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Obituary

Laila Shawa obituary

Palestinian pop artist whose work reflected the harsh political realities of her homeland

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Like many pop artists, Laila Shawa, who has died aged 82, used repetition and silkscreen printing. In the hands of forerunners such as [Andy Warhol](#), the form and technique highlighted the commodification of celebrity - as in the American artist's images of Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley - but Shawa, who was Palestinian, had much darker and more political concerns.

Her print *20 Targets* (1994), from the series *Walls of Gaza II*, depicts a five by four grid repeating the same photographic image of a young Arab boy, his body highlighted with a red circle. Arabic graffiti, which proliferated across walls in Gaza to circumnavigate Israeli censorship, is layered under the chilling image. The repetition suggests not a famous life celebrated, but many anonymous lives lost.

This style, dubbed “Islamopop” art, Shawa made her own: taking complex, politically fraught subjects, and commenting on them with a vibrant palette across paintings, sculpture and prints, the last of these often incorporating photography.



📷 Laila Shawa in 1990. Photograph: Heini Schneebeili

Blood Money (1994) featured a photograph of more graffiti-scrawled walls, a recurring motif, with an overlaid repeated screenprint of US dollar bills. Other works include a decommissioned AK-47 studded with costume jewels and an image of Israeli spy drones painted in a comic-book style reminiscent of the work of [Roy Lichtenstein](#).

In the Disposable Bodies series (2011-13), Shawa exhibited extravagantly decorated limbless and headless shop mannequins: one covered in rhinestones and wearing an ammunition belt; another with a flurry of peacock feathers framing its bare shoulders and sticks of dynamite strapped to its hips. Shawa conceived of the project after watching news reports about female suicide bombers, victims, she believed, of both the Palestinian plight and societal and media misogyny.

Born in Gaza, in Mandatory Palestine, Laila was one of the five children of Salma Izzat al-Idilbi and Rashad al-Shawwa. When she was eight, the British Mandate ended and her father got involved in the ensuing second Arab-Israeli war, helping to smuggle arms from Iraq and [Lebanon](#) to the Arab Liberation Army led by Fawzi al-Qawuqji. Laila was sent to boarding school in Cairo, and went on to attend the Leonardo da Vinci Art Institute, which was linked to the Italian consulate, when she was 17.



📷 Gaza Sky II by Laila Shawa

A year later she extended her education to Rome, studying at the Academy of Fine Arts for eight years from 1958, taught by [Renato Guttuso](#), an Italian painter whose own work was committed to anti-fascist expression. It was a glamorous moment in the Italian city, far from the horrors of home, and the young artist's encounters with the stars of the burgeoning Italian pop art scene in the cafes of the Piazza del Popolo, as well as luminaries such as the Rolling Stones, Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre, proved as educational as the studio time.

In the last three of these years, during the academic holidays, she would travel to Austria to attend the Salzburg International Summer Academy of Fine Arts, an alternative art school established by the expressionist artist Oskar Kokoschka, which rejected the prevailing fashion for abstraction.

She returned to Palestine in 1964 and began working on arts and crafts education projects in the UN-coordinated refugee camps. She had her first exhibition at the Marna House hotel in Gaza a year later.

In 1967 she moved to Beirut for nine years, exhibiting frequently in Lebanon and, in 1972, at [the Sultan Gallery](#) in Kuwait City. Her work in this period was characterised by the Cities series of blocky, vibrantly coloured cityscapes; yet even here the strident politics of her later art was beginning to show. The painting *The Well* (1967) depicts a group of women in full niqab sitting despondently outside a mosque, the building's tower rising up phallically.



📷 Fashionista Terrorista II, 2011. by Laila Shawa

As the Lebanese civil war flared up in 1975, Shawa returned to Gaza and collaborated on the building of the Rashad Shawa cultural centre, named after her father, who in 1971 had been appointed mayor of Gaza (he was removed from his post in 1982, alongside other Palestinian mayors, for failing to cooperate with Israeli demands to annex the Al-Shati refugee camp to the municipality).

She intended it to be a venue for exhibitions, with plans for an art college and permanent collection. With Israeli assaults worsening however, the brutalist building was bombed several times even before it was fully complete.

In 1987, at the onset of the first intifada, Shawa moved to London, working on a series titled Women and the Veil, in which she painted cartoonish groups of fully veiled women, which was shown in 1990 at the Jordan National Gallery, Amman.

One work, titled The Impossible Dream, shows 10 women whose vibrantly coloured niqabs prevent them from eating the melting ice creams they hold. A series ruminating on women and Islamic magic provided her with her first show in the UK, at the Gallery, London, in 1992. The Walls of Gaza series was shown two years later at the Soas University of London library.

That year, 1994, she showed in Forces of Change: Artists of the Arab World, a group exhibition that opened at the [National Museum of Women in the Arts](#), Washington DC, and travelled for 12 months to museums across America. Walls of Gaza was shown again as part The Right to Hope, a 1995 UN group show that opened in Johannesburg and travelled the world, including to Palestine and Northern Ireland.

In 2000 she had a solo exhibition at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. Some of her work was destroyed in 2009 when her home in Gaza was bombed. The Rashad Shawa Cultural Centre, requisitioned when [Yasser Arafat](#) came to power, and the site of a meeting between the PLO leader and Bill Clinton in 1998, is currently controlled by Hamas.

Shawa is survived by her brothers Hammam and Aladeen.

● Laila Shawa, artist, born 4 April 1940; died 24 October 2022

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