

Laila Shawa

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

Like many pop artists, Laila Shawa, who has died aged 52, 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 Eva 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.

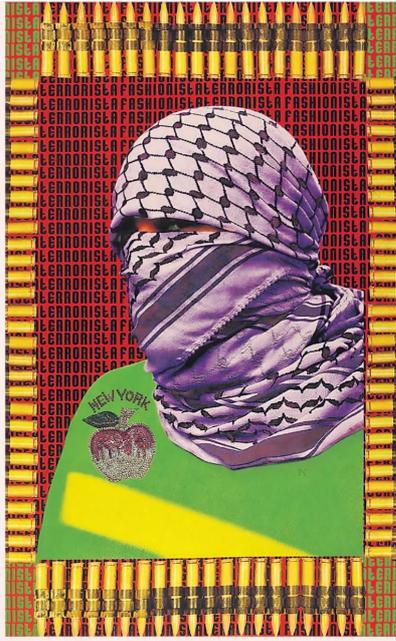
works include a decommissioned AK-47 studded with costume jewels and an image of Israeli spy drones painted in a comic-book style reminiscent of the work of Roy Lichtenstein.

In the Disposable Bodies series (2011-13), Shawa exhibited extravagantly decorated limbed 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 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-Idlibi 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. 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



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Shawa, far left in 1990, made 'Islamopop' art her own, with works such as Fashionista Terrorista II (2011), left. Below, Where Souls Dwell (2013), a decommissioned AK-47 studded with jewels, and Gaza Sky (2012), a comic-book style portrayal of Israeli spy drones



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