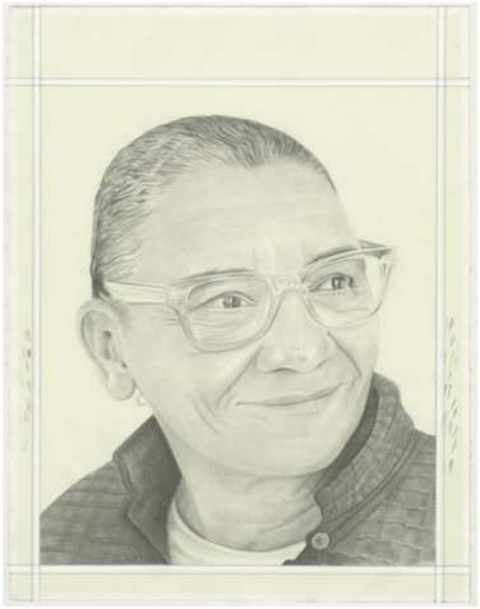
THE BROOKLYN RAIL

Art | In Conversation

Lubaina Himid with Dr. Omar Kholeif



Portrait of Lubaina Himid, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

It is an honor to be able to introduce Lubaina Himid to *Brooklyn Rail* readers. Lubaina Himid has become a very special person to me, as she is for many. In the time that I have come to know Himid, I have learned a tremendous amount about life—how we enter it, how we interrogate it, how we "perambulate" around it. By way of introduction: Lubaina Himid is a painter who uses the canvas to experiment not only with the language of traditional art history, but also to engage with the social sphere. Many of her works exist, as Himid has noted, in "the moment between a question and an answer," and in those interstices, audiences are invited to enter her exhibitions as worlds of their own making. Her "stages" serve as sites of active participation, sites to transmit the operatic feelings that emerge from lived experience. Here, the minutiae of daily life is amplified: it can be heard and seen, and importantly, *felt*.

Lubaina Himid is an artist who, yes, was the first Black woman to win the Turner Prize, but there's a lot more to her than that. She has been making waves in the realm of culture from an early age. A burgeoning cellist by age fourteen, a poet who won the *Observer*'s prestigious poetry competition at age sixteen, she is also known to have produced cut-outs for the storied restaurant, Tuttons, in Covent Garden after graduating from Wimbledon School of Art. Then at the Royal College of Art, as a graduate student in Cultural History, she summoned, through the British arts media, young Black artists to send her their work. She later opened and ran the Elbow Room, a space for experiments in Black art and creativity. She has pursued adventures and taken risks that very few artists would today. Although revered by many, practically, global recognition took its time. I wonder if, perhaps, her honesty was too much for 1980s Britons to handle. When she appeared in the TV program, *State of the Art* in 1987 on Channel 4, Himid spoke to why Black art

was important, but also different; but was it not *different enough*? Maybe, what the institutions really wanted to hear was a tale of exoticism?

In the mid 1980s, she curated several significant exhibitions of Black women's art. What did the public want, or indeed what did the so-called "art world" desire of her? Was it a market reverie? Himid was often inconvenienced despite her enduring commitment to artmaking. When she was the subject of a solo exhibition at the storied not-for-profit, Chisenhale Gallery, in 1989, who would have thought that a tube strike would affect the possibilities of her being seen, and able to celebrate her work with her peers. Today, Lubaina Himid is recognized for paintings on every medium—pictures that challenge and contour the field of human thought and expression. In her most recent exhibition, *Make Do and Mend* at The Contemporary Austin—the result of the Suzanne Deal Booth / FLAG Art Foundation Prize—audiences are privileged to enter an entirely new field of her artworks. It is an experience that is to be approached time and again; what will you take away with you? In the ensuing interview, I speak to Himid about the significance of painting, the tensions that she seeks to create in them, the invitations she extends to her audiences, and the places that continue to occupy the orbit of her imagination.

