Hello Art

June 2024



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Laila's artistic passion for painting nudes is showcased here at her 2007 exhibition

She is the glamourous daughter of India's iconic stylish star and late legendary actor, Feroz Khan. With her illustrious background, a career in Bollywood might have seemed the most natural choice. And with her striking appearance, one can only imagine the abundance of movie offers that came her way.

Laila Khan Furniturewalla is refreshingly candid. "Yes, I did [receive many film offers]. I guess it was inevitable. But I was brought up in a protective environment. My father was very modern in the way he portrayed women in his films. But when it came to his daughter, he was very protective," she reveals, adding, "I wouldn't say it did not cross my mind. It was an artistic pursuit. But it was not something that would have been encouraged, to be honest. The women in our family are not into movies but we are all creatively inclined. I must be very comfortable in my environment and when I am painting, I feel completely comfortable. I felt this is where I belong."

Despite being born into a Bollywood family, Laila was not raised in a conventional manner. "My father was not a typical movie star who was surrounded by fawning admirers. Our home was filled with poets, artists, intellectuals and people from all walks of life. We were taught to respect all," she says. Laila's father and mother, Sundari, were self-made and passed on those values to their children. Laila recalls their passion for fine art. "They both had a keen eye; we had a good collection of art at home. I remember society hostess, the late Parmeshwar Godrej, had done our farmhouse in Bangalore [now Bengaluru]. She was so ahead of her time. When I went to her house as a child, I was fascinated by the art in her home. I was impressed by an Anjali Ela Menon painting; I loved the mood she captured, the melancholy and the colour palette she employed at that time."

A JOURNEY IN ART

Not many are aware that her love for the subject took Laila to London's Slade School of Fine Art, UCL, to study nudes, and later to Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design for a specialised course in creative and expressive painting. She completed short courses for six months at both of these schools, opting not to pursue a full four-year degree. "I was very individualistic. I didn't want to be curbed," explains the artist. Instead, she completed a BA in English literature, philosophy and psychology from Sophia College while studying form and figure under the tutelage of artist Professor Kumtekar, an experience she found liberating.



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While Laila's early work (below, in 2006) was largely figurative, she has recently found inspiration of a different kind. Moved by the power of the Hindu god Ganesh, she created two new pieces, *Ganesh XVIII* and *Gauri I*, which were exhibited in March



Laila's formal training aimed to refine her passion, particularly for nudes. "All figurative works and my first solo show were nudes," she shares, adding, "I was told I would never sell a single piece, but that show was almost a sell-out."

Laila credits her parents for encouraging her on the path that she wanted to take. "When I started painting nudes in the '90s, my dad realised that it was an artistic necessity. He encouraged my work which gave me confidence," she says. "My mother is responsible for me being an artist today as it was her encouragement and involvement in my art that led me to pursue it without fear." Dedicating the past few years to her studio, investing her time in the pursuit of her artwork, Laila was struck by inspiration unexpectedly. "I found myself awed by the power of Ganesh as an image in my heart and mind. I wanted to represent this deity through my art. In India and many other countries, Ganesh is omnipresent, symbolising prosperity and new beginnings," she says.

At the recent Art of India event, she unveiled two artworks born from this inspiration. One, a 45x35 inches depiction of Lord Ganesh, crafted from copper, sand, pigment and metal leaf, radiates rich earth tones like burgundy, gold and browns, exuding divine energy. The other, a contrasting 51x42 inches portrayal of Gauri, employs whites, black and gold tones with pigment, sand, metal leaf and acrylic, embodying a feminine aura and power through varied textures and fluid movement.

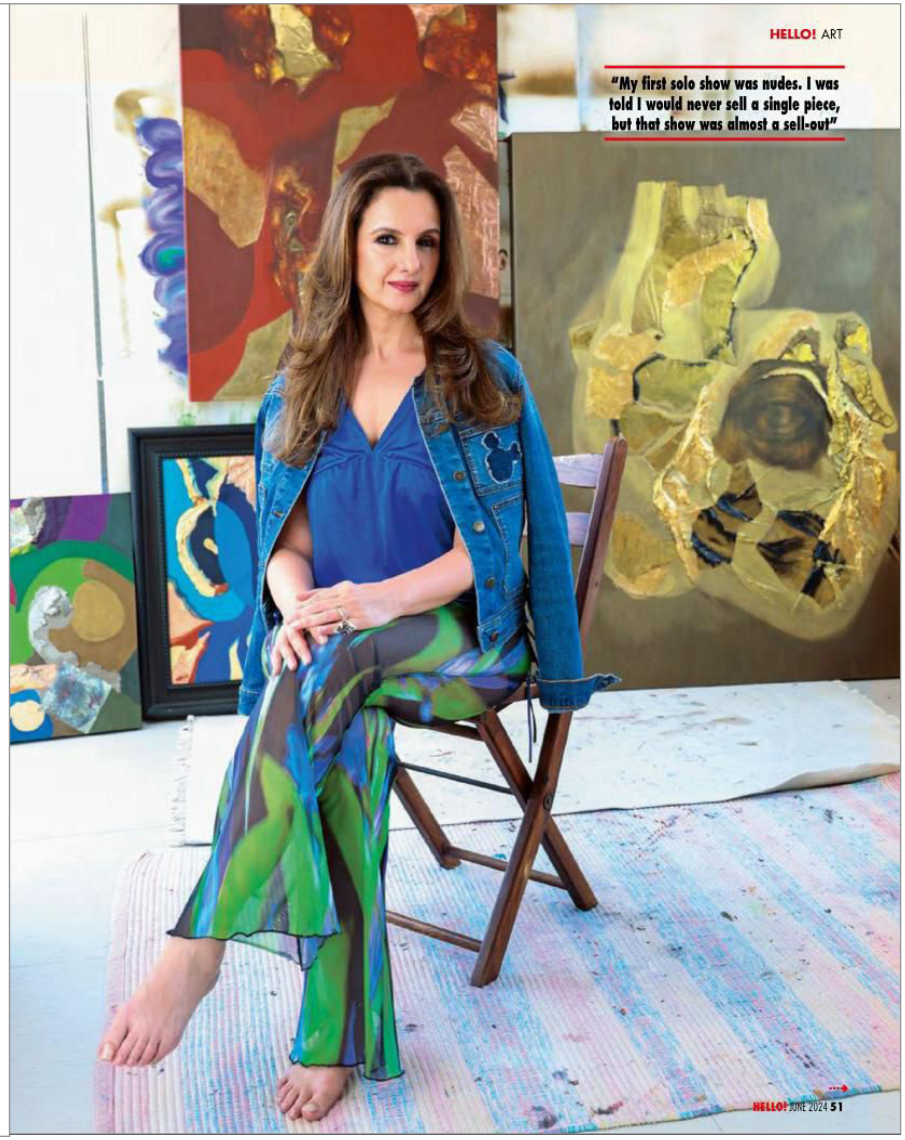
Speaking about these artworks, she explains, "The artworks explore the spiritual power within life's transitory aura, drawing a meditative connection to the Elephant God."

