



Clockwise from left: "Self-Portrait on Parquet" (2019), a work on display in Berlin, Fatma Shanan and "Portrait and Scarf" (2013).

Courtesy of the artist and Dittrich & Schlectriem, Berlin; Photo: Jens Ziehe/Nir Arzieli

Meet the Israeli Druze artist taking the art world by storm

Galleries are enamored with Fatma Shanan, 33, who wants to transcend identity politics and reclaim the female form

Joy Bernard

Fatma Shanan is a woman of many contradictions. The 33-year-old Israeli Druze artist – on the brink of bursting onto the global art scene – draws her inspiration from the aesthetics and traditions of her minority group's culture but does not wish to be recognized as a Druze artist. She only paints women, but won't acknowledge her art has a feminist artistic expression. She is the first to admit her work is acutely personal, but refuses to delve into private or political issues in conversation, claiming that her art speaks for itself.

In Israel, Shanan's star

is already on the rise. She is courted by commercial art galleries and big artistic institutions alike. Her works have been on display in two of the country's largest national museums: The Israel Museum and the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, where oeuvres crafted by Shanan were showcased in a 2017 solo exhibition that won many accolades.

But when she is not embraced by the cultural mainstream, Shanan lives and creates in rather unglamorous surroundings – the northern village of Julis, a tiny and scenic Druze local council that boasts less than 7,000 residents.

It is there where the artist first started painting,

taking private lessons as a young girl before going on to study visual arts at the Oranim College in the north. After that, she spent a year under the auspices of Israeli traditionalist painter Eli Shamir.

While Shanan has painted mostly in Julis so far, she insists that the narrative she is trying to convey through her work is bigger than the confines of her Arabic-speaking hometown.

Talking to Haaretz from New York, where one of her paintings was displayed and purchased at the Armory Show (one of the most prestigious fairs in the world), Shanan stresses that "If you connect to my art, it's not because you're Druze

or Israeli. I don't make art to appeal to Druze or to Israelis or to Americans. I do it because I am persuaded by the truth of what I do."

This quest for a universal appeal is reflected in the large canvases on which Shanan renders traditional decor and female bodies into ethereal, mysterious scenes. For years, a recurring theme in her work was the oriental carpet, which is a staple of the Druze aesthetic and can be found in almost every household of the 130,000-member community.

But Shanan chooses to depict the rugs in unlikely surroundings, thereby stripping them of their decorative quality. "The carpet

has a significant presence in our Druze culture and in my personal experience, in my own life. I'm trying to cancel this presence by taking it out of its natural surroundings and bringing to the fore the female body, or actually myself, by enveloping the woman in the carpet," Shanan says of the motive behind her previous works, many of which are self-portraits.

Asked whether it is important for her to give women special representation in her work, the artist responds that she "doesn't want to be perceived as a female artist." But after a moment of reflection, she adds: "Last week I found out that in the gallery in Berlin, I am the only female artist. They're all men, I'm the only woman. But I don't care."

Not just a carpet

The gallery in Berlin, Dittrich & Schlectriem, is a respected contemporary gallery that catapulted Shanan to the coveted spot in the Armory Show, represents her and is home to the artist's latest solo exhibition that opened March 1 under the name "Yellow Skirt."

In this exhibition, Shanan breaks away from the carpet that accompanied her throughout most of her career to make way for drawings that accentuate the female body and its somewhat fragile relationship to the space in which it operates.

The painter is moving away from more than just the carpet: In the past, she would construct scenes in Julis, which she would then photograph and use as a source for her paintings. Now that her work has crossed the ocean, so has she: One was developed during a residency in San Francisco, another was crafted in Romania. For a recent work, in which Shanan is seen levitating over an oriental carpet, she took a video of herself in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, which formed the basis for the painting.

She says that in the video she took to prepare that piece, "Floating Self Portrait," her body appears to be "like a magnetic field. There is a resistance, a coming together and moving apart of the body and the space. Each one is pulling in a different direction."

This might be an apt description of the artist's complex discourse about her own identity. On the one hand, she insists on how important it is to her that people know her mother tongue is Arabic when she introduces herself to gallery-goers abroad. But on the other hand, she isn't quick to say where she's from. "I would rather be defined as an artist."

But Shanan cares deeply about fellow Druze artists. She acknowledges many

artists from her community have not garnered the same acclaim she has but says she is beginning to see a change. "I almost feel uncomfortable saying this," she begins, "but I feel the impact of what I do on many women in the Druze sector who chose to study art. It's a good thing."

"There is a problem with the education in the Druze sector in Israel," she continues. "When I was in elementary school there weren't really art classes. That's why I took private lessons for two years as a young girl. But in recent years they started introducing art lessons for high schoolers in the village."

a legislation that defines Israel as the homeland of the Jewish people and gives superiority to Hebrew over other languages spoken in the country.

