Lamees Khoury: The Ultimate Observer

Rula Jiryis spoke with the Palestinian artist Lamees Khoury about belonging and identity, memory and intuition, and how form, voice, and movement appear in her artworks.

Conversation / Rula Jiryis October 8, 2022

Lamees Khoury is an artist living and working in the UK, born into a Palestinian family in Nazareth. The most impactful of her life experiences was teaching arts at refugee camps in Palestine. Although her artwork shows multiple levels of interests, Lamees is never reluctant to explore life with a twist of naivety and childlike acts.

Rula Jiryis: Since you were born into a society with a dual identity, how did you create a dialogue between the two?

Lamees Khoury: The paradigm of belonging and the inherent desire to be part of something greater than ourselves has been shattered since early childhood for me; I am not singling myself out, or my communities, as the only ones who've had such a complex state of being— it has happened to multitudes across the globe. When a crisis occurs, the issue at hand is how do we treat this acute friction collectively and individually. Leaving out the collective for now, I consciously resorted to the approach of including rather than excluding, and with this practice in mind, I have come to many realizations.

Primarily, I admitted to myself that there is a dark side to me, portrayed in a form of suppressed frustration that inhabits deep within me, and by doing so I opened up to understanding the source of it, then accepting all its aspects, without becoming an enemy to it. This revelation changed my view of my surroundings. Thereafter, handling the dark sides of others, whoever they may be, grew effortlessly. All of which helped me to process my work in a deeper and wider manner.

Collectively, however, we seem to have forgotten how to arrive at mutual agreements and resolutions. Acknowledging and accepting the illusive presence of the other took many forms of conversation and expressions. Moments of feebleness and despair have led me to my true belonging. It is acting on my strongest passion, and lending myself entirely to the path of creating. That is how I found my voice, my sounds, and my visual language, allowing me to structure an alternative zone, and a proxy reality.

"From a young age I began to search for a refuge that may provide a safe haven, I was passionately attending to that visceral overwhelming desire to create a different reality, or perhaps an alternative one in which I can exist".1

R.J: You write that you have always refrained from identifying with any calamity, despite the hardship you and many others had experienced. Can you expand on that point?

L.K: With waves of anguish, I learned how to turn any paradox into a silent point from which I can coherently perceive all possible angles and options. It is one thing to demonstrate solidarity with a certain cause; it is another matter altogether when we want to stand in the presence of a "Muse." I don't tend to bring my bias into my blank space. Instead, I find myself under a divine influence, where I shed my body and the residue of my identity. At an instant all is hijacked by that force we all name "Inspiration," for the sake of receiving and meeting the unknown. There and then, all of my cumulative quandaries will inevitably and intuitively emerge through the back door of my mind.

That being said, I should point out that more often than not we come to the blank space proposing an idea or a concept, but we must allow enough open channels to hear, then listen to what the creation itself is telling us. Many times, the material dictates a presence, which could lead the work in another direction. Mostly I explore everything, from a micro perspective, with the intent and the purpose of expanding my three-dimensional knowledge, and physical encounters, but I'd rather live,

exist and examine all that I have gained at the macro level, a bird’s-eye view where my awareness ascends to a wider and greater spectrum of comprehension, arriving time and again at the unfamiliar yet attainable states of curiosity.

