LAILA'S LIFE CANVAS

SHE'S NOT JUST ANOTHER STAR KID. LAILA RAJPAL-KHAN, A CELEBRATED PAINTER IN HER OWN RIGHT, TELLS *MASALA!* THE STORIES OF HER HEART AND THE MEANING BEHIND HER ART...

FAVOURITE ART PIECE

"The painting closest to my heart is the nude I gifted to my brother when I had a show at Yantra in Mumbai. Fardeen picked it out himself actually. The piece was part of a nude series I had done, in fact it was the first painting that I painted of the series. For me a woman's nude body is like a landscape — a beautiful thing. Even though there's nudity in the work, there is an element of pure elegance."



Fardeen khan.

FAVOURITE ARTISTS

Among the Indian artists I enjoy Shekhar Roy, Chandra Bhattacharya and Anjali Ela Menon's works. I admire M.F. Hussain very much. I think his energy is tremendous and he is responsible for taking Indian art to the international map. The Western artists I like are Igonshi, Gustav Klint, Lucien Freud, Salvador Dali, Picasso, and Van Gogh. I also like Caravaggio during the Renaissance.





Above: Laila Khan-Rajpal says that she gives a lot of credit to her husband for dealing with her eccentricities. "Artists are unconventional. We need nurturing so that we can flourish. My husband has fostered that environment for me."

The celebrated Laila Rajpal-Khan shuttles between the two party capitals, Mumbai and Delhi, three-four times a month. You could call her celebrated on both counts — as an artist and as the daughter of Sundari and Feroz Khan. *Masala!* awaits her arrival for the interview in her drawing room at FK House in Juhu, where her family lives.

When Laila flounces into the room looking saucy and stunning in a strappy pink *bandhini* summer dress, you forget she's anybody's daughter. The girl has her own rather charming personality. Shoot complete, she settles to speak easily on her work, her life and her family...

You have often said that when you start a painting you never know where it's going...
Well, I'm terrified when I look into a blank canvas. But when you do start, the painting decides for itself. There's so much you want to say through your work. Something takes you over — it's a very unconscious process, very introspective, meditative and therapeutic. Restraint is something you learn and the more you paint and the more mature you get. When to stop is the biggest obstacle. So the more you paint, your eye is trained to stop when necessary. I think that's the biggest challenge for an artist.

Did you have teething problems at the beginning of your career?
Well in the beginning stages, an artist has a lot to say and you want to say it all at once. But you learn restraint. The best way to learn painting is to paint. Art school doesn't teach you emotion; it doesn't teach you to have an eye. That is intrinsic and it is a gift. I think a little bit of art school can only hone your skills and polish what you already possess. I studied at the Slade School of Art in London on a short five-month programme. I went there because I wanted to study art through nudes. I was painting a lot of nudes at the time. It was only after I interacted with the foreign students that I was exposed to Western art — which has been a great influence on my work.

Would you categorise your art as a form of catharsis?
Yes, I lose myself when I work. It consumes me and I thank God for it. In my opinion you're never alone when you're an artist — you're life lies with art.

Do you thank your husband for understanding you and your work?
I do. Well largely, there's a side to artists and creative people, that's very Bohemian. They're unconventional, emotional, highly sensitive and temperamental. And it ▶

"Restraint is one of the hardest challenges for an artist. It comes with time."

WORDS AND PICTURES: KEYNOTE MEDIA

▶ takes someone very stable and secure to understand all the idiosyncrasies of an artist. All creative people need nurturing, without that anchor, stability, and fostering environment, they cannot flourish. My husband has definitely been all of those things to me. He loves art as well, he used to sketch at one time actually. He and my brother Fardeen often give me a critical analysis of my work. If they don't like a piece they always tell me.

Is there a difference in the way you painted before marriage and now?
Yes, every stage brings about something new in a work of art. As long as I'm growing and don't remain stagnant I am happy. I never stick to a style because that style sells or because there's a market for it. Sometimes artists tend to stagnate and fall into a comfort zone of doing one type of work that they think sells. I hope that never happens to me. I try consciously to get away from that.

Many of your art pieces have a signature red butterfly on them... what does this symbolise?
[Laughs] That is true. The butterfly is a symbol of metamorphosis and of transformation. The series in which the butterfly appeared represented the female principle. The female is the symbol of love, creation and union. She is fragile yet strong.

What was the first painting you ever did, and did it sell?
Again, it was of a woman — but a headless woman. I sold it for Rs8000 (Dhs667) and at that time, for me it was a lot of money. I was so excited.

What's the best compliment you've received on your work?
I've been told that my work enriches people, that it grows on them and they find more meaning in it every day. For me, appreciation is great. Just purchasing a painting as an investment has less meaning than someone who may not be able to afford it but loves the work and is willing to speak to me about it.



So just buying a Laila Rajpal doesn't do much for you as opposed to...
No, of course it's encouraging when people put money down. When you earn your own money it gives you the sense of independence, which is very important for an artist. To me the greatest compliment has been when people love my art without realising that it was my art. Very few people have their own minds, when it comes to art, most people get swayed by hype or a name.


Above: Laila with one of her art pieces.
Below: One of Laila's art works.

Above: Laila says that every stage in her life brings about a new style in her art works.

What touches your heart most?
A person who has nothing and is yet able to smile... when I see beggars on the street, smiling and happy, that touches my heart. But then that is the poetic justice in life, that is the way God balances. Because I've noticed that the more people have, the more they have to worry about. I'm also touched by people who have impairments and can still be happy and strive. When I see people who paint with their mouths or with their feet, I consider myself very, very fortunate in too many ways, and I think I enjoy God's grace. I'm not a religious and ritualistic person but I believe in the power of God, especially when I'm working.

What is the nicest thing your husband has said to you about a work?
There was a piece I did of Meena Kumari for a show called Art In Cinema, held in Delhi where each artist had to base their work on a film. I based it on *Sahib Bibi Aur Ghulam*, the scene on the bed where Meena Kumari is lying down drunk and she doesn't want Rehman to leave. I did that in charcoal, a very realistic rendering. My husband thinks I should do more like that.

Do you find it difficult to break away from the 'Feroz Khan's daughter' tag?
I don't want to break away from it. But when you come from a family that is known, the onus on you is far greater. I don't need to sell my work, so I try to be truer to my work. Yes, the fame and the family I come from has its advantages but no one's going to put money down for me because I'm somebody's daughter. If you're true to your art, it'll always show. Yes I've faced obstacles, hurdles, jealousy and brickbats but I have tried to use it to become a stronger person. ■

KIDS WHO TREAD THE PATH LESS TRAVELLED....

Unlike many other star children, Laila never had the inclination to join Bollywood. Instead she became an artist. Her cousin Farah Khan-Ali (daughter of Sanjay Khan) became a jewellery designer. The list of star-kids who did not follow in their parent's footsteps doesn't stop there...

Aditya Kapoor, the son of legendary actor Shammi Kapoor, ran amusement parks abroad for a while and later directed *Chamale*, which is up for release soon. Kailash Surendranath, the son of actor Surendranath of *Anmol Ghadi* fame, became one of India's best-known ad filmmakers. Even Raakhee and Gulzar's daughter, Meghna chose to become a director rather than an actor. Her film *Filhaal* won critical acclaim the world over. Dimple and Rajesh Khanna's daughter Twinkle did a short spate in Bollywood but quit films after marrying Akshay Kumar. This lady who dabbles in candle making prefers to lead the life of a quiet boutique owning wife today. Subhash Ghai's daughter Meghna is now helping him establish a major film institute in India.

Thus proving that all rich kids... are not spoilt brats!