

Q&A with Laila Shawa

Why did you decide to participate in the Fertile Crescent Project?

The concept of the exhibition seemed very interesting, and that is completely why—and, of course, showing my recent work in the States is also good for me because I show mostly in Europe. I'm very much in Europe and the rest of the world but not so much in the United States.

How did the concept for your work Refraction of Paradise originate?

It actually started when I was commissioned to do an exhibition in Dubai. It was very complicated in the sense that I had never been to Dubai. I was advised by somebody to do something that reflects the place, and when I went to Dubai, what hit me was the absence of any cultural identity . . . I [decided to adopt] Islamic geometry, which is one of the three components of Islamic art which has pretty much been ignored. I thought it would reflect the distortion of identity.

What do you hope people gain by viewing this work?

I try sometimes to draw peoples' attention to certain issues. Sometimes with my work people understand my message [and sometimes they don't], but I think this is the case with art because art is very subjective.

Why and how did you decide to become an artist?

Pure accident—I started by going to university and doing political science basically because I was following in the footsteps of my family, but I really wasn't all that happy with university, and a friend of the family asked me what I was doing. He was an Italian architect and he suggested why didn't I think of studying art—and it hadn't even occurred to me that I could do that.

Is there anything in particular that inspires your work?

My inspiration is my direct experiences. It's usually what I see, what's around me, so it is contemporary. I prefer to do the present, now, with issues that are very relevant . . . I need something that really gets me. I don't just have sudden inspirations; my artwork is a very creative process, a mixture of intellectual processes, observations, and I think it out very thoroughly. At the end of the day it has to make sense to me.