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An Interview with Laila Muraywid

By Nour Asalia

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Laila Muraywid, "la jupe rouge", mixed media on hand made paper, 25 x 73 cm, 2023

Born in Damascus, Laila Muraywid (1956) graduated from the Faculty of Fine Arts at Damascus University and went on to study at the École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs (ENSAD) in Paris. Working across sculpture, jewellery, photography and painting, Muraywid explores themes of the world, freedom and the body. Her practice articulates themes of female marginality, fragility, desire, objectification and violence, and the titles of her works carry narrative undertones, shaping the way they are perceived. In 2014, she collaborated with poet Adonis, and in 2015, she worked with poets Etel Adnan and Venus Khoury on limited-edition art and poetry collections – each comprising just 10 copies.[1]

Laila, could you share how your family environment shaped your personal development and how your surroundings influenced your visual memory? In a previous conversation, you mentioned memories of your grandfather's home, and its furniture and colourful walls. How did these experiences shape your artistic sensibility?

Childhood is the key to understanding oneself and the world, a bridge to the external world through place, light, scents, and colors. One of my earliest questions, at the age of seven, was about the colours of the walls in my grandfather's

house. Sun-drenched yellow, deep reddish-brown, and dark green coexisted in a single room, and stirred my curiosity. The materials were dense, rough and unembellished, standing on their own. Such details prompted me to question the possibility of different perspectives on matter and colour.

I believe each of us has a unique way of seeing and understanding the world. In other words, what we perceive is never quite the same as what others see. My earliest experiences were shaped by directly witnessing events rather than being part of. That was enough to form my understanding of beauty and make it my way of engaging with the external world.

You studied at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Damascus in 1975-79. Your graduation project featured an element that was unusual for that time: the nude male body alongside the female one. Did this choice stem from philosophical concepts, or was it a challenge to prevailing social norms?

I consider my journey into art to have begun not in the faculty but in the meat market, which I discovered after returning from Lebanon in 1975 following the outbreak of the civil war: that was the start of my attempt to understand the body, freedom, violence, pain and brutality in all its animal and human forms. I went to the market every day to observe and to learn with all my senses (the smell was overpowering). In fact, I was unconsciously searching for that thin space

between life and death. I tried to draw what remained of the slaughtered animals: meat displayed in shop windows, hanging flesh, bloodied bodies. It was an attempt to get closer to something that terrified me. The raw, exposed flesh was unsettling, especially seeing how the blood flowed from these carcasses as if it were something mundane. Those scenes became an endless source of questions.

The body is always the starting point in my work. It determines whether we belong to this world or remain outsiders. It is also the site of magic, secrets and beauty. This area (the body) is so delicate yet powerful, charged with violence and obsession. To engage with it, I had to employ contrasts, where the beautiful coexists with the brutal, the frightening with the secure, the static with the fluid.

You moved to France and joined the École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs in Paris in 1981. What motivated you to pursue your high studies there?

After graduating, I moved to France on a French scholarship to continue my studies. Travel is a rich experience for discovering the world and continuing a dialogue with a world shaped by fear, pain, desire, tension, solitude, transformation and possibility.

Tell us about your first solo exhibition and which exhibition you consider a turning point in your career.

I held my first exhibition in Syria in 1979, a joint show with artist Ziad Dalloul. It was a profound experience. My work explored society's mechanisms through the concept of freedom, examining its relationship to identity within a society

that differentiates between female and male freedom. Female freedom was confined to a cyclical realm shaped by the body, appearance and behaviour, all defined by biological functions. Male freedom, by contrast, commanded the external world. Through this experience, I developed my understanding of how women's freedom is tied to their bodies, which generate life, carry it, and connect it to the earth and nature. The association with nature, deeply ingrained in perceptions of womanhood, has historically been used to confine and control women's bodies.



Laila Muraywid, "Leçon de piano", mixed media on paper, 41 x 48 cm, 1979

You're a multidisciplinary artist, working across sculpture, photography and painting. In all these, whenever you depict the human body, there is a clear reference to its fragility and mortality (even as you highlight its aesthetic qualities). You tend to strip the body of idealised purity, often through a raw, almost violent revelation of parts rather than the whole. This also extends to your depiction of naked children and dolls, which could be seen as a return to a primal human state. Could you talk about the meaning of nudity in your work?

Engaging with the body means engaging with what is accepted or rejected, permitted or forbidden. To explore this theme, I sought out unconventional materials, constructing a personal grammar that reflects my perspective on the body in its broadest sense: dismantling and reassembling it, bridging the material with the immaterial, and finding the way that allows for seeing it differently through various mediums: photography, painting and sculpture. When an artist reconstructs the world, or fragments of it, the outside world becomes an extension of their inner world. My work revolves around tension, pressure, and the confrontation between the body and its boundaries, the area between order and chaos. This tension creates a state of flux and constant transformation. In my sculptural work, the grammar I have developed serves as a reminder that humanity is a witness rather than the centre of the universe.

During the war in Syria, sculpture took on a larger presence in my work, but only in a silent and painful way – like shadows of things and feelings that needed to be recorded and given tangible weight. It was an invocation of what had vanished and disappeared.