Lubaina Himid, *Chicken Seller* (detail), 2023. Acrylic on canvas, 96 x 72 inches. Courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali, New York.

Dr. Omar Kholeif (Rail): First, how was your day?

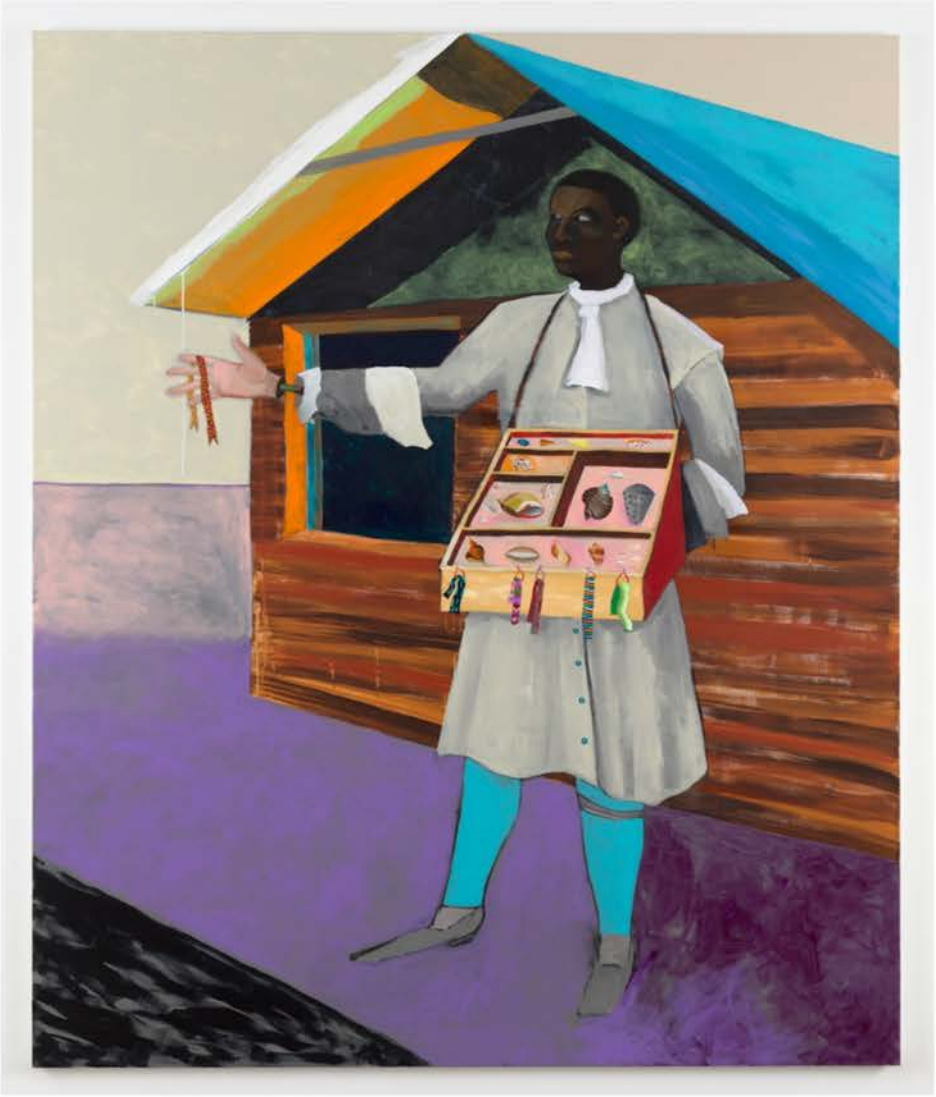
Lubaina Himid: Busy in a peculiar way. I was talking a lot this morning on Zoom, then I was wrapping prints with Magda Stawarska in the print studio. And now, here I am. I was thinking about painting, looking at my work as it was being wrapped, but I wasn't doing anything—well, I did a tiny bit of painting very, very early this morning, I got up. When I came to this studio, I thought, oh, I just need to do this tiny little thing with a painting that's on the go. But I only spent ten minutes in here, and then I got on with my day in a different way.

