



Top 10 Female Artists From The Middle East |  
By Mai Ardia | The Culture Trip | February 2015

## Top 10 Female Artists From The Middle East

The [Middle Eastern](#) art scene, historically patriarchal in nature, boasts some of the most influential female artists recognized on the global stage. Contributing to the evolving cultural landscape in the region, these artists work in a diverse range of media and engage with personal, as well as local and universal issues. Here are 10 of the best female artists from the Middle East.



*Lamia Joreige, Views of Museum Square 1, 2013, black and white photogram, 12.7 x 17.8 cm | Courtesy the artist and Taymour Grahne Gallery, New York*

### Lamia Joreige | Lebanon

Artist and filmmaker [Lamia Joreige](#) makes use of archival documents and elements of fiction to reflect on history and the possibilities of its narration, and considers the relationship between individual stories and collective memory. Joreige engages with Lebanese history and explores the ways in which the Lebanese war and its aftermath are represented and recounted, particularly in Beirut—the center of her practice. Her film *Here and Perhaps Elsewhere* (2003) represents Joreige’s personal map of Beirut as she encounters different people on her journey along the invisible Green Line—the site of military checkpoints and the scene of many kidnappings that divided Beirut between East and West. In her single channel video *Objects of War No.3* (2006), she examines how war and trauma come to be embodied in material objects, while in her photographic series *Night and Days* (2007) she records the passage of time and the transformations induced by war, through recordings and notes she took during the war in the summer of 2006. Essentially, Joreige’s oeuvre centers around the recording of time, its traces, its effects on us, the

process of memory and the impossibility of accessing a complete narrative of the past. In her latest ongoing project *Underwriting Beirut*, Joreige looks at historically and personally significant sites within the city. Like a palimpsest, the work incorporates multiple layers of time and existence, linking the traces that record the locations' histories and the fiction that reinvents them.



Mona Hatoum, *Web*, 2006, crystal balls and metal wire, 515 x 2100 x 1325 cm. Installation view at Galleria Continua / San Gimignano, 2006. Photo by Ela Bialkowska | Courtesy the artist and Galleria Continua San Gimignano / Beijing / Les Moulins

#### Mona Hatoum | Lebanon/Palestine

Of Palestinian origins, [Mona Hatoum](#) was born in Lebanon and has been based in the United Kingdom since 1975. Hatoum has found inspiration in her experience of displacement by conflict. Movement, travel, discovering new cultures, people and lands are at the core of her practice, which addresses the 'rootlessness' of a nomadic life. In the 1980s, her first works—videos and performances—focused on her own body as a means of making political statements about dislocation and migration, such as in *Measures of Distance*. In the 1990s, she moved towards the creation of large-scale site-specific installations and objects. Hatoum's oeuvre incorporates a variety of media, from metal, light and glass to bodily material such as hair and everyday objects.

Engaging with diverse issues, ranging from politics and gender to domesticity and our relationship to space, her works elicit multiple interpretations and emotions, depending on the physical and mental interaction of the viewer with the artwork. Her imposing sculptures and installations destabilize the perception of reality and highlight the conflictual relationships between desire and revulsion, fear and fascination, such as *Slicer* (1999), *Paravent* (2008), and *Daybed* (2008)— everyday utensils and furniture blown up out of proportion, becoming uncanny and threatening. Other works— such as *The Light at the End* (1989), *Current Disturbance* (1996), *Cage-à-deux* (2002), and *Impenetrable* (2009)— extend the exploration of such anxiety, by posing questions about the nature of shared and social space, and investigating notions of freedom and captivity.



*Shirin Neshat, Turbulent, 1998, shot of video installation at Espoo Museum of Modern Art, 2006 | © Sami Oinonen/Flickr*

#### Shirin Neshat | Iran

Through film, video and photography, [Shirin Neshat](#) explores notions of femininity and gender politics in Iran, as well as memory, religion and violence. Her poetic imagery and narratives are accompanied by the stark visual contrast between opposites—male and female, black and white, light and dark. Born and raised in Iran, Neshat went to the United States to pursue higher education in 1974 and, due to the Islamic Revolution, she was unable to return to Iran until the early 1990s, where she started producing her first artworks. These were photographs in which she addressed notions of femininity in relation to Islamic fundamentalism and militancy in Iran, such as *The Unveiling* (1993) and *The Women of Allah* series (1993-1997). The latter consisted of portraits of women overlaid with handwritten Persian calligraphy.

