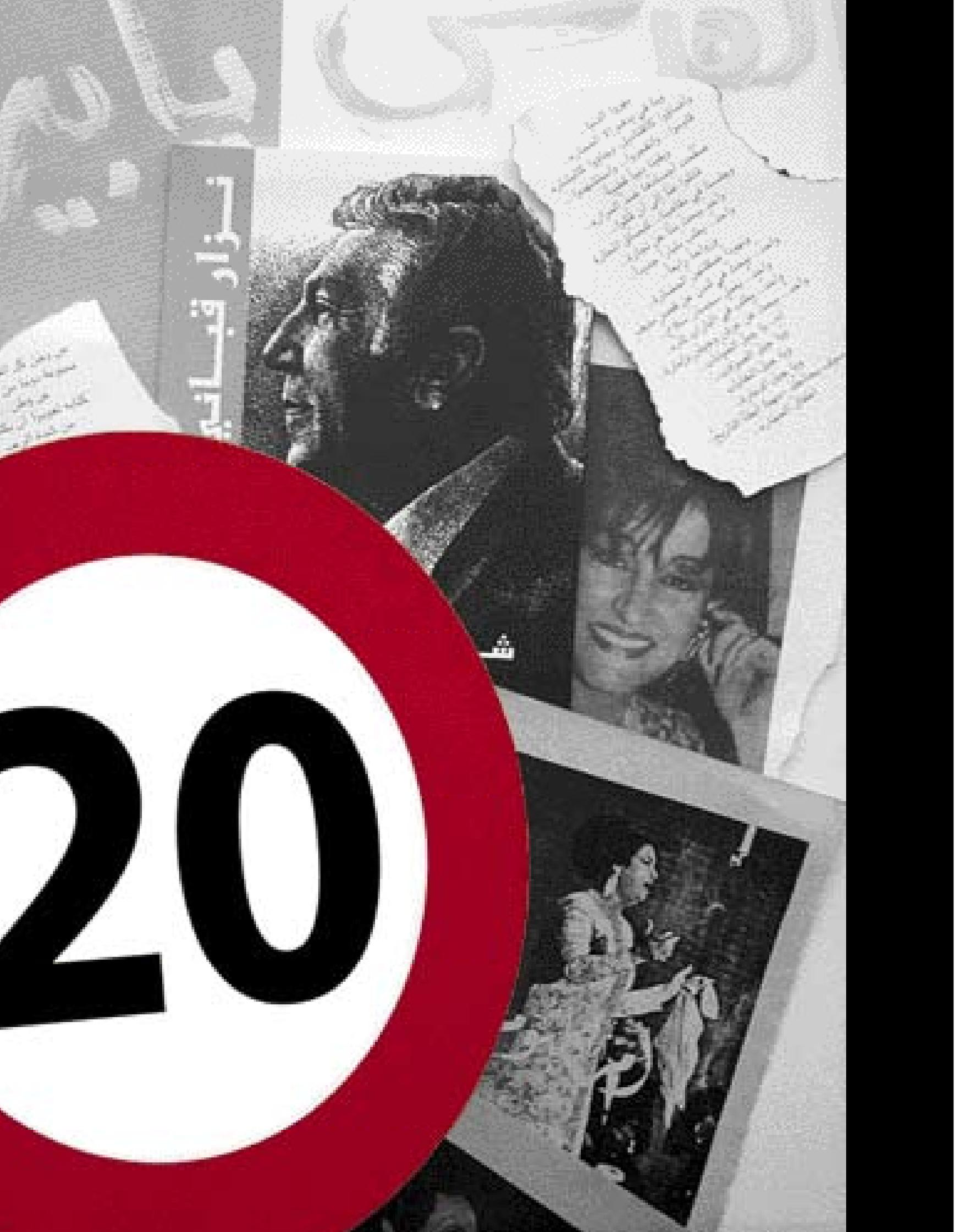


creative duality

nadine kanso

Above and beyond Nadine Kanso's fierce Lebanese patriotism is a staunch advocacy for a proud and unified Arab identity, which she brings to the fore through her moving photographs. From her own perceptions of the Arab world to those of the West, the photographer and jewellery designer casts a critical eye over what it means to be Arab. Like a cherished memory or unforgettable melody, Kanso's photographs have the power to stir dormant or forgotten feelings. Her jewellery does just the same: by wearing Arabic letters and phrases, a reminder of Arab identity is evoked.