Rail: I'm happy to know that you got those ten minutes. When you left London, to move north, first to work at Rochdale Art Gallery and then to teach in Preston, it was a decision that you made because it was incredibly difficult to live in London. You spent many years, decades in fact, teaching full-time fine art as a professor at the University of Central Lancashire. But now you are emeritus, and in a sense, your time is yours to pick and choose what to do with. It would be illuminating to know how that liberation from the structure of say, the academic sphere, changed the way you engage with your process and the practice of making art.

Himid: It's interesting. It was Rochdale Art Gallery that I came to in the 1980s. The curators there were forward thinking in their promotion, encouragement, and nurturing of feminist artists and of Black artists. The difference between the way I work now and the way I worked when I was full time teaching is that now, I can't really blame anybody else for anything anymore. Which is unfortunate, because, you know, it was quite good to do that. [*Laughs*]. In a sense, in the way that I work—getting up, going to a making space in my house, even before I go to a making space in the middle of town, going to that making space, starting the day as the artist that I am, is what I've always done. That is absolutely no different.

I learned to do that from day one of teaching, so it didn't matter how busy that teaching day was going to be. I went to the studio first and knew that I was going to make breakfast and teach and go to meetings as an artist. Because I'd started the day as an artist. And I'd had a conversation with the work that was always ongoing. And that's no different. There's always something on the go. And in those days, I had a lot of shows, it's just people didn't talk about them as much as they talk about them now. Except, now, if I don't do as much work in the day, it's because I'm talking to curators, or I'm talking to gallerists or doing events, rather than listening to students.

Rail: Could you tell us a little bit about how this kind of interest from curators and gallerists, which has emerged primarily in the last ten years, might have affected the ways that you choose to present your work, or perhaps aspects of your life?



Lubaina Himid, *Talisman Seller*, 2023. Acrylic on canvas, 96 x 72 inches. Courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali, New York.

Himid: If you start to do something at eighteen, and then you carry on doing it in different sorts of ways, through different kinds of economic situations, and then you're doing it across thirty years of teaching—I kind of tend to do it in the same way. If you ask me a question about the work, I will tell you anything you want to know. If you ask me a question about my life, I'd say, well, how long have you got? How many hours have you got to listen to me talk? Because it's long and it's complicated.

Rail: People don't want to hear long and complicated stories?

Himid: I'm much more interested in talking about the work, and to hear about what the work made you do, or made you think, or made you remember.

Rail: You used to refer to yourself as more of a political strategist than an artist; that has changed over time. You would subsequently refer to yourself as a painter, who is also a political strategist. I would like to clarify what this means because the paintings on the ground floor of the Contemporary Austin are part of a series that you refer to as "Strategy Paintings."

Himid: I suppose I spent many decades, along with quite a few other people (artists and curators), trying to change the shape of British art history. I'm not sure we always knew that that's what we were trying to do. But in hindsight, I think that's what we were trying to do. In a very naive way, maybe in the beginning, in a kind of bitter and twisted way in the middle, but with a bit more energy, as more and more feminist art historians became interested in unpicking and unpacking what I seem to be trying to say with this work.

I think that all those years spent with many of us doing things in different sorts of ways, not always agreeing that this was the right way to do it—we all thought we had the right way to do it. And I'm very up for that because I think the more people that think they have the right way to do it in changing the landscape, the more likely one of those ways is going to work. I think as the years went by and as more people who were interested in art became more interested in this kind of work that many of us were doing, we became less and less interested in talking about that strategy. And more interested in being able to produce experiments, be they experiments with color, or experiments with paint or experiments with working on found objects.

