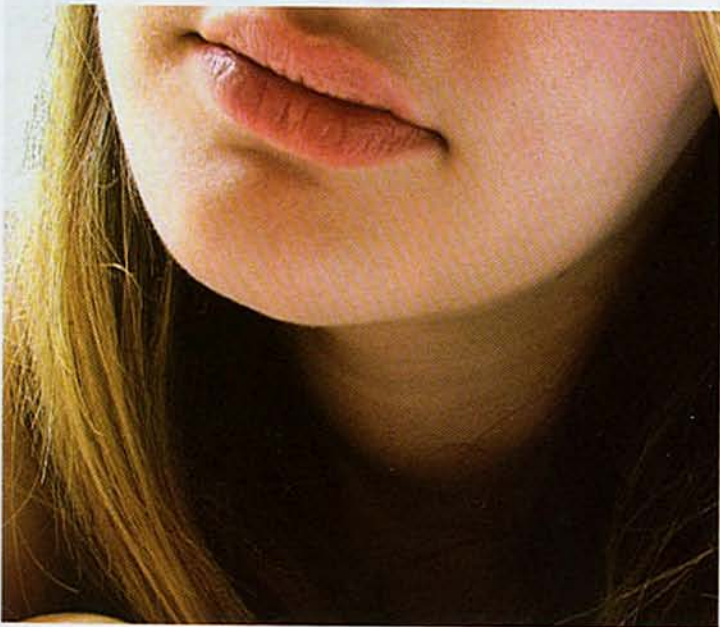
Estabrak's identity has been formed from a life filled with turbulence and happiness in seemingly equal measure. When her family came to London after fleeing Iraq she was just five years old. En route, the family were separated, then reunited in neighbouring Iran. Her father died when she was 16, and she remembers clearly that her mother and aunt, who has been a parent-figure since she came from Iraq five years ago, had always questioned her 'unnatural' friendships with other girls, though they eventually accepted that Rebecca was her 'best friend'.

Making a film about being a gay Arab-Muslim without splitting her loving family apart and upsetting the Islamic community was never going to be easy. Estabrak agrees; 'Though I thought that through it maybe people would understand me more, and I would understand myself more. Now I've made it, I know it's not really about me, it's about three people, three worlds, who have their own truths, none of which is necessarily wrong. We all cross a line together to try and reach each other, but at the same time none of us can understand the others fully.'

The story Estabrak tells in her video installation piece, *Self-portrait with Aunt and Rebecca*, is her own. On two giant screens at either end of the

speaker-lined, slightly claustrophobic lightbox room at the gallery, Estabrak is shown on one, outing herself to her Iraqi-Muslim aunt and, on the other, chatting dreamily with Rebecca, her partner of five years. Neither shows Estabrak's face; instead, the viewer is placed in her position. We are Estabrak. We're telling our aunt, who sits with her back to the screen, unmoving, why we won't ever be a traditional Iraqi wife. And it's we who watch our girlfriend, topless, chatting intimately about the most mundane things.

Its simplicity belies its power to move you. At one point, Estabrak speaks from behind the camera and tells her aunt, almost pleadingly, 'I am Muslim. I



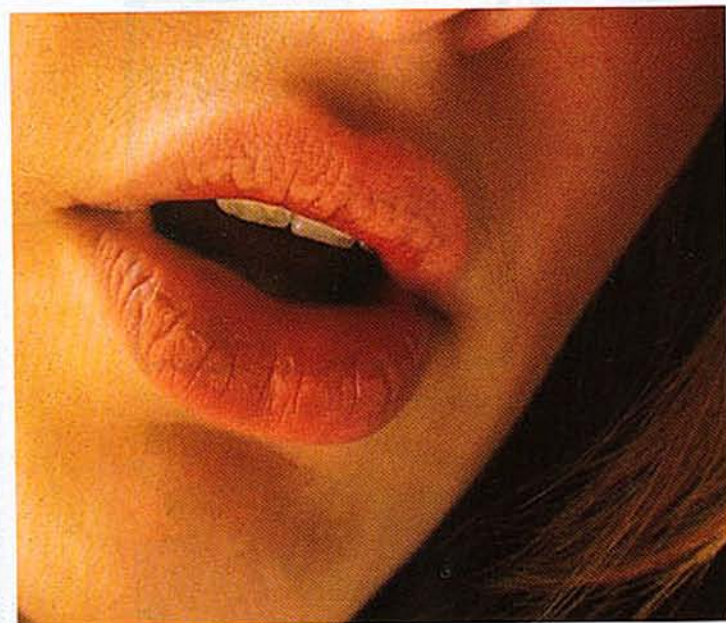
was born into a Muslim family, but I feel like a hypocrite just standing on top of a *sijada* [prayer mat] because who I really am isn't accepted.' Her aunt can only question, confused, torn between a niece she clearly loves and the pressure of a lifetime of Iraqi culture that denies homosexuality as normal.

#### SELF-EXPRESSION

It's hopeful and haunting in equal measures. The contrast between her aunt's anonymous, still image and the playful handheld camera shots of Rebecca were, says Estabrak, a conscious choice. 'As you walk around the room, you'll hear either Rebecca or my aunt speaking, but no matter how close to one you are, you'll always hear the other's voice in the back of your mind. You'll see my aunt holding back, but giving love, turn and then see this beautiful girl who is open and talking about anything.'

'With my aunt, the image looks static. With Rebecca, I didn't want it like that because that's not how our relationship is. It's a lot more intimate, more cosy, and I feel I can be much more open with her about who I am. She's made me realise that I can express this part of myself.'

