

The life and work of Palestinian Islamo-Pop artist Laila Shawa

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Palestinian artist Laila Shawa

A group of women wearing different-coloured niqabs carry ice creams that are just as colourful. Their eyes are closed as if they are about to savour the different flavours. Of course, they can't, because their mouths are covered by cloth. This painted image is a powerful statement not only on the conversation about women in the Middle East, but also the desire for westernisation by a section of Middle-Eastern society. Both are encompassed in "Impossible Dream", by Gaza-born artist Laila Shawa.

Not all artists with eventful lives have an output with similar compelling features. However, Shawa has been able to marry art and life in an original and unique body of work. While recoiling from any sort of label for herself, the artist has dedicated her career to expressing the complex realities of life for

Palestinians while giving a voice to women in the region. In doing so, she has been able to create art which is political without being simple rhetoric; pop without being superficial. She has plunged into the art conversation as well as social activism, and is closely attuned with the spirit of the times as well as being timeless. No wonder, then, that new generations of artists look to her as a reference point.

Born in Gaza in 1940, Laila was just 8 years old when the State of Israel was founded in her homeland of Palestine. A descendant of one of the oldest Palestinian landowning families, she came from a long line of strong, intellectual women. A major influence was her father, Rashad Al-Shawa, an activist and the mayor of Gaza from 1971 to 1982. The revolutionary attitude which she was exposed to from a young age has stayed with the artist to this day.

Laila Shawa's youth was cosmopolitan. She attended boarding school and university in Cairo, then flew off to Italy to attend the Art Academy in Rome. She was there in the sixties, when the atmosphere in the Eternal City was momentous and very glamorous, with the artist-stars from Piazza del Popolo hanging out at the Cafes Rosati and Canova with the Rolling Stones, as well as Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre. This must have provided a striking contrast for the artist given what was happening in her own country at the time.



Artwork showcasing different-coloured niqabs holding ice cream by Palestinian artist Laila Shawa

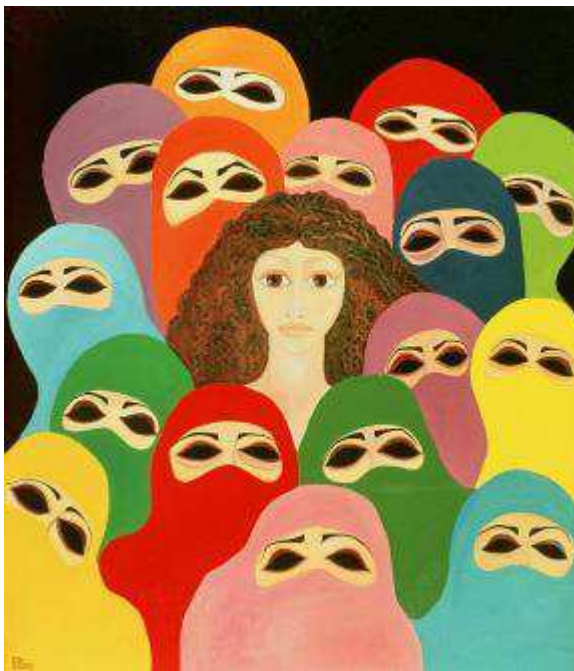
This clash of very different worlds still reverberates throughout her artistic style, which is defined as “Islamo-Pop” by critics. Her approach can't help being postmodern, looking at both the highbrow and lowbrow, and sparse cultural influences. However, this is driven by a strong sense of purpose that many postmodernist artists lack. It's the socio-political reflection tackled with

a healthy dose of irony and humour. The image of those Muslim woman trying to taste those ice creams is emblematic in this sense.

Indeed, if there is something that Shawa has absorbed from her peripatetic

existence, it is the realisation that complex problems give rise to multiple explanations, which are often mutually exclusive. However, she considers artists to have a privileged vantage point on life. She herself tries to consider all sides of any question, to find some sort of expanded perspective when tackling socio-political themes. Through her multimedia artwork, she encourages viewers to develop empathy and move away from prejudice and stereotypes.

An example of this way of working is Laila's "Walls of Gaza III, Fashionista Terrorista" from 2010, a screen print that originates from her own photographs. The picture shows a person wearing a Keffiyeh and a jumper decorated with a Swarovski crystal New York patch. The image shows how the Keffiyeh, a symbol of resistance in Palestine, is today considered a fashion statement by people in the West. Playing around with the kitschy, the fun and the ironic, the artist shows how images are continuously instrumentalised, interpreted and re-contextualised in the media. The work also comments on the popular imagining of Palestinian men or women, and how people are classified according to whose side they are on.



Artwork by Palestinian artist Laila Shawa

It's the combination of the Pop-Art style with a highly political content which makes her artwork appealing and shocking at the same time. Another work where this emerges clearly is "The other side of paradise", featuring headless, armless and feetless mannequins, painted in bold colours and adorned with gem stones. A closer look reveals chains and belts of munitions and dynamite on the torsos. We see what the other side of paradise consists of in Gaza.

We know the role that graffiti played during the media blackout enforced by

Israel during the first Palestinian [Intifada](#) (Uprising of 1987-1993). Being closely attuned to all the different expressions of the time Shawa created one of her most striking bodies of work inspired precisely by graffiti. In “Trapped I-III”, for example, words in Arabic hide a screaming woman in the background. The messages went from personal communication to political slogans and calls for strikes. The “Trapped” series expresses the necessity of human communication, while capturing a pivotal moment in Palestinian history.

Representing the coming together of ethics and aesthetics, over the years the artist has not only been present at major art fairs and represented by major galleries, but has also been engaged constantly on the ground. This has taken her from her early supervision of arts and crafts education in refugee camps for the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) to what she considers her greatest project, the Rashad Shawa Cultural Centre. This is a multi-purpose centre for art and culture named after her father, which she started to build after relocating to Gaza following a period living in Beirut. Sadly, over the years the centre has been confiscated by Arafat and bombed by the Israelis; today it is controlled by Hamas. However, the artist hasn’t lost hope that it will be active again one day.



Palestinian artist Laila Shawa with her artwork

This hope, this long-life commitment to art, culture and political engagement can’t but help coming from a belief in the transformative power of art and culture. In each piece of work of Laila Shawa, we can see clearly this strong faith in humanity’s ability to reflect on itself and, once it is ready, to correct its course.

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The best artists are those who make you discover something about yourself that you didn't know; like someone pointing out an app that you didn't know has been on your phone all along, and it somehow revolutionises your life. Laila Shawa is up there among the best of them.