

SHUROOQ AMIN



ayyam  gallery

POPCORNOGRAPHIC

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Renowned for her brave subject matter and use of taboo images, Kuwaiti artist Shurooq Amin explores the double standards, hypocrisy, and secret lives that exist beneath the surface of a conservative state. Her work illustrates the hidden, hedonistic world and dichotomy of the Arab man: religious preacher, weekend alcoholic; political activist, well-known party-animal; conservative father, secret playboy.

Born in Kuwait in 1967, Shurooq Amin lives and works in the country. Selected solo and group exhibitions include Lahd Gallery, London (2011); CAN, New York (2010); Tilal Gallery, Kuwait (2010); 11th International Cairo Art Biennale (2008). A retrospective of her work was recently featured in the biannual art journal, *Contemporary Practices: Visual Arts from the Middle East*.

Masked Faces, Censored Hopes: An Interview with Artist Shurooq Amin

Shaun Randol

Shurooq Amin is a Kuwaiti/Syrian artist, poet, and professor at Kuwait University. In two recent art exhibitions, "It's a Man's World" and "Society Girls" Amin has explored themes of gender, identity, duality, religion, and hypocrisy in Middle Eastern and Arab societies. Her colorful mixed-media tableaux depict Kuwaitis in trendy clothes lounging, smoking hookah, and playing cards, their faces all eerily erased.

On March 7, 2012, three hours after her exhibition "It's a Man's World" opened to the public in Kuwait City, it was shut down by authorities for being "pornographic" and "anti-Islamic." The suppressive act has made Amin a cause célèbre for advocates of freedom of expression throughout the world. Her story was picked up by blogs and media outlets, and her name even became a trending topic on Twitter.

The controversy has only emboldened Amin, who is preparing a brand-new show, "Popcornographic," that will address censorship and taboo subjects in the Kuwaiti region. The show is slated to appear at the Ayyam Gallery in Dubai in 2013.

In December 2012, Ms. Amin and I conducted our conversation over e-mail.

Shaun Randol: I've read differing accounts about why "It's a Man's World" was shut down. What is your understanding?

Shurooq Amin: The secret service, and two other entities

that shall remain nameless, arrived at the gallery around 10pm when the exhibition was closing down for the night. It had been a very successful opening night and a very successful private VIP viewing the night before. So, logically, a complaint was lodged within the timeframe of those three hours (from 7pm to 10pm on the night of the public showing) by some anonymous person(s) who came to the show and deemed that my work was "pornographic" and "anti-Islamic." It would make sense that if the complaint was lodged previous to that timeframe, they wouldn't have allowed the show to go on from the start, you see my point? That answers the "why" it was closed.

The "how" is a whole other story. Frankly, I feel like Inspector Gadget just analyzing it.

Randol: What has been the reaction to you and your art since officials closed your show? Are artists, citizens, journalists, and others taking sides?

Amin: It was an enlightening experience. For the first two weeks, I stayed home and became depressed, feeling sorry for myself and thinking "I had worked a whole year on those artworks and for some narrow-minded people to shut it down after just three hours was so unfair and heartbreaking." All that hard work down the drain... But then something wonderful and terrible happened (yes, an oxymoron, I know): I started getting support on social media, a trending hashtag on Twitter, messages of support on Facebook, thousands of e-mails from around the world from people I didn't know from countries on every continent, calls from everyone (writers to actors to politicians)- all supporting me!

On the other hand, the local community of artists-with the exception of some very talented, wise artists-didn't support me at all. Some local artists publicly attacked me (verbally and in writing); that was devastating. Their logic was that I opened Pandora's Box for them! They wanted to "let sleeping dogs lie," as opposed to broadening minds and enlightening generations and making a difference in society. Some people called what I did courageous and some called it

reckless. Some saw it as "heroic bravery" and some saw it as "shaking the boat" or "ruffling feathers" unnecessarily. I suppose it's all a matter of perspective. But the bottom line is that I got to know which journalists, politicians, artists, citizens, etc. are on my side-and which ones are against me. And that's fine with me. My mission is to make a difference, a positive change, and history illustrates that there are always people who will oppose that change.

Randol: Are you dissuaded to show art in the Middle East now, or are you more determined to do so?

