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essay

What we talk about when we talk about women:

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You may say that beauty is something you meet by chance when you look out the window just after dawn, and the noise of the city still belongs to another dimension. But maybe it's not true, because women like to get up late after a sleepless night as expressive and alluring as a cigarette between the lips of an unscrupulous lover. Women like to have breakfast in bed with coffee and orange juice while looking at



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stinging light
of late
morning, and
the
inconsistency
of things that
happen far
beyond habit
and
resignation.
Nights and
days of
gestures and
words that
accumulate in
the uncertainty
of noisy
choreographies
and useless
efforts. Don't
ask what time
it is, and they
will easily
ignore you. A
few hours of
ragged sex
erase
appearances
better than the
longest of
conversations
could do, a
coincidence of
sympathy and

restlessly and
blindingly
between desire
and pain. And it
is a singular
and desolate
sight at the
same time, a
neglected
intimacy
achieved
between the
sheets, with
the only partly
innocent aim
of breaking
monotony.

This is just a
small part of
what you can
feel after
looking to
Syrian
photographer,
painter and
sculptress
[Laila Muraywid](#)
→'s works, and
this short
essay is an
attempt to
analyze her
complex

dedicated to
women. Born
in Damascus in
1956, she is
one of the
most
interesting
members of
the still
nascent
feminist wing
of
contemporary
Syrian art.



Laila Muraywid,
Please don't forget,
2008. Courtesy Laila
Muraywid – Green Art
Gallery, Dubai

A MIND THAT'S CHANGING

Facing and
challenging
taboos is part
of Laila
Muraywid's

strengtn
emerges from
her works, in an
attempt to
make female
identity emerge
from the
inferior level
where males'
mentality had
put it: because
this is the
problem: still in
2023, there is a
male
chauvinistic
society that
believes
women can
only play
supporting
roles in life. For
them, only two
possibilities: a
wife or a
prostitute. On
the contrary, in
Muraywid's
vision there is a
wide range of
possibilities,
not just "black
or white": in the
middle there

and a woman
has the right to
live her own life,
she has the
right to her own
dreams, she
has the right to
be fully
respected.

Murraywid's
work is imbued
with poetry, too:
the black/white
combination
she uses for
most of her
works provides
a metaphorical
and physical
intimacy, and
through this
she goes
deeper in
women's
feelings, she
built the
relationship
between
women and
their social
environment.

works, dating
back to 2006-8,
she took a
slight
inspiration from
European
orientalist
paintings of XIX
Century, as you
can see in
Blood Deeper
than Shadows
exhibition
(Dubai, Green
Art gallery,
2009). Women
portrayed by
Muraywid
release an
authentic
sensuality,
emerging from
bodies that
show (or hide)
themselves in
their truth, and
not to offer
themselves to
male
concupiscence;
they are proud
of their breasts,
pubes and
pregnant bellies

of their
femininity.

THE BODY AS A WEAPON

But then, in just
one year, her
work gains an
impressive
conceptual
deepness.

Beyond the
body, the mask
too becomes
an important
symbol in
Muraywid's
work; the mask
conceals while
revealing, so
that the face
(and the body)
become
desirable, but at
the same time
is inaccessible,
because of the
distance that
the mask
creates. In this
way women
can keep their
secrets (related

Murraywid s
concentrates
her inquiry on
the idea that
every woman is
much more
than just her
body. And even
when the artist
depicts them
lying down,
these female
bodies stand
up like statues
of classical
antiquity,
affirming a
physical and
moral
presence,
telling stories
of real life that
can be intuited
just looking at
the nude skin,
the hands, the
traces of blood.

In the exhibition
All Masks Have
Faces (that
took place in
Paris in
October-

Imane Fares),
the title recalls
that the mask
is an imposition
that imprisons
a face and a
mind; on that
occasion the
artist exhibited
a series of
black and white
photographs
and prints
where the truth
of the body
suggests that
the secrets
hidden by the
mask may not
even
correspond to
the stereotypes
created by the
chauvinist male
mentality, and
that women are
free to live their
body as they
prefer.

These photos
are a
celebration of
real life, not as

distorted way,
according to
the
“perspective
realism”
theorized by
Italian director
Massimo
Cagri. You may
say that these
photos are part
of a pièce of
theatre taken
from real life,
dressed in a
way that
reveals the
infernal
machine
hidden under
the
appearances of
the comedy.
There is a
certain
ferocious, bitter
irony in the
faces and in the
bodies of these
women, and
probably this is
the real mask
more than the
one created by

other textiles.

The body is just a biological element that hosts a personality, a mind, a collection of dreams, ideas, projects; in an interview given to Wafa Roz, Head of Research of Dalloul Art Foundation, Muraywid states that to talk about her work is really to talk about women and their body, but from the inside, and to try to give this outside form an inside feeling. Because a woman is free to choose not to be necessarily beautiful, or in

deautitui
according to
standards
which differ
from those
imposed by the
male chauvinist
mentality. What
is beauty? Who
has the right to
uniquely
establish what
is beautiful and
what is not?

