

## HANAA MALALLAH ON EQUALITY, MALE MENTORS AND IRAQ FROM THE OUTSIDE

by Nada Shabout

**Hanaa, when we first started talking about your work, around 2004, you rejected the label of a woman artist. You said, 'I'm an Iraqi artist and I practice as an Iraqi artist.' Your reason then, which one could argue is still valid to some extent, was that Iraqi artists were isolated and to further segregate them would only add to their alienation. Now, you have been out of Iraq for a while, almost a decade. Do you still think that the issue of gender is not valid when we talk about Iraqi art? Does it make a difference that you are a woman artist versus a male artist?**

You know, in principle, I rejected the label because I did not want it to affect the perception of my work. The work should be judged as good artwork or not, regardless if it is by women or by men. This is the first point.

Then, when I researched women's art movements in the contemporary/global art, I found the Guerrilla Girls, among others. I realised that to label yourself as a woman artist does not mean that you are weak or that you seek more power. The Guerrilla Girls movement is empowering in itself as an activist movement. It seeks quality. They put masks on their faces. It is not because I am woman then my artwork is good. It doesn't concern you who I am, but if the work is good or not. Because it is by a woman artist does not mean we disregard its weaknesses. Unfortunately, this is happening in many cases when the work is labeled as women's art. Good and bad work are then put on the same scale and labeled as equal, despite variation in quality.



**But, as you know, there was an injustice regarding women artists within society and history. They had no presence and their presence is still relative until now. Perhaps some of these scandals are in relation to their creation of gendered spaces? For example, the first generation of women artists, here in the U.S., used their bodies and sex as a way of reclaiming it.**

Yes, I completely agree with that.

The second point is that women's art is not judged only by its quality, but many times the personal "scandals" and issues surrounding women artists become what is known about them. This is an issue that seems to plague the work of women artists on a global level.

**Nevertheless, this clearly brings up another issue, similar to the case of Orientalism. When do we really think of this as taking back the gaze versus we're just extending the practice of Orientalism? If I am using my own sexuality, am I reclaiming it and saying, 'Okay, if I want to be nude, I can present myself nude?' But men have always represented me nude, or women in the nude, so am I practicing the same thing or am I reclaiming? Of course, this is a debatable issue, and is far from being resolved. On the other hand, you were living and practicing in Iraq as a woman artist. You had different issues that were of your concern.**

Yes, it is strange. When I was in Iraq, I had no idea about this. Maybe because I was young. But looking back on my life there, I realised that all my friends were men. I worked with men. In all the photos I have, I am surrounded by men. There were no women. In fact, there were no women teachers in my life during the 14 years of my education. I wasn't influenced by any woman teacher or any woman artist in Iraq. All of them were just men.

**Why do you think that was?**

I don't know! When I look back, I think perhaps because I was there, I didn't feel or notice it. But now I realise that 14 years is a long time!

*above:*  
Hanaa Malallah,  
portrait

*opposite page:*  
Hanaa Malallah,  
*My Vest*, life size vest,  
cloth+oil paint, 2016





**Hanaa Malallah, *Moment of the Light*, wall installation + prisms, 200 × 200 cm, part of 6m wall installation**



Hanaa Malallah.  
*In the name of peace*, ink  
 drawing + digital print on  
 paper, 35 x 28 cm, 2014

**What about what the men professors were teaching you? Were they teaching you history of art that included women artists or not?**

No! I am only now discovering many important women artists. They were not included in any of the lectures.

**Not even Iraqi women artist? Suad Al Attar or Madiha Umar, for example?**

We didn't hear about Madiha Umar in Iraq until the last decade. Of course, everyone knows Suad Al Attar as an artist; as a big name. But her work was not taught to us as an example or for its own merit.

**Well, even in Western art history, and since Linda Nochlin asked, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" in 1971, progress has been slow!**

But now things are changing. In London, last year at the Tate Modern there were three exhibitions and all of them were retrospectives for women. But Nada now I struggle with this issue. It shocks me! Now outside of Iraq, I feel the issue of gender. Maybe because the circle inside of Iraq was smaller. Now the circle is bigger. For example, let's look at the contemporary circle created by collectors of Arab art. They are still very much male dominated. But this is also where I think the issue of Iraqi identity becomes important. I am very surprised that until now, Suad Al Attar is not celebrated on the level she deserves. This is where Iraqi artist women are still neglected. Iraqi art as a whole is still isolated!

**Back to you, as Hanaa Malallah, while in Iraq you made your name as an academic, a well-known artist and theorist. You had exhibitions in the region, and collectors. However, in the last decade you had been living in London and now teaching in Bahrain. How has this affected your work and sales?**

Being in London gave me a very different position. A very different status and location, for self-improvement, education but also the value of my own work. I realised that we lived in a bubble inside Iraq, that in my time in London I have accomplished three times as much as I had as an artist inside Iraq. I say I am lucky to be in London. In London I say I flourish, I am not in exile.

To fulfil my dream to be a full-time artist for ten years was a big thing. My time is for my art. I go around the crazy city to visit galleries and museums. London is a global city, and a hub for contemporary art. You don't have to go anywhere to see artists, you stay in the same city and see all the world. In London, and with the sense of London as a diverse cultural city, there is opportunity. I found this opportunity. I exhibited quietly, everything flourished. I even exhibited with British people and participated in British projects. My work is selling in a better way. I have established new prices for my artwork. It is just different.

**How has that changed your vision of art in terms of aesthetics, techniques and material?**

Very much so! What we were producing in Iraq was something out of its history. Not even modernism but rather very outdated art. For example, art of the '90s in London, its technique, was completely different from what we did. So we were completely isolated in that time, we thought we did something very big but it is small. You have to find yourself in a big circle to examine your taste and your artworks.

Without being too harsh, I feel what we did was fake; not honest. The illusion of my identity as an Iraqi artist was translated into a repetition of what we inherited from the West, and we claimed it as our identity. It was not. The work's identity couldn't be limited to choosing subjects from Iraq and from everyday life and calling it Iraqi art. This is a big question. Something you have to think a lot about before answering the question. We need to study this in depth. Instead we have lots of stories. We have no critics!

**Do you think these stories that Iraqi artists tell, or that are told about them, do they actually contribute to the construction of the understanding of art history in Iraq?**

I think we don't know. We need education first to understand all of that. Even now, my generation who are still trapped inside Iraq are repeating the same thing. They are still isolated. There's no connection with the outside world, from the '90s until now. Even with Internet, the connection is still constrained. We have no institutions to study this.

Our art production of the 20th century is not contextualised. For now, it appears lacking when presented. ■