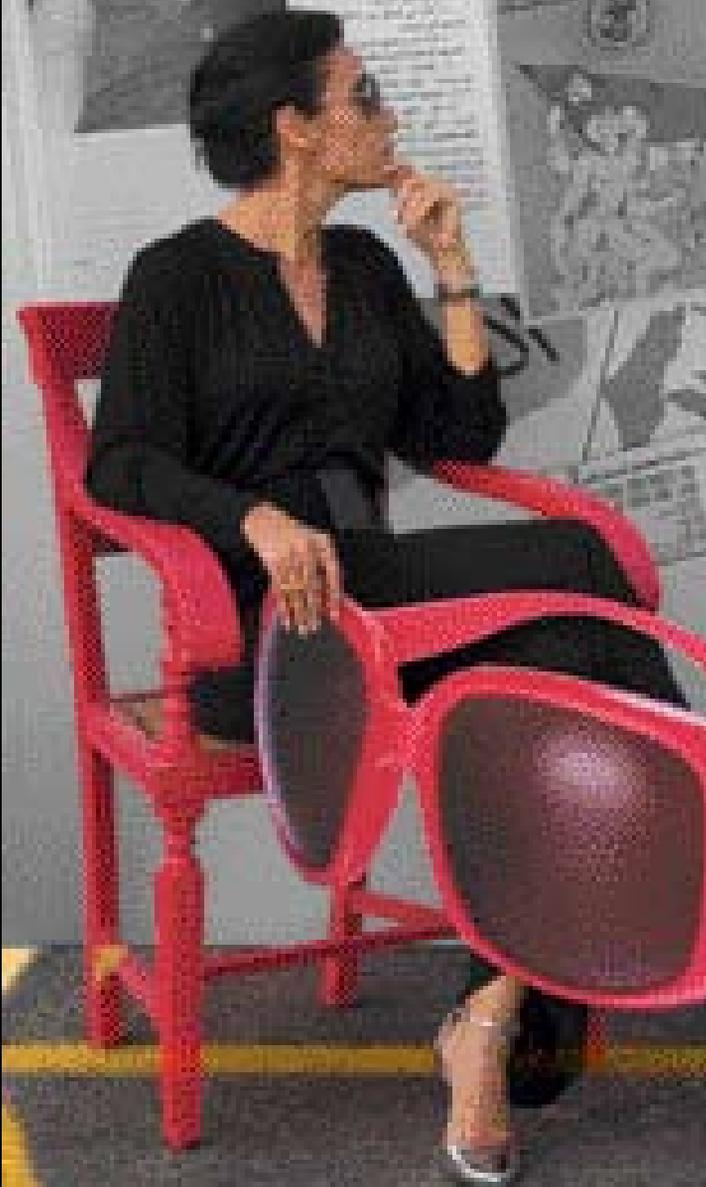
نزار قباني

20

الجمعة الشعبية
لتحرير فلسطين

حق العودة
النكبة

المستقيم
مناضل
من اجل
الوطن



TEXT BY MYRNA AYAD
PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Nadine Kanso stood at the steps of London's V&A museum in August of 2006 and heaved a great big sigh. It was the first time the Lebanese-born designer would enter one of Britain's most famous institutions as a participating artist and not as a member of the general public. Those steps proved to be the grounding metaphor and proverbial ladder in kicking off her artistic career. Armed with her prized notebook replete with personal observations, thoughts, sketches and random remarks made by friends and family members, the chic mother of two strode into the V&A charged with the very emotions that propelled her chosen theme: Arab identity. "I remember stopping to think, 'I am in London and I am exhibiting at the V&A'. It was overwhelming, no doubt about it but I felt confident. I am an Arab and I am proud to be an Arab and my theme focused on something very dear to my heart."

