

LET'S GET PHYSICAL

the body in art

In this section we explore the artistic potential of the human body and its physical properties, from the power of our hands to create and sculpt to the movement of our limbs in performance art. We also look at the social, political and symbolic aspects of the human form and its physicality, as expressed by artists in their quest to explain and understand what it means to be human.





ALYMAMAH RASHED

The Kuwaiti artist reveals how, when the spiritual becomes the physical and the body becomes one, new perspectives around concepts of identity and self-belief are laid bare.

Words by Jo Lawson-Tandred





Alymamah Rashed. *I Tasted Your Love Until You Didn't Exist Anymore (I Am Home)*. 2021. Detail. Oil on canvas. 149.9 x 299.7 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Tabari Artspace

The brightly coloured, lyrical works of Alymamah Rashed could almost be abstract were it not for their vaguely anthropomorphic forms. Caught up in tangles of vacant eyes and slinking, outstretched arms, it's not immediately obvious that these strange entities are images of the artist herself but, as she explains to me, "I am always trying to paint the body of my spirit and it seems to always surpass structure. It wants to curve, dance and caress itself with itself."

These fluid, elongated beings aren't self-portraits in the traditional sense, but represent what Rashed terms the "Muslima Cyborg", a combination of her physical self, her thobe (a robe for prayer) and her soul. The idea is analogous to a cyborg but with spiritual rather than mechanical elements.

The major turning point for Rashed in embracing this spirituality into her life and practice came during the second year of her MFA at the Parsons School of Design. The painting *Hikmat Al Eshraq* (2018), from this time, depicts the Kaaba within a blurred multitude of fleshy bodies "caressing it and absorbing it". It was inspired by the mass of worshippers that "push one another violently to touch the monument when it's supposed to rid you of your own ego and eagerness." In contemplating the Kaaba's

true purpose, Rashed had a profound revelation. "For the first time, I rid myself of any censorship that I had placed upon my ideas and thoughts," she explains. "I rid myself of the last thread of fear that I had from my childhood and felt an utter sense of liberation."

Born in 1994 in Kuwait City, Rashed was educated at a private school and recalls being a shy child who was bullied. "I felt like an outcast," she says. Although painful, the experience helped her to become a very focused student. "I kept creating because it was my escape. I remember drawing when I was four and getting so lost in the process that I didn't hear the teacher calling out my name."

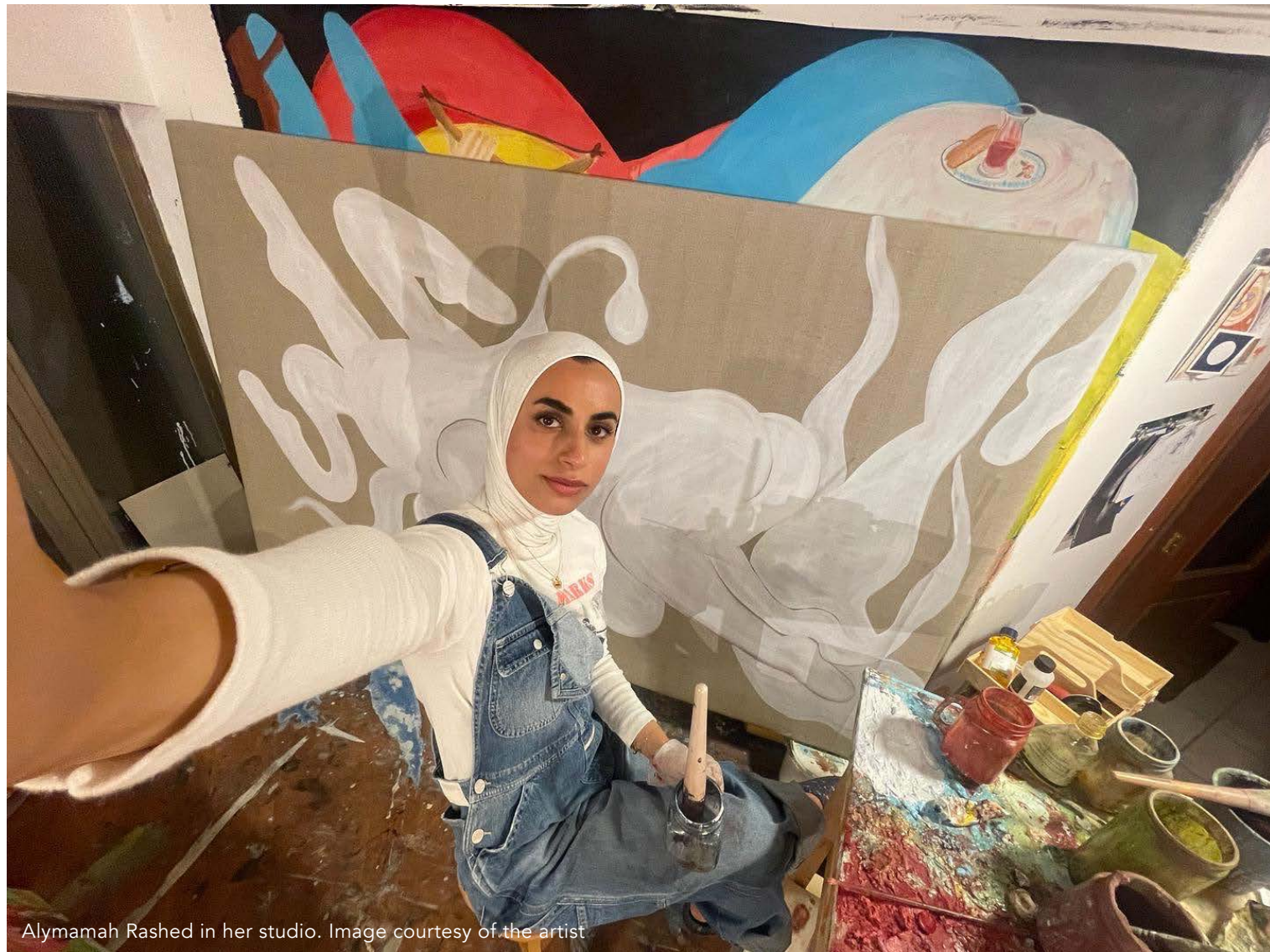
Her parents cultivated this interest, actively encouraging her to take up the art classes offered at her school, buying her supplies and even working with her. "My dad was a storyteller," she recalls. "He would come up with stories, narrate them with me, and then we would draw them together." Nonetheless, she was only able to envisage art as a possible career when the brother to whom she had long looked up left for Boston to study accounting. "This was when I knew that there was a world of possibility outside my



