



*A documentay film about young female  
directors from the Middle East.  
By Yasmina Ben Ari.*

# *With Open Eyes*

[www.withopeneyesfilm.com](http://www.withopeneyesfilm.com)



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## *About the film*

*With Open Eyes follows four young female directors all originated from various Middle Eastern countries (Egypt, Jordan, Palestine and Lebanon) in a moment of their life. The four directors tell us about “their artistic eye”, the society they come from and the changes they work to promote. For the first time these artists move from behind the camera to give us a piece of their reality, their thoughts, ambitions and fears.*

*How did they choose to become directors? What is essential for them to show through this media? How is it to be a woman in the filmmaking industry? What is the place of women regarding the recent boom of digital cinema in the Arab World?*

*The film “With Open Eyes” aims to show the contradictions and social mechanisms of today through woman’s eyes. Independent cinema is booming, free expression is choosing media and other artistic canals to express itself and women are growingly part of this transition. The diversity of the cast is set to open for more visibility of young female filmmakers from the Middle Eastern region. From a new generation, they are direct, engaged and not afraid to break ongoing taboos. For some of the films directed by the cast, various problems have emerged, sometimes to the extent of the film being banned or as in the case of one, the strict interdiction to go back home.*

*All between 23 and 34 years old, the directors of this film tend to represent in their own way, various aspects of the new generation of female directors in the Middle East. It is not the meaning here to give an analytic insight to female film production in the region. It is set and focused on four portraits, engaged artists and storytellers.*

*The image is dynamic and mobile as we move from Cairo to Amman, from video to still photography. With Open Eyes is a modern ballade in the realm of the identity of four artists and women living in dynamic and contrasted environments.*

*The link between the eyes of these directors, their gaze upon the reality they face and their artistic production is central.*

*Yasmina Ben Ari*

# Heba

*This picture is taken on the terrace of Heba's apartment. I like the peaceful confidence and her optimism on this image.*

*Heba is a very secretive and shy person. She could not imagine being filmed anywhere else than where she lives. It was as if we had to enter her intimate sphere.*



*Hebas place was quite dark so it took us some time to work on the light. I wanted it to be as taken from her bubble, her inside world. I am on the left with Mahmoud, our cameraman in Cairo as Heba caught in her thoughts, glances at Stephen.*



*I really like this picture. We're on a break from a long shoot. Heba just took back her sit. She looks so thoughtful as both cameras steal this image of her. I like the distortion of angles, nearly graphic and yet the profoundness of her expression.*

*I really like this portrait of Heba where all her light and positive energy comes out naturally. She is on the terrace of her apartment, the rush and noise around just seems to slide on her.*



# Dalia



*The cultural Center Darat Al Funun in upper Amman with its natural elegance and sober beauty. On this picture Rabieh and I are shooting Dalia and Serene, her best friend, on a stone platform facing Amman. Behind them, a sculpture of a man holding a mask on his face, further behind, Amman and its melancholic set of small white houses.*

*We are still at the Darat Al Funun, precisely where we filmed Dalia. There was so much noise with the installation of a new exhibition that we moved our set. Behind Dalia and Stephen a picture of Jordans beautiful mountains. Dalia has this dreamy yet concentrated look. I love the vividness of the colours and their expressions right in the moment.*



*To me, each director had a colour and a symbolic. With Dalia, it was the light blue sky and the freedom of these birds flying around in groups over Amman. I had come across this old Roman Theatre and wanted to film Dalia in it, going up and down the stairs. In the film she looks like a gracious bird as she gently moves from one stair to the next.*



*I absolutely adore this colourful image Stephen made of Dalia. She is so soft and somehow insecure. Yet this image seems to reveal the vivid strength within her. Her beauty is breathtaking.*



# Zeina

*Zeina is a multi sided energetic and confident artist. She has a great sense for fashion she uses in her work and also in promoting traditional Palestinian embroidery, modernized into dresses. The idea was to film her as in a real photo shoot in order to show more of her originality. She gave so much energy and inspiration to the shoot. It was amazing to witness.*



*The shoot is taking place on the roof of a small building in Amman. Firas and I in the right corner are shooting the whole scene. A short time earlier an old woman came to hang her clothes. A smile is exchanged. Everything was just natural and organic.*