Amin: I am more determined than ever to show in the Middle East! My work needs to be seen here so that I can reach the very people who oppose progress and who oppose freedom of expression. My next show will hopefully be in Dubai, and that's a good center of art in the Middle East. I can reach more people from Dubai. Of course, that doesn't mean that I won't show in Europe or the United States. I would love to show in New York, for example. Taking the message outside of the Middle East is vital, too. But one step at a time.

Randol: What has censorship done for your creativity?

Amin: I am not affected by censorship. I paint what I want, I tackle the issues that need to be raised and discussed, and if they want to censor, let them censor away. After every exhibition, I post images of my paintings on my website anyway. If anything, censorship has made me stronger and more determined than ever to continue my mission to fight for freedom of expression and to tackle taboo topics.

Randol: "It's a Man's World," refers to which world? Kuwait? The art world?

Amin: Of course it refers to the whole world. This is a global conundrum. But I was definitely focusing on the

Arab world within my images and on specific sociopolitical issues we face in Arab society.

Randol: Why are the subjects in "It's a Man's World" and "Society Girls" faceless? What is your intention with the masking?

Amin: There are two objectives from masking the faces: 1) to hide the identity of the people in the images, because they are all real people, not made up characters; and 2) to symbolize the double lives we lead here and the encouragement that society in the Middle East gives to double standards: do what I say not what I do, for example. In the Middle East, there are unspoken rules that order us to lie and hide our true identity, because our society doesn't condone individuality-it condones conformity. So, if you want to be accepted, you have to conform to the social norms, even if you don't believe in them.

Randol: What do you want to achieve with your art? Do you have a mission?

Amin: I want to make a positive difference. Simple. I want to be a voice for people who cannot raise their voice. I want my art to matter 100 years from now. I want my art-no matter how long it takes-to be a little part of the war to fight for freedom of expression. I want to ban subjective censorship. I want my art to be part of the cultural progress in the Middle East. I want to raise awareness and open up dialogue and liberate minds.

I'm patient. This will take time. And maybe I won't live to see the results. But I have no doubt it will happen one day. It's already started anyway, in very specific ways. For example, the majority of the random e-mails I get are from people who write to me thanking me saying that they have been influenced by my work and inspired by my strength, and then they go on to tell me to continue my mission and never give up. You would be surprised at the amount of e-mails I get from men as well, not only women, all supporting me.

Randol: Do you think your art has the potential to change policy? How about social mores?

Amin: Absolutely. The shutdown of my exhibition was a wakeup call for everyone in Kuwait. Parliamentary policies had been getting quite threatening for a while, but no one was doing anything about them. For example, members of the parliament (at the time of the show) were suggesting that there should be a dress code for women! And that women should not be allowed to travel without their husband's or father's permission! There were a few other ridiculous policies suggested. Can you imagine the disastrous ramifications if such nonsensical policies were actually implemented? Instead of progressing, we were going backwards into the Dark Ages.

After my show was shut down, entities like the Women's Society and other local liberal societies contacted me: some had me speak at their locales, some had me come out on well-organized peaceful protests, etc. People woke up because that was the straw that broke the camel's back.

Randol: Do you make art for a global audience? Or is your art focused locally? Does your audience change with each piece or series?

Amin: I make art for a global audience, no doubt, because I am a global citizen. That's how I view myself. Political borders are man-made! We are all human beings and at the core of it need the same basics in life: food, shelter, water, security, family, income, love, and peace. Art reflects our environment and our culture, and at that time, I felt moved by what was going on in my society at the sociopolitical level. If I was in a war zone, I would've painted something different. Right now, for example, I am moved by the impact of censorship on our society and by certain cultural and political issues going on around the Middle East that are making me furious! So I'm working

on my current series "Popcornographic" for Ayyam Gallery.

Randol: Where or with whom do you think your art has the most impact?

Amin: Judging by the e-mails I get ... anywhere and with anyone.

Randol: You are Kuwaiti and Syrian-what is your role as an artist (or a citizen) in the current Syrian civil war?

Amin: My mother's family is still in Damascus, though some of my cousins made it out and got jobs in other countries. It's devastating. As a citizen, there is very little I can do besides support my family and find possibilities for them to emigrate. When I talk with other Syrians, they tell me the same thing: there is nothing anyone can do at this point except talk about it, send money or other essentials, provide an escape, maybe a shelter, but in general we all feel terribly helpless.

