

# DESTIG

An aerial photograph of the Shanghai skyline, featuring the Oriental Pearl Tower and the Bund. The image is hazy, suggesting a misty or overcast day. The text 'DESTIG' is overlaid in large, bold, red letters at the top.

CREATIVES WITHOUT BORDERS

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# SHUROOQ AMIN

Leading artist in the Middle East, listed as one of the top 50 women in the GCC, single mother, voice against injustice and hypocrisy.



**Y**ou have blazed a trail for Women from your region and Artists too – what makes you different?

I honestly just believed in myself since I was a child. My late father reinforced this unfaltering self-belief in me. I owe it all to him. He made me feel invincible. I never gave up, and every time I fell, I got up and worked harder than before, and got more determined than ever. In this part of the world particularly, people – women even more so - worry about how they will be perceived and “what will people say”, etc. I never cared for hypocrisies. I always knew what my core was.

**A key theme in your work is Courage – it is often an easy word to say but harder to summon?**

I don't ever recall being afraid of people. Afraid of lizards (at one point in my life), afraid of something bad happening to the ones I loved and especially my children, things like that. But I have never been afraid to try new experiences, whether they are scuba diving, jumping from an airplane, or just eating scorpions or traveling alone to remote areas of the world. In fact, these efforts excite me and make me feel alive. I am always willing to try anything once for my own sake, and then I will make up my mind as to whether I like it or not. And I detest hypocrisy, so I have to fight it with my work, and the work has to be brave to do that justly.

**Something that comes through is how open you are about your life?**

I am far too open for my society, yes. I live my life transparently, and I always have, and that has garnered the respect and admiration of some, and the judgment of others. My transparency creates a level of honesty that is not usually found in the work of an artist from my region, and because the work is authentic, people feel it and respond to it. It affects the audience greatly, but sometimes at my own expense because I am judged for it, hated for it sometimes, and publicly “lynched” for it, you could say (as a metaphor). On the other hand, it is what clearly differentiates me from others, because I am not afraid to address the truth. Truth: now that is an interesting word. It generates terror in people. And my work is all truth.





Did it take a while to discover your purpose and how hard was it to let it out?

It did actually take me a while to find my purpose. Though I was born with a gift (I had my first group show at the age of 9), I never actually knew that my role as an artist had a purpose until I was going through my divorce. It was then that – with the opposition of society and my family and the ensuing struggle – the woman, the mother, and the artist in me all joined forces and meshed and they became one entity. I was no longer a woman and an artist, but just one autonomous being that needed to scream and voice an opinion. I needed to express my anger at the injustice around me, at the inequality, at the struggles that I was going through as a woman seeking divorce in my 40's with 4 children in tow. Society, including my own family, thought I was insane and stupid. But I insisted on pursuing happiness. And in doing so, discovered more and more hypocrisies and injustices that needed to be addressed. For me, my social responsibility rates high on my list of priorities in life; it is meshed with my role as an artist and is crucial to my work.

One of your most famous works is titled *The Prophetess* (from the *It's a Man's World* series) – obviously that could be inflammatory – your show was shut down and of course that's unacceptable but you have not been jailed or worse – In your poem *ANOTHER KIND OF LOVE* – I quote: “the shallow depressions in your mattress made by not one, but two daughters of Muslims.” Is Kuwait when compared to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Bangladesh or even Turkey actually as close to a haven for freedom of speech in the Muslim countries as one can currently hope for?

*The Prophetess* is about societal hypocrisy and how society shoves its religious, political and sexual dirt under the carpet. I have come into

existence to expose all that, for the purpose of addressing issues left dormant and stagnant, and subsequently finding solutions for them. *Another Kind of Love* is about lesbian love. We have a massive gay community in Kuwait, believe it or not, more than the world can ever realize. I was the first artist to address that, and project their human rights, which is one of the reasons (amongst other reasons they claimed) why they shut down my show, banned my work, and investigated me like a criminal. Yes, Kuwait has a reasonable freedom of speech when compared to other places in the region, but it is a subtle suffocation. In other words, if you talk about issues like gender equality or social status, or the Bedoon (the stateless), they will more or less leave you alone; but if you talk about religion or the government, there will be repercussions such as jail. If I did not have worldwide support, I may very well be in jail or worse. But Kuwait does care very much about its international stature. So I don't think it would jeopardize that.

You are half Syrian - how has the conflict in the country affected you and your work?

