

**New Yorker Lil Mahnaji has become one of the highest profile rooftopers in web3 — and the only one to do so while wearing a hijab. She sits down with Mariquita de Boissière to discuss what her work is like as an openly Muslim, brown woman, and her hopes to inspire minorities to succeed in whatever field they choose.**

Very few people think, when they first wake up in the morning, about gaining unauthorised access to skyscraper rooftops and urban pinnacles. But on one otherwise regular morning in 2017, Mahnaji did just that. “It had been on my mind for a long time. I was going through a deep transitional period and had started my new corporate job, just the week before,” she shares. “I woke up and was like, ‘I’m going to do this, because if I don’t do it now, I never will.’”

A long-time resident of New York, Mahnaji has since become one of the highest profile rooftopers in web3 — and the only one to do so while wearing a hijab. “For my first rooftoping experience — I don’t even consider it a rooftop —, but there’s a ten-story car park with beautiful neon lights and train tracks that run below it. It was gorgeous. I went for the sunset, and I sat on the edge and had a little dangle.”

What Mahnaji didn’t realise as she sat, legs dangling in the evening sun, was that the journey she was about to embark upon — above the New York City skyline and beyond — was also to be an inward quest for self-discovery. With nearly 80,000 followers across social media and a debut on the invite-only SuperRare marketplace, Mahnaji has amassed a significant audience for her gravity-defying shots, which include a **superheroine-like portrait** captured hundreds of feet above Wall Street’s famed bull statue, and her **now-iconic red Adidas trainers** dangling over Times Square’s landmark billboard.



*Clearing the Fog of Mind, by Lil Mahnaji in collaboration with Em1t.*

While onlookers may be forgiven for thinking that the greatest danger Mahnaji faces are the eye-watering heights she works from, in a post-911 world, it is the authorities that are meant to protect her that she fears most. “For me, being a visibly Muslim woman, my biggest fear is having my work, my identity, or my presence when I’m on top of these buildings being misunderstood, and my intentions mistaken for something else.”

From having Homeland Security show up at her door one morning, to the constant comments from security staff and the police, the rooftoper has had to deal with Islamophobic discrimination on top of the challenges typically associated with infiltrating rooftops. “Everyone’s like, ‘oh, you must have it so much easier because you’re a girl. Girls don’t get stopped.’ That’s true unless you’re a brown, Muslim woman.”

“I sat on the edge and had a little dangle.”

— Lil Mahnaji

Mahnaji shares how this relentless othering — and the material risks to her safety that come with it — led her to question wearing a hijab at all. “The peers I’m with,” she explains, referring to her white, male rooftoping friends, “they can go right through. Meanwhile, I’m getting stopped at the lobby because I look like I don’t belong there.”

“It all had me thinking, ‘do I even believe any of this? Do I want to keep the hijab on?’” she continues. “I feel like it’s kind of silly when I look back on it. I actually questioned my faith because I wanted to access the roof of some building.”

The question of belonging is one that has long been close to Mahnaji’s heart. A first-generation immigrant to the US, Mahnaji was five years old when she first arrived from Bangladesh with her parents. “Growing up, there was always that desire to belong, even though you’re made to feel like you don’t,” she explains. “I’ve always felt that pressure to wear the same clothes, to eat the same foods, to act the same way.”



*The Anti-Heroine, by Lil Mahnaji.*

As confronting as rooftoping was — and continues to be —, anchoring into the internal sense of belonging that it demands formed a turning point. “Walking into a building, you have to act as though you belong there to an extent. Then you find your way up, whether that be through the elevator or just walking up, like, a million flights of stairs until you get to the roof,” Mahnaji says.

While ‘fake it ‘til you make it’ may just be an exercise in pretending, the cliché has benefitted Mahnaji’s relationship with herself in real and profound ways. “This whole experience has really strengthened my faith. It’s like, ‘no, actually, I believe this, and I want to continue being a visibly Muslim woman because this is what I believe.’” With a rebelliousness to her voice, she adds, “I’m not going to allow any external challenges to change how I outwardly reflect my inward beliefs.”

“I’m not a photographer, I’m an artist who uses photography as her chosen medium.”

