

Verica Savic

American University of the Middle East, Kuwait City, State of Kuwait

Amira Behbehani: Art Knitting between Iran and Kuwait

Artist story of a self-taught, Amira Behbehani who has exhibited across the globe, goes by her childhood spent between Kuwait and Iran, often in Foucault's *out of places*, where she found inspiration for her diverse art. She grew up surrounded by art – her uncle being Jawad Boushahri, a renowned Kuwaiti sculptor and founder of the second art gallery opened in Kuwait in the 1960s. Although exposed to art since she was a child, she started to paint in 2001. Before embarking on her own, she worked in advertising company as well as in fine art reproduction printing. But in the endless journey, couldn't stay away from art.

Behbehani uses her art as a way to shed light on important social issues, such as peace, women rights, and inequality. In 2011, she became a Worldwide Peace Market ambassador and helped Kuwait to become the first Arab country to celebrate Peace Day. In 2015, Behbehani participated in the *Abolish 153* exhibition, a women's group working to remove Article 153, which makes 'honor killings' misdemeanor, from Kuwait's penal code. It won the Arab Women Award. She established the art department *LOYAC* in 2017, doing so without stopping painting and art production. Due to Covid restrictions she has not been able to exhibit, but is expected to do so in March this year with works created during lockdown, titled *Seeking Refuge*.

Her first solo exhibition, *Teacher and the Apprentice*, (Kuwaiti gallery Dar Al-Funoon, 2004) marks where her artistic journey took off. *A Fifteen Year Journey: The Art of Behbehani*, was highly impactful one exhibition (CAP Kuwait, 2016). She has become the most interviewed and exhibited artist in this part of the world, having many exhibitions (Bahrain, France, Iran, Turkey, Lebanon, Hungary, Brazil) over the last 10 years. Her audience is wide, and she is listening to their expectations and how they perceive work, trying to be their voice. Behbehani's retrospective on her 15-year career touches on three themes: firstly, the story of her childhood memories and the people that inspired her along the way; secondly, reflections on the master artists referenced in her art; and lastly, pieces wildly different in technique and presentation but cohesive as a collection. The mentioned exhibition was the summary of her work and artistic process, beginning with the presentation of *The Exhibit* (tent fabric canvas, 380cm per 150cm), a massive work painted with few colors on a raw canvas with six women portrayed in white *abayas*¹ sitting and walking in her imaginary

¹ The long floating robes worn in a number of Middle Eastern countries.

Matisse's courtyard in Morocco. In the background, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Francis Bacon and Vincent Van Gogh, represented by details of their famous paintings (*French Window* by Matisse, *Two Girls reading* by Picasso, *The Pope* by Bacon and *The Sunflowers* by Van Gogh), symbolically observing the women. For once “the European Masters” become the viewers. I brought the past into the future and the East into the West”, Behbehani explained. As in her other paintings, black and white are predominant, but dashes of blue and light green, as an homage to Matisse's Moroccan period, also appear in *The Exhibit*. This art story started when Behbehani took pictures of herself wearing an *abaya* in various compositions. When she printed it, she outlined the silhouettes on the canvas, gave different bodies and facial expressions to all the women, except one perched on a stool. “I realized that none of the women are looking back at the artists. The masters are looking at them. That's when I decided that these women are *The Exhibit*.”

Getting closer to women's problems, sharing awareness of many silenced voices, trying to help and protect, Behbehani unified art with fashion. Using *lines* and *abayas* became recurrent subject of her work. A series called *Lines*, women drawn with very simple and sinuous lines, was inspired by her late grandmother and family gatherings. In these paintings, black and white *lines* meet to create featureless women in loose fabrics, depicted as sitting, standing, sleeping, stretching or relaxing. Behbehani does not use the lines only to draw veiled ladies. “The line is a form of art, a form of drawing,” she said. “When you put lines together, you create shapes, and to me the figures are shapes.”

Authenticity and passion are the intrinsic qualities of Behbehani's work. In the bustling commercial Kuwaiti area of Salmiya, in her atelier she is constantly pushing boundaries between modernity and tradition. She recently opened *Nasj Boutique* (2018), incorporating and entwining her designs and drawings into fashionable and customized garments, entirely handmade with the help of three tailors and two embroiders. Bags and clothes are embellished with colored beads, metal or plastic pieces, vintage fabrics and parts of old canvases. Sometimes she paints or applies block-print techniques directly on the pieces as well. Each of her artwears is unique and precious, studied in detail, deeply inspired by the history of design and fashion.