BUILDING DREAMS TOGETHER

The Art of India event marked Laila's return to the art world after her last exhibition in Chelsea, New York, in 2022, which featured a collection of international artists. Art historian and curator Dr Alka Pande, an old friend, asked her to participate. "I have known Alka for a long time and I did my first solo show with her," says Laila. "She wanted me to showcase my most recent works and I was happy to be a part of this event."

Following her marriage to entrepreneur Farhan Furniturewalla in 2010 and the birth of their son Zaan in 2015, Laila chose to focus on motherhood. During these years, she became involved in Farhan's contemporary luxury furniture business, channelling her passion for interior design. "After our wedding, we decided to reinvent and reposition the brand with interior

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products that are more akin to our tastes. We brought in contemporary furniture and décor from around the world, so I started travelling with him and got involved with that," she shares.

Starting a family, she immersed herself in raising her son. "I believe that the first eight to nine years are important for a child's development. That stays with them for their whole life. For me, once I lock my door in my studio space, I get lost. I didn't get back to art full time. You must balance it out; sometimes, sacrifices are involved and you just have to prioritise what is important and you can't have it all," she reflects.

Laila credits her husband Farhan for being a supportive partner. "My husband is very honest in his response to my work. He is very stimulating for me. We both share an aesthetic sensibility that I am happy about. He will tell me if he does not like my work. He gives me my space, which I like very much. He is fully supportive as I am painting full time and could be away for hours and artists need that. You cannot grow and flourish without that kind of love and support at home."

What makes her relationship with Farhan so special? "Love. Love comes with its own

Laila is grateful to her parents, the late actor Feroz Khan and Sundari, for encouraging her artistic ambitions. She is close to her brother Fardeen and is thrilled about his return to the film industry. However, it is her son Zaan (below) who has truly added colour to her life





demands. Things you have to be willing to do for love. One has to understand that we are all human with flaws, and one has to forgive and give people a chance. I think it is important to be friends in a marriage and be honest as dishonesty does not get you that far. It comes in the way."

THE PROMISE OF TOMORROW

Incidentally, Laila and her brother, Bollywood actor Fardeen Khan, are both making their individual comebacks around the same time. She laughs aloud when we point out the coincidence. "I didn't think about it, but this was not planned," she confesses. Describing them both as highly individualistic people with their own lives, they do meet often and discuss things, especially since Laila's studio is located in the family house. "Being siblings, we are close and share a lot. I'm very happy for his transformation; he is putting in the work and has a few films on the horizon. It's a tough industry, so he's fortunate to have this chance, and he has worked hard for it."

Laila, who has experienced numerous upheavals in her life, including her divorce from her first husband, Rohit Rajpal, and the passing of her father, emphasises the importance of maintaining a positive outlook. "Most people are afraid of finding happiness again in relationships. The past should be left in the past. Tomorrow holds surprises you can never anticipate, and one should never lose faith, because the instant you do, opportunities may slip away. Leave the bitterness in the past. Sometimes, things may seem overwhelming, but you can wake up feeling happier with a fresh perspective," she muses.

If there's someone who has brought vibrant colours into her life and art, it's her son. "I thought I had experienced love, but with your child, it is a whole different thing. It is unconditional and beautiful. It's also influenced my work; I find myself using more colour now."

Laila is already working on her forthcoming solo exhibition, for which she is figuring out a date later in the year. "I want to make a statement with my new body of work." And personally, like everyone else, she wants to spend more meaningful time with her loved ones. For Laila, the journey of life has always been a balancing act!

TEXT: NAYARE ALI

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Farhad and Laila are parents to Zaan and Farhad's children from his previous marriage, Alaya and Omar (not pictured here). "[Zaan] is like a piece of my heart," Alaya has said, revealing her close bond with her stepmom