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**LOUVRE
ABU DHABI**
BY TAGREED
ALBAGSHI

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This Way Up - Painting the Roses Red. 2013.
Mixed media on canvas.
120x100cm; facing
page: *Natural Born Censors. 2012.* Print on
paper. 141x121cm.



The FUTILITY of CENSORSHIP



*Kuwaiti-Syrian artist **Shurooq Amin** speaks to Katrina Kufer about being a modern woman—equal parts artist, poet, professor, feminist, mother, Arab and Muslim—in the evolving realm of Khaleeji society*

"MANY ASK WHY I DON'T GO INTO POLITICS AS AN ACTIVIST. MY RESPONSE IS



Shurooq Amin is ride-or-die—controversy, authorities or loaded questions won't get in her way. "Censorship is futile," she says. "People have called my work a mirror of society—it is. I am not inventing anything, but I do conceptualise my paintings in imaginative ways, with elements hidden through symbols or metaphors." Amin tastefully—if not always tactfully—addresses Khaleeji society as it straddles culture, tradition, religion and modernity, documenting the times in the Gulf. And after two-decades, her practice is gaining international traction beyond an initial significance due to the cultural environment it critiqued. "My work shows the discrepancies, or hypocrisies mostly, of our society." Why? "To provoke change!" she quips. "One leads to the other—only when you open the dialogue, rub it in, can you create a conversation where people start thinking, wondering, questioning, fighting to inevitably provoke change."

Exhibiting since the 1990s, or even earlier, if you count Amin's premier in a group exhibition hosted by Kuwait's National Council of Arts and Literature when she was nine, "I didn't choose art, it chose me," she explains. A series of obstacles in her life only nurtured it, including classic angst-driven teen punk rebellion and family hardships. "My father passed away and my single Syrian mother had all Khaleeji eyes on her and how she was going to raise her Kuwaiti children, so she was more strict than she had to be," remarks Amin. "I couldn't go abroad to study art, which was probably the best thing she did for me in the long run." This led to her studying poetry at the University of Kuwait before attaining a PhD in Ekphrasis in the UK. "The relationship between art and is complicated. I ended up going with art more because it's an easier language to convey messages to the layman," she says. This niche faculty resonates throughout Amin's hand-painted and occasionally

collaged works. History is filled with paintings inspired by poetry and vice versa—and while she may have outgrown her punk kid ways and sublimated those urges into artworks, the punk kid hasn't necessarily outgrown her—"I use literature in my titles on purpose. I find censored movies, books, literature that have become un-banned, give it a twist and use it as a title just to prove a point. Yes, my work has been banned but here it is. On the Internet. At the Venice Biennale. In London, Beirut, Dubai... you can't stop me!"

The scandal to which Amin refers, picked up by outlets such as CNN or *The Washington Post*, is the 2012 closure of her 18-work show *It's A Man's World* by Kuwaiti authorities after three hours for its "blasphemous" and "pornographic" nature, despite lacking religious or nude components. Rather, it delved into Khaleeji male sub-culture. "It became a scapegoat, a pivotal point for change in Kuwaiti art scene," she says. "It opened the notion of censorship." Taboo and social reform go hand-in-hand, and when her daughter inquired at the time why people were referring to the paintings as "popcornographic", it clicked. "*Popcornographic* was a response to the censorship. The word is understood as 'pornography' but because it is a nonsensical word, it can't be censored!" Tackling child marriage, religious struggles, man versus woman, tattoos and freedom of expression, the series debuted in Dubai at Ayyam Gallery with massive success. Amin skillfully manipulates contentious issues—she describes a work that has an alcoholic beverage poured out of a coffee jug, symbolic of hidden relationships, vices and the dichotomous reality of Gulf society—but has not always been as discreet. "*We'll Build This City On Art And Love* included *The King of Hearts*, inspired by Gustav Klimt's *The Kiss*. It was simple, just a Khaleeji man kissing a Khaleeji woman, a beautiful, romantic moment of passion... but nope," she recalls. "The backlash! It was shocking and unexpected—but I'm glad it happened, because it goes to show how the concept of love is unacceptable in Khaleeji society." Naturally, Amin followed with a

Above: *The Last Straw*. 2012. Mixed media on Giclee print on canvas. 75x450cm.

