

Shurooq' Amin – A journey into a world of creation

By the Lahd Gallery in London.



Medusas Resting, The Bullet Series, 2010, Acrylic painting with photography on canvas and wood, 80x170cm - Courtesy of Lahd Gallery, London.

Considered one of Kuwait's foremost artists and poets, Shurooq Amin works from an ideology of distinct resolution and convergence. A free spirit anchored resolutely in an unflinching vision, she creates thought-provoking art, pushing the boundaries of her society. The polarity between East and West is the backbone of her images, as is her own struggle as an artist in Kuwait. Shurooq has had to overcome not merely patriarchal but also societal stereotypes. As such, for the last three years, she has embarked on a raw exploration of modern Arabian Gulf society. She began her journey with researching the secret world of women in Kuwait, entering their homes, allowing them into hers, being privy to the delicate nature of the double lives most lead, and henceforth documenting her findings with photographs that eventually became self-contained staged photo-shoots of images that do not profess to demean or criticize, but to exaggerate with an incongruent tongue-in-cheek quality the nature of these double lives. She uses these photographic documents

within her acrylic paintings, sometimes incorporating collage, to emphasize the gravity of the issue at hand. Her interdisciplinary technique reflects a culture interspersed and immersed in socio-political ritualism. *Synthesis* (2007-2009) explored the unilateral life of a child, the lonesomeness and confusion, the imbroglio of being neglected or unseen or unheard, the self-inflicted blame, the anomaly of existence. In her series *Society Girls* and *The Bullet Series*, (2010) she explored the secret taboo underworld of women in the Arabian Gulf with its accompanying ritualism, sexuality, and socio-political ramifications. Her paintings depict Arab Muslim girls in their embellished, fashionable state, an emblematic prototypical portrayal in which there tends to be a "sameness" of identity, a social cloning. She captures the spirit of a culture that has been characterized by candor and misconceptions, not least the heart of the artist who expresses it. In her series *Take Me to Heaven* and *My Country is Ill*, she tackles religion and politics, advocating peace through

tolerance indispensably. In her series *It's a Man's World*, (2011) she attempts to peel the under-layers of men's secret sub-culture; a documentation to divulge the truth and to open a window to a secret society. After focusing on socio-political issues and sexuality, Shurooq naturally began to delve into the world of religion and politics. She gravitates relentlessly towards the meaning of taboo in Middle Eastern culture. So she explores, travels, experiences and documents images that can only culminate in an open-minded, and ironically open-ended dialogue. Shurooq creates art that underlines the fabric of modern Arabian Gulf society. Unperturbed by the inherent societal restrictions, she goes on to strip the façade and reveal the hidden lives of society women and men in the Arabian Gulf. "Society hides the truth to achieve a false perfection", she asserts. Her paintings depict subjects in an embellished state, revealing themselves, while always denominated by the polarity of the East and West. These subtle nuances are further exploited to uncover an untold truth kept away from the outside world. Some paintings are shot with a small Hornet bullet, from an M16 sniper gun, providing an allegory of society's murder of a woman's sensuality and passion. "The shooting itself holds a dual function," she explains. "On the one hand, it is a symbol of society's injustice and hypocrisy; and on the other hand, it is a cathartic experience for me releasing my vision with kinetic energy – the concentration required to shoot a bulls-eye - and allowing me to physiologically and symbolically be a part of the canvas." She has missed her target only once.

In exploring eroticism, she found herself inspired by Nizar Qabbani's controversial book *On Entering the Sea*, and it was then that Shurooq began to etch her own poetry onto the canvases, to further challenge society with text and image combined. By using a translated version of Qabbani's censored work, she identifies with him as an Anglophone poet herself, whose own work has been banned from publishing in her country (Shurooq publishes her poetry and writing abroad). Unrelenting and inevitably controversial, her oeuvre explores the darker depths of society's suppression and the fragility of human nature, in a critical analysis of an elite sector of society who choose to live on their own terms. Her works open a long overdue dialogue on the patriarchal



My Louboutins, Society Girls series, 2010, Acrylic painting with photography on canvas and wood, 100x120cm - Courtesy of JAMM.

nature of Middle Eastern society.

Shurooq ensures to document her creative process, illustrating the implementation of her vision onto canvas. Her techniques over the years have evolved in relation to her own evolution, determined by the milestones in her life: Her father's death in her arms at the age of 11 (charcoal, pencil drawings, illustrations, pen and ink self-made storybooks); her foray into puberty with the dichotomy of being educated in a private British school yet expected to restrain, as an Arab Muslim girl, from self-expression (watercolor, gouache, and pastel paintings); her rebellion as a teenager and spontaneous suicide attempt (a period in which she abandoned art altogether, almost in an effort to annihilate herself); her marriage as an act of rebound (a time in which she thrust herself into her art – using oil on canvas - and poetry, and began to exhibit and publish frenetically); her divorce seventeen years and four children later (a period of quasi-freedom and a



Starts With Religion, Toby for Peace series, 2011, Photography, 80x100 cm - Courtesy of Lulu Al-Sabah.

complete mental, emotional, psychological, physical, spiritual and of course, artistic, rebirth).

Press has referred to her as a “patriotic liberal expressionist” and yet ironically her works are all rebellious, controversial in subject matter, and taboo. She insists that she will liberate her country from its “mind-forged manacles of man” as she quotes one of her favorite poets/artists William Blake (another is Khalil Gibran, as she identifies with his duality as artist/poet, too).

Shurooq has been invited to live in Dubai, Barcelona, or London, to further her art career rapidly. She knows she stands a better chance at international recognition and would find an abundance of opportunities if she migrated to a cultural and artistic center. But she insists that she has a role to play in the region, and especially in Kuwait. “I know that Kuwait is not a cultural or artistic center yet, but someone has to take the reign and start a movement here. Why not me? I want to put

Kuwait on the map, artistically.” As with everything in her life, she has taken matters into her own hands. In mid-2011, Shurooq, Hamad Al-Saab, Ali Sultan, and Amira Behbehani established “The Art Salon”, an art movement that aims at giving back to the community, by using art to help people in need, as well as creating opportunities for local artists of all nationalities. “This is my destiny. I won’t abandon my country like so many other liberated intellectuals, academics, writers, artists, musicians and designers have done. I won’t desert it when it needs people like me more than ever. The Fundamentalists are growing. How can we progress then? That’s where I come in.”

In 2010, Shurooq Amin’s painting *Society Girls* (estimated at \$5000 at the time) sold for \$28,000 at the Inaugural Auction of Contemporary Arab and Iranian Art in Kuwait, organized by Lulu Al-Sabah and auctioneered by Aileen Philips de Pury. It gave Shurooq a wider audience, and provided her with a



Is There a Problem Baby? The Bullet Series, 2010, Acrylic painting with photography on canvas and wood, 120x140cm - Courtesy of Lahd Gallery, London.

more international platform. “People were asking me – rhetorically I assume - ‘Where did you come from? Where’ve you been hiding?’ and I find that amusing because I’ve been painting all my life, and exhibiting for 20 years (does my first solo show at 9 years of age count?)”, she responds laughing.

“With every image I create, if even one person is inspired to discuss, one person’s perception is altered, one person’s mentality is liberated, then I’ve achieved my goal. That person will go on to affect others.”

There is a ‘pay it forward’ mentality, a “domino effect” on society, she insists, that will ultimately culminate in a better world. In this sense, every image she creates is a rebel with a cause.

We would like to thank the “Lahd Gallery” in London for their support providing the material needed for this article.