



Strude, the Danish Burka

written by Julie Billaud
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The garment before your eyes is called 'Strude'. I discovered its existence in 2010, while conducting research in Denmark on controversies around Islam that had emerged in the wake of the 'cartoons affair'. Like in the rest of Europe, the controversy was about pieces of cloth displayed in public; namely the participation in the parliamentary elections of a veiled Muslim woman called Asmaa Abdol-Hamid. As I interviewed people who were directly or indirectly involved in the debate, and spent long hours discussing my findings and ideas



with my friends, one of them directed me towards the [Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek](#), where an exhibition of photographs by artist [Trine Søndergaard](#) was taking place. 'We too in Denmark, she said, have an equivalent of the burka!'

I entered the museum on this snowy November day, eager to find some warmth and a pleasant way to spend a few hours away from my research. The exhibition was composed of 'portraits' of women wearing the little-known garment mysteriously called 'Strude', the existence of which most Danes ignored. This face-mask used to be worn in the past by women living on a small Danish island to protect their faces against the elements. In her work, the artist revisited the portrait genre by interrogating the machinery of truth that it traditionally seeks to create: giving access to the 'soul' or 'personality' of its subjects through the meeting of the gazes. In this work, this meeting was doubly blocked: by the mask and by the averted face of the sitter. Just as the codes of the dresses remain an island secret for the uninitiated, the artist explored what happens when the meeting between the gaze of the subject and the viewer is deflected and denied. Strangely, far from provoking feelings of anxiety, the characters appeared in an aura of introspection and quietness that left me filled with an unexpected feeling of fullness.