*Zeina is here with her Uncle Mohanna Durra a famous artist and painter. We all came to film her with part of her family living in Amman. It was a very warm and interesting moment to be welcomed with open arms and see Zeina surrounded with some of her family roots.*



*Zeina and Safwan Durra, her other uncle still living in Jordan. Zeina was very keen in inviting Safwan to join us to come and share stories with us about his past. To me this is one of the most beautiful pictures of Zeina, she seems in her element, simply.*

# *Annemarie*



*The shooting is over. Annemarie has been wanting to “go out and play” for hours. The picture is taken on top of the building where we all stayed in Amman. The sun just started going down. It is my favourite of Annemarie, sad yet grounded and strong.*

*We were on a break on the main day of shooting, at the apartment where we were staying. Annemarie is sitting in the chair where we filmed her. She is looking at her new mobile card in Amman. I took the second camera and film the kids playing outside. A little girl is climbing rocks with great agility while two other are running back and forth.*





*I can't help but smiling when I see this picture. I was so totally in this moment, had this image in my mind of Annemarie facing Palestine from the top of Mont Nebo (Jordan) in this strong, nearly hieratic posture. Yet I had no monitor to follow, had to run after Firas and fight a wind storm. It was all quite surreal after waking up at 4 am to catch the right light.*

*This is the image I had in mind.*

*Annemarie is facing Palestine, just in front of her before the big void, a map on a stone showing the directions for Ramallah, Bethleem, Jerusalem...*



## *Heba Youssry*

Egyptian director, 23 years old, graduated from Egypt Higher Institute of Cinema. She has directed various short and documentary films among which "Profession: women" where she dares entering the sphere of prostitution in Cairo as she follows young prostitutes in their search for clients.

Though still very young, Heba has already been noticed by professionals in Egypt and abroad and is currently editing her last film in Cairo about her famous grandmother, the Egyptian singer Shahrazade. Her approach is documented and neutral. Distant to her subject yet furiously engaged.

## *Dalia Alkury*

Palestinian director and documentalist, 27 years old. She holds an MA in screen Documentary from Goldsmiths College, UK, and has directed over seven documentary films, all of which were screened in international film festivals or on the Arabic MBC Sattelite TV network. She has been granted support from the TV channel Al Arabya twice including for her last film, "Smile you're in South Lebanon". The film follows a Palestinian family in the realm of the July war in Lebanon with a humoristic approach.

Her approach to images is romantic yet sharp in the way it chooses to depict each and every side of a given issue. Dalia has a sense for portraits and films people as if she painted them, touch by touch with a warm and innocent approach to human nature.

## *Zeina Durra*

Born in London, England of Middle Eastern Parents, is a 31 year old and received her BA in Oriental Studies, (Arabic and Modern Middle East Studies) from Pembroke College, Oxford. She recently received her MFA from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, Graduate Film Program and graduated with the thesis film, *The Seventh Dog*, which she wrote, directed and edited. The film depicts post September 11 USA and the look Native Americans tend to have towards Arab originated people and communities. The film follows a young Lebanese girl and her Saudi boyfriend as they go about in New York, followed and recorded by CIA agents.

Durra holds various identities among which Bosnian, Palestinian, Jordanian and Lebanese, raised in England she films her world and its apparent contradictions with irony and distance and a strong sense of visual aesthetics.

## *Annemarie Jacir*

Palestinian filmmaker and writer, living in Ramallah (Palestine) until she was recently forbidden to go back, Annemarie currently lives in between different countries including Jordan. Jacir has been working with independent cinema since 1994 and has written, directed and produced a number of award-winning films and was recently named one of *Filmmaker magazine's* 25 New Faces of Independent Cinema.

Annemarie Jacir co-founded Philistine Films, an independent production company, focusing on productions related to the Arab world and Iran. She has recently finished her first feature film, "Salt of this Sea", which follows the story of a working-class, Palestinian-American refugee returning home. "Salt of this Sea" is the first feature film ever made by a female Director in Palestine. It was screened at the Cannes Festival 2008 in the category Un Certain Regard. Annemarie's work is poetic, grounded and strongly connected to Palestine and its contemporary reality.

