

# HALA OF FAME

Sur La Terre gets captivated by Bahraini artist Hala Al Khalifa. In a retrospective of her life and work, including a recent exhibition in Qatar's Al Markhiya Gallery, and an exclusive interview, we learn more about what makes this incredible local artist tick.

>>> Three misaligned red brushstrokes drip menacingly in thin air against an indiscernible backdrop of fading metallic purples and a sunset of soft pinks. In the middle ground, there rests a lone chair that is not entirely "all there," shifting in its own seat as if unable to decide whether it is finally given solid form or, conversely, dissolving from existence. A barely perceptible Arabic script scrawls itself in a delirium of free verse madness across any available space, subtly implying that indeed the writing is on the wall, but perhaps nobody is there to see it. Welcome to the fragmented headspace in the land of forgetting. Welcome to the world of Hala Al Khalifa.

Despite the deep gravitas of her body of work, Hala Al Khalifa is a cheery individual with a million-dollar smile and a vivacious personality, both of which immediately put you at ease and irresistibly invites you to like her. It is a contradiction in terms, then, that her work is so grippingly haunting, begging the question of where this talented local artist originated, as well as the motivations that drive her. Born in London and raised in the Kingdom of Bahrain, Hala's initial inspiration came from a very diverse mix of styles. She attributes her early art appreciation to the many pieces from a variety of Arab and Western artists that hung

in her childhood home. Driven to pursue this innate passion in art both internally and by her family, to whom she admits she “owes a lot,” Hala began painting at the tender age of ten, when her gift was given an outlet and instruction by a family friend, who just happened to be an accomplished Spanish artist. After high school, Hala moved to America, obtaining a Bachelor’s degree with a joint programme between Tufts University and the School of the Museum of Fine Arts (SMFA) in Boston, Massachusetts. She then returned to the place of her birth to attend Slade School of Fine Arts in London, where she received her MFA.

After graduating in 2002, Hala has been a whirlwind of uncompromising artistry and vigorous production. Of course, that’s the way it has always been. Since 1992, she has participated in multiple group shows and has been invited to showcase her work to almost as many solo exhibitions in places like Bahrain, Egypt and Tunisia. One of her latest shows, entitled *Windows of Separation*, was even shown at Fiumano Fine Art in London’s trendy West End. Over the years, her growing experience and confidence has allowed her to evolve a style that is at the same time somber and arousing. More than anything, it is one that is difficult to define in words.

In her new show at Al Markhiya Gallery, a quiet, hunkered-down refuge in the bustling cultural centre that heaves daily in Qatar’s Souk Waqif, Hala has launched a brand new temporary show called *Fragments of Memory*. In it, she showcases her strengths, manipulating and disturbing the still-life physical structure and static colour of chairs. In fact, much of her work uses the humble chair at its center, and while this may sound odd in print, it is truly something to behold in practice. The very fabric

of both the chair and reality unravel in dripping strands that seem to cry themselves down the canvas in loss-filled tears of sorrow, twisting as they do in sprains and slashes of bright colour. Hala herself admits that the focus in these paintings is not the chairs at all, but instead the absence of a subject entirely. With this interpretation considered, the subject becomes an invisible elephant in the room; you cannot see it, but it is impossible not to feel its tauntingly gaping nonexistence.

*Fragments* is not simply about chairs, however, as Hala also shows her somewhat newer penchant for painting figures. Faceless and nigh-formless, these figures offer you only a glimpse of their existence, never looking you directly in the eye and mostly snubbing you over a hastily turned shoulder. The effect of withdrawal succeeds, not in shunning the viewer, but instead seducing him or her to end the frustrating silence by engaging its subjects further. The name for the show is well chosen, as it all comes together in ambiguous incompleteness that resounds in a hazily fractured sense of withering memory and weathered emotion. In a way, Hala’s technique brings to mind what might happen if the impressionist paintings of Claude Monet or Mary Cassat were drowned in oil and brought to boil.

Hala Al Khalifa presents a conundrum, but a beautiful one. She is modest, kind and self deprecating as an artist, yet her art itself is cutting and acute in a way that confounds the relationship between creator and creation. In every respect, she is a clear talent in a region now prospering with a deluge of artistry. Qatar, where she currently works and lives with her family, as well as the entire Gulf region should proud to have her here. ●

## Interview with Hala Al Khalifa

We know you often use abstraction and a wide range of colour in your work - used alternatively in sparing doses to define, or liberally to lighten or even deconstruct. Your work on figures and objects is similarly diverse in its treatment of dysmorphic angularity, alternating between heavy, misaligned strokes and barely perceptible sketches. You've employed these to great effect in harrowing emotive responses such as in your Separation exhibition. In your own words, how would you describe your style and from what human connection (or lack thereof) do you draw the most inspiration?

