



• Artist Profiles

Meet the Artist: Afifa Aleiby

The distinguished Iraqi artist Afifa Aleiby has been painting since the 1980s, but it feels like it's only been during the past few years that her name has become gradually recognized in the regional art scene.

In 2021, she made her debut at the Art Dubai fair with a popular solo presentation of soulful portraits of female characters that got fair-goers talking. She considered it a significant moment in her career.

It was the Norwegian gallerist Kristin Hjellegjerde, who operates her eponymous gallery spaces in London and Berlin, that introduced her work to the Dubai public. Hjellegjerde first heard of Aleiby through the artist's son, sculptor Athar Jaber, and she was taken by what she saw.

"I just loved the way she portrays women. She says herself that she portrays women for both beauty and politics, in a way. She tells the stories that need to be told. You really feel the passion behind them," Hjellegjerde said in an interview.

Hjellegjerde has represented Aleiby since 2019, showcasing her work in a number of regional and international art events. "I think Afifa is one of the most important Iraqi female artists today. . . It's my duty to make sure that she's going to get some good museum shows in the future," said Hjellegjerde. On a more personal level, she added: "She's a heartwarming person. I feel really privileged to be on this journey with her."

It seems that Aleiby, who has been based in the Netherlands for nearly three decades, was destined for a career in the arts. She was born in the southern Iraqi city of Basra in 1953 to a family that appreciated and encouraged art, which was rather unconventional in Iraqi society at the time.

"For some families, it was socially unacceptable for their children to study art," she told Arab News in 2021. "My family was interested in books, theater, cinema and music — I grew up in that environment. As the youngest child in my family, there were no barriers ahead of me. Whatever I desired, it became true."

After studying at the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad, where she was a student of renowned Iraqi artists Shakir Hassan Al-Said and Rafie Al-Nasseri, Aleiby travelled to the Soviet Union in 1974, where she studied at the Suikuv Institute in Moscow. Due to Iraq's unstable situation, where she couldn't go back, she became something of a globetrotter, living in Yemen and Italy.

Once describing its streets as "a museum in itself," Italy, especially the Renaissance capital of Florence, would have a particular impact on Aleiby's life and art. "She made a new life there, as a refugee in a way, but you were luckily in the most beautiful place," said Hjellegjerde. "She ended up going there and not having a community. I think art become her community,"

Aleiby's paintings are full of emotion, expressed in a melancholic and quiet manner. The characters are gentle, pensive, and sensual. Women are indeed at the heart of her canvases. "In the history of art, the most important element has been the woman. . . She gives life," she previously said. "There is a tenderness in the way a woman moves, sits, talks and uses her hands. These are all important factors for me and they enrich my painting."

Placing her characters in imaginative landscape settings (sometimes serene or dark), she developed her own pictorial language, so much so that "she has a strong identity. If you see any of her paintings, you know that immediately it's her," commented Hjellegjerde. "A lot of her work is very theatrical. It's like settings. She has the drapery, the storytelling, and masters the light and shadows. If you look at the women, you can see and feel the story they want to tell. . . Each painting could be a movie or a book."

While Aleiby is inspired by different elements of art history, there may also be hints of her personal life in her work. Hjellegjerde describes Aleiby as "a freedom fighter," who sometimes reflects on warfare and its devastating consequences – something the artist is familiar with. Hjellegjerde added: "There is sorrow for losing her country and not being able to go back. She's not been back for over 35 years or so. I think she thinks about her home country every single day." The recent death of Aleiby's second husband of twenty-years, Islamic history professor Pieter Sjoerd van Koningsveld, was another blow to the artist. "She's used to loss in life. . . Painting is a way of survival," said Hjellegjerde.

She likes to take her time with painting, reportedly working on two to three images simultaneously in her open apartment that accommodates a studio. Aleiby's paintings have found homes in the Farjam Foundation, the Barjeel Art Foundation, among other private collections. Her work has also been exhibited in Berlin, Cairo, Kuwait City, and The Hague.

According to Hjellegjerde, a lot of Aleiby's works are being purchased by international art collectors, especially (and perhaps, surprisingly) those from the United States. "The world is more open than we think. I think people just want really good art. That's what art is so good for: We all learn more about each other," she said.

As for Aleiby's future plans, a selection of new paintings are in the pipeline for the opening of Hjellegjerde's new art space in West Palm Beach, Florida in October 2023. "Every painting she presents is exciting," remarked Hjellegjerde, "because you don't know what's going to come next."

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Sunset, 2017, Majid & Lynn Jafar Private Collection