The wheel of Karma.JPG



[1]Lamees Khoury, Not My Hand Writing, 2016, 20*20 cm
Courtesy of the artist

Family tree.JPG **[2]**



[3]Lamees Khoury, Family Tree, 2019, 20*20 cm
Courtesy of the artist

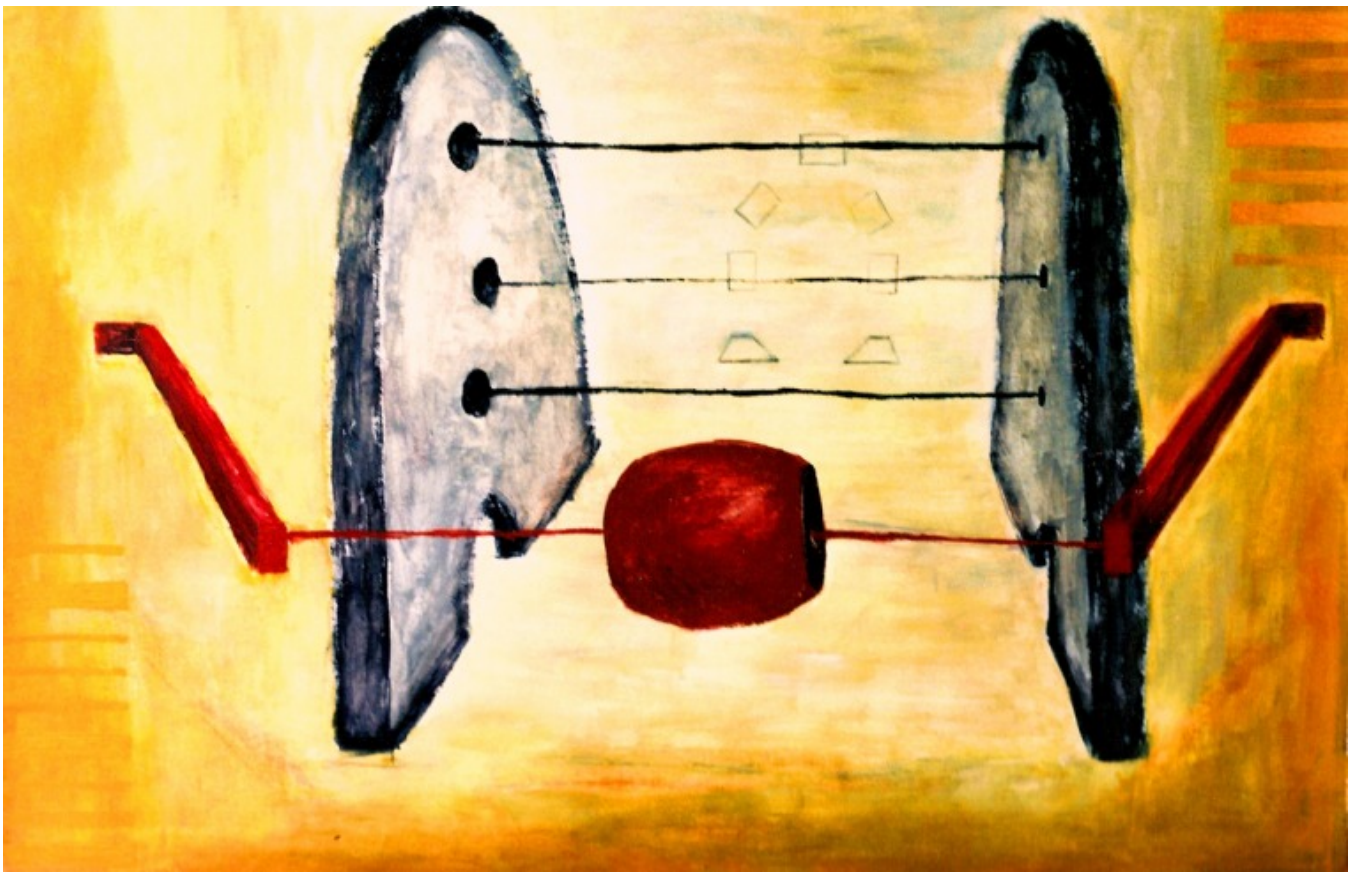
"…instead, I decided on becoming a witness, or perhaps an observer who records and registers, which in turn shaped how I perceived my world, and later it raised my awareness about the very fine nuances of humans' conflicts."

R.J: You wrote that you were holding "silhouettes of memory" wherever you went. What are these silhouettes? And are they still present in your work?

