

SHUROOQ AMIN

ON ART, CONTROVERSY, AND INJUSTICE

Words by **Nagmani**



Shurooq Amin is a 47-year old artist of Kuwaiti and Syrian descent. Dubbed by many in the regional art world as “controversial”, Amin is a master of provocation, her paintings often brimming with candid innuendo, all part of a passion to break free of misogyny and gender inequality. In an exclusive interview with *IN Magazine*, Amin shares her ideals and passions, and gives us insight into her life.

Art came naturally to Amin as a child, “It was something that was innate. My father noticed that I was gifted and subsequently supported that intuition by buying me equipment and praising me. I was known as ‘The Little Artist’ in my family amongst all my relatives. So I guess you could say it was an organic evolution,” she says. Now a full fledged artist, Amin sees her art as more than a gift or a passion, “It has become a serious social responsibility.”

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A pivotal point in her artistic journey was a very personal event: her divorce. “I started a dialogue about very complicated issues facing people in the Arab world after my divorce. I became more determined when I realized there is a lot of stigma attached to being a Muslim single mother who was outspoken and nonconformist,” says Amin. “So I rebelled against that stereotyping with my art and I responded to the injustice around me with my art.”

Amin has a strong belief in the power of art to address the deeply entrenched social ailments plaguing Arab society. She is a firm believer that art can play a massive role in breaking taboos, especially socio-political art like hers. After all, history proves that people are always resistant to change, but that the visionary mind prevails eventually and the community does come around, with time. “Not every artist can be, or has to be, an activist but certainly for artists like me—whose primary purpose is to send a message across in the hope of instigating positive change in a decaying society – then we can do a bit of our role by being socially responsible and advocating justice,” she says.

Amin’s inspirations are directly linked to her own personal experiences; experiences of people close to her; the unstoppable flow of breaking news, any act of injustice that occurs to which she is privy, “and there are plenty of those,” she whispers.

Her most inflammatory work titled ‘It’s a Man’s World’ which came out in 2012 was banned in Kuwait as it was deemed sacrilegious. But in 2013 another new work of hers titled ‘Popocornographic’ resulted from this interdiction. This project addressed female-related grievances such as child marriages to the art of tattoos on the Arab skin.

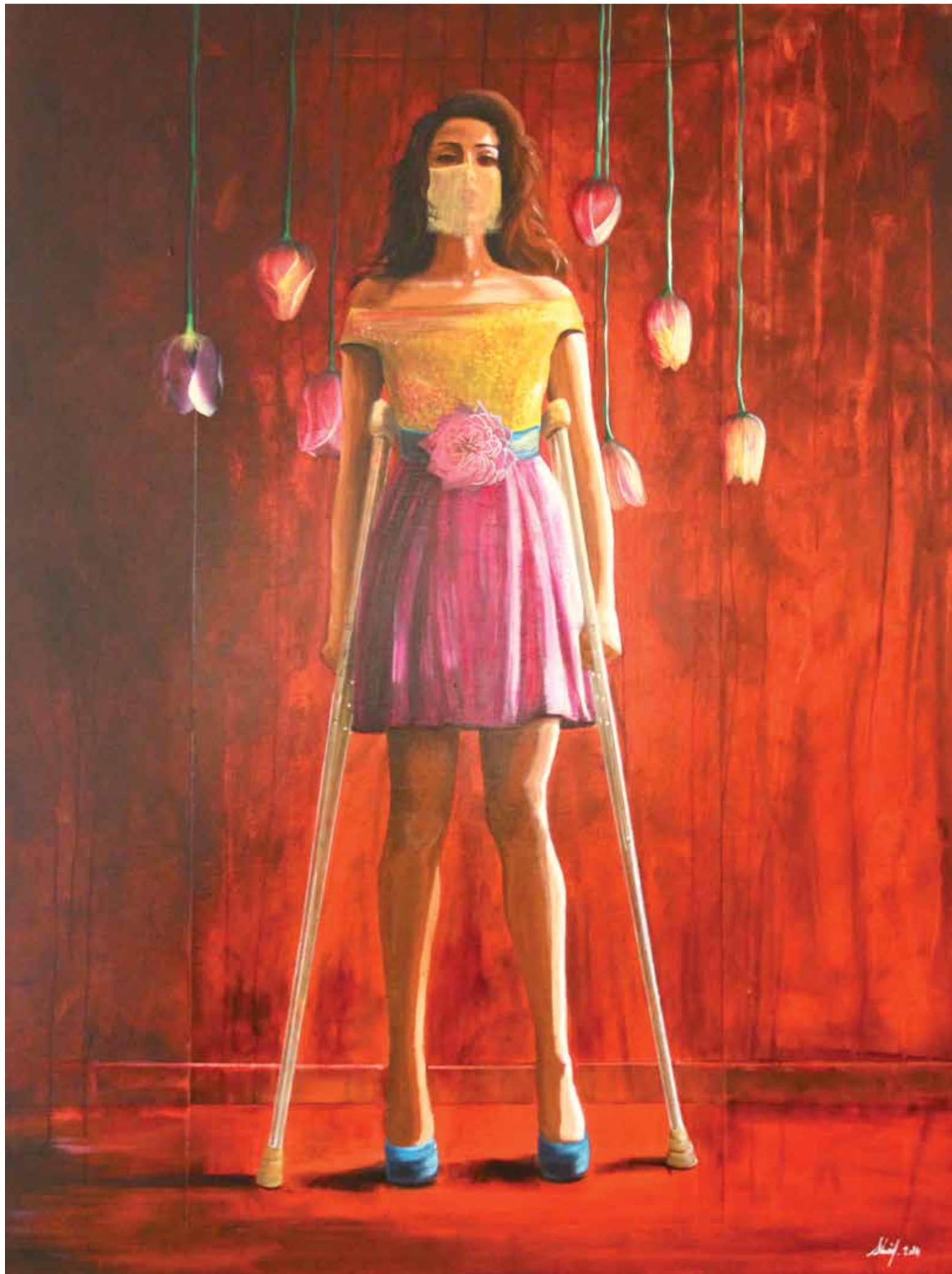
When it comes to who her role models are, she has only words of praise for those that rise against all odds. “I admire and look up to women, men and even children who have gone against the grain in the name of justice and love and peace and light,” she says. “I’m a warrior at heart, but my weapon of choice is art. I love beauty and I strive to make my art as much beautiful as possible considering the harsh messages it sends.”

