

Photo: Ghassan Al-Kindi

A Woman's Passion

**Ghadah Alkandari**  
Artist





H

ow hard can it be to try to get to know someone? As we sit down, the first words out of Kuwaiti artist Ghadah Alkandari's mouth are "I'll talk about my Show, just don't ask me about myself". Ordinarily this would not be a great starting point for an interview, but in Ghadah's case they prove to be the precise opposite.

I ask her if she is going to be difficult. "A bit", she replies without hesitation, but with a smile.

Artists are typically riddled with internal conflicts and contradictions. While they may hide behind their writing, their music or in this case their painting, the nature of an artist makes it impossible to hide the truth or prevent their character from exposing itself through their art. In this regard, Ghadah Alkandari is no exception.

An artist of increasing repute, she follows a stellar twelve months in which she showed her work in Florence, Dubai and Kuwait with her latest exhibition of works, entitled 'The Yellow Tape Portraits' at Kuwait's Sultan Gallery from the 10th to 12th February.

Perhaps best known for her strong portraits of women - although her previous Kuwait portrait exhibition included Pele, one of her brothers, and a cat - this show is exclusively women. Why? "I think, as a woman, and as someone who subconsciously lays herself onto the canvas, it's just what I do".

It is perhaps no coincidence that many of the women bear more than a passing resemblance to the artist herself. I wonder if she sees herself as these women? "I accept that many people see these women as being me, but that's not my intention. When I paint, my feelings are just so raw, and so honest, that part of me is bound to transfer to the canvas".

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“A lot of times when I’m painting my women, they don’t mirror me. Instead, I mirror their expression. Or maybe it’s the mood I am in that begins to reflect itself in my paintings. Mostly, the line between my work and myself gets very blurry”.

I comment that the paintings themselves, and the women in them, sometimes make challenging viewing. These are not merely pretty images. “They are not pretty women, but on the whole they are strong women, they are arrogant, and they are defiant.” Yet not all of them are strong, “But I believe they are all women who will come into their own as time passes”. She talks as if they are not paintings at all, but instead real women. “Because I live with them for a while - when I am painting them - there is an interaction there. The story develops as I create them”.

Having ‘created’ these women, and formed a bond, are there no issues that develop when it becomes time to part with them I wonder? “Not at all. It’s like a catharsis”, she says. “When I’m done with a painting, that’s it. It’s time for both me and her to move on to the next stage of our lives”.

Some of Ghadah’s paintings give a suggestion of perhaps appearing slightly, well, unfinished. In explaining this element of her work she feels that there is a layer in her paintings that only achieves completion over time, and often long after it has left her studio. This happens when her works find their new

homes, and settle into their own environment. They continue as living objects.

“I think time is a factor in my work which is often overlooked”, she continues “let’s say I were to buy one of my paintings. It becomes a finished work once I decide, over time, how I’m going to view it. The final strokes of the painting are formulated in the viewer’s eyes. No, more than that, I’d say not just a casual viewer, instead it must be someone who lives with that painting”.

“I have a painting I bought years ago. It used to always hang in the same place in my home, and I would just lay there and stare and stare at it. What it became for me, what it created in my mind, became an extension of the painting itself”.

With her latest show opening in Kuwait later this month, my thoughts turn to who it is that buys her work. As striking as her works are, they are perhaps not always the easiest to hang. She feels that people buy her work for many reasons, insisting that some do find her work decorative. “I wouldn’t put my work up in my own home, but I think that some of my older pieces, some of the ones that are a bit, I don’t know - ‘neater’, would be easier”.

In the past her work was perhaps indeed ‘neater’. It certainly appeared more ‘finished’. Ghadah explains that in the past there was more of herself covering her work, and the paintings were





more glossy. Aware of her descent into psychobabble, she says “I think at the time I was using a lot of things to cover up areas in my life, but now I am letting more of my life show through and this is reflected in my paintings”.

“I’m less ashamed to show what is under the layers and on canvas. Mine and my paintings”. Look closely at her work, there are innumerable layers, I am beginning to learn there are many layers that go to make up the artist too.

“It’s scary,” she says, “to leave some things unfinished”. Today she has developed the confidence to do so.

I’m always very interested to learn more from artists here about the way they see their relationship to their surroundings, and indeed to other Kuwaiti artists. With her surroundings she has no hesitation, “When I paint, I don’t paint thinking I’m in Kuwait. I could be doing the same work in New York, or anywhere else. If I change, my paintings change with me. I wouldn’t even think about it”.

In regard to her relationship with other artists, she pauses and thinks deeply. “I think the artists that were around in the 70s, they are the artists I have more professional respect for, they are the ones I feel closest to. It has nothing to do with the talent that we have here now, I think it is more to do with the way art is dealt

with in this country, where many people are freely allowed to call themselves artists. Therefore, in Kuwait, there is apparently no need to define a minimum level of ability to paint in order to qualify for the title of artist”.

Sami Mohammed is the Kuwaiti artist Ghadah has most admiration for. “I’ve said it before, for me he is a great artist. I don’t find his work aesthetically pleasing, it wasn’t supposed to be. It’s very disturbing. At around the age of ten when my father took my family to the Free Arts Atelier, Sami’s works showed me the limitless aspect of art, they showed that anything is possible. I realized that if someone can do what he does to the human form, then I can do anything I want to”. Seeing his work was what Ghadah describes as one of her ‘eureka’ moments.

Of the current generation of artists, she refuses to name names as to whose work, if anyone’s, she admires. “The talent is there”, she says, “you are either born with the talent to paint, or you aren’t. It’s that simple. I think the blockage in the expression of this talent is simply money, or lack of it. In Kuwait we don’t have the patronage of the Government, we don’t have sponsorship from businesses.”

Here she makes a valid and oft spoken point. In the 1970s the arts were rightly supported by the Government, and the arts were still valued by society. Regardless of this, it would be nice to think

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One, 2008, acrylic / charcoal / pastels on canvas, 91cm x 152cm

that a good artist will always find a way to express their art. “I don’t think so”, says Ghadah. Not in Kuwait anyway. “I think the issue here today is that people have got themselves so caught up with the lifestyle where you do need to earn a certain level of money in order to achieve what people now feel is the minimum level of lifestyle”.

“I think the way this country operates is wrong, the superficiality of it, the ease of it all, you don’t have to struggle. It makes it too easy to wake up one day and decide that you are an artist. The problem in Kuwait today is that we have a million artists, but almost none of them are any good. Look at the Fine Arts Society, they’re letting anyone in”.

She is vehement on this subject, and finishes by saying that “someone needs to tell it to them like it is”. I think she may have just done exactly that.

Through refusing to talk about herself - remember she spoke only about her paintings, and then discussed her relationship

with art and other artists - we have learned far more about her than any personal question and answer session could have uncovered.

Ghadah Alkandari is a woman passionate about her art. Protective of it too. She is at once strong, arrogant, and defiant. Yet she is conflicted and questioning too, clearly as multi-layered as the subjects in her paintings.

Ghadah Alkandari, The Yellow Tape Portraits, opens at The Sultan Gallery, Subhan, at 6pm on Tuesday 10th February and runs through 11th and 12th February. The Sultan Gallery telephone (+965) 2471-4325.