And then therefore talking about that became, okay, who is brave enough to let me have a show, and not have this be about the color of my skin? Let it be about: What the hell are you doing there? How did you do that? Where did this come from? Why is it like that? What conversations are going on? And I began to understand a lot more. I mean, I've been listening to artists for thirty-five years. But I began to understand more and more that there was something liberating and energizing about speaking about the work, rather than speaking about the difficulties of showing it. And as many of us allowed each other to do that, the difficulties in showing it became less and less.

Installation view: *Lubaina Himid: Make Do and Mend*, the Contemporary Austin, Texas, 2024. Courtesy the Contemporary Austin.

Rail: At the Contemporary Austin, you have put a table in the middle of the gallery, which is occupied by a series of inspiring square paintings. When you look at the paintings, there's *always* something happening—the characters are convening around a table. Can we reflect on this set-up?

Himid: I think from the very beginning I was sure that I wanted to make a series of paintings of people trying to work out enormous problems. In this case there were twenty-four people all together in ten paintings doing this very thing about issues that are too big to talk about. Approaching questions such as: What are monuments for? Should we be favoring forests or farming?

very thing about issues that are too big to talk about. Approaching questions such as: What are monuments for? Should we be favoring forests or farming? What is care? Can care be poisonous? Big, big issues that are very difficult issues to discuss. I set myself this problem: How can I depict this challenge and show that it is people having these discussions, and that there are always other layers to these relationships happening while people are trying to argue for something; to discuss something, to get nearer, or to pull further apart. I wanted these multiple textures to reveal the different ways different figures were experiencing something at the same time. Each painting is in a room, so I wanted the set-up of the gallery to create a scenario where if you wanted to come do something simple, like have a discussion with your book group, or something more complicated, like discuss how the city of Austin is developing its real estate, or if you wanted to talk about how your university department is slightly under siege, you can do it in an environment where twenty-four other people who are living on the walls are also having big important meetings. So, the audience then becomes part of the paintings.

If you sit at a table, then you're at your own table. Maybe on your own, other people emerge who see you sit. You might choose to talk to people at this table. And at the same time, you can see the way that these other twenty-four people are acting out their conversations. I'm interested to know whether this aspect changes the nature of their meeting, while they are being surrounded by these paintings of other people having meetings. What did that mean to them? Was it just much nicer to have a meeting in an art gallery than it is in an airless office?

Rail: Or a corporate coffee shop.

Himid: Yes, indeed. Nicer, or more useful or less intimidating. Do you get to say different things because you can see that there are different layers of things going on in your conversation that may or may not be happening or immediately apparent in these other people's conversations? We're setting up a way for audiences to really feel part of the performance, part of the action.

Installation view: *Lubaina Himid: Make Do and Mend*, the Contemporary Austin, Texas, 2024. Courtesy the Contemporary Austin.

Rail: I'd like to pick up on the word that you just ended with: performance. Would it be fair to say that every exhibition that you stage is indeed a platform for performance or encounter?

Himid: Absolutely. That's the point of the table. I first used that device in some of my "Revenge" paintings from the early nineties. Then again, in a painting called *The Operating Table*, in 2019. You as an audience member can choose to engage or not, but the table is there; there's room at the table for you. There's room to pretend or to *actually* be there in the conversation. That is important to me. It's like when you're in a theater space as opposed to a cinema space where it makes a difference to the performance of the protagonists on the stage and the audience, to the drama, if one is performing for a Tuesday afternoon versus a Saturday night audience—one's reasons for being in the theater are different.

Lubaina Himid, *A True and Perfect Plot*, 2023. Acrylic and charcoal on canvas, 72 x 72 inches. Courtesy the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London.