L.K: They will always accompany me; and so is the case with everyone, for that matter. Those residual silhouettes are deeply embedded in our subconscious, in forms of one-dimensional symbols, images, or motives if you wish (as Carl Jung writes in his 1964 book *Man and His Symbols*), when we come to recognize and outline those silhouettes they may act as triggers of obscure feelings, emotions, or traumatic incidents. Going through that state has contributed to my self inflicted stagnant stage, as though I was too weary to look these silhouettes in the eye. For a long while I managed to play a game of "hide and seek" with them, and made believe that I was over-occupied with prodding other curiosities, yet that enigmatic drive and its prompters kept nudging me to befriend them over new and unfamiliar games, on a surface of a painting. A short while later, and almost despite myself, I was driven again to be immersed in a painting which all my inhibitions were absent.

Like most artists, my perplexities are never done and captured. They keep presenting themselves from so many angles, and through different projects, bringing along more of my questions, they portray themselves by inexplicably resurfacing without my intention or intervention. For example, my curiosity about time and its faculties kept resurfacing in all of my past and present work, *Rosary Beads* (the Masbaha), to mention one. This particular wonder about what is time appeared repeatedly in a linear fashion. On other occasions, I found myself exploring through this object the "masbaha", the essence of time in its cyclical movements, whilst simultaneously conversing with the effect of centrifuging and the faculty of repetition, in the context of time and space.

Abacus.jpg **[4]**



[5]Lamees Khoury, Abacus 1990, oil on canvas, 200x160 cm
Courtesy of the artist

Balance.jpg **[6]**



[7]Lamees Khoury, Balance, 1994, mixed media, 270x160 cm
Courtesy of the artist

A few more motives that are of a recurring nature are flights of stairs, as well as letters and numbers, they have proposed strings which held together all the stages of my evolving work.

R.J: “Studying fine arts seemed to me as a magical path to take.” What did you mean by that? And what magic did you explore? Tell us about your art practice.

L.K: When I held a pencil for the first time at the age of 5, with the intent of drawing something to ease and distract myself from fear, I instantly felt that there is splendor and sanctity in the moment when our feelings, thoughts, and hands align in a magical dance of co-creating. That inequivalent energy I felt on that day, was utterly gentle and forceful, it permeated a sublime process through which art is born. I grew to fall in love with the acquired ability to tap into pure intuitions. Therefore, when it was time to choose, I had chosen a path where all my answers would be questioned, and where the flow and freedom of thinking resides, partnered with the continuous movement of energy, which is always on offer in the sphere of the arts.

An artist feels that all mediums and ways of expression are available to her, depending on the project at hand. There was a state when I had to transform some visions and images from 2D to 3D, and so I did. Consequently, my body of work ranges from oil paintings of all dimensions, to installations, as my first project, the Rosary Beads, had been. Other times, I am led to create small objects or sculptures, then I go on to stage them in a certain way. I would then take photographs of them to have a link to other works in progress. This theme was the essence of my work on the ”Ultimate Observer”. There is always a changing flow of understanding, as well as concepts, space and materials.

Spring Hill.jpg **[8]**



[9]Lamees Khoury, Springs Hill, 1992

Installation view of (back) wall painting, charcoal and glue, 180*200 cm, and (front) three stainless still pillars, 90*30 cm each, at Bogrshov Gallery, Tel-Aviv, 1992.
Courtesy of the artist

“I am awed by the premise that the margin of a straight line is where I meet my unfamiliarity, and that may be as expansive as a whole universe.“

