

Harper's BAZAAR

ARABIA

ART

ISSUE 23

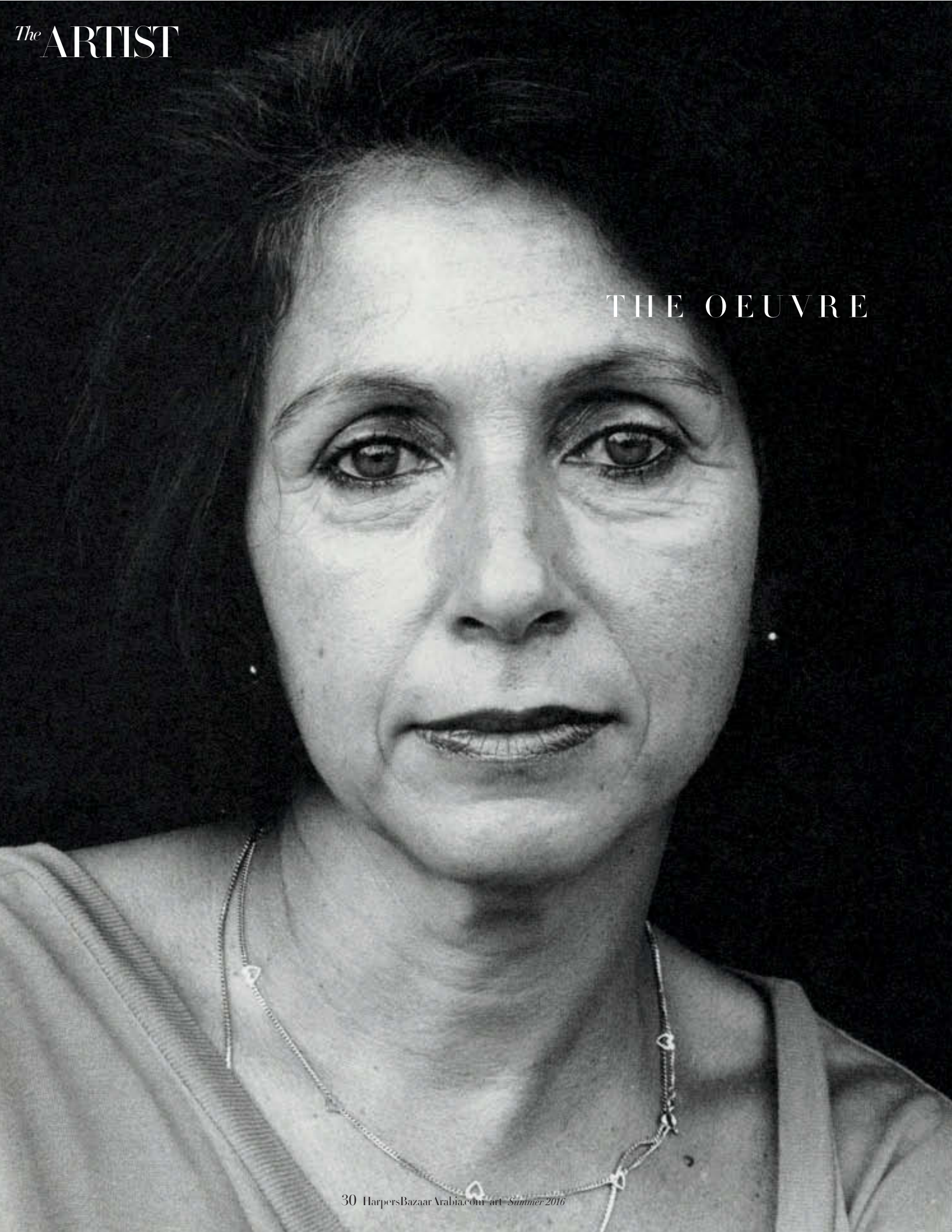
FARIDEH LASHAI

AND HER
ENCHANTING OEUVRE

AFRUZ AMIGHI'S
UTOPIAN
TOWERS

WINDS OF CHANGE
MIDDLE EASTERN ART
at the GUGGENHEIM
NEW YORK

COMPLIMENTARY COPY



THE OEUVRE

of MALIHEH AFNAN *Written*
PAINTINGS

*The work of the late Iranian artist **Maliheh Afnan** explores Middle Eastern history, turmoil and nostalgia. Asmaa Al-Shabibi reflects upon the life and work of one of the great Middle Eastern artists of the twentieth century*

My art background was not so much painting as it was manuscripts, calligraphies, carpets and these things,” said the late Maliheh Afnan in an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist in 2010. Step into her home and studio and you will appreciate that this is the essence that permeates through her paintings. Situated in an elegant red brick mansion-block in the heart of central London, her space has the atmosphere of an Oriental caravanserai—Persian rugs adorning the floors, beautiful Middle Eastern antiques displayed on engraved tables and, of course, her paintings, with Afnan’s favourites adorning her walls while the rest are casually stacked up against them. Her home and workplace for the last 19 years of her life reflected an assemblage of the different eras and places that she lived in.