As an artist, I honestly haven't gone there visually because I am already undergoing a personal trauma in my own home with one of my children, who is consuming all my attention. But that's another story for another time. A special friend sent me this today: "You know you've healed when you're able to talk about your story." One day, I'll talk about my story.

This interview was originally published on 4 January 2013 on the World Policy Institute Blog's 'Illuminating the Arts Policy Nexus' fortnightly series examining the role of art in public policymaking.

The title of this work is based on Harper Lee's novel, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, which was banned in several American states in 1977. Just like Lee's protagonist Tom Robinson, a black man unjustly accused of raping a white woman and convicted by a racist, biased caucasian jury irrespective of evidence proving his innocence, this artwork is an analogical self-portrait of sorts.

After the closure of Amin's exhibition in Kuwait in March 2012, she received thousands of emails from supporters around the world. These positive emails were the only life-line the artist had to combat feelings of inadequacy, depression and hopeless victimization. After printing as many as possible and pasting them onto wood, *To Kill A MockingGirl* was born. An artwork of empowerment, resistance, positive combat, and hope, it symbolizes her rebellion against the censors and is a personal statement that Amin, and her art, are here to stay.



To Kill A MockingGirl
2012

Mixed Media on Canvas mounted on Wood
150 x 150 cm

The Dates of Wrath is concerned with the Middle Eastern man's obsession with women's appearance and behavior.

Women are forced to make the best of what life and society have given them and have learned to adapt to their lot in life through a peaceful rebellion. Most strong independent Arab women choose to live the lives they want despite the repression from their families and men, though they must do so by leading their own double lives just as the men do.

The title of the artwork is influenced by John Steinbeck's , *The Grapes of Wrath*, which was banned and burned in some American cities in 1939, 1980 and 1982, and in Ireland in 1953. The theme correlates to Tom Joad, the novel's protagonist who must also make do with what life hands him. Despite his sins and being separated from his family for years, he lives a complete life and does not harbor regrets. His wisdom and moral certainty gives him strength and resolve, ergo earning the respect of his family, as well as the workers. This is what the Arab woman is learning to do in order to coexist quasi-equally in a patriarchal society obsessed with her appearance and virginity.



The Dates Of Wrath
2012

Mixed Media on Canvas mounted on Wood
150 x 170 cm

An Arabian Tragedy portrays the sad reality of subjective censorship in a humorous manner, highlighting the ridiculous issue symbolically.

Borrowing from Theodore Dreiser's novel *An American Tragedy*'s poignant tenant that human beings are helpless pawns of their own environment, society and heredity, the painting displays that man is at once the protagonist and victim, not because of his narrow-mindedness, weak will, and tragedy, but rather due to the "pathetic" plot whereby human frailty and futility pervade. The pitting of the "pathetic" individual against his "tragic" society invades this work, just as it does in the novel.



An Arabian Tragedy
2012

Mixed Media on Canvas mounted on Wood
130 x 180 cm

Also dealing with the issue of subjective censorship, *Natural Born Censors* reappropriates the title of Quentin Tarantino's gruesome movie, *Natural Born Killers*, a film banned in Ireland and listed as the 8th most controversial movie in the world.

This painting illustrates how the censors, with their lack of a logical, reasonable, across-the-board criteria for censorship, make a mockery out of literature, art and culture in Middle Eastern society. They slash at books, movies, paintings, and sculpture without a set of agreed-upon criteria, hence creating a culture of chaotic, anarchic censorship whereby what is deemed *halal* in one movie/book/magazine/artwork or *haram* in another is purely based on the whims of the individual censor working at the time.



Natural Born Censors
2012

Mixed Media on Canvas mounted on Wood
170 x 150 cm

Blind New World portrays the irony of modern technology with its freedom of information for all, especially for children who are more technologically adept than adults, and its relation to the outdated notion of subjective censorship. Modern technology desensitizes children, and through the freedom it imparts, creates a future generation conditioned for its own whims and fancy, and to whom censorship is a pathetic joke.