— Lil Mahnaji

Rooftopping brought Mahnaji on a collision course with her identity as an artist, as well as her relationship with her faith. That began with an unexpected encounter with the night sky in 2018 that would go on to sow the seeds for what has become a deep passion for photography. “I would only take photos with my phone back then. I didn’t want to kill the exploration by taking a proper photo,” she recalls. “But one night, I was at an abandoned resort in upstate New York, and I saw the Milky Way for the first time. I was so blown away,” the artist tells me. “I just could not capture it with my phone. That was the moment I decided I needed to get a camera to document what I was seeing and feeling.”

In the years that followed, Mahnaji threw herself into her photography. But it was not until she brought her art onto the blockchain in late 2021 that she was able to start getting by from her work. "I can do art. I can express myself for a living now," she affirms. Lacking access to the artistic gatekeepers of New York, Mahnaji has used the blockchain to circumvent traditional galleries and sell her photography as NFTs. As such, she has been free to apply the same spirit of adventure to her art as she does to exploring the urban skyline.

In August last year, **she wrote**: "I'm not a photographer, I'm an artist who uses photography as her chosen medium." Drawing upon techniques that span colour manipulation, animation, and panoramic photomontage, Mahnaji works with tone, movement, and composition to bring a sense of poignancy to an otherwise dispassionate cityscape. But then, if there is one word that Mahnaji could never be described as, it would be "indifferent".



*Conviction is part of Lil Mahnaji's Identity collection. "I guess it's about having that open mindedness and curiosity to understand the experiences of people who don't look like you."*

Mahnaji's **Genesis Collection** on Foundation mounts a powerful social critique, confronting spectators with a bird's eye view of racialised gentrification in **Reflection Introspection**, and of wealth inequality in **The Great Divide**. In her nocturnal **Cyberpunk New York City** collection, Mahnaji casts herself as the 'anti-heroine', ushering in "a new era" from the liminality of cyberspace; one in which "dreams become reality." Meanwhile, her **Identity** portraits series blends the rooftopping she is known for with the visibly Muslim woman behind the camera.

Immortalising her high-profile place in the global urban explorer community on the blockchain is part of Mahnaji's deeper mission to inspire women, minorities, and marginalised communities "to go out there and be their best in whatever field they choose." While rooftopping has tended to be more accessible to those with the (white) privilege to challenge authorities, without fear of facing excessive violence or heavy recrimination, Mahnaji uses her art and her platform to speak out and raise resources for a range of issues close to her heart: the Free Palestine movement, women's rights in Iran, and humanitarian efforts following the disastrous flooding in Puerto Rico and Pakistan, amongst others.

**"I can express myself for a living now."**

— Lil Mahnaji

Mahnaji aspires to take her advocacy and activism on the blockchain further. "Lately, I've been trying to be more open about my experiences, my identity, and seeing who responds and what works out. This is a direction I'm going to continue in," she affirms. "I think artists really want to bring their full selves onto the blockchain, but it's hard when your success in web3 depends on who is collecting your work, and how well you can market yourself."

No longer subject to the gatekeeping inherent in web2, Mahnaji fears that similar dynamics may nonetheless be retained if collectors and community members favour the same kinds of people who have benefitted within the traditional art world. "I guess it's about having that open mindedness and curiosity to understand the experiences of people who don't look like you."



Written by  
Mariquita de Boissière

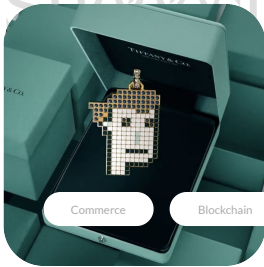


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Mariquita (she/they) is a freelance writer who lives in La Paz, Bolivia. A late-dx autistic with ADHD, they are in an ongoing process of (re)discovery and self-expression. Originally from Brighton, UK, over the past decade, she amplifies movements for environmental justice and coordinates campaigns to resist the criminalisation of protest.

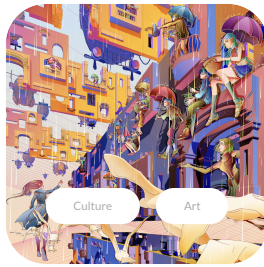


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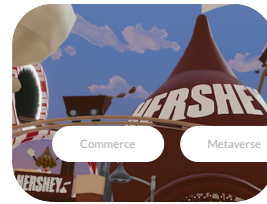
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We exhibit the creativity of web3 artistry, the use cases developed by web3 builders, and the communities augmented by and built on blockchain.

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