

**Nil Yalter**  
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Can a body be institutionalized? The human mind certainly can. And what the mind absorbs the body enacts, as it is corralled by the social structures and physical architectures it inhabits. Paris-based Turkish artist Nil Yalter has created a body of work over the past forty years that addresses this idea in relationship to the politics of affect—specifically examining the experiences of women who exist on society’s margins, such as immigrants and prisoners. Her first solo exhibition in London presented three early works from the 1970s: *La Roquette*, *Prison de Femmes*, 1974; *Harem*, 1979; and *Rahime, Kurdish Woman from Turkey*, 1979.

*La Roquette, Prison de Femmes* was created in collaboration with Judy Blum and Nicole Croiset. It tells the story of Mimi, a former inmate at a Paris women’s prison whom Blum met when their children attended the same kindergarten. The work comprises a black-and-white video, sixteen photographs with handwritten texts in English, sixteen drawings with texts in French, and a book. The video never shows more than a bit of Mimi’s face, instead concentrating on peripheral details that also feature in the black-and-white photographs, such as a woman’s knees, a bowl of soup, and a blanket. On the sound track, we hear Mimi’s account (a semifictionalized version written by the artists) of her daily experiences; she describes the prison, run by nuns, as panoptic in structure. Overall, the work combines the clinical aesthetic and compositional tropes—such as black-and-white photographs accompanied by text—of the Conceptual art of the 1970s with more classic documentary strategies. This deliberately serves to confuse any instinctively empathetic response to Mimi’s emotionally affecting story—seemingly a deliberate strategy to negate reductive or simplistic readings of Mimi’s, and therefore other women’s, experience of prison.

“The rich, they have one child in general. They have servants. They hire me as a servant to watch after their only child. I’ve worked myself to death to raise my ten children and I raise their one child,” states the first-person narrator in the video that, alongside drawings and photographs, is part of *Rahime, Kurdish Woman from Turkey*. Rahime’s account of her life is accompanied by simple, very physical, yet symbolic imagery. For example, as she speaks of her experience as a mother and a nanny, we see a small girl scooping dirt and ash into a box using her bare hands; Rahime explains that the privileged child lies on cotton and her own on ash. Yalter met Rahime, who had migrated from Diyarbakir in southeastern Turkey to the ghettos of Istanbul, at a friend’s house, where Rahime was working as a cleaner. The artist did not fictionalize or even actively shape Rahime’s story to make a didactic or agitational statement. Instead, the poetic imagery in the video, drawings, and photographs—one photo has faux-blood hanging from it—becomes a series of visual metaphors for Rahime’s difficult experiences in the social and physical spaces she exists within.

Yalter, who settled in Paris in 1965, had no formal art education, and her very early career included work in pantomime and costume design. Her own experiences as an immigrant, and within the patriarchal systems of the Paris art world, were not easy; nevertheless, she experienced the liberatory politics of 1968, which influenced her lifelong feminist critique of the power structures that we inhabit. The third video presented here—*Harem*—shows Yalter performing a series of choreographed movements in a small room as the narrators (the artist and another woman) tell a mythical tale of a woman trapped in a harem. The ritualized movements and text emphasize constraint—by spaces, by systems: performance as a metaphorical institutionalization of the female body.

—Kathy Noble