

ARTIST
OF THE MONTH

Laila Shawa

By Christa Paula



Portrait with my AK-47 (Where Souls Dwell), commissioned by Peace One Day, 2012.
Photo credit : Malcolm Crowthers.

After 50 years of creative production, Laila Shawa's oeuvre contains some of the most recognizable images in Palestinian art. Her enchanting cityscapes from the late 1960s and 1970s are still coveted by collectors, whilst her later work points a powerful brush at injustice. She seduces with form and color yet conveys incisive socio-political messages, camouflaged in irony and a touch of the absurd. Highly acclaimed for her ongoing series titled "The Walls of Gaza" (from 1992), she was the first Palestinian artist to

combine photography, printmaking, and mixed media, situating her firmly in the contemporary. Often called Palestine's first Pop artist, her paintings, sculptures, and prints grace private and institutional collections around the globe.

Laila Shawa was born in 1940 in Shuja'iyya, a vibrant, multicultural neighborhood east of Gaza city center, and enjoyed a privileged, if not idyllic childhood. "I remember a magical world beyond the high gate of my grandfather's compound. Narrow dusty alleyways, mud houses and old

mosques; Sufi holy men, drumming, and Turkoman carpet weavers. Most of all, I remember colors: pinks and blues, reds and greens, as the freshly dyed wool strands were stretched along the street running all the way from the train station to the market," the artist reminisced in a recent interview.

At the age of six, as was customary in the Shawa family, she was sent to boarding school in Cairo and commuted by rail in the company of siblings and cousins. Vacations were spent at home, on the beach, or with maternal relatives in Lebanon. Laila was eight years old when the 1948 war for Palestine found Gaza reduced to a third of its territory, cut off from its hinterland and flooded with refugees. Making art eventually became a way to understand and comment on the never-ending Palestinian catastrophe. A way to keep sane.

Laila Shawa was formally introduced to art at the Leonardo da Vinci School in Egypt's capital in 1957, and in 1958 was accepted to the University of Rome's Academy of Fine Arts. She augmented her training with summer courses at Oskar Kokoschka's legendary School of Seeing in Salzburg. Kokoschka founded his school along humanist principles in the aftermath of World War II, promoting the importance of sensory experiences in the exploration of the world and the self through creative process. These principles guide her practice still.

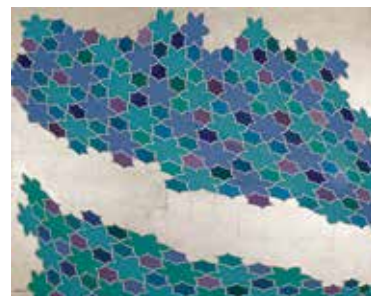
Despite acceptance to the Royal College of Art in London, her parents insisted that their daughter return to Gaza in 1964. She took a job supervising arts and crafts education for UNWRA whilst re-orientating her eye working with the documentary photographer Hrant Nakashian. Four months before the 1967 war, Laila moved to Beirut and set up her first professional studio. She found a job at a bookshop in Hamra where she was put in charge of the art and architecture section. Trained exclusively in the Western tradition,



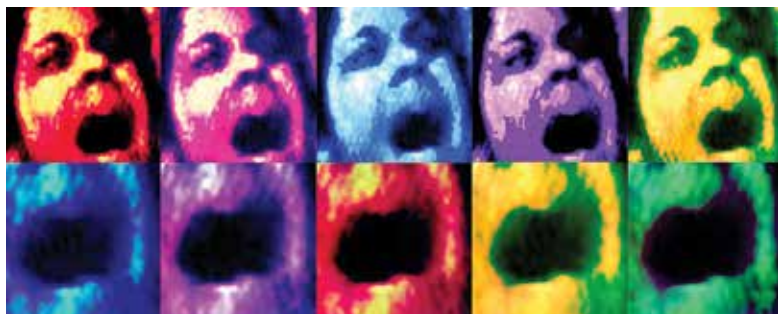
Gaza Sky, 2010.
Digital and mixed medium on canvas.
Size: 100 x 160 cm.



