

Art Dubai 2021: How women inspire Iraqi artist Afifa Aleiby

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DUBAI: As soon as we begin our virtual conversation, Afifa Aleiby’s evocative paintings — hanging on the wall behind her — become noticeable.



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“I’ve made my home a museum,” she told Arab News from the Netherlands.

The Iraqi artist was speaking ahead of her anticipated debut at the 2021 edition of Art Dubai with a solo presentation of her recent figurative works, often dominated by female forms, showcased by her representative, London-based Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery.



"Flute" (2012) by Afifa Aleiby. Supplied

Aleiby has lived outside of her home country for more than three decades, which is why participating, though not attending in person due to COVID-19 travel restrictions, in this prominent regional fair is a significant moment in her long career.

“It’s a new experience for me and it makes me happy,” she said. “In addition, Dubai is an international place and galleries from all around the world will gather at this meeting point.”

Born in the southern city of Basra in 1953, Aleiby comes from a family that nurtured her artistic practice, which was regarded as quite unconventional at the time.

“For some families, it was socially unacceptable for their children to study art,” she explained. “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.”



"Acrobat" (2020) by Afifa Aleiby. Supplied

It was eventually the art of painting that captivated Aleiby, who pursued her studies at Baghdad's renowned Institute of Fine Arts, where she became a protege of Iraqi pioneers Shakir Hassan Al-Said and Rafie Al-Nasseri.

Her journey has since taken her to Aden, Moscow and Florence, an artistic capital that informed her sense of aesthetics after living there for more than a decade.



"At the Fig Tree" (2020) by Afifa Aleiby. Supplied

Describing the streets of Italy as a museum in itself, she was particularly inspired by iconic Renaissance painting, as well as the theme of surrealism. As seen at Art Dubai, her colorful paintings depict graceful, wide-eyed figures that are often lost in thought, far

away from the real world. In serene yet sometimes melancholic compositions, women dominate Aleiby's canvases.

“In the history of art, the most important element has been the woman... she gives life,” she 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.”