Courtesy of the artist

ALWAYS THAT POLITICS IS NOT AS EFFECTIVE AS ART " - *Shurooq Amin*

highly political series about Syria entitled *It's A Mad World*.

Amin is quick to note that Khaleeji society and politics are unique in that they are influenced more by tradition, culture and history than religion. The ensuing limitations and struggles appear in Amin's translation of public versus private space into masks and veils. "Our society raises us to be hypocrites, fact. I had a boyfriend when I was 18, and I'd wear my jeans to go have a hamburger with him," she recounts. "I wasn't doing anything wrong, but because I was in public, unveiled, I was called names and earned a reputation. Meanwhile, a friend of mine, who had a boyfriend with whom she was active, would put on an abaya to go to his home. But she was the 'good girl' because she was publically masked. If you cover yourself, you have freedom, but removing it means you have to hide." Amin's characters portray this duality, masked because that is what permits them to perform the actions they do and live fully—exemplified by the six veiled faces but bare, glistening limbs of *Society Girls* (2010).

Misleadingly shock value-esque, Amin's *oeuvre* is more contemporary feminist expression. "Feminism has evolved—everyone should be feminist," she declares. "It isn't what it was in the 70s, it isn't about man hating or being hard. It's simply about humanity, equality, and how a woman has no less intelligence, capacity or power." Amin discusses the meaning of feminism as owning one's power, citing how adult industry professionals can be feminist because it's her choice—if she can pay her own bills, then that's her right. "We are stronger because of our ancestors, who struggled against restrictions," she says. "Many hide behind limitations imposed upon them by male family members, but it's just an excuse—people set limitations all the time. You have to find a way to bypass them." A task, Amin notes, is made even more trying by being a Muslim Arab female artist living in the Middle East: "It is really the bottom of the ladder in this world. So many stigmas." Inspired by females such as Frida Kahlo or Georgia O'Keeffe—"strong, passionate,

talented, sexual women"—Amin describes parallels, such as Kahlo's incapacitating bus accident which resulted in the transportation of her whole hospital bed to her opening, with Amin's own five-car pile up, causing her to wear a neck and back brace to her vernissage. Highly lauded for being the first Kuwaiti female artist auctioned at Christie's, shown at the Venice Biennale, welcomed on BBC's *HARDtalk*, as well as being a Puschcart Prize-nominated poet and winner of the Artist of the Year by the Arab Woman Awards, "I am extremely proud to be a pioneer," she says. "I feel honoured and validated—it's wonderful and heartwarming—but it was never intentional." Amin takes risks, and has been ever since that show at age nine. "I remember standing in that corner with my drawings, I was the only child, when I knew this is what I want to do for the rest of my life. Not the painting—I would be doing that anyway—but reaching people. Realising I could influence people, have a conversation or start an argument was such a thrill!" Amin figured out early on how to harness and own her power. "But I've only scratched the surface."

Art is Amin's vehicle to make a difference. "Many ask why I don't go into politics as an activist. My response is always that politics is not as effective as art," explains Amin. "With politics, you're always talking and people remain skeptical, convinced you're furthering your own position. Art is subtle—you aren't preaching—art is just there, whether people want to look or not. It gives the illusion of choice; even though art has invaded society to an extent there is no actual choice. What matters is that people think they do, and therefore become more willing to look, think, get the wheels churning, and start a discussion without realising because art is indirect!" Amin tackles social issues with savvy, realism and a hit of fearlessness. "I want to prove that what was censored will one day become free for everyone," asserts Amin. Ride-or-die, indeed. ■

Shurooqamin.com