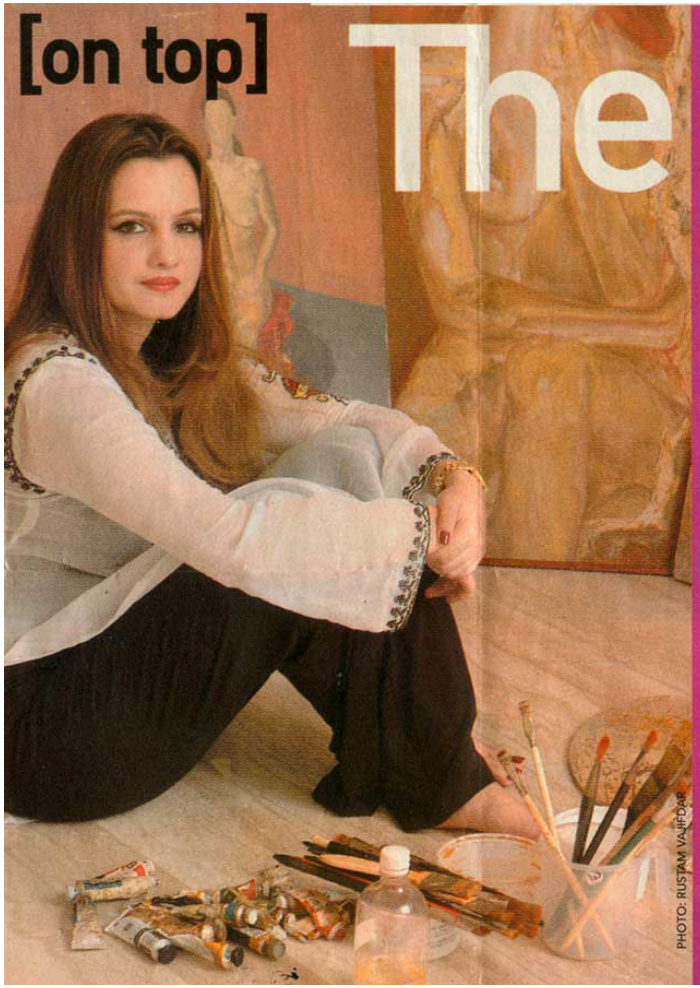
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The feminine mystique

She believes dreams have no titles and that the female form is infinitely fascinating. FARHAD J. DADYBURJOR reconstructs a portrait of the woman behind the artist, **LAILA KHAN RAJPAL**

PHOTO: RUSTAM VAHEDAR

When were you first drawn to the easel and brush?
I think I was drawn to art, even way back in school, because of its ability to express without any loss of control. The freedom that one felt and realised, because it's just between you and the canvas. There's no hidden truth; there's no lie. And that itself was fascinating for me. So, after school, I apprenticed with an artist whilst studying English literature in college and then later, went to the Slade School of Fine Art in London because I wanted to study the nude; I wanted to study from life. Though art school cannot teach you to have an eye; it can't teach you emotion. That has to be in you, and you have to believe you have something to say, which is original.

When did you decide to pursue art as a full-time career?
It started with painting for myself, but then people wanted to buy my work. And the selling was interesting because the money gave me the independence and creative freedom to continue, and make one's own decisions. For me, freedom and pleasure - these are the things in life! And I'm fortunate that I don't have to sell my work to live - and that's why it's a bigger onus on me to be true to my work.

Isn't it also cathartic - a way to live out your demons?
Sadness is a part of life, and it's all around us. 'It creates intensity, a brooding, an introspection. I think a work should hide more than it reveals. Painting is an experience which is very solitary and artists are solitary people. They may not necessarily be lonely people, but they are alone...though not really alone.

They are most alive when they are alone.
Yes. Though I never feel alone because this is divinity; this is what it is. When I finish a work, I feel I couldn't have done that - that this is a force of life and creation and God which infuses itself through you. I draw a lot of strength from my work. It is what I am. It's autobiographical.

When or how do you know that you've finally finished a work - that it needs no more?
That's the greatest quest for any artist. When to restrain; to let go. Because overworking on a painting can take away so much, and sometimes in three strokes you can finish a work. I think the painting decides that for itself, but you get to know that only with a lot of painting. You know, you learn painting by painting.

What are you currently working on and how do you approach your work?
There are no 'rules' in my dictionary - I approach my work in a very instinctive and natural manner. Like currently, I'm working on a figurative series which are all manifestations of the female principle of a woman. A woman can be many different things: she can be fragile, strong, erotic...she can be a man, a woman, and through her I'm exploring beauty, the destruction of beauty, the transience of human life...

Is there a name to the series?
No, dreams have no titles.

Which artists have influenced you?
Picasso, Van Gogh, Salvador Dali, and amongst Indian artists, Anjolie Ela Menon. I love the mood she creates; her intensity.

Artists were meant to tackle themes that wrestled with the world. Do you think that holds true for Indian artists today?
Whilst there is a lot of packaging, like in most things today, yet you have a lot of artists who are trying to say something...though the movement in that direction needs to be more. Today, there's a lot of money in the art world - and why not? The days of the tragic artist dying in poverty have gone.

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