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Laila SHAWA — a prolific and revolutionary artist from Palestine



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Welcome to HerArt podcast, a project for art lovers, especially art created by women. In our third episode, we will talk about **Laila SHAWA**— a prolific and revolutionary artist from Palestine. My name is Nata Andreev and I am going to tell you seven curious facts that you didn't know about the artist that is known for her use of bold colors and illustrative designs to tackle structural violence, political turmoil, the plight of children and resistance. For this episode, I wanted to thank my dear, dear friend Simone, who helped me find out when exactly Laila was born.



Lail...

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Curious Fact #1

Laila Shawa was born in 1940, in Gaza, a descendant of one of the oldest Palestinian landowning families. She studied at the Leonardo Da Vinci School of Art in Cairo and Rome's Academy of Fine Arts. After graduation Shawa went home to supervise arts and crafts education in refugee camps for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency and entered into an informal apprenticeship with UN war photographer Mr. Nakasian. At the age of 27 years old she moved to Beirut to paint full-time. When the Lebanese civil war started she returned to Gaza.

Curious Fact #2

Growing up in the Middle East, where many diverse cultures live in close proximity, Laila learned to speak several different languages. Speaking different languages helps one understand how complex problems give rise to multiple explanations that are often mutually exclusive. From the privileged vantage point of the artist, she tries to consider all sides of any question. Through her multi-layered approach, she expresses the ironies, and hypocrisies to which others seem less attuned.

Curious Fact #3

Laila's work is being intensely engaged with the physical aspect of production, moving with ease across media from print to oil on canvas to more recently, installation. She was trained mainly as a painter, later as a photographer, but as artists evolve, Laila discovered that one tool of the trade does not fulfill all requirements. She found herself facing subjects, such as graffiti on walls, and the only medium she could use was photography, which also led her to print. Later on, as in the case of installations, the subjects dictated the use of mediums. With the existence of so many options, Laila adopts different techniques in her work. It is a matter of necessity and evolution.