Self-expression is one thing, but Rebecca must surely have taken some convincing to bare her chest, let alone her soul, to wandering crowds, even if it is in the name of art. Estabrak laughs; 'She didn't want to be naked at first. No matter how beautiful you are, you'll be self-conscious about showing your body. When I took photos for the original *imagine art after* website back in 2005, I remember her standing by me and saying, "You can't put that

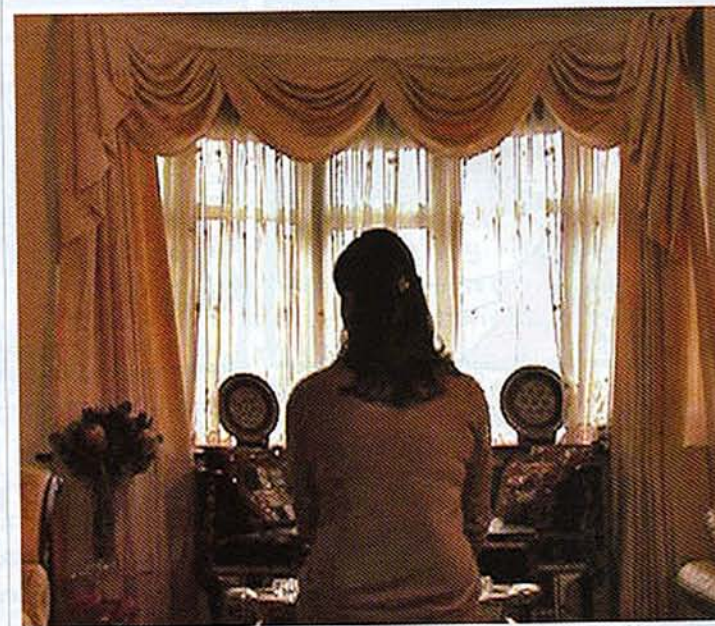
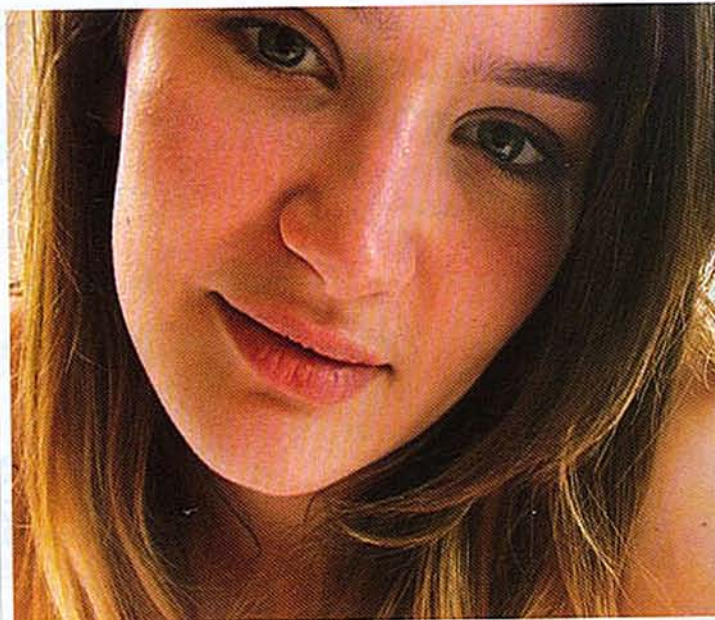


one in, or that one; my nose looks huge", and I had to coach her through it and tell her that it wasn't about her body; it's about art and what she represents. I think she now understands art a lot better, and I'm grateful for that. If I'd asked her two years ago if I could film her naked, she would probably have slapped me round the face and said, "No way, I'm not doing a porno".'

She admits that it's still difficult for her to watch her aunt's film; it reminds her of an experience – coming out and risking rejection – that remains raw for both parties. Estabrak explains that it threw up issues of trust, privacy and whether or not to tell her mother (who they feared would isolate herself from her traditional Iraqi community), for Estabrak's aunt and three older sisters, to whom she is out. She admits; 'My aunt was disheartened because she was put in a difficult situation, which I completely understand. To this day, trust between us is a little shaky, but I think she understands why I had to do it.'

#### KEEPING IT REAL

Whether her aunt understands or not, however, the pressure to hide her relationship from her mother and, for her mother's sake, the Iraqi community, means she can't include any pictures of herself in this article or use her full name. She insists that it isn't anti-Iraqi or anti-Islamic, but accepts that there are likely to be critics from the Muslim community. Her aunt refuses to see the exhibit, and Estabrak has yet to tell her mother she is showing her art at one of the UK's most prestigious galleries. Despite this, she



remains positive and proud that the self-portrait is honest and meaningful in an art world rife with mass commercialism and false emotion. It's also, she asserts, her experience of being a gay Muslim, a story not often told in the mainstream media.

'In our society, Muslims get a lot of negative press,' Estabrak concludes, 'and, without a doubt, one of the images I hope my piece leaves with the

**'It's about three people who have their own truths. We all cross a line to try and reach each other, but none of us understands the others fully'**

viewer is that we're normal people too. There are gay people within the Muslim community, and instead of going out and planning who we're going to bomb next, we're thinking about our own lives and our families, and the fact that we love them so much we can't go on lying to them for the rest of our lives.' D

*Estabrak's work is showing as part of the imagine art after series, a contemporary art project by six emerging artists, devised in different stages and settings. Until January 6th 2008, [www.imagineartafter.net](http://www.imagineartafter.net)*