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Laila, O Laila

Given her lineage and glamorous looks, she could have easily been in the movies. But, artist Laila Khan Rajpal prefers to emote on canvas rather than the screen. She tells *Mini Chandran-Kurian* that she's not afraid of being alone



A crouching girl-woman with a rose in her hand. The canvas sighs, weighed down by the enormity of its statement – the promise of life and the certainty of death. The young woman with golden hair steps closer to her painting. "I love doing figurative work," she says musingly. "What fascinates me most though is the fragile impermanence of life. We live every moment with the knowledge of our mortality."

Laila Khan Rajpal's first show was at the Habitat Centre in Delhi last year. Huge canvasses, embodying that quality of transience, juxtaposed against towering architectural forms. Uneven swathes of red symbolising blood, slicing fields of ochre, siena, burnt umber and sand reliefs. Ruins that whisper of a world that lives on, even as the life that once inhabited it, is extinguished.

"I was inspired by the ruins of Petra, an ancient city of Jordan," she says quietly. "And the thought took hold of me that the creator dies, but the creation lives on. I was obsessed with transferring that thought onto canvas. The most important thing about a painting is the intention."

For one so young, her eyes are intensely evocative – darkening and glowing in remembrance and reflection. "I'm not very verbal," she confesses. "I emote on canvas. But I'm neither impulsive nor spontaneous, I'd rather not regret anything." Which probably explains why it took her eight years of 'getting to know' Rohit Rajpal, a dashing young Davis Cup level tennis player and garment exporter from Delhi, before tying the knot in December '98. She brushes her hair back from her eyes and explains, "I had to be sure that he was the right one for me, who would give me the freedom to be me. You know, people use the word 'love' so freely. For me, it's more important that I respect the man I live with.

> **"The girls in our family are brought up pretty conservatively"**

And I respect Rohit enormously! He is a man of integrity, you can see it in his eyes..." A pause. Then, "I'm not obsessed with being Mrs So and So. Marriage is an essential rite of passage. But I've always known, right from the beginning, that life for me would be a solitary journey. I enjoy the idea that as a painter, one needs to be alone for several hours at a time. Painting is my *raison d'etre*."

And yet, given both her lineage and her arresting looks, one could see her drifting so easily into the film industry, carving a niche for herself like her illustrious brother-in-law Hrithik, or her brother Fardeen. Her eyes light up at the very mention of her darling kid brother. "Oh, I guess I've always kind of mothered him, and it makes me so happy to see him growing as an actor."

She laughs and adds, "As for me becoming an actress, I'm afraid the girls in our family are brought up pretty conservatively, and my mother in particular, was against it. My parents were separated when I was 14, my mother and I are extremely close. I would never have hurt her; besides painting means more control over your art, acting would involve too many variables."

It is the self-assurance that sets her apart, and allows her to brush aside suggestions that her glamorous image may actually be a deterrent to people taking her seriously as an artist. "Oh, I know that some people may be drawn to my paintings out of curiosity. But that will carry me only so far! After that, it is really up to my talent. I'm eager to see how people will react to my second show, to be held in Mumbai soon. It will have more female nudes, I want to depict the strength and mystery of a woman who is an emotional anchor for her man... Well, I've only just begun, I have a long way to go before I can call myself an artist like Anjolie Ela Menon, who incidentally I adore, or Gustave Klimpt, whose work I was exposed to while I was studying at the Slade of Fine Art in London."

Interestingly, Laila did not take any formal training in art, believing that it would have cramped her style. She learnt technique from the renowned professor Kumthekar in Mumbai, and for the rest, is self-taught. Most days are spent at her studio. The studio becomes her private space, away from home, where she thinks, reads, paints. Not every moment is productive, in terms of painting, but the hours spent in contemplating help her to evolve, to seek a fierce independence.

"I cannot depend on anyone, I am not afraid of being alone. One has to live as close to the truth as possible. If the painter is not sincere or honest, it will show up on canvas. Finally, it's between you and the canvas..."

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