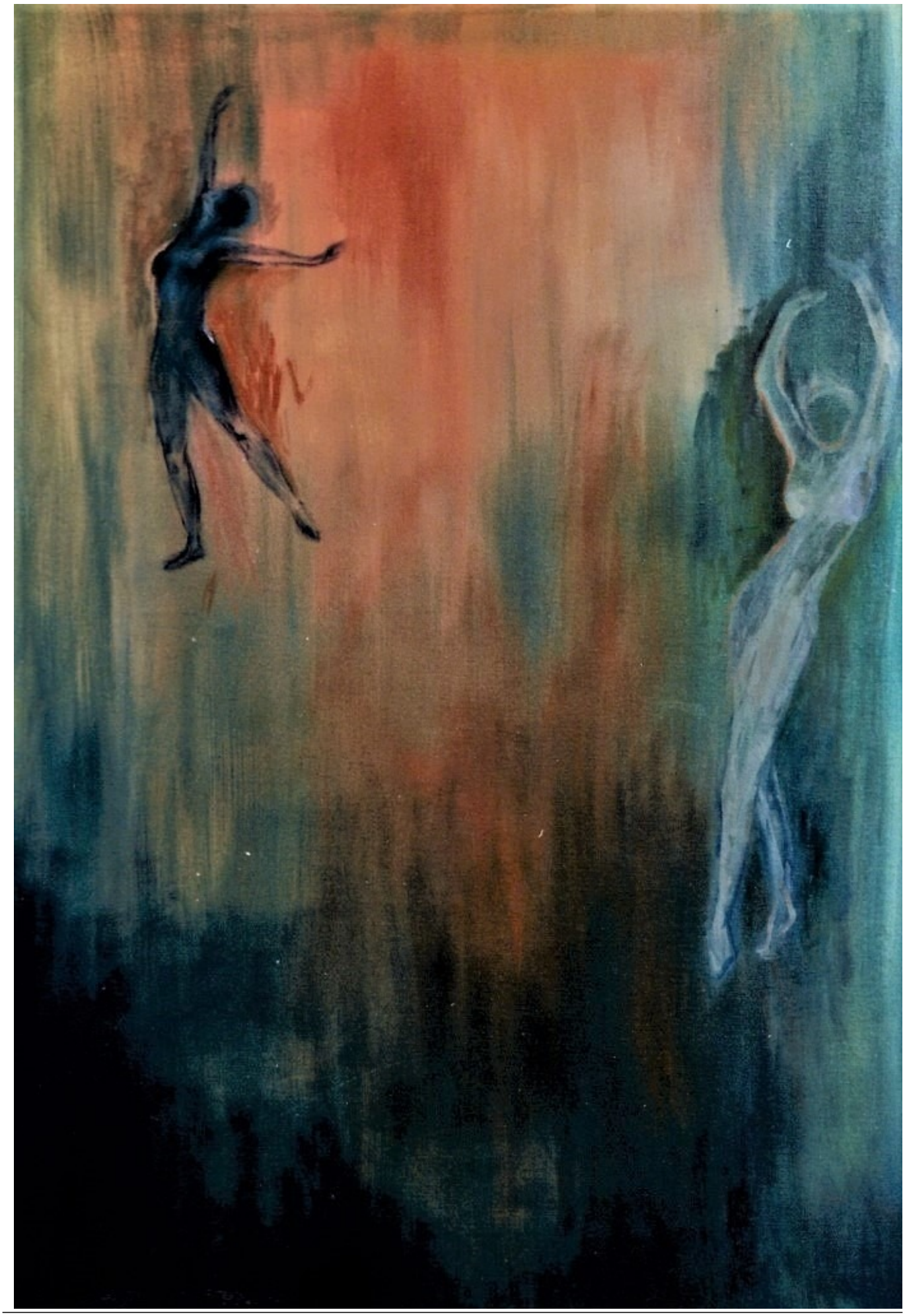
R.J: “In motion, thus e-motion.” Changing locations considerably fast, while stability is a safe and comfortable zone for most people. Why did you choose to convey that immense change by painting *Dancers*?

close.jpg **[10]**



[11]Lamees Khoury, Close, 2000, mixed media, 230x190 cm
Courtesy of the artist

Two more.jpg **[12]**



[13]Lamees Khoury, Two more 1999, oil in canvas, 190x90 cm
Courtesy of the artist

