

*Paddle 8*

February 25th, 2013

[Dr. Kathy Battista Speaks with Artist Sherin Guirguis](#)

Dr. Kathy Battista works as the Director of Contemporary Art at the Sotheby's Institute of Art, and also worked as one of the curators on the groundbreaking exhibition and private sale [Encounter: The Royal Academy in The Middle East](#), which will remain open on Paddle8 until March 5th! This incredible exhibition is the second edition of the Royal Academy's Encounter series, bringing together Royal Academicians with prominent Middle Eastern artists, with a portion of all sales going to the Royal Academy. Read below for Dr. Battista's conversation with participating *Encounter* artist Sherin Guirguis!

*Kathy Battista: You live in LA, but have Egyptian heritage, which comes through in your work. How does Egyptian culture play a role in your practice and why do you live in LA in particular?*

Sherin Guirguis: It took me many years to feel the need to incorporate anything Egyptian or Middle Eastern in my work. It wasn't until the second gulf war when I felt compelled to reconstruct my experience of Egyptian culture, perhaps as a way to combat the images of the Middle East at war and in flames that were saturating the media at that time. It wasn't the Middle East I remembered and love and missed. I picked up an old novel by Naguib Mahfouz (I remember watching his films as a child and being mesmerized by them) and read it – slowly translating the words in my head into what I thought Mahfouz's poetic Arabic version would sound like: that cultural heritage that even I had forgotten, a long and rich history that was buried amongst the images of war.

My practice is a way for me to mitigate the complexities of having a multi-cultural background. I try to resolve and complicate the relationship between my two histories and have both come through in the work. Increasingly, I meet people that have a nomadic upbringing but it seems that we still don't have the tool to describe this experience.

To me, Los Angeles and Cairo are parallel cities. Their pace and rhythm echo each other, especially the antagonistic yet symbiotic relationship between street and car culture. My work is as much influenced by the Light & Space and Color Field movements of the West Coast as it is by the mashrabeyas of old Cairo.

*KB: The balance between abstraction and figuration seems an important part of your work. Would you agree with that assessment?*

SG: Yes. I tend to work at the cusp of several traditional categories. Eastern/ Western, ornamental/minimal, feminine/masculine, historical/contemporary, and formal/conceptual. I suppose that this is again a result of living as part of the diaspora – in a constant state of "otherness." So the ability to move fluidly between boundaries is a matter of survival.

*KB: We are showing your work on paper in Encounter, but I also love your sculptures. Can you say something about the three-dimensional work?*

SG: I hardly ever think of my practice as in terms of medium. Some ideas resolve themselves best as 2D work and some in 3D. They continually reference each other. The sculptures I am working on at the moment refer most directly to the body and the history of female agency via ornamentation and architecture. The culturally divergent elements I use in the paintings are again fused together to form hybrid kinetic sculptures. Originally modeled on a pair of Bedouin earrings these works are then fabricated through the formal lens of minimalism. Additionally, the earrings' kinetic rocking movement (which is activated solely by the viewer) references the physical narrative of a woman's body as it walks down the public street (an image described often in Mahfouz's work). Moreover, it asks the question 'What does it mean for a woman to occupy this space art historically and socially?' Shifts in cultural and political paradigms are embodied in the objects' formal language, both decorative and minimal, as well as the viewers' performative interactions.

*KB: I know that you are interested in the legacy of feminism and gender. How does this come across in your work?*

SG: I have been working with mashrabeya (traditional privacy screens found in Arabic architecture specially in harems) patterns and jewelry design as way to politicize the ornamental and that which is considered feminine. I'm interested in issues of female agency and how those are iterated in literature, music, architecture, art and design.

*KB: You are, like many of the Royal Academicians, also a teacher. How does this factor into your art practice?*

SG: Teaching is one of the most challenging jobs I have had; however, I learn so much from my students. It is a privilege to be around the energy of young artists, to be constantly challenged to articulate my passion for my practice, and to not take the basic principles of being a contemporary artist for granted.

*KB: You have recently become a mother. Have you made any work about your son or has being a parent affected your practice?*

SG: Although I have not (directly) made work about being a mother, I can't imagine that being a mother has not affected my work. Logistically, being a mom has had an effect on my practice, but overall I think it drives me to focus even more on the cultural and political content of the work. I hope that what I make adds to the way my son will see the world and helps him better understand and connect with his own heritage and cultural history.