Afnan was born in Haifa, Palestine, in 1935 to Persian parents where she lived until 1949. Her family, prominent Bahai’s, had been exiled from Iran in the late 1800s fleeing to the Ottoman Empire (first to Baghdad, then Istanbul then Palestine). With the upheaval that accompanied the creation of Israel, they once again were exiled, and this time to neighbouring Beirut. Here the young Afnan went to high school and in 1955 graduated with a Bachelor’s degree in Psychology and Sociology from the American University of Beirut.

While the artist was surrounded by a rich creative heritage, it wasn’t until 1956 when she moved to Washington DC, that she pursued her desire to become an artist. It was there that she graduated with a Master’s in Fine Arts from the Corcoran School of Art in 1962. In 1966 she returned to Beirut and in 1973 she was invited to show in Gallery Cyrus in Paris. It was during that time that the Civil War broke out in Lebanon, and so it was that another forced exile turned Paris into her new home for the next 23 years. During the 1970s she continued to make a few trips to Beirut where she experienced immense sadness at the devastation that she witnessed. It was in response to this that she produced a series of works on corrugated cardboard that she exhibited at Galerie Principe from November to December 1978. These works showcase the only time in which she worked with corrugated cardboard, burning them with a torch flame to induce the sense of desolation and despair she felt about the war, but also to create beauty where there was destruction. Two of these works—*War torn* and *Silent Witness*—remained in her private collection.

As a child Afnan was interested in writing, and even when she was unable to write she would pretend that she could, filling empty pages with illegible text and numbers. For her it was the form of the script that excited her (be it Persian, Arabic or English) rather than its meaning. Describing her works as “written paintings”, text was her point of departure, the line her starting point. In some of her works, such as her *Ecriture* and *Veiled* series, text is scrawled obsessively across the paper forming an illegible train of thought. ▶

In her abstract landscapes and personages the script is subtler, appearing beneath layers of pigment or perhaps just materialising as simple lines. As with the written word, there is a linear quality to her paintings and the materials traditionally used for writing, such as paper, pencil, pen and ink, have been consistently adopted throughout her practice. Paintings to which she has applied pigment with her signature earthy hues are made to resemble ancient scrolls and tablets, akin to relics that have been excavated from a long-forgotten site.

“My work is rooted in memory—both my own and a more distant, perhaps collective one,” the artist once when describing her work. The mesmerising layers and overlapping patterns of her paintings, and the intimacy of their small size, are in many ways renderings of her own life journey, evoking a sense of the passage of time and bygone eras. There is one painting, which she completed in 2007 and which is called *My Story*. Like a tombstone, she started the work by inscribing the date of her birth and then continued with significant events of her life such as addresses where she lived, special dates and the names of important people.

Some of her more abstract paintings have also been likened to ancient maps, charting an ageless course or terrain. The same can be said of her paintings of men and women—what she describes as “personages.” These are of nobody in particular, just her own recollection of faces of people she may have known or imagined, the “ravages of time” etched on their faces. In many ways these notions and the feelings experienced by the viewer return to the universal memory that she seeks to evoke in her works; the memory of moving from place to place, of tracking one’s course through time. “I like the idea of palimpsests, of putting layers and layers on something.” In the 2000’s Afnan’s many layers became even more physical as she began to use gauze to cover her written-forms—this in response to 9/11 and when issues of the veil became prevalent in European societies, Middle Eastern artists and international curators. By that time Afnan was working with Rose Issa and had established herself as one of the most important Middle Eastern contemporary artists, with works in London’s British Museum and the Metropolitan Museum in New York.

