

# DISCOVERING AND NURTURING NEW TALENTS:

## *A Profile of Gallery Owner Amal Trabulsi*

By Wafa Stephan Tarnowski

*Epreuve d'Artiste*, Amal Trabulsi's art gallery, is now 17 years old — give or take one or two years of closure during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the long civil war. Her gallery is a synonym for professionalism, quality and refinement, and reflects much of Trabulsi's character. Tall, dressed in muted colors, and speaking eloquently in muted tones, Trabulsi is a much admired and respected artistic entrepreneur who disguises a formidable will behind a charming smile.

Beginnings, however, were not easy for Trabulsi. She needed a lot of determination and stubbornness to arrive where she is today: owner of a solidly-booked gallery where painters queue up for two years or more for a space and an opportunity to exhibit. Not a professional painter herself, but rather, a lover of art since childhood, Trabulsi says that she never imagined that one day she would be so totally involved in the art world. She began her involvement in art by studying architecture at the ALBA (the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts) in the 1960s. At the age of 18, she interrupted her college studies to elope with her fiancé in order to live a conventional bourgeois life in one of the more refined districts of Beirut. At the time, she says, it was the only means of escape from home and from the influence of a very domineering father who never wanted her to work, as well as the only way to live with the man she loved. She regrets her parents' narrow-minded attitude which pushed her to take such a hasty decision at such a young age. Although she does not regret the marriage or the children, she now regrets the limited choices available to her at the time, and believes that if she had been permitted to live out this love affair without having to marry the man, it would have saved her a divorce.

"When I left home," Trabulsi recounts, "I had no idea of what life was all about, nor did I really know what I wanted. I was in love; I wanted to live this love, so I had to get married. Soon after marriage, I began taking correspondence courses in Fine Arts from the *Ecole Universelle de Paris*, a very serious school with excellent professors who weren't available in Lebanon at the time. I went to Paris once a year to sit for my exams, and it was a very positive experience for me overall. It allowed me to work hard on myself and by myself. I did all of this while having children and raising them. I had one in the womb, one in the stroller, and one playing in the park, yet

I continued to study."

When the Lebanese war broke out in 1975, Trabulsi used her artistic abilities to help her husband run a children's clothing factory. "I used to design clothes and be responsible for the workshop. We had 150 women who worked for us and they all depended on my creations. It was a big responsibility for me. I had to invent a new model for them every day, or else they didn't have any work. So, I took it as my personal responsibility to provide work for these women. I was continually impressed by the women's positive attitudes towards their work and their conscientiousness in performing their duties. They had to punch-in at 8:00 a.m., but they never left at 4:00 p.m. sharp if I still needed them. Never did they say, 'sorry; my work is done. I have to go now'." From this experience, Trabulsi became aware of the very docile and patient nature of Arab women, and realized how much they sacrificed for their families. She recalls this time of sharing with these women with fondness.

As the war raged on, Trabulsi left for Europe with the children. "It was the first time I was alone in a foreign country. Suddenly, I didn't have to see the same films, the same exhibits, as everyone else. This trip to Europe made me realize that I was too closed-up within myself, and that I had made too many concessions." A clash followed, then a divorce. Trabulsi returned to Lebanon, a 34-year-old single mother of three teen-aged children. It was at this time that she met Martin Giesen, a Canadian professor and painter who was giving courses in art history at the American University of Beirut. Trabulsi recalls working on projects at the AUB Fine Arts Department while bombs were falling just outside the campus.

Dr. Giesen's contract with AUB had come to an end, and the only way that he would be able to remain in Lebanon would be to open an art gallery where he would introduce the Lebanese public to the works of famous international artists. Trabulsi, intrigued by the idea, agreed to become his partner. "During the war, decisions were often taken at the spur of the moment," she recalled. Giesen and Trabulsi travelled abroad to survey and buy works of some well-known international artists. They returned to Beirut, having spent all of their savings. For the opening night of the gallery, they did not even have enough money to buy good champagne, so they settled for the local variety, which was undrinkable.