Departing from overt political content or critique, her first video installations—the trilogy comprising *Turbulent* (1998), *Rapture* (1999), and *Fervor* (2000)—used two screens to portray abstract oppositions of gender and social status, individual and group. While the videos hinted at the restrictions of Islamic law against women, they also opened up to multiple readings, highlighting universal conditions. She now continues to engage with central themes of religion, violence, madness and gender in a variety of work, including the feature film *Women Without Men* (2009, Silver Lion at 66th Venice Film Festival) to her photographic series *Zarin* (2005) and the film *Faezeh* (2008). In her more recent series, *The Book of Kings* (2012) and *Our House is on Fire* (2013), Neshat responds to political events throughout the Arab world, capturing the emotions of people she met after the Arab Spring.



### Emily Jacir | Palestine

Working in a variety of media including film, photography, installation, performance, video, writing and sound, [Emily Jacir](#) combines the roles of artist, activist and poet to [create poignant works of art that are both personal and deeply political](#). Jacir is an advocate of Palestinian rights and her dedication to the plight of her own people lies at the center of her practice. *Memorial to 418 Palestinian Villages which were Destroyed, Depopulated and Occupied by Israel in 1948* (2001), the result of a three-month community based project in her studio, is a refugee tent onto which 140 people from all walks of life and places—Palestinians, Israelis and others—sewed the names of villages destroyed. In the guerrilla piece *Sexy Semite* (2000-2002), Jacir invited 60 Palestinians to contribute ads to *The Village Voice* Personals Section seeking romantic liaisons with Jewish readers, thereby proposing to marry in order to be able to return to Palestine using the Israeli Law of Return.

Her award-winning multimedia installation *Material for a film* (2005-)—which won the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale in 2007—looks at the 1972 assassination of Palestinian writer Wael Zuaiter, killed near his home in Rome by Israeli Mossad agents. In *ex libris* (2010-2012), Jacir documents the 30,000 books looted from Palestinian homes, libraries, and institutions by Israeli authorities, during the mass-displacement of Palestinians for the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. Jacir photographed the books with her cellphone over two years of visits at the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem, where the books are kept and catalogued as A.P.—Abandoned Property.



*Shadia and Raja Alem, The Black Arch, 2011, installation view at the Venice Biennale 2011. Collection of Basma Al- Souliman | Courtesy the artists*

#### Shadia and Raja Alem | Saudi Arabia

The collaborative sisters duo of [Shadia and Raja Alem](#) base their work on their spiritual bonding to focus on “[translation and interpretation between different genres and notions of culture in an era of glocalisation.](#)” Shadia, the visual artist, creates individual works in painting and photography, such as [Kabat Allah Al-ulya’ \(Supreme Ka’ba of God\)](#) (2012), as well as collaborative installations with Raja, the award-winning writer. In *Negative No More* (2004), the artists’ shrouded images are projected onto a golden curtain, made of negatives woven together from family photographs taken throughout their lives. Deeply autobiographical, the installation stands as a description of a woman and artist in Arab society, casting off negative assumptions and projections. In 2011, they represented Saudi Arabia in its first official pavilion at the Venice Biennale, with [The Black Arch](#)—an exploration of the physical and psychological presence and significance of ‘black’, a pivotal aspect in the artists’ lives. From the black silhouettes of Saudi women, the black covering of the Ka’aba and the black stone—a key feature of the installation which is said to have enhanced knowledge—black is everywhere in Mecca.

The installation delves into the illumination and ignorance evoked by the color black, as well as speaks about a journey, a transition, and the connection between Mecca and Venice, and the two cities’ similarities and inspirational powers. The dialogue between East and West is also reflected in the projection of images on the floor and the mix of sounds including pigeons, seagulls and voices of pilgrims and gondolieri.