Children of War, Children of Peace, 1996.
Silk screen on canvas (two parts). 235 x 200 cm
Edition of 3. British Museum and private collection.



Sarab Sky/Sea 2008.
Acrylic and silver leaf on canvas, 100 x 125 cm.



Scream, Video Still, Digital print on canvas, 2010. Size: 100 x 250 cm.



The Impossible Dream, 1988.
Acrylic on canvas, 76 x 102 cm.
Collection of The Jordan National Gallery.

she began to investigate for the first time Islamic architecture, Byzantine icons, and Persian miniatures. In 1970, she held her first solo exhibition at Le Vendome Hotel and sold out. This initiated a highly productive period and a solidification of her art practice.

Shawa's burgeoning career was brought to an abrupt end with the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war in 1975 and, consequently, she returned home again. She was asked to collaborate on the planning and building of the Rashad Shawa Cultural Centre, her father's final gift to the people of Gaza. And while the difficulties of completing a major building project in Gaza under Occupation interrupted her progress as an artist, they focused her political consciousness.

In 1987, Shawa returned to art making with extraordinary ferocity. She set up a studio in London and was asked to participate in Rose Issa's seminal Arab



Against the Wall (from The Walls of Gaza III), 2009.
Mixed media on canvas, 100 x 150 cm. Edition of 3.



Target (from The Walls of Gaza I), 1992.
Silk screen on canvas, 100 x 150 cm. Edition of 3.
Jordan National Gallery Shoman Foundation and private collection.

Women Artists in the UK exhibition in August of the same year. She has not stopped since. However, the critical creative who returned to the art world at the beginning of the first Intifada was no longer a painter of fantasies.

In Gaza, she took to the streets and photographed her environment anew. The changing graffiti on the wall; the disproportionate reprisals by the Israeli military against stone throwers; the rise of political Islam, and the growth of superstitious beliefs. The re-emergence of the *hijab* engendered the *Women and the Veil* series, including ostensibly humorous paintings such as the *Impossible Dream* (1988), now in the collection of the Jordan National Gallery, and the *Hands of Fatima* (1989) in the British Museum. These were followed by *Women and Magic* and the iconic *Walls of Gaza*; both series commenced in 1992 and continue still. The growing escalation of violence against Gaza is mirrored by

ever more saturated colors, stronger graphic elements, and easily approachable yet multilayered iconography.

Since the *Sarab* series (2008), where she proposes Islamic geometric design as a primary visual identifier of Islamic popular culture, she has been called a Pop artist, and, although this is only partially applicable to an artist who moves with such ease between media and ideas, many recent works fit well into this category. The replicated face of a female suicide bomber contorted in agony (2010) also draws attention to the culpability of the global media in perpetuating the Palestinian tragedy; *Gaza Sky* from the same year depicts cartoon-like compositions of deadly drones designed as wallpaper for the children of Gaza, whilst *Fashionista Terrorista* (2010) sports the *kaffiyeh* as an absurd fashion statement; and a bare-arsed army of Handalas is lined up *Against the Wall* (2009) awaiting execution.

Shawa's newest series titled *Shujayya '14* (2016) commemorates the intense bombardment two years ago of her childhood neighborhood. An aerial view of the brutalized streets drenched in angry red paint; plastic doll babies imperfectly swaddled in gauze, the cloth that gained its name from the ancient city, and cut strands of wool mourn loss and appeal for restitution. "I am motivated by anger! But I hide my anger behind color and irony because I need people to understand the reality and absurdity of the human condition."

Dr. Christa Paula is an author and freelance art historian.



Shujayya 14, 2016.
Gauze, plastic, wool, and acrylic on canvas, 100 x 100 cm.

Target Wall of Gaza I, 1992.
Silk Screen on canvas
100 x 150 cm
Edition of 3
Jordan National Gallery Shoman Foundation and private collection.

