

Culture

Controversial Kuwaiti artist undeterred by censorship

Jimmy Dabbagh

Beirut

Engulfed in sombre shades of violet and blue, the view of an abandoned amusement park full of bumper cars elicits distinct feelings of discomfort. At the centre of the scene, an older man dressed in a suit forcefully pulls a young girl dressed as a bride, while strange masked figures seem blissfully resigned in the moment, starting off with vacant smiles on their cartoonish faces.

This dystopian world is one of many in a series of mixed media works from the *It's a Mad World* exhibition at Beirut's Ayyam Gallery by controversial Kuwaiti artist Shurooq Amin.

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Kuwaiti artist
Shurooq Amin

Bold in her creative convictions, Amin is no stranger to the controversy that can ensue from addressing sensitive topics such as child brides and homosexuality.

In 2012, her similarly titled series *It's a Man's World*, which explored the hidden transgressive lives of Arab Gulf men, was banned from public view. The setback propelled the artist forward with a new body of work. This time, Amin observed, there has been a shift in attitudes.

“People were more willing to listen and look, to think and discuss,” she said. “Emerging and younger artists were also beginning to touch



Shurooq Amin's *The Moving Doll House (The Moving Toyshop by Edmund Crispin)*.

upon topics that I had tackled but were considered taboo previous to *It's a Man's World*. I had been accused of opening Pandora's box but time proved that my actions were of benefit for the art movement in Kuwait.”

While conservatism may be woven into the fabric of much of the region, the arts have provided an avenue to challenge and project alternative points of view around ideas that are considered taboo. As the region continues to become increasingly globalised, a sort of cultural awakening seems to be afoot and Amin said she sees censorship as an irrelevant barrier.

“If there is one thing history has taught us, it is that change is inevitable and that people resist change. So, while us artists are pushing boundaries and breaking moulds, society will resist – yes – but time and history are on our side,” Amin said.

“People eventually come around because, if they don't, we will not evolve and if we don't evolve, we will become extinct... Censorship is becoming more and more ridiculous in an age in which children can

hack into anything online. So, while censorship may be a nuisance now, it will eventually become a moot point.”

Surveying other works in the show, a straightforward assumption about the provocative nature of their aesthetic comes to mind. There also seems to be more beyond mere shock value. At their core, the works stress the importance of freedom of expression and the need to take risks, experiment and embrace diversity of opinion.

“My work intentionally exposes taboos and openly discusses those topics that no one wants to discuss – homosexuality, child brides, corruption and bribery, adultery and gender double standards, religious hypocrisy, political hypocrisy, alcoholism, etc.,” Amin said. “The fact that this provokes people is just a side effect. My work is never sensationalist or provocative on purpose but it may very well come across as sensual while sending out its socio-political message, that is true.”

Contrasts seem to dominate Amin's canvases. The stark worlds and scenarios are often offset with a hint of humour.



Shurooq Amin's *Who's Afraid of the Big Brave Woman (Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf by Edward Albee)*.

“Because the message is so dark and sometimes shocking, I tend to balance this out aesthetically with bright colours and with a hint of sarcasm,” she said. “It's all done in a very tongue-in-cheek manner, as humour is essential when tackling sensitive subjects like religion, sex and politics.”

■ *It's a Mad World* continues at the Ayyam Gallery in Beirut through November 5th.

And this duality is best observed in her female protagonists. These are complex characters that maintain a strong presence alongside their male counterparts. Even when they seem utterly trapped in their problematic circumstances, Amin manages to inject a rebellious and empowered facet into them.

“The strong female presence is a two-pronged approach. On the one hand, the strong female represents my own voice expressing itself freely; on the other hand, the pro-

tagonist is almost always a woman in my story because I believe it is in her hands to change society.”

“If women banded together,” she added, “they could alter legislation. If they banded together, they could raise an open-minded generation of future men. Women have the power but they don't use it.”

Criticisms of her art do not faze Amin, who said the substance of the work will remain long after the controversy has fizzled.

“Everyone has the right to say what they please but, at the end of the day, I wholeheartedly believe that time will prove that my work reflects an important time-slot of Arab cultural history. Art is part of cultural progress; it can liberate spirits, broaden minds, pushes envelopes, ruffles some feathers along the way and tackles taboos,” she said.

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Jimmy Dabbagh is a journalist based in Beirut and contributes cultural articles to The Arab Weekly.