In Aldous Huxley's novel, *Brave New World*, technological advances witness the assembly line production of thousands of nearly identical human embryos. These human embryos are treated and vaccinated to perform specific duties and fulfill positions in society from leadership to menial labor. While some infants are reprogrammed to dislike books and flowers, thereby creating humans who will grow into docile and eager consumers, others are brainwashed about the morals of their "World State".

Likewise, Arab children who grow up with the freedom of technology are torn between poverty and wealth, religious taboos versus liberal privileges, and traditional roles versus western-imparted roles. They grow up all the more confused because of the hypocrisies which surround them in their own society.

Blind New World
2012

Mixed Media on Canvas mounted on Wood
170 x 150 cm



A Tale of Two Muslims, title based on Charles Dicken's *A Tale of Two Cities*, explores the socio-religious and political rifts in the Islamic world between the Sunni and Shi'aa cultures.

The little girls sitting on the bed are identical, with the exception of their patterned dresses. Their roots and ancestry are one and the same. Their essence is their similarity, their unity.

Amin employed green as the predominant color in this painting because of its associations with Shi'aa culture.



A Tale of Two Muslims
2012
Mixed Media on Canvas mounted on Wood
100 x 150 cm



The Last Straw
(Detail)
2012

Mixed Media on Canvas mounted on Wood
75 x 450 cm



The Last Straw
(Detail)
2012

Mixed Media on Canvas mounted on Wood
75 x 450 cm

The Last Straw is based on the exact mathematical ratio of length and width of Da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, on a smaller ratio, and includes the Twelve Disciples and the ever-debated figure of Mary Magdalene. As *The Last Supper* was literally the last meal, this artwork is the proverbial last straw, sensually portraying the Arab man's relationship with, and perception of, women.



There are subtle analogical details left to be discerned by the viewer, such as the analogy between the eucharist service in Da Vinci's original painting, and the seductive women lying on the table offering themselves up to the men, if even only in the men's imagination.

The Last Straw
2012
Mixed Media on Canvas mounted on Wood
75 x 450 cm

The past has a way of catching up with many of Oscar Wilde's characters in his play *A Woman of No Importance*. Likewise, for the men in Amin's *A Man of No Importance*, their actions against women eventually catch up with them. There is a play on homosexuality as well as conformity, with the men portrayed as paper cut-outs that the Queen, a woman embodying strength and determination, can string along before her.

A Man of No Importance
2012
Mixed Media on Canvas mounted on Wood
170 x 120 cm



The title combines elements from both Rene Magritte's famous *The Treachery of Images* and Johannes Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* paintings and serves as Amin's self portrait. *Ceci n'est pas une femme Arabe avec trois boucles d'oreilles perles* is a minimalist portrayal of an Arab Muslim woman pitted against a traditional society that continues to attack women and maintains its glass ceiling at any price. The smoking of a pipe, traditionally a man's smoking instrument in both Eastern and Western cultures, offers a sensual rebellion to the viewer. This rebellion is further enforced by the provocative female legs cheekily rising from the pipe. Though the artist may be smoking a "male" pipe, she is offering a purely "female" powerful point of view with multiple under-layers of subtle connotations. The ironic title, thanks to Magritte, further enhances the humorous yet profound message.



Ceci n'est pas une femme Arabe avec trois boucles d'oreilles perles
2012

Mixed Media on Canvas mounted on Wood
120 x 170 cm

Unlike the previous *Ceci n'est pas une femme Arabe avec trois boucles d'oreilles perles*, this artwork incorporates bits of printed and signed papers from the psychiatrist and psychologist Amin's son was seeing, as well as from the school that asked him to leave for a year to get treatment, the psych ward admissions department, and from the psychiatric hospital that he would be going to in Boston. Soaked in tears and pasted with transparent gesso onto the flowers, these papers in flower form represent life, hope, and rebirth from pain and darkness.

The deconstruction of *This Is Not a Pipe: A Deconstruction* is literal and psychological. This artwork teems with emotion and engages the bond between mother and son. After the depression of all the psychiatric visits, the disturbing experience at the mental hospital, and the suicide attempts, these experiences joined in a work of art that aided the artist is dealing with the pain.