There's an opportunity in a painting such as *A True and Perfect Plot* (2023) to watch these individuals being persuasive and not being persuasive. There is an opportunity to observe how they are using the objects on the table, the trees and animals, to discuss the difference between forests and farming. Still, on another level, you look out of the window to the side, and you will notice that they're having this discussion in a landscape of mountains and lakes. It's a bit like when you live in a town, and the traffic system doesn't work because it was designed by someone from another town. It's much better to try to solve something if you at least understand the challenge that you've got, rather than to assume that you know what the challenge must be, because you live in a different kind of world. This specific painting is perhaps the most active of the new "Strategy Paintings," where persuading is going on. Some of the most active trying not to persuade is going on, and the most oppositional environment in which the balance of discussion is tipping.

Rail: When I zoomed into the details of the painting—the colors in the backdrop—I became aware that there were competing temporal orders. I understood that there was a disjuncture between the topography that was in

front of these characters and the landscape outside. I couldn't quite tell if the space inside was completely imagined, but I felt invited to make that decision myself, because the question is in a sense in the title: What is a "True and Perfect Plot"? It is in a sense impossible. Were you particularly excited about *experimenting* with space and time in this work?

Himid: I am always interested in several things at once. Sometimes it is very important where the work will be shown. Every place has a history, and I'm interested in *that* history. The gallery in Austin once was a cinema, a department store; it has been all sorts of different kinds of things. As well as the place where the work is being shown, I am curious about the people who are expected to usually come to that place. Then I consider disrupting that place somehow.

In the New Museum in 2019, I made paintings called "Metal Handkerchiefs." They were created on very thin sheets of zinc and embedded in the walls of the New Museum. It was as if there was a blank wall, and you'd scraped away at it. Underneath the scraping were these metal paintings. With the paintings in the exhibition in Austin, I wanted them to feel to an audience as if they belonged in that space, so much so that they would hardly remember what was on view there the last time they visited. And the next time they come, there might be a trace or hint or breath or stain of what was there when my show was up.

Lubaina Himid, *Egg Seller* (detail), 2023. Acrylic on canvas, 96 x 72 inches. Courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali, New York.

When you're in the gallery with those paintings, there are certain gestures and facial interactions between the protagonists in the paintings, where I don't necessarily know what is going on. I think the protagonists sometimes *do* know what's going on. They know who's there, however, they quite often don't know who *isn't* there. I think that happens to us often in life. When we walk the street, or when we're in a room, very often we remember people in the room with us, even though they're not in the room with us.

Talking is very difficult for many people. Listening is very difficult for certain people. And so, the use of objects, which I love to paint, in painstaking detail, as opposed to the rooms, which are painted with a degree of exuberance, flamboyance even. And then there are these details that are painstakingly caressed and nurtured—that are crafted into being. I love to try to do all three of these things at once in a series of paintings, so that there are many entry points. I also want to get some kick out of making this work, so being very free with the color and liberal with the combinations is exciting. But then there needs to be some form of awkward tension, and that is where the people come in. As well, there needs to be some challenge. How difficult is it to paint a toy soldier? How fun is it to paint a lemon? There are specific things that I paint repeatedly, that I'm always trying to do better. Not more realistically, but better.

Lubaina Himid, *Divided Loyalties*, 2023. Acrylic and charcoal on canvas, 72 x 72 inches. Courtesy the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London.

Rail: I want to talk about *Divided Loyalties* (2023), and not simply because I think this is one of the best kettle situations I've ever seen you paint. Clearly, looking at it, there were people that have been painted out. When I read the title of the work in the gallery, I could not decide if the divided loyalties were between you and yourself, or between the two characters who have become ghosts. Despite the haunting aspect of this work, it still brims with life. Could you tell me what happened here?

