

Challenging the Muse: Asad Faulwell

Maan Jalal

maan@khaleejtimes.com/Dubai

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There is over a week left to visit Lawrie Shabibi Gallery in Alserkal Avenue and marvel at their current exhibition. Asad Faulwell's second solo show at the gallery, *In the Heart of the Cosmos*, closes on February 6 and will leave you speechless. Not only thanks to the scale, detail, colour choices and composition of the pieces but also because of the compelling subject matter.

The exhibition is from Asad's ongoing series *Les Femmes d'Alger*. The series sheds light on the Algerian women freedom fighters who fought with the National Liberation Front during the 1954-1966 Algerian war for independence from French occupation. Unfortunately, their sacrifice, effort and legacy has not always been given the exposure or recognition it deserves. In fact their stories are mostly forgotten.

What Asad attempts to do is pay homage to these women, immortalising their names, faces and stories on canvas while also changing the course of a long dialogue on the depiction of Arab women in the world of art. They are, without their historical, social and political context, mesmerising pieces of work.

We see a kaleidoscope of detailed patterns, creating layers of space and movement around the figures

who have been painted in a statuesque manner, immobile, strong, self-sacrificing. Using visual elements we might recognise from other artists, from elements of nature and society, Asad has created a very distinct style that narrates the lives of these women while reevaluating and challenging the oriental gaze we have often seen focused on the Middle East and specifically Middle Eastern women. Even if you aren't aware of this history, simply seeing Asad's work, the intricacies, the engaging force of his images you can clearly see a layered, textured and distinct voice.

"I know I always wanted to make art," Asad tells *City Times*. "When you are an undergrad you're doing projects that they're giving you. I didn't have an independent voice at that time. Then at graduate school I started finding somewhat of my voice."

In the midst of geometric design and ornamentation, decorative, daring, monumental, shrine like with halos, crowns and elements of collage, the women stand firm within the spaces of the paintings, willing you to watch and recognise them as more than simple muses. As real women with real stories.

City Times spoke to Asad about his own identity and how it informs his work, his views on Dubai's growing art scene and how he came upon the rich subject matter that has enveloped his work so far.

What are your thoughts on UAE as a place to exhibit your work?

The first time I came here, I was actually invited to give a lecture and do a workshop and work with art students to teach them something about my practice. The second time I came here, I was having a show, then another show, a group show in Sharjah and now this one. For me, the UAE is a completely different context as a place to show my work as opposed to anywhere I can show in the United States, anywhere I can show in Europe. It basically offers an opportunity to have an entirely different dialogue, I would say. The reality is that most of the dialogue comes from the perspective of the people who are viewing it and then engaging. In the United States that's going to be a particular perspective and that's the perspective I'm going to get the most because that's where I show most often. But coming here, it's a completely different perspective.

How does that dialogue with people viewing your work affect or feed into your practice?

It's definitely interesting for sure and I think that it inevitably feeds into my practice. Artists spend all of their time alone working, just dialoguing with themselves. So anytime you have a show you instantly are getting feedback from hundreds of people after not hearing from anyone for like nine months. Maybe I'll talk to a couple of my good friends in LA about my work or my fiancée but really it's the same three people I'm always talking to. And then you get a hundred new perspectives in three days. In that sense it has to affect me as an artist, I'll have ideas, things I want to try but sometimes I'm not sure about them until I actually get out to talk to people. They see the work, I get their response, and it can actually give me the confidence to be more bold and try something that I've been tentative about or pushing something further that I've not been sure about. Any time I show work and I get a large amount of input from the viewer it has to inevitably affect how I make work, going forward.

From what you've seen of Dubai, how do you view it as an environment for artists to create work?

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Dubai seems to have all the elements to make it a good place for an artist to work. In my opinion those elements are access to art. I think you need to be able to see stuff in order to keep things moving. And then there is space here. Space is so important. I think LA is a great city to make art in for a lot of the same reasons. There is space. You have room to work, as opposed to a place like New York where you're probably working in a closet and it costs more than you can afford. I think for that reason it's probably set up to be a great place to make work in. And with Abu Dhabi having these big institutions, like the Louvre is almost done; Sharjah as well has the biennial; I think between Dubai's commercial gallery scene, which every artist needs, and the institutional support the elements are all there to make this a place for making work.

How has your background and sense of identity affected the way you make art and the subject matter you tackle?

I think to a certain extent. Being half Iranian, half American, born in the United States, I never felt specifically attached or aligned to one ethnic group or one background or one nationality. Yeah, I was born in the US, I'm as American as any other person born there but my name is different from the standard American names and inevitably that creates a separation so even though I spent just as much time there as any person born in the US, you're never a hundred percent integrated. And similarly, I never felt that Iranian either, so there is this detachment from these categorizations and groups. Even religiously, my dad's family is Catholic, my mom's family are Muslims, I just never felt that I needed to fit into these categories. In a sense, it can be confusing and in another sense, it can be liberating also.

How did you get interested in Middle Eastern history, which has informed a lot of your work?

I was in school doing my undergrad, I was an art major and I wasn't enjoying it that much. So I quit and switched to Middle Eastern and African Studies. I took more of those Academic Classes for a year and I gained a good knowledge base of the Middle East, North Africa. Specifically the part that I kept finding myself attracted to was this post colonial, this period where the 1940s to the 1970s where all these colonies fell and independence was gained, that period of immense change. It was such a dynamic time and really the whole power dynamic of the globe was changing. I've always been a pretty politically involved person. Contemporary politics and historical politics are major interests of mine.

How did this body of work begin?

It started really with watching the movie The Battle of Algiers which happened when I was in school. It had a huge effect on me. And even though I didn't do anything about it initially, it was always in the back of my head. Then I started doing research, more academic research, digging in, trying to find out more about these women and the Battle of Algiers. Then maybe three years I was out of school I made the first one of these paintings. The movie dealt with the post-colonial thing that I was very into but it also dealt with gender in a very direct and interesting way too. I think in just the same way that the power dynamic of colonialism was collapsing at that time the power dynamic of the male hierarchy was also being challenged. Both of those two things were equally compelling to me.

Your style is now incredibly distinct. How did you end up with your very specific visual language?

There was a period of uncomfortable awkwardness, in trying to figure out how to make all the different elements work and trying to figure out how to make them merge together. When I first started this, the work had almost no pattern, no figures, my work changed dramatically in those like three years. Things opened up and then I started showing in New York, I got picked up in a gallery there.

There is also strong references to art history in your work. Could you elaborate on that?

There has been such a long and rich history of European painters, painting specifically Algerian women from Delacour, Matisse to Picasso, from an Orientalist perspective. I could talk about this post colonial stuff, I can talk about gender, I can talk about art history and how art history mimics and relates to this colonial history and to this gender dynamic too. European men have been painting Algerian women in such a way as to exoticise them and sexualise them.

Did you want to attack this idea? Speak directly against it?

Yes, that's why I called all the work *Les Femmes d'Alger* taking the title from those Delacour and Picasso paintings, because I wanted to draw a direct link and so by drawing attention to those works, by trying to essentially undo what they did, by making work about very specific women, not just anonymous women . . . I wanted to relate this to very specific women with names, with a story, who did remarkable things that went against the stereotype or might go against a certain idea. More than a muse. Their lives are infinitely more dynamic than anything I've done in my life. So these are the stories that I want to talk about, the complexity of them and the ability to talk about more than one thing at once was what really drew me to this.