



A MAN OF NO IMPORTANCE from the Popcornographic series
Mixed media on canvas mounted on wood 2012. Courtesy of the artist
and byyarn Gallery

UNAPOLOGETICALLY SHUROOQ

THE KUWAITI ARTIST DISCUSSES HER TABOO TABLEAUX

“It’s a Man’s World,” the solo show of Kuwaiti artist Shurooq Amin, was shut down by authorities within three hours of opening at a Kuwait City gallery in 2012. The works on display—all of them mixed-media portraits on canvas—dared to playfully expose illicit everyday scenes that take place behind closed doors in the artist’s society, from a married man with his scantily dressed mistress to drug and alcohol abuse, and even flirtations with the still highly taboo notion of homosexuality.

BY **DAVNA LORCH**

The paintings were intended to probe the contradictions between people’s conservative outward appearances and more hedonistic domestic lives in an insular society—a society that Amin, a divorcee and a single mother, already straddled at the margins. Despite the pressure to slip away from further commentary, Amin fiercely stuck to her guns and returned to her studio to begin a series of seely self-portraits flippantry titled “Popcornographic.” Meanwhile, the censorship was widely deplored by the international art world and within a year, local public opinion shifted. Amin went from pariah to role model when she was recognized as 2013 Artist of the Year by the Arab Woman Awards, honoring her as an artist whose work seeks to highlight social issues with a nod to pop culture.

Amin sees absolutely no conflict between career-ing around gallery floors in her trademark red Loboutins and addressing serious topics through her art. An academic by training, the artist holds a PhD in ekphrasis (the study of the relationship between visual art and poetry) and is also a Pushcart Prize–nominated poet.



Our interview took place at Ayyam Gallery in Dubai, the day after her latest show, 'We'll Build This City on Art and Love,' opened to a packed, largely Arab crowd in the affluent Dubai International Financial Center. I was immediately drawn to *Piece of the Pie* (see page 44), a portrait of a woman in a cerulean cocktail dress who raises a finger coyly to her lips, her other hand displaying a pie. There is a group of minuscule men in traditional Kuwaiti robes on top of the pie, scuffling for a taste like greedy schoolchildren, oblivious to the woman controlling their fate.

Just as in her previous work, this painting referenced the strength and agency of Arab women, a concept that remains largely unthinkable in the West, thanks to the North American and European media's petty habit of speaking about rather than with everyday women living in the Middle East: The beauty of Shuouq Amin's artistic practice is the steady fearlessness with which she paints what she observes in the region, regardless of who that truth may offend.

THIS PAGE, FROM TOP LEFT:

THIS WAYUP PAINTING THE ROSES RED from 'We'll Build This City on Art and Love.' Mixed media on canvas, 2014.

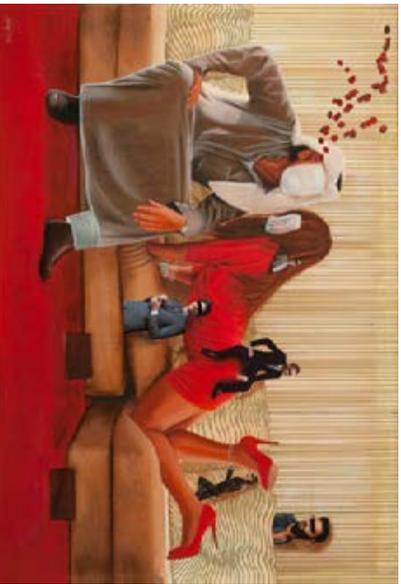
DEAREST PALS WE REMINE, ARABE ARABE, **TROIS BOULES D'ORÈLLES PERLES** from the 'Topographic' series. Mixed media on canvas mounted on wood, 2012.

MY MISTRESS AND FAMILY from the 'It's a Man's World' series. Mixed media on canvas mounted on wood, 2012.

THIS PAGE, AT RIGHT:
SHE LOVES ME, SHE LOVES ME NOT from the 'It's a Man's World' series. Mixed media on canvas mounted on wood, 2012.

OPPOSITE PAGE:
SOCIETY GIRLS PART II from the 'Society Girls' series. Mixed media on canvas mounted on wood, 2010.

All artwork courtesy of the artist and Ayyam Gallery.



In the gallery program for "We'll Build This City on Art and Love," you write that as a teen you decided to go against society and family expectations, mentioning that there are strict codes of behavior for both women and men in Kuwait. Are these rules recited out loud or simply implied?

They are never spoken out loud. You're just supposed to pick up this unwritten secret code from being part of society. There is an implicit understanding that you are allowed to do what you want as long as it is behind closed doors. People are vocal about it when you seem to have forgotten the secret code. But what are these rules and where are they written?

"It's a Man's World" was closed down by Kuwaiti authorities within three hours of opening in 2012. I'm pretty sure that was a record! Was that the first time you'd been publicly censored?

THERE IS AN IMPLICIT UNDERSTANDING THAT YOU ARE ALLOWED TO DO WHAT YOU WANT AS LONG AS IT IS BEHIND CLOSED DOORS.



No. It's happened to me all my life, since I was a child because I was a girl and a rebel who enjoyed so-called boys' games like football and skateboarding, and I eventually wanted to date. The shame of that!