Manal Al Dowayan, *Esmi (My Name) 2*, 2012, installation view | Courtesy the artist

#### Manal Al Dowayan | Saudi Arabia

A photographer and installation artist, [Manal Al Dowayan](#) creates artworks that are a direct reflection of her life, and the ups and downs that exist. Her main focus is the Saudi women's experience, but [she also engages with more personal themes](#), such as in *Landscapes of the Mind* and *And We Had No Shared Dreams*. Starting from black-and-white photography, she layers a variety of media, including silkscreen prints, collage, spray paint, and neon and LED lights. King Abdulla Al Saud famous speech—calling upon all Saudis to come together in building the country and stressing on the importance of women participation—inspired her photographic series *I AM* (2007), portraying self-assertive, charismatic professional women in traditional dress and jewellery wearing elements, such as safety helmets and a stethoscope, that alluded to traditional 'male jobs'. In 2011, Al Dowayan contributed a work to the Venice Biennale with *Suspended Together*, an installation of 200 fiberglass doves hanging from the ceiling. The dove, a symbol that has appeared in her previous works, symbolises Saudi women, and in this particular case, imprinted with travel permission documents, it addresses the situation of Saudi women and their need for permission by a guardian when travelling. Al Dowayan asked leading Saudi women such as designers, scientists, educators and artists, to contribute permission documents for her installation. *Esmi – My Name* is an installation resulting from a participatory project that addressed the unique social attitudes towards women's names in Saudi society.



Shirazeh Houshiary, *Commission for St Martin-in-the-Fields, London, 2008*, collaboration with Pip Horne on the new East Window | ©fmpgoh/Flickr

#### Shirazeh Houshiary | Iran

[Shirazeh Houshiary](#) came to prominence in the 1980s as a sculptor. Her practice now encompasses painting, installation, film, and architectural projects—such as the *Commission for St Martin-in-the-Fields, London* (2008). At the core of her practice lies a fascination with the tension between the process of disintegration and erosion of the universe, and our efforts to try and stabilize it. This element transpires in her work through leitmotifs like veils, mists and membranes—visualizing different modes of perception. Houshiary draws inspiration from a wide range of sources, including Sufism, 18th century poetry, physics and Renaissance painting. The transformation of materials is pivotal in her work, destabilizing reality. Houshiary's interest in physically embodying spiritual concepts, such as 'breath', led her to shift from her biomorphic sculptural forms increasingly towards the two-dimensional. *Veil* (1999) is part of a series of 'self-portraits', based on the idea that the word is the manifestation of breath. The veil—*chador*—is represented as a black square acrylic ground onto which she inscribed Arabic calligraphy using a pencil and applying various degrees of pressure. *Touch* (1999) and *Presence* (2006–07) are also monochromatic works with Arabic calligraphy on white or black acrylic background, rendered unintelligible through intricate patterns in graphite and pigment. In her first video project, *Breath* (2003), Houshiary visualized breath through a four-screen digital animation with each monitor featuring an expanding and contrasting mist as cultural and religious invocations are recited. The words are a formal manifestation of breath, the misting of the screens its visual expression. A new *Breath* was presented as an installation at the Venice Biennale in 2013.



*Mandana Moghaddam, Chelgis II, 2005, installation view at Venice Biennale 2005 | Courtesy the artist*

