

Interview

‘Subjective censorship’ should be abolished

Shurooq Amin

Artist and activist

By Ben Garcia

Kuwaiti artist Shurooq Amin is world renowned, controversial and daring in her art. She is also an accomplished poet and writer and a mom who cares deeply about the future of Kuwait. In an exclusive interview with Kuwait Times, she revealed herself as someone willing to reach out and ever ready to represent her country on the international scene. Amin would also like to abolish ‘subjective censorship’ once and for all.

Excerpts:

Kuwait Times: What has been the biggest achievement in your entire career as an artist in Kuwait and internationally?

Shurooq: There have been different achievements at different milestones in my life. For example, being awarded Artist of the Year by the Arab Woman Awards in 2013 was a huge achievement. Then having my artwork auctioned at the renowned Christie's auction house in 2012 and 2013 was a great achievement. Being invited by BBC to be interviewed by Stephen Sackur on the prominent program HARDTalk in 2014 was another huge achievement. Currently, another massive honor for me is having been invited to exhibit at the 56th Venice Biennale from May to November 2015. The Venice Biennale is the highest accolade for any artist.

KT: What challenges you have faced as an artist in Kuwait? How do you think Kuwait can reach the status of Dubai and other open countries in the Arab world?

Shurooq: There are many challenges that I have faced - from not finding opportunities in the art field in Kuwait (still the case for emerging artists) to rumors and haters (still the case for me) to not having financial backing or support (thankfully I am represented now by the distinguished Ayyam Gallery). In order for Kuwait to rise to the level of Dubai in the art world, there needs to be a drastic shift in management in the government sector (ie the National Council of Culture, Arts and Letters, the Kuwait Art Association, the museums, etc) so that the money allocated to these institutions can go wisely to supporting local artists at international art fairs, biennials, etc.

Secondly, people need to eradicate the ‘clique’ mentality and start opening up generously to true talents who are less fortunate (either in terms of money or family affiliations), so that opportunities can be fairly spread to all artists who are really dedicated and talented.

KT: What made you a good artist?

Shurooq: Other than the fact that I was born with talent (many people are born talented but do nothing about it) - it was an infallible belief in my abilities, determination, persistence and most importantly, artistic integrity.

KT: Is there anything that you wish to achieve in your career as an artist and a Kuwaiti? What would you like to change or maybe be part of?

Shurooq: I would like to be able to help more tangibly in both Kuwait and other countries child brides, abused children or women, orphans, trafficked females and children, the stateless, refugees, etc. Currently I donate to auctions and other charity causes, as well as helping through our movement ‘The Art Salon’. But I have plans for two bigger projects in the future - one soon and one in a few years. I would also like to abolish ‘subjective censorship’ once and for all.

KT: Can you share with us your younger years as a struggling artist in Kuwait? What sparked the fire to be an artist?

Shurooq: I never decided to be an artist - I was sketching and painting ever since I could hold a pencil. My family noticed my talent and encouraged me by buying me art equipment. I used to draw so much that my father contacted the NCCAL and they helped me participate in my first group exhibition with adult artists. My school noticed it and awarded me various prizes. There was an interview with me when I was 9 years old in a local newspaper and the journalist asked me: “Why do you want to be an artist?” and I answered: “It’s my passion. It makes me happy beyond words.” So I guess even at that age, I knew my path in life.

KT: What is your dream that hasn’t been achieved as yet (related or unrelated to your career)?

Shurooq: The dream that I have that hasn’t been achieved yet is to establish a special customized learning school, call it The Amin School for Custom Learning, and give a truly safe alternate methodology for children and young adults who are “fish that can’t climb trees”. I want to establish this school for Kuwait and help create a new generation of geniuses that will benefit the country - invent, discover and create to make us a progressive society and a better future civilization. This school will not be mainstream, nor will it be special needs - rather, it will be for the kids who fall through the educational system’s cracks (like my son); kids who are smart at alternative thinking, but don’t fit into the cookie-cutter mould of our one-size-fits-all educational syllabus.



‘Natural Born Censors’ from the 2013 series Popcornographic. The title is based on Quentin Tarantino’s movie ‘Natural Born Killers.’



‘See the Beauty Here’ from the 2014 series We’ll Build This City on Art and Love.



‘Piece of the Pie: Who Stole the Tarts’ from the 2014 series We’ll Build This City on Art and Love.

Bio

Born in 1967, Shurooq Amin is a Kuwaiti mixed-media interdisciplinary artist and an Anglophone poet whose purpose is to instigate change in society. She has a PhD in Ekphrasis, the connection between art and poetry, and has been published and anthologized internationally. Shurooq’s poetry has been published into two books to date in more than 40 literary journals across the globe, and has been anthologized in the ‘Gathering the Tide: An Anthology of Arabian Gulf Poetry’ by Ithaca Publishers in association with the Virginia Commonwealth University of Qatar.

Her second volume of poetry, ‘The Hanging of the Wind’, is taught as part of the contemporary literature curriculum in universities in the Gulf. She is the first Kuwaiti to be nominated for the prestigious Pushcart Prize in December 2007 in the US. In March 2012, her show ‘It’s a Man’s World’ was shut down by Kuwaiti authorities and her work was banned in the country. In April 2013, Shurooq was awarded the title of Artist of the Year by the Arab Woman Awards, and has since become the first Kuwaiti woman to be auctioned at Christie’s auction house.

She exhibited her 2013 series ‘Popcornographic’ during Art Dubai with Ayyam Gallery. Her 2014 series ‘We’ll Build This City on Art and Love’ was exhibited from Sept 14 to Oct 23, 2014 with Ayyam Gallery, DIFC, Dubai, and exhibited in London from Nov 12, 2014 to Jan 10, 2015 with an artist’s talk and panel discussion. In Oct 2014,



Shurooq Amin stands next to her painting ‘A Man Of No Importance’ from the 2013 series Popcornographic. The painting’s title is based on Oscar Wilde’s book ‘A Woman Of No Importance.’

