

Art and Humanities 101 With Shurooq Amin

By Mariam Nihal
Saudi Gazette

JEDDAH — Born and raised in Kuwait, to a Kuwaiti father and Syrian mother, Shurooq was raised in a household that gave birth to her liberal format of art conscience. She lives to fulfill a prophecy, a dream and a purpose led by the core of humanity and her gift of art.

Shurooq's art identifies with a strong visual message, be it socio-political, religious, moral or cultural.

She pursues themes linked to socio-political and cultural injustice, like child marriages, subjective censorship, freedom of expression, cultural progress, human rights issues.

"He told me I was going to be great one day," she said reminiscing about her father. "And then he passed away in my arms when I was 11."

And from that point, Shurooq made it her life's mission to honor his legacy. "What that man gave to that little girl in 11 years is more than I've received from the world in the other 34 years. Now, at the perfect "just right" age of 45, I can tell you that what I've learned from my childhood is that a parent's influence is more lasting and more profound than any other life-experience; every word a parent says, every action, it all stays with the child, nestling in the inner crevices of their heart and mind and soul, and it will explode one day in some shape or form.

"Because I know that so well, I raise my children with compassion and love and reward, not strictness and punishment, no matter what society says.

"And because of that, I paint what I paint.

"I know there are so many people out there, victims of society, of their families, both girls and boys, who need a voice for their muted pain and fear.

"They are victims of well-intentioned but ignorant parents, who scar them for life unknowingly. I'm their voice."

She completed her education in England, culminating with a PhD in Ekphrasis. "The most important thing you need to know about my past, or my childhood, is that I had a gift for the arts ever since I could hold a crayon, and that my father saw my gift, nurtured it, and did everything possible to educate me culturally and to make me believe in myself."

She said in the beginning, with her first solo show in 1992, there was no message but all experimentation. "It was about finding my own voice and style. It was only years later and many exhibitions later, in 2007, when my marriage was falling apart, that I began to paint about what I couldn't say. "I was unable to speak out in real life, so I started screaming out in my paintings. That was when "Society Girls" was created (details on my website) in 2009/2010 (London and Kuwait), then followed by It's A Man's World in 2012 (Kuwait), which dealt this time with men in the GCC society, but was shut down after three hours by Kuwait authorities and censored; and then Popcornographic in 2013 (Dubai), which I did for/with Ayyam Gallery and dealt with various taboo issues in Middle Eastern society. Now I'm working on my 2014 series called We'll Build This City On Art And Love. Also with Ayyam Gallery."

Discussing the role an artist plays in a society especially in the Middle East, she said: "A region so rife with wars and trauma and conflict of every kind (from physical to psychological), the artist's role becomes more important than ever. The artist throughout history has been the one to break barriers, overcome obstacles, and speak the truth. "Sure, we will step on some people's toes in the process, but — as a dear friend of mine once told me "If we don't step on each other's toes it means we're not even dancing." The artist must open minds and liberate society and help it move forward. There can be only one direction for the artist: forward. In other words: progress.



The artist is the one who documents a society's progress, sometimes knowingly, sometimes without even meaning to. But when people look back at the history of the Middle East, they will evaluate not only its chronological events, but also its soul from what's left behind of its art."

Describing her art, she said: "I create controversial images to raise essential questions for our society that may or may not need to be answered, but they certainly need to be addressed.

"Some people would find that inspirational and liberating; others find it offensive and abhorrent. I am infuriated by injustice and try to speak about it through my art and my writing. I believe in human dignity and human rights. Most people tag me as a feminist, but the fact is I'm a humanist. I try to be the voice for the underdog."

She talked to Saudi Gazette about her father's role in educating her in life through music, art and most of all compassion.

"He took us (my brother and I) traveling to many countries around the globe like England, Spain, France, Russia, etc. I remember Cold War Russia and how the concept of solely locally-produced products bogged my mind.

"The concept of different cultures, rituals, and traditions was taught to me at the young age of seven. My father even enrolled me in a ballet school at that age and I learned to dance, and this cultivated my love for music and dance. He played — loudly — records of Mozart, Chopin, Bach, and Beethoven in the house and music echoed throughout my childhood."

Shurooq said the reason it took her 20 years to reach this point has been because she refused to compromise on integrity. "I didn't take any shortcuts. I took the long, hard road up.

"And after my show was shut down and censored in Kuwait last year, I met a decent human being who is a true believer in Arab art, as I am, and he believed in my message, my voice.

"Khaled Samawi restored my faith in the art world. And now I'm a happy camper as part of the Ayyam Gallery family; emphasis on family."

When asked if her artistic life is full of glam or devoid of it, she said: "That's a really interesting question. No interviewer has asked me that before.

"There are two sides to the artistic life actually. There is the life in the studio, which is not glamorous at all, and results in aching knees and back, arthritis-like hand pain, stained nails, and a mind that doesn't stop reeling at night.

"When an artwork is going well, you're on top of the world and you feel like you can conquer anything. But when an artwork is not working out the way you wanted it to, you become moody and grumpy and snappy with everyone around you,



not to mention depression sets in and thoughts of failure and inadequacy and feeling like you're a fake.

"Then there's the social side of your life, where you're invited to glamorous parties and events and you dress up like Cinderella. So I guess you could say it's a Schizophrenic lifestyle. I don't know any artist who would say otherwise."

