

SUBJECTIVITY VERSUS SUBJECTION: *The Role of Women's Art in Contemporary Arab Society*

Although I have viewed beautiful and impressive works of art in a number of art galleries in Lebanon, Tunisia and Palestine over the last ten years, my most memorable encounters with art works in the Arab world occurred in unlikely settings: a lawyer's office and a doctor's clinic. In both cases, the art works I saw and admired were the creations of political prisoners and torture victims who had made ingenious use of mundane and simple materials--rocks, match sticks, the inside of toothpaste tubes, wrapping paper--to give voice to their indomitable spirits and their unquenchable thirst for freedom, dignity, beauty and humanity. The artists in both cases were neither well-known nor extensively trained in the fine arts. Rather, they were creative, sensitive and strong individuals who had found unusual ways to convey powerful messages under difficult circumstances. Their artistic creations were compelling and moving examples of art as passionate declaration rather than clever decoration.

To create a work is to make a very personal statement about one's innermost experiences, dreams, desires and emotions. To externalize one's private, inner world before a public audience requires even more courage, especially if the artist is a woman creating in a cultural milieu which has traditionally encouraged women's silence, submission and exclusion from the public realm. Yet, despite these risks, Arab women artists working in a variety of media are making their mark on contemporary Arab culture and society.

In the file section of this issue of *Al-Raida* we present some established and emerging women artists and their works. Whether painters, novelists, musicians or performers, these women have a passion to express and actualize their subjectivity, to reveal their uniqueness as distinct, creative individuals possessing definite opinions and feelings about the world in which they live. This affirmation and celebration of subjectivity and selfhood is played out against an increasingly bleak background of social, political and economic subjection of the Arab individual, whether male or female. Some of the artists we have surveyed in this issue expressed the hope that, by sharing their visions, concerns and dreams through their art work, they may be able to effect positive social and cultural changes. In confronting subjection with their own subjectivity, these women are redefining their roles, their relationships to others, their place in society and

their impact on social and political developments. Through their art, some are attempting to change the world "from the inside out" by encouraging others to see the world from new angles, to reassess their values and priorities, to call attention to dangers threatening not only the Arab world, but the entire human race, e.g., environmental devastation, economic injustices, psychological and political repression, and the dangerous cycles of warfare currently erupting all over the world.

Other articles in this issue of *Al-Raida* indicate the extent of the dangers, troubles and injustices to which individuals in Lebanon and other Arab countries are subjected. Nada Awar's moving article about the tragedy in Qana in South Lebanon last April and Ghena Ismail's report on a workshop concerning violence against women remind us that a lot of passion, effort, creativity and courage are required of women as well as men, to heal the wounds of our societies and pave the way to a just and healthy future for Arab women, men and children. The free and creative expression and sharing of our dreams, visions, hopes and values, whether through the arts or other media of communication, cannot but enable us to create a better future together.

The next issue of *Al-Raida* will be a special double issue focusing on the topic "Women's Rights are Human Rights: Perspectives from the Arab World." If you are interested in submitting an article, report or graphics for this issue, please do so before 1 October 1996.

Laurie King -Irani
Editor-in-Chief

Announcement

Al-Raida is looking for foreign correspondents to write stories on topics and issues of concern to women throughout the Arab world. If you are a professional or freelance journalist or researcher living in an Arab country, please consider submitting reports on legislation, events, conferences, debates and performances related to women and women's issues. If your article is accepted for publication, you will receive a payment of US\$100.