

# LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

*'Perpetual Identities'*

By

Katya A. Traboulsi



*U.A.E., 2016, Hand nailed and painted wood Brass base and top, 73 x 21 x 21 cm, Edition 3/6*

Dubai, UAE – Leila Heller Gallery is pleased to announce Beirut based multimedia artist Katya A. Traboulsi's solo show *'Perpetual Identities'* opening on 26th April 2023.

Katya through her art talks about identity as a force that no war can eliminate and that bounces back inevitably. During the Lebanese Civil War, in 1975, she received the empty sleeve of a mortar shell for her birthday, which automatically found its place on a shelf, without further reflection on its nature or the journey which led it to her. Thus, the object, which had blindly sown death where it fell, ended up in her room, raised to the status of a trophy celebrating the courage of fighters or the defeat of enemies. In 2014, as the Arab Springs wilted into winters, the memory of this object, trinket or trophy, called on to Katya again. Reflections on the mortar shell inspired an installation project which sought to divert the weapon from its morbid destiny and make it serve Life.

The depiction of the shell dressed in a variety (46) of symbolic cultural execution, is the physical and spiritual core of the *'Perpetual Identities'* project. Each one is handmade, using different materials, including ceramics, porcelain, resin, wood, and iron. Each titled with a country's name, most are produced by their native artisans. The dimension of these objects being 75 x 20 cm, its base and top are made of brass and/or iron. The shell is a symbol of destruction and renewal, with its distinctive shape, has become one of the most violent symbols of destruction and invasion in history since the invention of the canon. These 46 shells, adorned with the arts and crafts of various countries, become body of designs, themes and skills; bearing the glory of every person and inviting them to join in the universal sentiment of Humanity.

The shell becomes like a 'book', an inventory of myths, of traditions of embodied know-how, and invites the discovery of the "Other". Now its otherwise deadly one-way trajectory becomes an exchange. The shell becomes an 'arrow' and sows not death, but knowledge and civilization in the territory of the "Other". Its scope becomes sociological, theological and philosophical. The many cultures and societies involved in the project enrich the object

with seemingly infinite meanings. As part of the process, cultural identities were constantly added as a palimpsest, until the mortar became enriched with reflections and revelations. The mission of this transformed object is to celebrate the glory of Humanity. Removing its primary function permits it to carry universal and immortal messages. The mortar as art transcends its destructive origin and it becomes a melting-pot of perpetual identities.

Katya's creations are inspired by historical events. The artisans that took part in the project are the perpetual memory of that history, glorifying through their artistic talent the heritage of their identity. An object of death forgotten on a dusty shelf, found itself rehabilitated, transfigured in the sparkling whiteness of a museum, a place of beauty and life. Also endangered are the identities sacrificed on the altar of globalization which imposes an aseptic and effective language, gradually leading to the loss of ancestral know-how, language, tools and its land. Since humans perpetuate by nature, interactions with other cultures enriches and develops our identities, a heritage rooted in our mother land, our past and our culture.

The other part of this exhibition is Katya's unique collection of painted rear doors of trucks titled '*Rej3a ya mama*', which as a statement is a reminder of the impatient wait for the return of those who had to leave their homeland. This was inspired by her desire to collaborate with the traditional creators of these designed rear doors and to share their knowledge with her art. In Katya's words, each truck tells a story, of life, beliefs and love. A moment of driving behind a truck can facilitate a connection with the driver's story, beliefs and fears, through the graphics and text on the rear door. This project is also an homage to the city of Tripoli in Lebanon and to their tireless truck drivers whose work connects regions and lives without distinction for religious or political differences. Painted with the owner's identity, the truck doors become a mode of communication with the onlookers; through images, symbols and lyrics acting as memory markers. These designed doors and tailgates that close on life goods have been an opening door for Katya to a new life and artistic experience.

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Born in 1960, Katya A. Traboulsi is a Beirut based multimedia artist whose practice is characterized by the emotional intensity with which she confronts the effects of the Lebanese civil war. Both her painting and sculptural works are characterized by her bold use of colour, which disrupts the viewer's expectations of the dark subject matter they are confronted with. Her solo exhibition *Perpetual Identities* (2018) held at the Salah Barakat Gallery saw presented 46 handcrafted replicas of Lebanese war bomb shells adorned with colourful patterns, beads and sculpted forms, thus transforming these destructive military objects into beautiful, ornate vessels.

In 2013, Traboulsi published *Generation War*, a body of work that traces the story of photojournalists who witnessed the civil war during the 80s – an homage to their efforts and a political project that seeks to record the country's complex histories. Traboulsi lived and worked in Dubai from 1989 till 2016 before returning to her native Beirut. Her work has been exhibited internationally since 1986 in Paris, London, Dubai, Kuwait, North America, the Algerian museum of Modern Art and the International Armory Show in NYC.

## ABOUT THE GALLERY:

Since its establishment over four decades ago in New York, Leila Heller Gallery has gained worldwide recognition as a pioneer in promoting a creative dialogue and exchange between Western artists and Middle Eastern, Central and Southeast Asian artists. It has garnered a reputation for identifying and cultivating the careers of artists leaving a lasting impact on contemporary art and culture. Currently representing a diverse roster of Western, Central Asian, Southeast Asian and Middle Eastern artists, the gallery is also active in the American, European, and Middle Eastern secondary art markets. In November 2015, Leila Heller Gallery opened its first international location in Dubai's Alserkal Avenue. At 16,000 square feet, the state of the art gallery features three exhibition spaces, making it the largest gallery in the UAE. Showcasing leading regional and international artists, many of whom will be presenting their work in the Middle East.

In addition to presenting a dynamic exhibition schedule, Leila Heller Gallery actively organizes shows with world-renowned curators, hosts educational panels and film screenings, and produces catalogues and books with scholarly essays. Each year the gallery participates in major international art fairs and stages off-site projects as a platform for exploring new conversations within a wider context of galleries, artists and institutions. Gallery artists have consistently participated in international museum exhibitions and biennials, and are included in leading institutional collections worldwide.

For any press enquiries please reach out to [ankita@leilahellergallery.com](mailto:ankita@leilahellergallery.com)