In collaboration with the V&A and London-based Ziyarat – an organisation that aims to promote, develop and encourage artistic practice related to the Arab world - 'Arabise Me' features a diversity of Arab contemporary music, dance performances, visual art and entertainment. Kanso's photographic body of work, '*Meen Ana*' (Who I Am) was a response to the frustration and aggravation that she had felt towards the misperception of the Arab world by Westerners and their media vehicles. Those same emotions proved to be defining denominators in her subsequent exhibition, '*Rewind Ya Zaman*' (Rewind Oh Past), in April this year at Dubai's B21 Progressive Art Gallery; except the exasperation was not at the West, but rather, at the East

and its contemporary denizens whose lack of appreciation, pride and knowledge about their "backgrounds and the icons of Arab nationalism were a great disappointment."

Indeed, the fervour that drives Kanso's artistic labour is rooted in her background. With a politician for a father and having grown up in a country divided by religious sectarianism and plagued by fighting and war for decades, one could assume that Kanso's political convictions are staunchly partial. Au contraire, or as Kanso puts it, "I know there has

been a lot of disappointment in the wars and the leaders we have had and will have, but why should we forget about our rich culture and civilisations?"

Keef Ballashit (How She Started)

After graduating from the Lebanese American University in 1991 with degrees in Advertising Design and Communication Arts, Kanso established 'Ashkal', a company that focused on

corporate identity. She then got married and moved to Montreal, Canada and worked with fashion powerhouse Mondri; a break she deems was essentially one and the same, believing that, "fashion is also art." Prague was next and with it, motherhood, before finally settling in Dubai in 2000. "I carried my love for photography wherever I went," says Kanso who had taken photography courses at university. "I never took myself seriously in terms of photography and always thought I needed a theme to it, a sort of structure." Kanso put passion to practice by taking portraits of friends and family which led to commissions and jobs for product shots, among others. But it was her stint with Arab satellite channel, the Middle East

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photography & design

Broadcast Centre (MBC) that was the seemingly clandestine doorway for Kanso's entry into the art world. Features writer, TV and Radio Producer Leila Mroueh was brought in from London to work on MBC's 'The Investor' programme with Kanso. Mroueh was also curating the 'Arabise Me' exhibition and asked Kanso to participate, having seen her elaborately designed Dr Scholl clogs and funky T-shirts that Kanso had created and sold at popular Dubai boutique, Sauce. "Leila really encouraged me and I guess I work well with deadlines, especially since the whole concept of the exhibition was something I tremendously valued."

It was April and Kanso's deadline was June. While the months leading up to her artistic kick-off were a frenzy of high pressure in terms of "bringing it all together and being cohesive and conceptual," Kanso managed to show her work to Isabel van den Eynde, Curator and Director of the B21 Progressive Art Gallery, who was so impressed she immediately signed Kanso on for an exhibition. "That was a double whammy for me!" laughs Kanso, whose V&A 'Meen Ana' exhibition was squeezed in between two of the gallery's upcoming shows.

Kanso's portfolio – a three-part series of photographs that mirrored her own reflections of the Arab world – was divided into portraits, media clippings and lifestyle images. For the portraits, Kanso intentionally chose subjects from various parts of the Arab world with the aim of covering most of what is contemporary Arabia. Each subject held a little banner which she had calligraphically inscribed with varying messages – '*Fikri Arabi*' (My thoughts are in Arabic) or '*Shakli Arabi*' (I look Arab) or '*Hkeeni Bil Arabi*' (Talk to me in Arabic). "The banners were meant to symbolise identity cards," says Kanso, who also used her two young sons in one portrait whose banner read, '*Mosta'wali Arabi*' (My future is Arab). "The subjects I chose are young and creative and they are also the future of this part of the world. They could be people from the US or England or France. It's a global world and part of my message was to show that we [Arabs] are a part of this world, so stop categorising us."

photography & design

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Kanso’s media clippings, on the other hand, were the sole black-and-white images within her collection. For months, she researched magazines, journals and newspapers that covered news stories with irony in their editorials or images. At the heart of this category was a political message: to highlight articles written by Westerners, criticising the West. One article Kanso stumbled upon included an image of US President George Bush clad in army gear entitled, ‘Dressed to Kill’. “The point was to show that the grass is not greener on the other side,” says Kanso, adding that, “the media continuously depicts us [Arabs] as the bad guys, when really the West has their own fair share of problems.” The third part of her exhibition – the lifestyle images – comprised random shots Kanso had taken in nightclubs, fashion shows and restaurants in Beirut and Dubai. “You’d think they were taken in Ibiza or London or New York,” underlines Kanso. An impressive 3000 people attended the ‘Arabise Me’ opening night, leaving Kanso overwhelmed, elated and rather befuddled. Buoyed by the exhibition’s success and her upcoming show at B21, Kanso knew that her artistic path was being paved. “I took myself seriously after ‘Arabise Me’,” she notes, “I had never, prior to then, considered myself an artist. I think I had been waiting for this but like every artist, I was always hard on myself.”