Behbehani is an artist who keeps changing. “That's basically my personality,” she said. “I don't like repetition, I can't do only one task; while watching I have my pencil, paint or scissors cutting from newspapers.” She mixes different styles and introduces foreign elements in her creations without exaggeration. “I look for simplicity with a twist and refined, sharp cuts. I collect clothes, but it's not only something I use to cover myself, rather it's a piece of art,” she said. “The way designers combine materials gives an essence of their soul. My fashion icons are Yohji Yamamoto, Junya Watanabe, Emanuel Ungaro, Paco Rabanne, for one very simple reason: they are not fashion creators only, but artistic.” Her own designs are neither too Arabic nor too western. Her art's subject matter isn't always obvious; she often prefers not to put labels on her work but to let their audience interpret it, aware of living into plural truths. Using different materials, techniques and media, she prefers to create art that makes the viewer think, art that is open to interpretation. She is also a complete artist

willing to experiment with new disciplines and techniques, not afraid of going out and pushing through limits, experimenting recently with digital art. “Through my art I express myself, especially when it comes to causes that need society’s attention. I want people to be aware of the cause and learn that art and creativity is a way of expression. I started my career when I stopped being afraid of what tomorrow holds. Stop being afraid... The fear factor is blocking our way, especially for women” she said.

Behbehani’s art, promotes that through painting, drawing and designing it is possible to get a relief, as well as theories related to the human mind, thoughts and behaviors. “The universe is something that I like to think of the philosophy of: Why are we here? What are we doing? Why do we act in such a way? I never plan a lot in advance, letting things and people flow.”

Behbehani is currently working on shoes’ project where design, drawings and photography are combined. The shoes as her new subject matter are a symbol of steps, differing from one another according to the path taken, not because of beauty or elegance. “We choose our steps and become responsible for our choice,” she said. “It could be white or black, right, or wrong, no one knows until we will be taken by first step.”

Mixing different materials and concepts, Behbehani is sending the message that we are all connected, and that she hopes to achieve more unity. I can confirm it as I personally met her once I was hosted at local TV station. The following day, while exploring her art, to my big surprise I saw a figurine from the Neolithic Balkan Vinca culture in her recent collage artwork. I couldn’t resist to call and ask about... That how this portfolio came out. Serbia – Kuwait and much more, there is connection, just rethink!

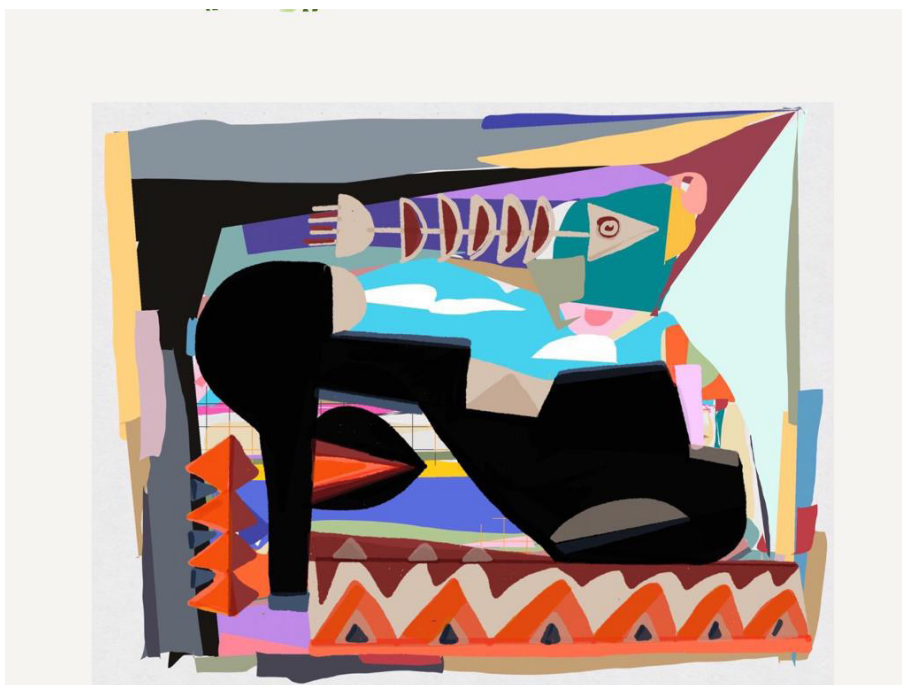
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Amira Behbehani, *The Exhibit, GAP*, 2015, 380”x150”, acrylic



Amira Behbehani, *Lines series*, CAP, 2015, 40'' x 60'', ink on paper



Amira Behbehani, *Shoe*, never exposed yet, 2020, 20'' x 30'', recent digital work



Amira Behbehani, *Pele*, 2021, 40" x 45", collage on paper