## *Producer and director Yasmina Ben Ari*

Yasmina Ben Ari was born in 1979 in Paris, France. She studied Music and Arts at the Collège des Enfants du Spectacle from the age of 15. Educated violinist she performed in Orchestras for 5 years until she decided to leave Paris. She then worked as a music teacher in Spain and moved to Belgium for four years to enter university. Yasmina holds a double Master in International Politics and Contemporary Arab and Muslim world with a specialization in Gender studies. She worked as project coordinator with various NGOs and elaborated projects to increase the visibility of social minorities through Artistic gatherings. It is in the frame of her Thesis on new means of Female empowerment through Art in Egypt that she first used the film media as a tool for her work.

After attending a training in documentary making in Copenhagen, she was granted a financial support to direct her first documentary, *With Open Eyes*. She is currently working on her next documentary film in Egypt. See [www.withopeneyesfilm.com](http://www.withopeneyesfilm.com)



## *Photographer Stephen Freiheit*

The photographer/DOP, Stephen Freiheit, Denmark, 42, is educated at the Czech Film School in Prague. He is an experienced photographer who has collaborated with various known artists in Denmark and abroad as the Dalai Lama, Yoko Ono, Marc Almond etc... He has directed short films featuring American photographer Arnold Newman, the short documentary "Women's World" about foreign women in Denmark with the NGO Hennah.

He has recently published a photography book "Related" on the visual relation beyond the cultural gap in collaboration with the Red Cross. He is currently working on a photographic coffee table book portraying life of exiled Tibetans in Nepal.

See His work at [www.freiheitphotography.com](http://www.freiheitphotography.com)



# *Music credits*

Heba's theme: "Cairo Breath"

Composed and arranged by Pelle Skovmand and Yasmina Ben Ari © Pelle Skovmand & Yasmina Ben Ari  
Aoud: Nassir Shamma · Bass: Asger Baagøe · Vocal: Yasmina Ben Ari

Dalia's theme: "Wings"

Composed and arranged by Pelle Skovmand & Stephen Freiheit © Pelle Skovmand & Stephen Freiheit  
Guitar: Thomas Kurek · Piano: Pelle Skovmand · Bass: Asger Baagøe

Zeina's theme: "Rooftop"

Composed, arranged by Pelle Skovmand and Stephen Freiheit © Pelle Skovmand & Stephen Freiheit  
Trumpet: Anders Juhl Nielsen · Aoud: Nassir Shamma · Drums: Kaspar Jensen · Bass: Asger Baagøe ·  
Guitar: Thomas Kurek

Annemarie's theme: "Exiled"

Composed by Pelle Skovmand, Stephen Freiheit and Yasmina Ben Ari. Arranged by Pelle Skovmand and  
Stephen Freiheit © Pelle Skovmand, Stephen Freiheit & Yasmina Ben Ari.  
Aoud: Abdo Daebis · Fad Cello: Fadi Hattar · Bass: Asger Baagøe

*The music has been partly recorded in Amman at Fluid Productions. Produced, arranged and mixed in Copenhagen at Neat Productions. Thanks to all musicians part of this work and to Fluid productions for their assistance.*

# *Credits*

This film was granted a financial support from the Danish-Egyptian Dialogue Institute (DEDI), see [www.dedi.org.eg](http://www.dedi.org.eg).

The film has received technical and administrative support from the Royal Film Commission in Amman. See [www.film.jo](http://www.film.jo)

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Many Thanks to Heba, Dalia, Zeina and Annemarie for their time, trust and patience.

# *Crew*

Producer/Director: Yasmina Ben Ari

DOP/Photographer: Stephen Freiheit

Camera: Rebieh Darwish, Mahmoud Darwish and Firas Taybeh

Editing: Doa Fathy and Haytham Al Sakhaoui

Music: Yasmina Ben Ari, Stephen Freiheit and Pelle Skovmand



In the course of 2007-2008 Yasmina Ben Ari wrote and directed the documentary "With Open Eyes" portraying four young female film directors - all with roots in the Middle East.

The movie launched the initiative With Open Eyes, which aims to shed light on young independent Middle Eastern cinema made by and/or about women and to promote dialogue between young filmmakers. Media is here perceived as a tool to inform and engage, inspire action and challenge dominant perspectives.

The movie takes us on a journey with four rising directors in the fantastic settings of Amman and Cairo. The director and the crew are presented in this book.

Visit [www.withopeneyesfilm.com](http://www.withopeneyesfilm.com)