L.K: Dancers are the grandmasters of cultivating energy in motion. It is utterly puzzling, the human capacity to create remarkable movements and shapes with our bodies. This has always gripped my attention. I felt as though dancing is a subtle innate corner in my soul. Therefore, when I was on my voyages, I keenly experimented with the world of dance, and was desperately trying to fill that inexplicable void I carried around due to the absence of painting. After a while I discovered that although I enjoy and admire the act of dance, I could not express my state of being and what I have to voice through physical movement, and since dancing is the art creating shapes through space and time, I concluded that I had better examine my personal movement in space and time by creating visually and linguistically, to best express my intent.

R.J: How do art and science intertwine in your work?

L.K: Scientists and artists have similar research methodology and line of thinking. They first observe an external or internal state, then pose a question with many quandaries, and then subject that inquiry to thorough examinations, each with their own tools and instruments. The outcome can never be known in advance. Results are always open to further discoveries, which will bring them both back to the' “drawing board.” In both disciplines, if and when there is a final outcome or a creation, it is forever temporary and without end, yet it seems to enhance and have a profound impact on our collective evolution.

R.J: I know about another interesting research you’ve done that is not mentioned on your website, yet threads of it can be found in your recent works - it is about the letters of the Arabic alphabet. Can you tell us about that?

L.K: It is curious that you have used the word ‘threads’ in your question, because that is exactly how I perceive the involvement of my work, besides my fascination with threads as a moldable material. There is a cord of thinking underlying all of my past and recent work. It is the everlasting fascination with humankind and their symbols. In other words, I am intrigued by the origin of symbols and ancient scripts, where and when they were created? And how they turned into archetypes of understanding and modes of behavior? All of which was expressed along my path, from so many angles. At each point of interest I arrive at, I start embroidering my work, a stitch at a time, around that particular context.

“Sounds and Their Symbols,” my latest project, was born and nurtured during the time of COVID, when the world we knew had been deconstructed. At the end of that echoing noise, along came the magnificent silence that hovered over our lives. I am amongst many who have utilized the enormous restriction and reduction of movement to take a deeper gaze into our silence, and the impact of stillness, all resulting in clarity and higher awareness for many.

The pen (1).jpg **[14]**



[15]Lamees Khoury, The Pen, and What They Write 2, 2022, oil on canvas. 86x102 cm
Courtesy of the artist

Here.jpg **[16]**



[17]Lamees Khoury, Here, 2022, oil on canvas, 102*80 cm
Courtesy of the artist

You might agree to a certain degree that both visual and vocal languages are inseparable. As a unit

they both represent our primal need for contact and communication. Having them both completely silenced in 2020, I revisited my basic questions and their answers. Going back to the drawing board seemed crucial. One of the foremost was the question about imparting information to one another. How do we understand what is being communicated, or rather conveyed to us? And why does a simple sound we utter, or a scripted symbol, become an expressive tool of connection, or a source of distress? I am exploring through my art the pulse of the sound that transforms into the written letter, which in turn forms a complete, coherent language.

I first conducted the visual search for the shapes and colors of sounds, then I steered to a wider look into how sounds turned into letters, and more so how they acquired their visual form. Not least important was the enlightening fact I learned about Arabic letters and their meanings. Above all was the exciting reassurance I had gained through the process, that uttering certain sounds in a particular sequence undoubtedly has a calming and healing effect on our being.

You may have gathered that I have a fascination with the pulse of letters and the rhythm of words. I have also been carrying the trait of a story teller, and that is how my book *28 Letters* came to light - it stemmed from my latest work with paintings. Just like in my visual work, in a symbolic and a minimalist manner, I tell my story, intricately laced with 28 other characters, whose names start with a letter in the order of the Arabic alphabet.

- 1. All quotes are taken from Khoury's website [18]unless otherwise stated.

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