Himid: It was a painting that was difficult to do. There were originally five people in the painting, and all these people were making too much noise. Nobody was listening. Everybody was talking. I was trying to finish this painting and Magda Stawarska, who works with me a lot, came into the studio, and she was talking to me, and I was listening, but I can't remember what she was saying, so I clearly wasn't listening as much as I thought I was. But she was talking and talking and talking and talking. It was one of those beautiful moments where I was listening, and I was making a visual picture of what she was saying. But it was so comforting because she was there, and I suddenly knew that *this was* the moment to paint all these people out. I just got a brush and I just started to paint them out. And she kept talking, and I kept painting, and then all the other people except this person were gone. But of course, they are still there. You can see the fingerprints on this person's arm. Because you can tell that those other people in the room were just too close. They were not keeping their distance from this person who was quiet, who was listening, who does have something to say. And I thought that these other people needed to have been in the room and then gone from the room. So they are there, but they're not there. They're there for this person. But the awkwardness and the tension are between the kettle and the glass because, of course, a kettle and a glass are of no use to each other. You pour something from a metal kettle into a glass, you don't have the glass anymore.

Rail: That violence is what I was curious about.

Himid: I took the object; I stole them directly from a Hogarth engraving. And the series is called "A Harlot's Progress." And the woman in question is in her parlor, and her slave servant boy has the kettle in his hand. A visiting suitor has the glass in his hand. I'm very interested in print, in engravings, in Hogarth, and in that juxtaposition of objects that go together, but are clearly useless. I made a painting many years ago called *Jug and Two Spoons* (1989). And of course, the jug and two spoons, they're no use to each other. It's very difficult to make use of the liquid in the jug with two spoons. They're sort of awkward and tense. The awkwardness and tension is between the objects. Which one will this person engage? The kettle or the glass? This is the moment of decision between the clamor and the decision between the objects.

Rail: You mentioned your partner and collaborator, Magda Stawarska. I've known you both to spend a lot of time in the print studio in Preston, at the university where you used to teach. Could you tell us a bit about what you do in that studio as a painter, and how important print culture is to you? And of course, we know that working with Magda is an important part of your practice, because we, you and I, and Magda created a show together in Sharjah entitled, *Plaited Time / Deep Water*, which next year will be traveling to Mudam in Luxembourg.

Himid: I think for the last fifteen or twenty years, Magda and I have had conversations about print, about how to push it around. We have interrogated how I'm constantly entranced by the flexibility; the possibility of what Magda does with ink—how she mixes colors that I can't mix, how she understands opacity, viscosity, and luminosity. I understood so much more about layering by looking at what she does and talking with her. In the print studio, the way we work has sort of changed in some ways in that now we're very often making a mark on the same surface. I will be painting, and then she will print over the top of that. And then sometimes I will paint over the top of that. But it's a conversation about what print can do, what gesture is, what layering is, what language is, what text is. And we're talking while we're making. If we're

in the print studio, I am sometimes standing still, and Magda will be pulling the print. In this space, we often speak about color, and how we might play with the images as she works with the print. It is very much a continuation of the conversations that we have when we're not making prints. And of course, she has her independent practice, but that's what I find interesting, as someone who makes work with sound, moving image, and paint as well, how we interleave through talking. And how the wisdom of all those experiences with various mediums is brought into the work.

Lubaina Himid, *Aunties*, 2023. 64 painted wood planks, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London.

Rail: I am fond of the way that you approach the subject of opacity and viscosity, as something that is embodied through the presence of the spectator. When I first ventured up the stairs of the Contemporary Austin, I happened upon your incredible installation *Aunties* (2023). It is made from planks of wood, but they're not really planks. They are myriad bodies. Things such as a fragment from a picture frame that's been appropriated into so many other objects. As I entered, I could not help but feel that I was in the belly of a ship—a traumatic enclosure. But I don't have any idea if that's what you intended.

Himid: I wanted to fill the room with the women that hang out, either in our houses, or at weddings, or at parties, or on street corners, or in back gardens, or on balconies, talking and solving the world's or their family's situations. They're the women who wonder why you're wearing that pair of shoes, why on earth you're marrying that person. They're the women who let you eat ice cream in the street when your mother won't. They're also the women who make you take your shoes off before you come into their house. They are the women whose upholstery is covered in plastic to make sure that when you put your sticky hands on the arm of the sofa, none of your stickiness is going to be left behind. They're the kind of women who occupy many young people's worlds. And they're not always the sisters of your mother or your father, they are just women that belong in your environment and in your world. They're also about how miraculously—goodness knows how this happens—I have become one of those people without realizing it.