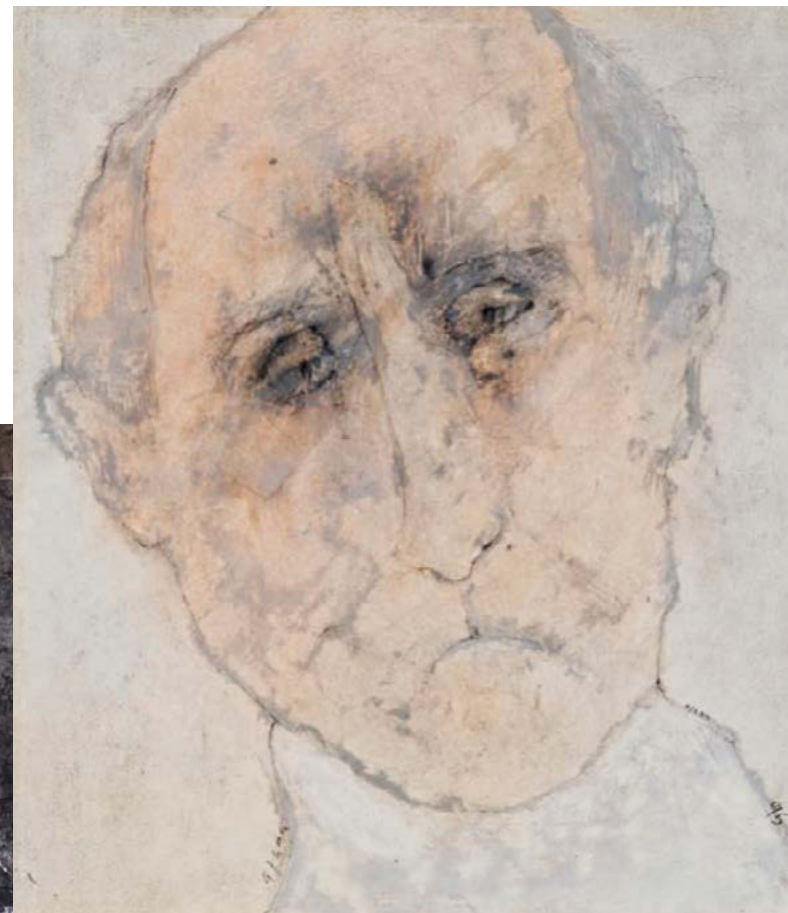
Opening spread: Maliheh Afnan in Athens, 1989. Courtesy the estate of the artist, Lawrie Shabibi and Rose Issa Projects.

From above: *Lost City*. 1987. Mixed media on paper. 40 x 46 cm. Courtesy the estate of the artist, Lawrie Shabibi and Rose Issa Projects; *Wartorn*. 1979. Mixed media on torched corrugated cardboard. 56 x 66 cm. Courtesy the estate of the artist, Lawrie Shabibi and Rose Issa Projects; *Ecriture II*. 1982. Pencil on paper. 31 x 64 cm. Courtesy the estate of the artist, Lawrie Shabibi and Rose Issa Projects.



“MY WORK IS ROOTED IN MEMORY BOTH MY OWN AND A MORE DISTANT, PERHAPS COLLECTIVE ONE”

Maliheh Afnan



Afnan’s art was influenced by her own cultural heritage of Persian miniatures, calligraphic texts and ancient manuscripts from the Near East. Notwithstanding her own influences, her Western art education caused her works to absorb and transcend any direct cultural references, creating her own unique language. In this regard she recalls how in the US while studying art such calligraphic forms would enter subconsciously into her work—something that made her art different from that of her peers. Very quickly her teachers and critics referenced her works to that of Mark Tobey—an artist she had up until that point never heard of. Upon seeing his works for the first time, Afnan experienced an epiphany: at last she could identify with another artist whom also at that time had incorporated calligraphic marks (in his case ancient script from China).

Her next most defining moment was meeting Tobey in 1971—an encounter the young, determined Afnan instigated from Beirut at a time when she felt frustrated at the lack of local feedback on her work. Upon seeing her portfolio he introduced her to the gallerist Clare Brambach who described Maliheh as a “good artist” with the instruction to give her a show. And with that, the artist held her first solo show in Europe.

While politics is not overtly evident in her works, it was politics and the impact that it had on her own life that greatly influenced her viewpoint. A well-informed, highly articulate and vivacious personality, Afnan would engage in lively discussions about today’s news of which she kept abreast. Conspiracy theories and Middle Eastern politics would be mixed with Lebanese pastries and Persian chai brewed traditionally in her samovar.

There is a line in one of Afnan’s paintings that says, “Death is the only secret.” Taken from a poem by the English poet Emily Dickinson, stating it in such a way also serves as a declaration of her own mortality and also of the limited time on earth we too have until we become part of a collective memory. Afnan passed away on 6th January 2016 in London at the age of 81. ■



From above: *Eminence Grise II*. 1995. Oil pastel on paper. 18 x 16 cm; Untitled. 1969. Collage on rice paper. 38.5 x 54 cm; *Omen*. 1978. Mixed media and collage on torched corrugated cardboard. 51 x 76 cm; *Silent Witness*. 1979. Mixed media on torched corrugated cardboard. 61 x 71 cm. Courtesy the estate of the artist, Lawrie Shabibi and Rose Issa Projects; *Ecriture I*. 1982. Pencil on paper. 50 x 64 cm.

All images courtesy of the estate of the artist, Lawrie Shabibi and Rose Issa Projects

