



Leila Nseir, Untitled , 1986, Oil pastel on Wood, 93 x 70 cm, Image Courtesy of Barjeel Art Foundation

Istoria: A Retrospective Reimagining Middle Eastern Feminism with Leila Nseir

18 September | 12 November 2024

Ayyam Gallery is pleased to present a retrospective exhibition with the works of Syrian artist, Leila Nseir. This retrospective, an homage to Leila following her passing, honors Leila's legacy and celebrates her contributions to art and feminism. We extend our deepest gratitude to The Samawi Collection and the Barjeel Foundation for their generous support in loaning their impactful pieces. We would also like to thank Ahmad Kasha and everyone who put this exhibition together.

About the exhibition

“Being a woman is my core, but femininity is not.” – Leila Nseir

Historically, women have been both subjects and creators of art, from The Venus of Willendorf to Nefertiti to Tamara De Lempicka and beyond. Reverence for female physicality alongside admiration of qualities traditionally associated with women—courage, victory, and grace—profoundly broadened and challenged prevailing narratives and norms.

Born in the core of the Middle East, Leila Nseir’s art is a vibrant testament to the rich tapestry of her culture. Her art was deeply rooted in humanist concerns and feminist thought, addressing themes of conflict, inequality, and poverty. Nseir’s career was impacted by gender persecution and patriarchal attitudes, both within her close-knit and broader communities. Nseir’s intentional reinterpretation of historical forms demonstrates a distinctive fusion of intimacy, complexity, and human suffering.

A true revolutionary, Nseir persisted through adversity. On account of social interpretations and expectations, she first let go of sculpture as it was deemed too masculine a medium. She then embarked on a long journey in painting and drawing, but faced a decline in health, due to the development of oil paint poisoning; this motivated Leila’s experimental approach. Transitioning from oils to acrylics, graphite, pastels, and eventually developing a unique monotype woodcut print technique. She continued to explore and push artistic boundaries, indicative of her resolve.

Her embrace of *Istoria* and the use of figure composition to convey a narrative is unwavering. Nseir’s later pieces delve into the complexities of diaspora, migration, and the interplay between tradition and modernity, by being a voice that amplified women’s stories. Nseir depicted females as a mirror, reflecting Syria and its embodiment of strength, complexity, and intricacy. *Istoria* is more than an exhibition; it is a dialogue between past and present, tradition and transformation. Through her evocative use of color, form, and narrative, Leila invites us to reflect on the enduring power of heritage and the ongoing quest for self-expression. Her twisted and contorted figures express both the intimacy of personal experience and the complexity of cultural identity. Nseir’s female subjects transcend traditional genre and narrative boundaries and question gender conventions and the status of women in Arab society. Nseir’s decision to leave her artworks untitled and undated stemmed from her belief that their themes were omnipresent, universal, and timeless, thus inviting a greater field of interpretation. Influenced by ancient art forms, including Mesopotamian and Egyptian, her oeuvre thus captures the essence of a cultural flux.

Thank you for joining us in celebrating the artistry and impact of Leila, whose work continues to inspire and challenge perceptions.

About the artist

Pioneering modernist Leila Nseir is known for her superb draftsmanship in addition to her reinterpretation of historical forms as a means of depicting reality. Initially finding artistic inspiration in the region’s ancient civilisations, Nseir often employed mythology as an allegory for life, and later worked in realism, expressionism, surrealism, and even abstraction, all while experimenting with various media and techniques. Today, her paintings have traces of these different stages of her oeuvre, indicating the journey of a seasoned artist who has frequently embarked on new creative paths.

Born in Latakia, Syria in 1941, Nseir graduated from the Faculty of Fine Arts in Cairo in 1963, and later taught at the University of Damascus. She began her artistic career during the height of Syrian modernism and developed a focus akin to the work of her friend the late Louay Kayyali, whose paintings depict the fragile nature of the human condition and the experiences of the disenfranchised. Although exploring similar themes, Nseir’s female subjects added the question of gender norms and the status of women in Arab society. Nseir’s bold attempt to broaden the social narrative of Syrian art quickly established her importance, serving as inspiration to aspiring women artists.

Possessing an extensive exhibition history, Nseir has participated in artistic events worldwide. A leading painter of her generation, she was honoured by the Syrian Ministry of Culture for her contributions to art in both 1968 and 1999. Nseir's work can be found in the National Museum of Damascus and numerous private collections throughout the Middle East, Asia, Europe, and North America. She has spent most of her life in her native Syria.

About Ayyam Gallery

Founded in 2006, Ayyam Gallery is a leading arts organization that manages the careers of diverse established and emerging artists. Blue-chip art space in Dubai, a series of collaborative projects in the United States, Europe, Africa and Asia, and a multinational non-profit arts program have furthered the gallery's mandate of expanding the parameters of international art. With its widely respected multilingual publishing division and a custodianship program that manages the estates of pioneering artists, Ayyam Gallery has also contributed to recent efforts that document underrepresented facets of global art history.

Exhibition Facts

Exhibitions Dates: 18 September | 12 November 2024

Regular Hours: Monday - Friday: 10 am - 7 pm

Saturday: 12 pm - 6 pm

Location: Ayyam Gallery, B11, Alserkal Avenue, Street 8, Al Quoz 1, Dubai

T: (04) 323 6242

Email: aryana@ayyamgallery.com

Website: www.ayyamgallery.com