It's about that moment of becoming, as well as about the memories of particular people. How women talk to each other about the wisdom that we have is quite particular. My intention was to create a space in which audiences

would come and recognize those groupings as people and people talking. Each of those planks is made up of bits of pianola, door, from a chest of drawers, and musical instruments—and more. Many of the fragments appear in different planks. You can see that these people are made of the same material but are not the same in any way. They don't look the same. Indeed, they are not the same. They are all the same length. They are all sort of the same width. I then painted them in groups that I thought I would then split up when I arrived in Austin, but then I didn't. I decided not to.

There are sixty-four planks, which is quite a lot. They are clearly very confident in their groupings. And they are asking to be listened to. That's why there are benches up against the wall in the gallery. We had an idea to put seats down the middle of the space because that's where seats usually go in art galleries. But when the staff brought benches out of one room and into this room, I felt right at the last minute that they needed to be up against the wall so people would sit on these benches and hear the answers from either side. Visitors will see other people on the opposite wall sitting on these benches, listening as well. Again, there's this kind of enveloping of an audience in the conversation and an invitation to have a conversation, as well as listen to what these women might be saying.

Lubaina Himid, *Posture Master*(detail), 2023. Acrylic on canvas, 96 x 72 inches. Courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali, New York.

Rail: There is a project that was realized recently in Sharjah, called *Dreamboats* (2023). It was your second participation in the Sharjah Biennial. When I asked you about the work recently, you mentioned something about making space for women in the street. I think it's an important point that links to what you have also achieved with *Aunties*.

Himid: When I was invited, I didn't want to have an exhibition in a showing space. I wanted to be in the street in a very confident way. I wanted to be part of people's every day. The team there worked incredibly hard to find empty shops where I could place these signs, to kind of also try to do things on very different levels. To be on the street in a very confident way. Everybody could read those signs. It would mean something, but of course, it would mean something different to every person that read them. They were always outside empty shops. In a sense, I was also trying to encourage, perhaps somebody who had an idea of opening a sweet shop or a fabric shop, to think, "I might just do that," you know, "I might just be able to change my life by doing that." I was sort of suggesting that your dreams could come true, by starting a business, I suppose, in one of these shops, or using them in a way that differed from how they had been used before. I also did not like the idea of being confined to a gallery environment. It felt important to be able to occupy, in a positive way, many of the streets in Sharjah, and to be able to speak to people who had come to the biennial, but also those people who were going about their daily business all the while.

Rail: There were fourteen signs, some of which were removed after the biennial, some were exhibited for longer. Curiously, the wall labels were not removed and probably remain in many of the streets. I recall walking down the narrow path of the souk in Sharjah, and someone was examining the wall label and asked another person: who is Lubaina Himid? As a spectator, the significance here is that you were able to be seen for who you are, without having to argue for it, or even contextualize it; it was implicit. It's "Here I am!" And the pictures on these are all of boats, because not only is Sharjah a port but also—as I understand—you paint boats when you're anxious. Is that correct?

Himid: Yes, that's right. After my Tate show opened, I was extremely stressed. And I painted some of the most meticulous, precise pencil drawings of boats that I've ever drawn or indeed painted. I just couldn't go out at all. And I just drew boats week after week after week. I get a great deal of solace from it.

Rail: And in art, some of us find our solace.

Contributor

Omar Kholeif

Dr Omar Kholeif, CF FRSA is an author, curator, cultural historian and artist whose ideas come to life in words. They currently hold the double-pronged position of Director of Collections and Senior Curator at Sharjah Art Foundation, Government of Sharjah, UAE.