In other words, I sought to illuminate pain, to give it dimension and form. But later came the desire to move beyond the shadows, to surrender once more to nothingness. I believe that nature always has the final word, and that humanity never triumphs over death. War erases all languages, exposing life in all its rawness, strength and fragility. As pains accumulate, words lose their credibility and meaning. Some bear witness, some narrate, some judge. The artist, however, attempts to grasp the aching depths of the chaos of existence.

The world is a place we don't own, yet our bodies belong to the world. Art is an attempt to reclaim the body. This reclamation is a kind of trickery; a way to come to terms with life. The body is the vessel of sensation, pain, and pleasure – something language cannot possibly capture. It is also a political subject, entangled with desire and constantly negotiating social norms around what is forbidden and permitted. What interests me about the body is its connection to knowledge as a means of understanding the world; the body that precedes culture rather than the body that is a cultural construct. Knowledge is also tied to sexuality, as Sigmund Freud and Georges Bataille suggest. It is a way of grasping life and death. There is an enduring relationship between knowledge, power and sex. As a woman, I seek to understand the physical dimensions of contemporary womanhood.

Although we are witnessing anthropological and social shifts in some societies, the foundational theory of gender difference is still rooted in Aristotelianism. This notion questions whether women have souls, portrays them as lacking capability, and justifies inequality and submission to men. Roman customs regarding family, marriage, and women persist in the collective unconscious of societies well into the 21st century. When I articulate the body, and specifically the female body, I am articulating fear, anger, love, sex, and shame – all that is hidden and forbidden. My work is an attempt to reconcile what we perceive as dichotomies and understand their impact on human relationships: reason and emotion, the public and the private, the body and the soul. On the other hand, many philosophical traditions have tied the female body to nature, reducing women to nothing more than reproductive vessels. This has deeply shaped their oppression, restricting capacities as human beings.

For me, no experience should become a closed box or a narcissistic mirror. Instead, it should be transformed into materials, elements, and tools for confronting both life and death. In this transformation lies the act of creation, which allows us to come to terms with the mystery of existence.



Laila Muraywid, "The waiting", mixed technique, 2014-2019

In your work, dolls and jewelry carry meanings that depart entirely from their conventional symbolism. What is your feminist perspective on these traditionally feminine elements, from girlhood then womanhood?

I approached sculpture through the language of jewellery. According to some legends, precious stones are born in the head, connecting light to the hidden energy buried deep within the earth. Jewellery belongs to a world tied to authority, possession, power, control and belonging. It has indeed been linked to women and the realm of femininity.

If jewelry is light cast directly upon the body, the doll serves as an intermediary, bridging the individual with the world, deities, and ancestors. It embodies desires and fears, forms part of art history and connects to the collective unconscious.

The doll, with all its symbolic weight, has been used to emphasize dominant beauty standards. Walter Benjamin suggests that the world of dolls revolves around love and play, embodying a dual role of life and death. Across civilisations, dolls have often been shaped in the image of women, reinforcing the roles society seeks to impose on them (as if telling young girls, this is how you should see yourself, as a doll, as an object, and you must accept being treated as you treat your toys). The doll exists in that narrow space between childhood and adulthood. It reflects the part of us that remains tied to the world of objects.

You don't believe in artificial boundaries and see human beings – especially artists – as belonging to the world. This is evident in your work, where no place or element binds the spectators to a fixed identity. Could you share your perspective on belonging?

My work is driven by an urgent, almost quixotic desire to expand the spirit of the world through pain, tension, violence, anger, desire and anxiety. For me, art is an attempt to connect human beings to the realm of emotions and to bind the self to others. To reach the truth and depth of things, one must strip away their outer layers and go beyond the surface. My work raises questions about how we communicate with others and it challenges relationships built on difference. It seeks to foster connections that expand perspectives and transform hardships into a unifying force rather than a divisive one. Art is an act of life. The lived experience and the artistic experience cannot be separated. Art is a full breakthrough into ordinary reality, revealing the world from all angles at once with equal depth and intensity.

In other words, art is an attempt to grasp the flow of the universe, like a river in constant motion, and to understand humanity's place within this flow. The creative process itself isn't gentle or delicate; it is like birth: painful, violent, extraordinary and unstoppable.

Laila Muraywid recently exhibited work at two major shows in Paris: her solo exhibition at Galerie Jacques Leegenhoek, curated by Nadine Fattouh, and the group exhibition Arab Presences at the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris, co-curated by Morad Montazami, Odile Burlaux and Madeleine de Colnet. Her participation in the latter served as a testament to the power of her career. The works on display dated back to her first solo exhibition in Damascus in 1979. After more than 40 years in obscurity, they have resurfaced, reaffirming the vision she first expressed in her youth and her lasting exploration of the world through the body.

[1] L'Histoire qui se déchire sur le corps d'une femme, 2014, with Adonis.

Sea and Fog, 2015, with Etel Adnan.

Le Livre des suppliques, 2015, with Vénus Khoury-Ghata.

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