The conflict in Syria has been a huge influence on my work recently, as is evident from the series *'It's a Mad World'* (2015/2016), which was exhibited for six weeks in Beirut and six weeks in Kuwait (it was my “comeback” show after four years of censorship). I still have family who live in Damascus and refuse to leave, despite the atrocities committed all around them. My uncle and aunt want to die in their home, regardless of how this death comes about. This is very traumatic for us as a family, especially as my uncle tells me stories of incidents that take place before his own eyes. I don't listen to the news propaganda. I just listen to him, my uncle, and what he portrays can be far worse than what you see in the news. The sad reality is that people living there have become jaded. He

tells me about the most awful occurrences very casually, like it is normal life. Well, it is normal life for them. So yes, it enters into my messages through the work, absolutely.

Can Art really change the Middle East?

What do we have to lose? We are a region rife with wars; economic, political and religious struggles; social hypocrisies; all sorts of injustices; and more. Art is the simplest – and simultaneously the most complicated – way for people to express themselves. Many artists are voicing their opinions now through their art, music, writing, and dancing. I for one absolutely believe that art can influence politics through societal interference. For example, when my show was shut down in 2012, after months of opposition and struggles, in 2013 – only one year later – I was awarded Artist of the Year, and other artists began to follow suit in being more courageous (because I opened that door for them). The art movement changed gradually from 2012 until now. People took notice, and that had a ripple effect, and instigated social changes that reflected in the art movement.

What's your support like, back home in Kuwait?

The support for me in Kuwait is very black and white: people are either with me or against me; they either love me or hate me. Or some of them feel that way about my work and not about me personally. Most of the younger generation are keen supporters of my work, and most of the beautiful supportive emails I receive are from younger people. I think I appeal to them because I address taboo topics and rebel against injustice, and by speaking out without fear; I become the voice of many who cannot speak out. There are many reasons why people – young or old – cannot speak out: their families would punish them, societal pressure, peer pressure,

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fear of ruining their reputation or their marriage prospects or get fired from their job, etc. So I put myself out there because none of these things bother me. I believe so strongly in my message that it over-rides any rational or irrational fear.

**What role do mothers in your region (and beyond) have in the push for gender equality?**

Mothers play a huge role, and I have addressed that in my work as well. If you look at 'Painting the Roses Red: This Way Up', that artwork shows a mother with a hijab holding the eyes of her son open wide, while he casually drinks his juice. On a microcosmic scale, the mother is responsible for raising decent, broad-minded men, no matter how religious, conservative or traditional she may be. Being open-minded and being conservative are NOT mutually exclusive. Then on a macrocosmic scale, the mother represents the nation, and the government or society can still hold onto its culture and tradition while encouraging open-mindedness. I think the problem comes from misunderstanding the term open minded, which to me simply means accepting diversity and respecting others, regardless of your nationality, religious affiliation or gender. I think what goes wrong is still related to gender stereotypes: that men must be violent and emotionless, and that they must be ruthless to be powerful, etc. We need leaders who break that stereotype. Some do exist, but not enough (yet) to change the world dynamic.

**How do you balance knowing exactly what you are going to say with allowing your work to evolve organically?**

My process is: the ideas come to me all the time, from the world around me, mostly during my dreams actually. Then I write them down and do a few sketches and leave them. I don't actually start putting them onto canvas until I have all of them in my head ready, and I usually instinctively know that the series is complete and that I can now start. Once I get inside the studio, it is a matter of implementation, so it is daily work (sometimes up to 12 hours a day closer to the show) until the series is completed. It is a smooth process for me technically but one that is emotionally, mentally and physically harrowingly rife with mood fluctuations. No one close to me understands it except my children, because they have seen it all their lives.

**You have a PhD in Ekphrasis (the relationship between art and poetry) – how do they exist in your work?**

I studied Ekphrasis because it seemed like the ideal solution to someone like me, someone who both painted and wrote. People would always ask me where I "saw" myself: as an artist or as a poet, but that really shows how little they know about the creative process. The two are not mutually exclusive, but people like to pigeonhole you and put you in a classified box. Blake did both, Gibran did both, Miro did both. I have

always been drawing and writing since I was a child: it was never a decision for me. It evolved organically. As an artist, Ekphrasis affects my work deeply via the titles. They are crucial to my message, they are complex and well researched; I work really hard on my titles because they complete the story. And they are usually quite cheeky, witty and sarcastic.

**You were recently listed as one of the top 50 GCC Women Leaders – what are your future plans?**

I have a large project that I am working on that is incredibly exciting but cannot divulge its details just yet. Also, I am planning my largest solo show yet in Dubai with Ayyam Gallery for 2018, then a show in New York, plus other smaller projects here and there. But what I really dream to do is to open a school for customized learning, where students are not tested on the generic subjects, but rather they are given subjects that nurture their natural gifts: a school that would potentially graduate geniuses, and eliminate judgment and "one-size-fits-all" mentality. Ultimately, as an artist and a human being, my goal is to actually affect the minds of others and to help reform society.

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

Credits – Shurooq Amin & Abdullah Al-Saab