For Amin, poetry is another love that she interweaves in her artwork with her knowledge in *Ekphrasis* (the connection between art and poetry) in which she has a PhD. “It’s another form of art or just another vehicle that I am extremely fond of cherishing and thereby always ready to apply it to send out the same messages to society,” she says.

Over her 20-year career, Amin’s paintings have been exhibited at group shows, art fairs, and biennales, as well as have been sold at auctions too. Amin has received many accolades at home and abroad for her work. After receiving the title of ‘Artist of the Year’ by the Arab Woman Awards in 2013, she became the first Kuwaiti to have her paintings on auction at Christie’s. “As far as solo exhibitions are concerned, I’ve had 12 solo exhibitions between Kuwait, Dubai, and London,” she says.

While there is a lot of outcry against her artwork, young people in Kuwait or anywhere else in the world tend to love her work. As Amin puts it, “Many of my fans are young people in their teens or twenties. And they aren’t shy to express their admiration.





The fact that these kids can relate to me - a single forty-something mother - is a wonderful thing, proving that my work is universal and can appeal to the masses." As a matter of fact, there are men and women in their eighties who just adore her paintings for what they stand for. "I constantly receive emails from these people and this is what makes a real difference," she says.

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Whatever Shurooq has been able to achieve in life so far, there is no doubt that it's very noteworthy. Nevertheless, her success is largely indebted to her parents who guided her talent prolifically in the beginning. On one hand, it's her father who noticed her gifted talent and encouraged and supported her when she was still a child. He used to dabble in oils and would take her with him to his friend's studio, a well-established local Kuwaiti artist, and she would watch them paint and she would paint too. He also opened her up to unforgettable experiences such as flamenco dancing in Madrid, museum and bookshop hopping in London, ballet concerts in Moscow, etc.

On the other hand, her mother's role is more of an unintentional sort. By her very act of refusing to send her to study art in the UK at the young age of 16 (after she graduated from the New English School in Kuwait), she opened the door for Amin to be raw, pure, experimental and fearless in her painting because she didn't have to be tutored. "I just mixed things up and tried crazy things in my studio. Whatever worked became a technique, and whatever didn't work became a learning experience. It made me find my own personal voice without the conformist influences of a rigid art education," she says. "Experimenting in the studio wasn't about whether I could draw a perfect perspective, or a perfect human face or body, or shadows and light. That was easy for me. Absolutely not! Experimenting in the studio was actually about discovery, exploration and personal revolution for me, to a certain extent."

Nevertheless, Amin's work has ironically directed a sort of injustice towards her and her family, she has been threatened on several occasions, called names, and her children bullied. Blogs have attacked her, other local artists have reprimanded her and even people in the media have said very hurtful things about her. Yet Amin takes it all in stride, "New changes never succeed without facing obstacles in one way or the other. They are bound to raise eyebrows. You can't expect to make a difference in the world and get upset when you face resistance. I understand - as history proves - that people will resist change and will resist the voice of a woman who cannot be stereotyped, cannot be made to shut up, cannot be controlled. That scares them. It intimidates them especially if that woman is an Arab Muslim woman."

"I believe they will all come around one day, even if that day is long after I'm dead: they will eventually see the light and realize that what I am trying to do is open minds, open a dialogue, and instigate positive changes in society by breaking taboos and stereotypes and allowing a transparency that will make us move forward and progress," she says.

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Despite that, Amin and her children call Kuwait their home, "I will never uproot them unless absolutely necessary. And it hasn't come to that stage yet."

Amin dreams of a peaceful, loving, charitable society. She feels sad that we are not that kind of civilization right now despite the fact that Islam is a religion of peace, love and forgiveness. "One of the ways to relieve this disease, in my opinion, is for artists and other creative people to gather the courage to expose this hypocrisy and injustice and start a movement of positive change by influencing the community." **IN**