I noticed that other girls were doing far worse things than me. I just wanted to go share a soda with a boy. They might have been covered in *aboya* [the traditional robe and head scarf], but they were going to a boy's house and sleeping with him. Yet because I was the one wearing jeans and having a soda and a burger in public with a boy, I was labeled the whore.

"It's a Man's World" was so blatantly controversial with the whiskey bottles, the mistress on the lap of a man, and the religious guy gambling and getting high, but it was true. These were all images from real society in Kuwait. That is what was going on.

Are you saying that the *aboya* gave them the anonymity to do what they wanted?

Yes. Some girls normally wear just the headscarf but when they go out with boys they wear *nigab*, which covers their faces and bodies completely and frees them to do anything.

This is the irony and that is why you find so many covered women in my paintings.

I have always interpreted the masks worn by both men and women in your work to represent self-censorship and the deliberate concealment of facets of one's personality that must be kept hidden. In your latest series, you have substituted blossoming flowers for your typical mask. Does this symbolize a softening in your perspective or a new optimism? Definitely. The flower is a running motif and is symbolic of the potential for growth and progress. Flowers start as a small bud and bloom into a full flower, so for me they represent a sense of hope. The title of the series, "We'll Build This City on Art and Love," is a call for advancement and peace.

Something I have always admired about you is your refusal to be silenced or to leave Kuwait at times when it would have made life a lot easier for you and your children to do so. Why have you ultimately stood your ground?

I won't ever be pushed out. As long as I can produce work and slip it out of the country, I will stay in Kuwait. When I

THIS PAGE:

PIECE OF THE PIE from "We'll Build This City on Art and Love," Mixed media on canvas, 2014. Courtesy of the artist and Ayyam Gallery.

OPPOSITE PAGE:

SHUROOD ANIM, *AT WORK* IN HER KUMAR STUDIO. Photograph by Suwera Shaheen.



was censored and banned it really took a toll on me and I was overwhelmed with sadness. I spent the year going from being hated, resisted, and objected to in the local media to receiving more international support than I could have ever imagined. Individuals from cities I'd never even heard of, museums, galleries, and the International Association of Art Critics/USA all wrote letters on my behalf to the emir of Kuwait.

Do your paintings suggest that women are oppressed by Arab society?

I portray Arab women as powerful and strong. If anything, I'm showing that in this patriarchal society, men are the subjugators and, as the imposers of these laws, are social criminals. In *Piece of the Pie*, the woman has grown tall like Alice in Wonderland. She is towering over the men, holding the pie out for them to jostle over. She rules it. She could turn it over if she wanted. The pie could represent a country, power, money, a seat at a boardroom table, anything. Those little men at her feet are so narrow-minded that all they can see is this pie to fight over, while she is becoming more and more independent.

Are you purposefully bringing the situation to light by visually exposing the discrepancies between public and private space in Kuwait?

Yes, and painting about it is my way of telling society that this is wrong and has to be stopped. Back in the days when we were still without TV, phones, and social media, and we communicated by traveling on camel, this might have made sense, but now it is ridiculously hypocritical. As Muslims, as Arabs, we are putting our kids in international co-ed schools, exposing them to the media, and then expecting them not to have friends who are of the opposite sex. What do you want them to do? These are all outdated social norms that have nothing to do with religion and we really need to get over them.

Your poems consider the same societal topics as your paintings—Arab women in the Middle East—yet are in English rather than Arabic. Would it be unreasonable to suggest that the choice of language makes them elite, only accessible to the educated, or geared toward a Western audience?

I do consider myself an Anglophone because English is my first language. I have no choice with the language. If I could write in Arabic I would, but mine is really weak.

Where have you chosen to create a studio for yourself in Kuwait?

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The condition of my divorce was that I could leave with my four children, but could take nothing material. I started out penniless and had to apply for huge bank loans. I found a home that I knew had five bedrooms upstairs, but the first thing I saw was a tiny room downstairs with the most

incredible light. I said yes to the place before even seeing the kitchen or the rest of the space. I did not care. I knew that was the studio. That's where I produced "It's a Man's World" and "Popoportographic."

Are you comfortable being described as a feminist artist?

I'm not necessarily uncomfortable with it. Maybe it's cheesy, but at the end of the day I am a humanist and I'm all for the underdog. If the woman is the underdog, I am rooting for her. If the man—the gay man or the Black man—is the underdog, I'm rooting for him too. My goal is to expose and fight injustice in the region.

What does feminism mean these days?

Does feminism mean being a strong woman? Can you be a strong woman without being a feminist? I think being a feminist these days means demanding human rights for women. So essentially we should all be feminists.

Can you still rock Loudbouts and be a feminist?

Absolutely. I love my heels. All my shoes are stilettos.

Most of the women in your paintings are wearing Loudbouts too.

One of the details I first noticed after moving to the Gulf is that women in traditional dress often wear the most provoca-

tive shoes. It seems to me that in this group, the feet are the only part of the body that is an acceptable canvas for expressing one's sexuality as a woman.

Many women like shoes because the feet are one part of the body that will never change. You can be from any culture or religion in the world and express yourself through your choice of shoes. I may look pretty and into my clothes, but don't mess with me at the end of the day. That shoe could come out and stab you! ☺

Danusa Lorch is an American writer and editor based in Dubai, covering art and pop culture from the Middle East at darnawrites.com and in publications including *Vogue (India)* and *AVSStart*. She holds a graduate degree in Middle Eastern Studies from Harvard University.