Academics fight to protect Libyan antiquities

Karen Dabrowska

London

“We can't go to Libya and our students can't go to Libya but we are building a creative resource for a new generation of scholars.” That was the message from Corisande Fenwick, a lecturer in Mediterranean Archaeology at University College London, to *Libya Matters* workshop participants.

The event, organised by the Centre for Hellenic Studies at Kings College London and the Society for Libyan Studies, discussed the safeguarding of Libyan heritage, highlighting the historical and cultural importance of the North African country.

While travel to Libya is almost impossible, foreign academics and archaeologists say that a great deal can be done to support Libyan colleagues in protecting their heritage through information gathering and training programmes.

■ The Society for Libyan Studies is digitalising 3,000 items from its archives and hopes to create online exhibitions.

For instance, the Society for Libyan Studies is digitalising 3,000 items from its archives and hopes to create online exhibitions. It also set up the Libyan Antiquities at Risk (LAaR) project – an online photographic reference collection that will help safeguard Libyan monuments threatened by destruction and looting.

The project aims at recording and

disseminating information about Libyan funerary sculptures of the Hellenistic, Roman and late Roman periods which are under threat of being sold on the illegal art market. The sculptures are particularly vulnerable to being removed from monuments due to their peripheral location in ancient settlements.

Hafed Walda, an adviser to the Libyan Department of Antiquities, described security as the greatest challenge for Libyan antiquities.

“The lack of security hinders cooperation between local and foreign groups, research on materials in museums and collections which are now stored away, the protection of sites due to the spread of arms and lack of law enforcement and the prevention of illicit trade in antiquities,” Walda said.

He noted that the Libyan Department of Antiquities was still functioning because local communities are protecting their archaeological heritage. “In the communities everybody knows each other,” he said. “If there is a breakdown of the communities you will have total chaos. It is not total chaos yet but there is a possibility.”

“Libya needs a government that has the protection of cultural heritage on its list of priorities, encourages heritage awareness and finds solutions for the communities in areas surrounding important archaeological sites to halt urban encroachment into sites. One that is capable of enlisting the international community to help in the development of the heritage sector and has a long-term plan for sustainable tourism development,” Walda said.

Collaboration between academics, the Libyan Antiquities Service, cultural heritage operators, police, professional antiquities dealers, museums and other institutions constitutes an essential part of the LAaR work.



A Libyan man walking past damaged statues in the ancient Greek city of Cyrene, a colony of the Greeks of Thera (Santorini) and a principal city in the Hellenic world founded in 630BC, located in the suburbs of the Libyan eastern town of Shahat, east of Benghazi.

Also speaking at the workshop, David Mattingly, professor of Archaeology at the University of Leicester, talked about the Endangered Archaeology in the Middle East and North Africa (EAMENA) project, established in January 2015 to respond to the increasing threats to archaeological sites. The project uses satellite imagery to record and make available information about archaeological sites under threat.

He said satellite images of al-Jufra oases revealed that, out of 85 archaeological sites, 68 had been damaged. “They are of international significance as the likely centre for several Berber polities and for their crucial role in Trans-Saharan trade. The surviving sites are under threat primarily from construction and cultivation,” he said.

Mattingly drew attention to the

destruction of tenth-century Islamic tombs in the desert town of Zuwila and the targeted destruction of Sufi marabout shrines, simple enduring structures built over the tombs of respected mystics. He pointed out that digital lists of looted antiquities could be seen as “hit lists”.

“The message to looters is that if what you have stolen is on this list, you won't be able to sell it. It is a way of reducing demand for looted items,” Mattingly said.

The British Foreign Office warning against travel to Libya has made it impossible for British archaeologists and academics to conduct training in the country but training programmes for Libyan archaeologists have been organised in Britain.

Paul Bennett, director of the Canterbury Archaeological Trust,

organised training for Libyans on British archaeological sites to assist them in excavation of the Haua Fteah Cave in Cyrenaica. The cave has been regarded as one of the most significant for prehistoric occupation in North Africa and is arguably one of the most important ancient caves in the world.

Professor Charlotte Roueche, senior research fellow in Digital Hellenic Studies at Kings College, emphasised that working to provide the tools for a better future for Libyan archaeologists was vital.

“We can't provide a time scale for that better future but it is definitely going to come,” Roueche said.

Karen Dabrowska is a London-based contributor to the Culture and Society section of The Arab Weekly.