Shurooq said she has two dream

projects. One is to open up a specialized school that "takes in disturbed, troublesome children, teenagers and youths up to the age of 29, where they can get a customized education geared toward their strengths. This would not be like any school curriculum that exists right now; this would be a syllabus that I would create from scratch with a think tank of the best minds I can gather and would



take into consideration the changing times, eg: video games would be part of the curriculum, but as in animation and how to make your own video game.

"It would harness their REAL creativity, not what the old fashioned establishment expects from our youth today. This school would not only be pleasurable but it would also be a place where these kids and youth can find help for their issues, have a learning disability like ADD, or are simply tortured souls; they will be treated in a safe environment by psychiatrists, psychologists, etc, not

your regular 'sit on the couch and talk to me' type, but an alternative methodology." Similarly she wants to provide a cutting edge University for the Arts somewhere in the Arabian Gulf, that would offer bachelors, masters and doctorate degrees in Fine Arts.

She said her dream, interwoven with her life, is to change the world just a little bit.

Even if that meant saving a young girl from a fate her family had chosen for her, or influencing a woman to leave an abusive husband and face society at the age of 40 with four children alone "like I did."

China's top restaurants reeling over new austerity

BEIJING — The shark's fin, bird's nest and abalone are gone from the offerings at Beijing's Xiang E Qing restaurant — a favorite of Communist Party cadres just months ago. Diners are now left with less exotic fare such as shredded beef, pickled turnip and fried peanuts.

China's high-end restaurants have gone into crisis under leader Xi Jinping's campaign to crack down on the kinds of party extravaganzas that have angered ordinary Chinese, such as dining on the public dime. To stem big losses and avoid the now-tarnished image of VIP banquet halls, these restaurants have been busy re-inventing themselves.

"We don't do high-end! We just serve family-style food!" a jittery manager at Xiang E Qing told a visitor who wanted to see the dramatic, near-overnight transformation of one

of the capital's most prestigious eateries.

The Xiang E Qing restaurant in downtown Beijing — part of a national chain that has been among the hardest hit — no longer has the expensive liquors, minimum spending requirements or special fees for the private banquet rooms where government officials and business executives once gathered in seclusion. Its calling cards have been rewritten to promote a joyful, family atmosphere.

Restaurants serving exquisite delicacies in banquet rooms long flourished under the lavish spending habits among all levels of public officials, who spent about 300 billion yuan (\$50 billion) a year on food and drinks in recent years, according to state media. But new party rules since the beginning of this year curb spending on food and drink, and Xi

himself has set the example by having a work meal of four simple dishes and one soup.

Some of that wining and dining has gone underground, with officials sprucing up private clubs and government canteens with pricey booze and fancy meals or ducking into secluded locales to avoid detection, according to state media who have sent undercover reporters.

Even so, China's dining market has hit its lowest point in more than two decades — barring a brief industry collapse related to the 2003 SARS epidemic — and the high-end market had suffered the most, Commerce Ministry spokesman Yao Jian said last week.

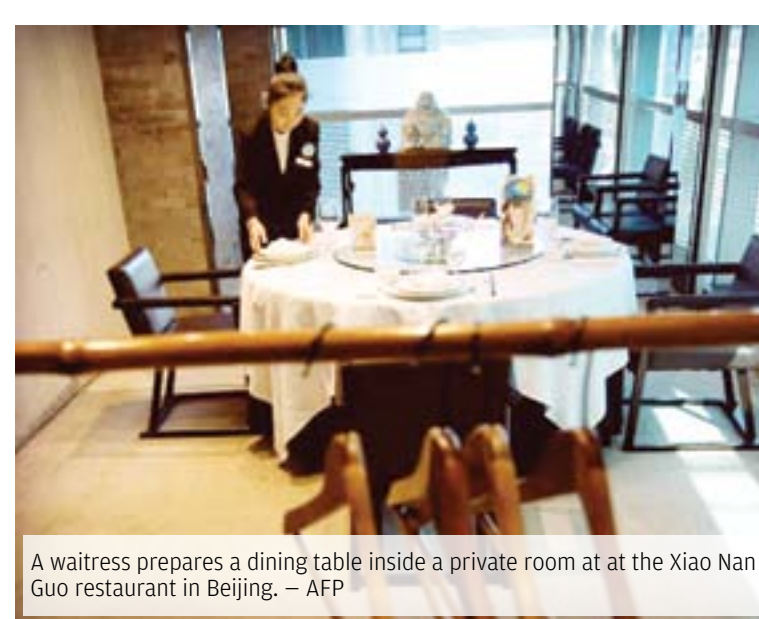
To cope with the new reality, high-end restaurants are diversifying services to include fast food and take-out, or offering modestly priced

homestyle dishes and hot pots with wider, common-folk appeal.

The anti-waste campaign promoted in state media has not been aimed solely at party cadres, but also at members of the public, urging them not to over-order and to clean their plates.

"We are all remaking ourselves," said Han Fang, a manager at another high-end restaurant in Beijing. "We need to adjust to whatever the policies the country has."

The Xiao Nan Guo restaurant in downtown Beijing specializes in elaborate Shanghai-style cuisine on white tablecloths with floral arrangements in private rooms behind thick, carved wooden doors. To attract more customers, it has revamped its menu to include new dishes priced under \$15, said Zheng Yuming, the restaurant's general manager. — AP



A waitress prepares a dining table inside a private room at the Xiao Nan Guo restaurant in Beijing. — AFP