The work stresses the weak mental psychiatric health system in Arab culture. It is an important message for the artist as her family had been suffering for a year because they were unable to receive proper diagnosis and treatment. Psychiatrists have their hands tied and are unable to help because the Arab culture does not cater to the brain, it caters only to material desires.



This Is Not a Pipe: A Deconstruction

2012

Mixed Media on Canvas mounted on Wood

120 x 170 cm

Nora Cassandra is, as the title clarifies, a caged woman singing her own song. Shurooq Amin met Nora Cassandra on a trip to Bahrain and was moved by her powerful story of human struggle and survival in the face of a dual identity crisis. A half Finnish, half Kuwaiti woman, Nora Cassandra fought both countries to get her nationality without avail; subsequently resorting to tattooing her identity on her skin so that she can claim it and die with it, despite what either government decided.



I Know Why the Stateless Bird Sings: The Case of Nora Cassandra
2012

Mixed Media on Canvas mounted on Wood
150 x 150 cm

One Hundred Years of Darkness mocks the Arab world's modern take on "progress", symbolized as a chandelier covered by a veil. This painting varies from others in the series as it is the only artwork that does not include photography or collage. Its minimalist nature belies the underlying weight of the tragedy of contemporary Arab culture, as compared to our past, which was rich with literature, art, unique creativity and ingenious invention. As the rest of the world becomes more progressive, we, with our so called Arab Spring are regressing into another hundred years of darkness. The work sheds light on the political and social ramifications of ignorance and blind adherence to outdated notions and calls for a universal unveiling.



One Hundred Years of Darkness
2013
Acrylic on Wood
150 x 150 cm

After her first tattoo, Amin constantly dealt with the stigmas associated with being a tattooed Muslim woman and mother. Refusing to accept the discrimination, Amin decided to create an artwork to refute the ridiculous beliefs held regarding tattoos and requested Muslim tattoo lovers around the world to send her pictures of their tattoos for inclusion in a work of art.

The culmination of this three year project is *50 Shades of Tattoo*, a powerful work to combat the stigma attached to tattoos in Muslim society that juxtaposes tattoos with religion, observing and analyzing their place in the modern Muslim culture.

Amin puts forth the positive side of tattoos and their diversity of meanings for those who have them whether it is a physical personal rebellion against conforming to society's notion of social norms, an exciting spontaneous moment in someone's life, a well-thought out decision based on a memory of a loved one, or simply because it is beautiful art for the body.



50 Shades of Tattoo
2013

Mixed Media on Canvas mounted on Wood
150 x 150 cm

Of Wives and Men is a response to the many news stories and first and second hand sources the artist has heard of young girls thrust into forced marriages to men much older than them, usually aging and with previous wives and children. Like John Steinbeck's mentally-impaired character Lennie in the novel *Of Mice and Men*, of which the title of this painting relates, the young girl dressed in bridal white is incapable of understanding her new role at the side of this older man wearing a tuxedo, her new husband. He holds her possessively at his side, pulling her towards him as she leans away in a manner indicative of subconscious resistance. The artwork pertains to the controversial practice of child marriage still prevalent in many cultures around the world and illustrates its disturbing reality with the inclusion of sexual references such as the giant cherries on the floor that symbolize both the girl's premature de-virginization as well as her lack of menstruation and immaturity to comprehend sex.

Of Wives and Men
2013

Mixed Media on Canvas mounted on Wood
200 x 120 cm



As the artist traveled around the GCC throughout 2012, she was never without her camera, a little black book, and masking tape. She asked people of all ages, positions, and tendencies if they had anything they wanted to say that they couldn't ever express, and whether they would agree to being photographed with their mouths gagged. Many were afraid and declined, though some agreed, and this painting is the culmination of that research for freedom of expression in every country of the GCC.

The year-long process was tiring and the artist felt her vision was not translated onto the canvas the way she had anticipated, so she nearly gave the project up. Thankfully, three weeks before this exhibition, Amin awoke from a dream and realized that she had seen the completed painting in her dream. All she had to do was implement what she dreamt. This artwork is a combination of practical research and a magical dream intervention and portrays the faces of repressed people without an outlet for expression living in the Arabian Gulf countries. This painting is their platform of expression, where their images and words collide and are heard.



All Quiet On The Eastern Front
2013
Mixed Media on Canvas mounted on Wood
150 x 150 cm

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