Laila Muraywid, *The
sacred time*, 2022.
Courtesy Laila
Muraywid

THE POETRY OF THE BODY

Muraywid
always
wonders how
to work with
the body, how
to access it;
nudity is a key
topic in her
practice, but

voyeurism: ner
approach to
nudity is
functional to
represent the
moral strength
of women,
nudity is the
element that
enforces the
relationship
with the body, a
relationship is
necessary to
find your own
place in society,
outside of
stereotypes.
But the naked
is harder than
the nude to
make it
acceptable,
because it is
linked to the
idea of
sexuality, while
the nude is
acceptable
because it is
linked to the
idea of
metaphysics, to
that idea of

Greek culture
which
encompasses
the essence of
things. The
artist thinks
that a naked
body is
beautiful as it
is, but she finds
important to
put it against or
in relation with
something else,
and that's why
she covers
some parts of
the bodies with
soft materials
like organza or
silk. In this way,
there is a
dramatic
contrast
between
woman's nudity
and her
covered parts,
but the mystery
of the body
remains intact,
just like a
miracle that
you can see,

Murraywid,
whether the
body is naked
or not it's not
important,
because very
often, due to
males'
voyeurism, a
female body is
imagined as it
was naked
even if it is
covered with
dresses. So,
Murraywid's
women (and
their bodies,
too) feel
completely free
because they
simply don't
care about the
others (males,
in particular)
looking at
them; their
bodies are free
because these
women have
freed their inner
selves. They
are real women,
not just

THE PARADOX OF VIOLENCE

Murraywid's artistic practice also includes resin sculpture, through which she creates bodies who are physically and metaphorically violated. If you consider *Un doux cercueil de chair* (2011), you are dealing with a paradoxical triumph of Venus that recalls the "triumph" of the Siren described by Curzio Malaparte in his novel *La Pelle* (The Skin); the latter is a symbol of Italian people torn apart by

corais as a
bloody
necklace, it's
the exaltation
of the
innocence. On
the other hand,
wounded
female body by
Muraywid is a
metaphor of
the social,
physical and
political
violence that in
Syria, as
unfortunately in
many other
countries, is
still practiced
against women
today.

Another work
like Under the
shadow of the
years (2010)
celebrates
women in a
very similar
atmosphere. It
is a triptych
that tells a
story with a

very physical
work, where
you can
breathe the
aforementioned
few hours of
ragged sex that
erase
appearances
better than the
longest of
conversations
could have
done, and the
coincidence of
understanding
and perception
that arises
restlessly and
blindingly
between desire
and pain.
Because
women are
stronger than
violence and
death, and
when you think
you have
physically
conquered
them with
violence, in
reality they

courtesan
 Kamala
 explains to the
 young
 Siddhartha in
 Herman
 Hesse's
 eponymous
 novel, you can't
 really steal love
 from a woman
 who doesn't
 want to give it.
 You may violate
 her body, but
 her soul
 remains intact,
 as well. And in
 this work you
 can see that
 this woman
 has been
 humiliated but
 not defeated.

SHE'S LIKE A RAINBOW

In the last three
 years Muraywid
 started to use
 colors, and
 these works
 have marked
 the beginning

made of
complex
pictorial
compositions,
permeated with
a strong
dynamism
thanks to which
each scene
seems like a
dance, and the
inspiration from
Picasso
emerges
clearly,
combined with
the one from
Dali, Chagall,
prehistoric rock
painting and
Greek vase
painting. What
you can see in
these works is
a sort of
cosmic dance
in the
immensity of
nature, women
are still
protagonists:
floating angels,
dancing
amazons,

contemporary
women who
enjoy life well
aware of their
responsibilities.

In these
paintings, like
La Joie (2022),
The sacred
time (2022),
Dreaming of a
perfumed world
(2022), One
hundred river
deep (2022),
woman
appears the
custodian of
the natural
force from
which life
arises, just like
Giorgione's
female gypsy in
La Tempesta
(The Tempest)
– her naked
body, too, is
partially
covered – her
dance is a
gesture to
control and

physical and
spiritual healing
ritual that
stresses how
women are
important in
the natural
balance.

Murraywid's
women are not
just symbols,
their bodies are
made of flesh
and sunrays;
they are
dancing in the
light, just like
many Iranian
women are
now doing in
Tehran,
Mashhad,
Isfahan, and
many other
cities. In these
works, woman
is part of the
natural
harmony, she is
on a level of
equality with
man and she
participates in

principles and values; the role of woman as an educator is here expressed in an extraordinarily touching way, and it's easy to recall traditional cultures of East Asia, in particular Ijji (oral poetry) by Ivatan people in the Philippines. And one of these poems, *Like raindrops dripping*, celebrates the importance of woman in the education of the new generations, side by side with man, in a perfect gender equality:

*Like raindrops
ripping through*

*the lofty
lessons
taught me by
my father and
my mother:
shall I store
them in the
hollow of the
bamboo,
or treasure
them
in my guts, the
vessel for
the wisdom
passed on to
me
by my father
and my
mother?*

Here, the role of
mother is the
widest society
can create,
because it's not
limited within
the family but
extends to
society: in fact,
the maternal
instinct
expresses a
generous sense
of care

mentality), an effort to create of sense of peace, stability and eternity.

Looking at these new works by Muraywid you may now say that beauty is something that springs from the depths of the ancient age, from the instinct of love, and that without women you would not have society nor civilization.

**Written by
Niccolò
Lucarelli**

Laila Muraywid, Un doux cercueil de chair, 2011. Courtesy

About the Author:

**Niccolò
Lucarelli**

holds a degree in International Studies but also has a background in the arts and academia. He works as an art and theater critic for esteemed publications such as Artribune and Exibart. His curatorial research is primarily dedicated to exploring the influence of socio-political subjects on artistic practices. He keenly examines how artists engage with and respond to these themes, resulting in thought-provoking exhibitions and projects. He has curated shows in Italy, Czech Republic and Africa. He also works as a military historian for the Italian Army General Staff and has published some essays and books on World War I and II.

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Olga Boznańska in Paris.

Dominika Górowska ◦
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The Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation Prize 2023

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