The figures are really, really important to me. They represent a lot, I think because certain figures, like family members, play such a strong role in my life. In this life, there are so many people and so many faces. Of course, it's not only figures. In my latest group of work (*Fragments of Memory*, on show at Al Markhiya gallery), there are a couple of paintings of chairs. These chairs represent the absence of the figure. They're big, bold and half-completed, but the subject of the painting is actually missing. I enjoy showing that absence. That has a lot to do with my paintings being what I would call "heavy" on me. They have a lot of sadness, grief and separation, and I think these chairs are powerful in my heart because they are empty and unstable. They are my hallmark. In my work and in my life, there's always this sense of an incomplete puzzle. I'm always looking for the missing piece. In my daily struggle as a mother, as an artist and as a working woman, I'm not seeking perfection, but I'm looking for a sense of completion, not that I think I will ever finish or find what it is I'm looking for. That's part of why I call this show *Fragments of Memory*, painting bits of what I remember because I want to close this particular chapter in life. At the same time, it keeps me going. The subject matter is heavy, but when a painting is finished, it is intensely satisfying.



◀ MY SMALL CIRCLE BY HALA AL KHALIFA ▶



◀ HALA AL KHALIFA ▶

**We have noticed that in many of your works, including *Words on Skin* and *After a Storm*, you use lightly-etched Arabic verse to fill in spaces. While many of the themes can be seen as literally painting an Arab culture picture themselves, is this a conscious effort to make your work more identifiable as "Arab"? How much of your work is influenced by your heritage and in what way is it influenced?**

I am an Arab Muslim woman artist, first and foremost, and let me just say that the Arabic language in literature and poetry and as a visual is very important to me. Now, I'm not a calligrapher or a poet, but representing a word or sentence in art? That is important to who I am and what I do. I don't go into a blank canvas and think that this painting will have Arabic verse on it and this one will not. Those paintings you mentioned were "asking" to have writing on them. Of course Arabic is part of my language and heritage and my mind thinks in Arabic first, so that affects me a lot as well.

**Would you say you're more influenced by the culture you were raised in and in which you had your first experience with art, or by the Western culture in which you studied academically?**

Well, both. The childhood that I have come from and the house I grew up in was filled with contemporary Arab art. I grew up with paintings that were done by art pioneers who were Iraqi, Syrian and Bahraini. I also have a mother who has a huge appreciation for this type of art. If you grow up with these big names all around you, it will influence you as an artist. As a child and then a student, I loved and studied classical Arab cultural scenery like the desert and dhows, but I told my instructor that I didn't just want to do those things, I wanted to paint women and fashion. She let me try those things, so that's a part of me as well. Then I went to study in America and it was a totally new thing. It was my first time in university and I was blown away by the talent that surrounded me and the differences between the other students and me. That first year was a struggle, especially because everyone was so confident and different. It was an eye-opener, and it made me a sponge for other things. I had a strong base from my mother, but art school gave me something else entirely, and it's still an ongoing learning process.

**You are originally from Bahrain. What does it mean to be a modern artist in today's Middle East art scene? What are the benefits of creating here and now, and what are some of the challenges?**

I didn't choose to be a modern Arab female artist. It just happened! [laughs] But as for the scene, I think there is a lot of support at the moment from exhibitions, galleries and fairs. There are some challenges, but overall the arts scene in the Gulf is blossoming. Everything has opened up in this region, everyone is more aware and there seems to be a greater understanding about art. There are more galleries opening and the scene is expanding; it's amazing! Before, people would struggle to go to art school and they would struggle to become artists. A lot of people in the Gulf would be artists with another job on the side, but I think that might be changing now.

The one thing I think we lack in this area is a proper art school. I know that Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) is in Qatar now, but I think that's more of a design approach. We need to give the young generation of artists the support they need, and in order to do that, we need an art school. I'm pretty lucky because of the support I receive from my family, but there are others that maybe lack that kind of help. It's the galleries' role to look into what's going on and support everyone from the big names to the new generation of artists. Al Markhiya gallery, for example, provides their 40 Minus programme, which is fantastic because they are putting a spotlight on young Qatari artists and young Arab artists who want, and need, exposure to get established. Having that kind of support is great, and we need more of it. These prominent schools of fine art with strong teaching methods have been in Iraq and Syria for ages and it would be great to have them here in the Gulf. There are things like the Jameel Prize at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, which are really good because it brings young, contemporary Muslim artists together under the umbrella of Islamic culture and makes something new and cutting edge with great exposure. Having a prize would be another great avenue to raise awareness and exposure to the art scene here in the Middle East.

◀ THE ANXIETY OF THE PLACE BY HALA AL-KHALIFA ▶

For me personally, sometimes people look at me, seeing the way I dress in the traditional style, and see that I paint things like pregnancies, nudes and torsos, but I don't feel any judgements. I'm comfortable in my skin and I know who I am, so I cannot be labelled or judged. I'm allowed to do whatever I want. There is no limit.

**Where do you see Modern Arab Art going into the future? Do you think it has grown into a viable international entity of the arts and do you envisage yourself as a part of a geo-artistic movement?**

I think so, yes. It puts contemporary Arab art on the map and there is now this growing exposure, especially with interest from auction houses like Christie's and Sotheby's. More and more, these organisations are coming and offering huge opportunities to the well-established artists in the area, to be known abroad and to sell. Where do I fit in that? Well, I always have this fear of being categorised. Will Hala Al-Khalifa change something in the art movement? I don't know! It's as simple as this: I am painting from my heart, because I want to and because there is this urge and passion for it. I cannot answer if I have a place in the movement, because it is up to whomever comes and interacts with the pieces to decide that. I would be really happy to know only that my work is reaching out to people. Right now, I'm just being honest to my art and to myself. ●