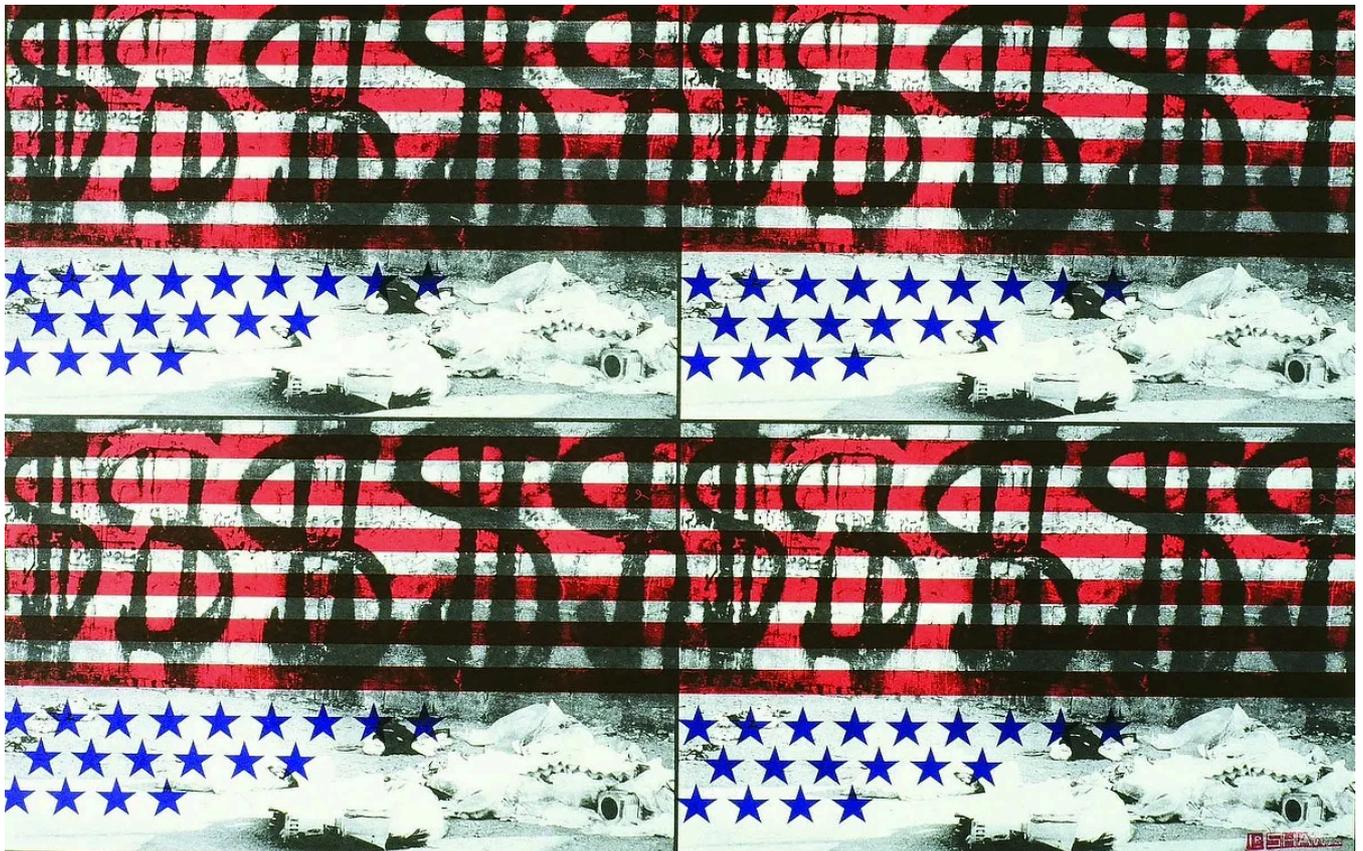
“The impossible dream” by Laila Shawa

Curious Fact #4

Together with her father and her ex-husband, Rasha Shawa, Laila founded the cultural center in Gaza in 1988. The whole project took them 12 years. The purpose of the center was to connect Gaza with the cultural world by staging exhibitions and holding annual festivals. There is also a theatre and a library inside the center, but due to all the events that happened in Gaza the center isn't serving the aim, it was built for. It was confiscated by Arafat when he arrived in Gaza, it was bombed by the Israelis, and today it is controlled by Hamas. In one interview Laila said that she's still full of hope that one day she will be able to go back and restore the building to its original purpose.

Curious Fact #5

Shawa is the first Palestinian artist to incorporate photography in the manner of pop-artists like Andy Warhol. She first experimented with photography during her informal studies in the early 60s but subsequently neglected the medium. She took up the camera again in earnest during the First Intifada when graffiti started appearing illicitly on the walls of Gaza to circumvent the stringently enforced media blackout. "I wanted to show the reality of these walls as political spaces; their immediacy and discursive unity," she said during an interview, "the filters came later."



"WALLS OF GAZA" (11 OF 12) by Laila Shawa

Curious Fact #6

When Shawa took up residence in London in 1987, she launched the painting series “Women and the Veil”, a sociopolitical critique of its subject. The veil is what Laila would term as a Bidaa — something which was introduced to Islam, but has nothing to do with the teachings of Islam. The comeback of the veil, starting with the Islamic revolution in Iran and its spread into the Middle East, was more of a sociopolitical phenomenon designed to control and subdue women, as a result of men losing control of their lives due to Western hegemony and complicit and corrupt dictatorships, in their various forms. In an interview, she also added “I come from a long line of strong women. My grandmothers were very powerful; my mother was a follower of Simon de Beauvoir. I grew up as an equal and always believed in the power (and to some extent the supremacy) of women. Watching women subdued — but above all, seeing women accept it — is something I could not accept.”

Curious Fact #7

When asked to look back on the Israeli-Palestinian history, Laila had this message for the international community and younger generations “to read history from the correct point of view. The problem with the Palestinian issue is that it is discussed from the middle of the story while ignoring totally the origins of the conflict. Most people don’t know the real history of what happened in Palestine. History is written by the victors and the truth is distorted. The information is there for those who care to find it.” Shawa, who also illustrates children’s books. Her work has been exhibited around Europe, the Arab world, Russia, China, Malaysia, and the United States. It is represented in collections of the National Galleries of Jordan and Malaysia and the British Museum.



“Where Souls Dwell IV” by Laila Shawa

Thank you so much for listening to the fourth episode of season three, of HerArt podcast — a project for art lovers, especially art created by women. If you want to follow more of what I do, find me on Facebook and Instagram. And don't forget to tune in next month, when I am going to tell you about Marisol ESCOBAR — the forgotten star of pop art. This is the second episode I am recording during COVID-19. I hope everyone is safe and takes care of themselves and their loved ones. See you later!

References

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