Al-Tari’ Al-Fanni (The Artistic Journey)

Her B21 show was a success, confirming a necessity for continuation. “My message had to further,” says Kanso who delved into thorough research on Arab nationalism. March of this year was a celebration of culture in Dubai with the annual Art Dubai fair and the Creek Art Fair, organised by the XVA Gallery. Kanso was invited to participate in the latter and in light of the recent political turbulence in Lebanon, chose to exhibit ‘*Fil Qalb*’ (In the Heart) – a body of images she had taken

of Beirut about 20 years ago. Essentially black-and-white but with a hint of colour, the series is juxtaposed against abstract images of the female form with Arabic verses taken from the poem, ‘*Ya Beirut Ya Sitt El-Donia*’ (Oh Beirut, Oh Woman of the World) by famed Syrian poet, Nizar Qabbani. Sentimental and emotive yet poignant, the images hark back at times past that while unstable, reflect a charm and resilience in Lebanon.

The following month, Kanso exhibited ‘*Rewind, Ya Zaman*’ at B21 – her ode to Arab nationalism contrasted with images of contemporary subjects partnered with their material pleasures. “A lot of people did not know who these icons of Arab nationalism were, which was one of my messages – that these symbols are unknown or forgotten. I wanted people to think about that,” says Kanso, whose intentional contrast of subjects from the past and present, proposed the obvious differences in “politics, ambitions, worlds and intellect.” In sync with that notion is a call for action. “I made people think,” says Kanso, “and perhaps by realising that one needs to go back and read about the past, one may become more involved in their own society and be proud of being Arab.” Intensely passionate and perhaps playing the role of a contemporary ambassador for Arab culture, one wonders where does this drive come from? “It’s the situation we are in,” says Kanso, “it’s in the unfairness in this world.”

Al-Fann Al-Akhar (The Other Art Form)

Undeniably, ‘Like a circle in a spiral/Like a wheel within a wheel’, Kanso’s foray into calligraphic jewellery design was “essentially derived,” from research on her ‘*Rewind Ya Zaman*’ exhibition. “I wanted to make my message more accessible to people since not everyone was going to buy one of my pictures. Jewellery is something everyone keeps and calligraphy is a huge part of the Arab culture.” Using single Arabic letters and





photography & design

phrases, Kanso has adapted the beauty of Arabic typography as fashionable, contemporary accessories that simultaneously serve as discreet reminders of Arab heritage. “Why not have your own initial in Arabic instead of Latin? Through my jewellery line ‘*Bil Arabi*’ (In Arabic), I am always reminding or educating people somehow,” she says.

What began as a personal want to do something with calligraphy became a full-blown business. Kanso created a ring for herself with the letter ‘*Noon*’ (N) and through increasing demands by friends for the same, realised she was onto something. Co-Founder and buyer for Dubai-based Sauce boutique encouraged Kanso and took on the UAE exclusivity of the ‘*Bil Arabi*’ line. Initially incorporating semi-precious stones, Kanso has recently begun using diamonds, “but nothing in the carat range!”

Beyond her impacting photography and her exquisite jewellery, Kanso maintains that her message may be an artistic one, but that culture begins in the home. “I know Arabs who don’t teach their children Arabic and that saddens me. You erase a language like that! If you don’t pass it onto your child, your child won’t pass it on either and you lose part of your identity that way.” Kanso understands all too well that a grand cooperative effort from members of the Arab world is essential. “Canvas magazine, you, me, our friends... We can change this,” she says. And with that, she heaves another great big sigh and says, “we’ll get there. Remember, we gave civilisation a great deal.”

Nadine Kanso is represented by B21 Progressive Art Gallery. For more information, visit www.b21gallery.com Kanso’s designs are available at Sauce boutiques in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, Dado’s in Doha, Selim Mouzannar in Beirut and Eye Candy in Muscat. She also holds private viewings for her jewellery in Kuwait City.