Alymamah Rashed. *Hikmat Al Eshraq/ The Philosophy of Illumination*. 2018. Oil on canvas. Image courtesy of the artist and Tabari Artspace



View of Alymamah Rashed's studio. Image courtesy of the artist



Alymamah Rashed in her studio. Image courtesy of the artist

immediate environment,” she says. She accepted the offer of a place at the School of Visual Arts in New York with a scholarship. “I didn’t do my research and hadn’t even seen the campus, but something in me told my timid, shy and fearful past self to go to New York City.”

The BFA exposed Rashed to a wealth of new artistic experiences and insights as she commenced a new life of wandering around museums, making friends, meeting mentors and going on studio visits. “I have always had a sense of fear within me due to my early school years and I knew my true self was censored and perhaps insecure,” she says. “Being in New York, I was forced to strip this fear naked, confront it and demolish it, even though I had thought I wasn’t capable of doing that.”

Reading up on Western philosophy also helped broaden her mind and Rashed was particularly taken by Alan Watts, Gilles Deleuze and Guy Debord. Eventually she would seek out texts that helped “redefine what Islam meant to me and reclaim it”, including those by Al Ghazali, Ibn Arabi and Thich Nhat Hanh. The latter taught Rashed “the act of simply seeing within my

everyday”, a skill that was reinforced by a professor who “would ask us to contemplate objects around us in our daily commutes to school and question whether they are art or not. This subconsciously rewired my gaze.” It’s something she still practises today, as it “allows you to redefine what you see beyond its utility or perception. That discipline bled into how I perceived my own narrative and how I perceive my body, my womanhood and my spirit. This is what I try to explore with every work I create.”

Upon graduating, Rashed still hadn’t decided if she wanted to be an artist or gallerist so took a job at a blue-chip gallery in Chelsea and a start-up gallery on the Lower East Side. The jobs left her “borderline depressed”, thanks to poor pay and “extremely hostile work environments due to racist comments, gaslighting and rudeness.” Understandably, she jumped at the chance to intern in the prints and drawings department at the Museum of Modern Art. There she archived the Fluxus collection, transcribed Adrian Piper’s works and translated Ibraheem El-Salahi’s prison notebook from Arabic to English. “I read about his longing for home and God and I suddenly purged the tension I



Alymamah Rashed.
Your Sorrows Held My Petals (I Reflected My Love On You). 2021.
Watercolour on paper
36.8 x 45.7 cm. Image
courtesy of the artist

had built up for months and kept crying at my desk,” she recalls. “I felt understood, for the first time after an extremely difficult six months.” She soon realised that she was an artist.

The revelation came just in time to meet the application deadlines for grad school, during which she developed her concept of the Muslima Cyborg. The new approach was to “connect my work with all of me,” she explains. “I am unable to separate my life from my work; it’s all a singular circle that connects itself through itself.”

I Tasted Your Love Until You Didn’t Exist Anymore (I Am Home) (2021) reflects on a relationship with a past lover and on “submerging from that space through saving my own self from the abandonment and trauma in order to create rebirth.” A narrative painting, it tells a story from left to right but is striking also for its miscellaneous mix of visual references, including a design borrowed from a Persian rug used for prayer in the artist’s studio, the tulip bouquets that she would gift herself every week, tiles she found in an old mud house in Kuwait City, a starfish from a friend and a butterfly she saw on a work break.

A glimpse into her process can be seen on Rashed’s Instagram, which she treats like “a thought catalogue”. In one post from 24 June 2022, she holds up a peach next to the version on canvas and in another, from 17 February this year, she shows the inspiration behind a drawing of a bright fuchsia pink flower. Botany has been a special interest for Rashed recently, and a series of new works on this theme will be exhibited by Tabari Artspace at Abu Dhabi Art in November.

Since finishing her MFA in 2019, Rashed has returned to Kuwait City where she feels she has more time to pause and contemplate her work. “The process is meditative and it fills me with utter joy and satisfaction,” she affirms. In the watercolour *I Leak Pools of My Light To Birth My Palm Tree That Rises Into Your Sky* (2022), featured in a campaign by the fashion retail platform Farfetch, bodies and flying doves emerge from layered pools of pigment. Throughout our conversation, Rashed’s descriptions of her pictures share their mesmerising and melodic quality. As she tells me, “the colours caress one another in order to replicate the bloom of a new spirit within.” ■