#### Mandana Moghaddam | Iran

Granted asylum in Sweden following the execution of her father during the Islamic Revolution, [Mandana Moghaddam](#) draws from her experience of dislocation to create works that attempt to bridge cultural boundaries and inspire intercultural dialogue. Engaging with themes of alienation, communication and gender, she also memorializes aspects of Iranian life. Moghaddam's installations express a tension between the male and the female spheres, as evident in her *Chelgis* series of works (2005-2007), in which materials such as hair and concrete or guns are juxtaposed. *Chelgis II* (2005), presented at the 51st Venice Biennale, features a block of cement suspended from the ceiling by four braids of hair. The braids with a red ribbon—a symbol of feminine liveliness, glimmer and sensitivity—tolerate and support the heavy cement, a symbol of the absolute, traditional masculinity as well as a manifestation of monotony and coldness. In *Chelgis IV*, braids of hair again support a large structure made of mirrors. Moghaddam's work expresses the plight of women in the Arabic world, symbolized by the hair: oppression and forced ideals. But those same hair, cut off, reveal the inner strength of women and their liberation. In a search for reconciliation, dialogue and hope, Moghaddam's *The Well* (2008) connects different cities around the world through a well installation, which sends audio feeds to another well in another country. By 2009, she had installed wells in New Delhi, Bangalore, Gothenburg and Seoul. *Sara's Paradise* (2009) speaks of massacre and memorialization, providing a commemoration of and a reflection on the 800,000 young lives claimed by the Iran-Iraq war.





*Shadi Ghadirian, Untitled from White Square series, 2009, photography | Courtesy the artist*

#### Shadi Ghadirian | Iran

Through photography, [Shadi Ghadirian](#) explores themes of conflict between tradition and modernity, and the position of women in a male-dominated society. Her work does not only offer an identification with women in the Arab world, but also points to universal conditions that provide a link between the East and the West. Ghadirian came to public attention in 2001 with her series [Like Everyday \(2000-20001\)](#) and [Qajar \(1998-1999\)](#). The latter is a series of sepia photographs in Qajar dynasty (1794-1925) period style: women clad in traditional garments of the era pose with modern objects, such as a radio, a ghetto-blaster, a telephone or a Hoover. The images humorously comment on the contemporary Iranian female life experience, as if existing outside of time. [Like Everyday](#) features portraits of women entirely covered by patterned veils, with everyday utensils and domestic tools covering their faces. The images ironically point to the one-dimensional interpretation of the housewife, by reducing their identities to household objects. Ghadirian also makes reference to the ever-present shadow of war in everyday life, as evident in her series [My Press Photo](#) (1999), [Nil Nil](#) (2008) and [White Square](#) (2009). While her photo collages [My Press Photo](#) combine images taken from press-agency catalogues with old portraits of Iranian military men, [Nil Nil](#) sees objects of war—a hand grenade, a bloody bayonet, a gas mask—penetrating the domestic sphere in absurd ways, such as in a fruit bowl, as a place-setting or in a kid's toys bag. [White Square](#) extracts these tools of death from any context or background, and presents them as if in a series of product photographs of gift items. A grenade, a military helmet, an ammunition belt, a gas mask, military combat boots and other objects are set against a white backdrop, complete with a red satin ribbon tied around them.

#### Boushra Almutawakel | Yemen

[Boushra Almutawakel](#) was inspired by Egyptian writer Nawal al Saadawi's view that [women who wore the hijab or niqab were the same as women who wore makeup in the sense that they all hid their true identities](#). After September 11, the West either demonized or romanticized Muslims, and she decided to express her own experience of being a woman in the Arab world, through the representation of the veil or [hijab](#). Middle Eastern women have been portrayed either as oppressed, or as mysterious and exotic behind the veil. Almutawakel wants to challenge these stereotypes and the common view that all women wearing a veil are suppressed, ignorant and helpless. With her representation of veiled women, the artist explores the many faces and facets of the veil based on her own experience: the convenience, freedom, strength, power, liberation, limitations, danger, humor, irony, variety, cultural, social, and religious aspects, as well as the beauty, mystery, and protection. Almutawakel is interested in how women are

viewed, portrayed and objectified, and in themes of motherhood, feminine power, couples, and women's contribution to change. Part of her Hijab Series, *Mother, Daughter, Doll* features a mother, a daughter and her doll in a sequence of increasingly veiled portraits. *Fulla* captures the Muslim version of the Barbie doll against typical landscapes and traditional architecture, veiled and at times in company of her male companion or a female friend. Both series explore the ways in which women in Yemen have progressively covered their bodies with various styles of veil in recent years. In another powerful image, Almutawakel portrays an uncovered woman sitting next to a man wearing an integral veil. Ultimately, the artist aims to [provoke discussions about social norms and question the ways people and cultures judge one another](#).

*By Mai Ardia*