The law sparked outrage among the Arab and Druze communities in Israel – for the Druze, the main sensitivity was that most serve in the Israeli military and identify as Israeli (the Druze living in the Golan Heights remain loyal to the Syrian regime across the border).

Shanan declined to speak on this issue, noting that her work is by choice not political. "When I do talk about being from Israel," she concedes, "I talk about

Men are almost entirely absent from her paintings, "because I want to show the female body, I want to show myself. It's not that I don't want the male body there. I could draw a man, but it doesn't serve my purpose."

And what is this purpose? Shanan says that she wants people who interact with her artwork to "be aware of the connection between the physical space and the body. It can express itself in many ways and in the manners in which it impacts your body and urges you to reclaim it."

This metaphysical experience overwhelms the senses when one takes a closer look at Shanan's paintings. In "Yellow Skirt" – an avid example of the trick Shanan plays on the viewer – a woman clad in a skirt is seen from above, practically forcing the observer to imagine the skirt's wearer. Shanan admits this is her own favorite work from the exhibition "because it shows the connection to the female form, but the body is incomplete. There is a malfunction there."

From New York, Shanan headed back to Tel Aviv, where she is participating in a group exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum that opened on March 12. From there she will go back to Julis, to start work on a new project.

Is she not afraid that by changing the theme of her works, she will lose focus? "Every time I make a new painting there is fear," the artist admits, but then says she is certain she will never lose her passion. "In my studio, I have two paintings I am not willing to sell. One of them is a still life drawing and the other is the sketch of a model. When I look at these two works I tell myself – okay, you can paint. It gives you this seal of approval, and you know that despite the fear you can rise up to the challenge and make that painting."



Fatma Shanan's "Mother, Child and Necklace" (2016).

Shanan: 'You can't really live your life [in Israel] as an individual; you're always part of the collective.'

Prof. Gideon Ofrat, an Israeli art historian, curator and professor of philosophy and aesthetics who also wrote a text to introduce Shanan's work to people visiting the Berlin gallery says that while he believes the painter's work is truly unique, he agrees that with her that there is a change and says she is certainly not the only Druze artist operating in the field. "If people think that," he tells Haaretz, "it's a sign of ignorance because very few actually care about Israeli art."

Dramatic turnaround

Ofrat says that he has seen a "dramatic turnaround" in the local art scene, which started featuring more heavily Palestinian, Bedouin and Druze artists. He is also quick to observe that "when you look at the works of many Israeli Arab artists, you see them placing an emphasis on their identity and their rural background." In that sense, the historian says that Shanan's statement that she doesn't want to be perceived primarily as a Druze artist is "odd" but that "it's her right to present her art however she wants, and I respect her immensely."

Where Shanan comes from, the discussion surrounding Druze identity has become more complicated over the past year after the Israeli parliament passed the nation-state law,

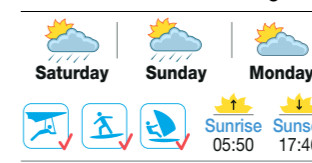
the difficulty of living in a society where the individual is almost nonexistent. You can't really live your life as an individual; you're always part of the collective. And these are questions I don't ask just as a Druze. I ask them as a person."

Although she refuses to be bogged down by religion, ethnicity or political agendas, the painter is keen to illustrate the importance of female identity in her artwork and her life.

Weather

Rainy weekend

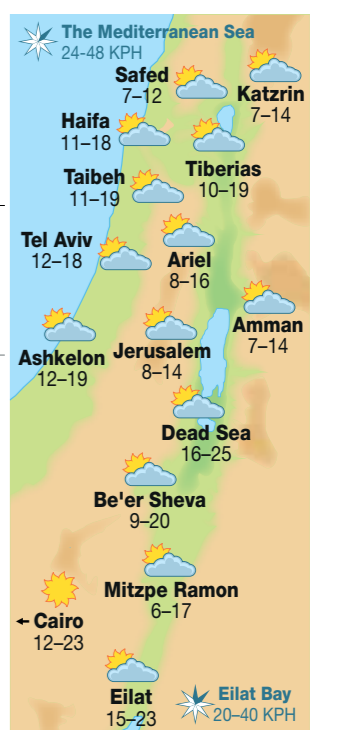
Light rain will fall on Friday in the north and center; it will be slightly warmer. The rain will strengthen at night and thunder storms may occur. Saturday will be cooler, with occasional showers from the north to the northern Negev.



Air pollution index: 14.3.19
● low ● medium ● high ● very high
Jerusalem Tel Aviv Haifa Krayot
Be'er Sheva Karmiel Afula Modi'in
pollution forecast for this morning:
low-medium

Shabbat Times

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Tel Aviv	17:26	18:26
Haifa	17:17	18:25
Be'er Sheva	17:29	18:26



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