That was in 1979, the year *Epreuve d'Artiste* was born. The gallery was located at that time in Clemenceau, a chic area of West Beirut. However, the war was still raging, and people were turning their backs on what was happening outside the safety of their immediate neighborhoods. In this atmosphere of insecurity and danger, the gallery did not receive a warm welcome. Trabulsi and Giesen discovered that an enormous gap existed between Lebanese and international tastes in art: the Lebanese wanted nostalgia, peaceful village landscapes and traditional sculpture and architecture. Giesen and Trabulsi realized that they had made the wrong wager, so they started to encourage young Lebanese artists to exhibit. To stay solvent, they were forced to sell off their valuable collection of foreign art, now worth a fortune, at very low prices.

By 1981, Beirut had become too dangerous a city for foreigners, so Giesen had to leave. Trabulsi bought up his share and started running the gallery alone. At this time, it had become extremely dangerous for people to cross the "Green Line" which divided Christian East from Muslim West Beirut, but Trabulsi made the crossing daily from her home in the East to the gallery in the West. "It became sort of a political statement for me," Trabulsi noted. "I was crazy; I crossed from Ashrafieh to Clemenceau, even under the bombs. If I took the Ring road on the way in, it might be closed by evening, in which case I had to take the port road, where I often was shot at by roof-top snipers."

In 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon and Amal had to close the gallery for a year and a half. During this difficult time, artists were anxiously looking for galleries in which to exhibit. There was no one to take care of them, so Amal decided to open *Epreuve d'Artiste* No. 2, in a garage in Kaslik north of Beirut. She brought Muslim artists to this Christian enclave, and when some people reacted negatively to this confessional mixing and mingling, she simply pretended not to understand. The gallery in Kaslik was very successful. Each new exhibit was a "happening," she says. Not many people could

have organized or enjoyed such an art event at the time, so they bought art to feel alive and to take some pleasure in life and beauty amidst a world steeped in death and destruction.

Finally, at the end of the war, Trabulsi opened *Epreuve d'Artiste* No. 3, situated in a nicely renovated basement at Rue Sursock in Ashrafieh, where life is punctuated by regular fortnightly exhibitions, opening every other Tuesday night. The exhibits include art work by young and old, women and men, new talents discovered and nurtured by Trabulsi, as well as famous names which bring prestige and a faithful clientele. Each year before Christmas, Trabulsi organizes an event she calls "*Les Artistes s'Amusent*," in which artists forget their usual medium of expression and let their imaginations run wild. They paint on furniture, ceramics, curtains, cushions, and make whimsical jewelry or sculptures. The resulting art works are put on display for sale, and many Lebanese purchase them for that special present for Christmas or New Year's Eve. Recently, Trabulsi has used the top floor of a war-damaged cathedral in the center of town to stage a very special painting exhibit, featuring special lighting of the cathedral from within and without, to the accompaniment of religious music. The opening night was indeed a memorable and moving event for the Beirut art scene.



Amal Trabulsi near a painting by one of her protégés

When asked about the artists she discovered, developed and encouraged, Trabulsi mentions at least a half a dozen reputable names: Jean-Marc Nahas, Ali Shams, Youssef Aoun, Robert Helou, Rima Amyuni (see her painting on the cover art of *Al-Raida* No. 68, 1995), Maya Eid and Ghada Saghieh. Commenting on why Lebanon has more renowned male than female artists, Trabulsi opines that it is not for any lack of talent among women artists, but rather, stems from the fact that women lose their single-mindedness, focused energy and time once they get married and have children. Their emotions and energies become divided between children and art work, whereas men, whether married or not, still have time, space, and focused energy to devote to their craft. Male artists in



Lebanon do not have to worry as much as women do about children and domestic matters, because women protect men from being disturbed. Men, therefore, end up giving their utmost to their art, while women leave behind the studio and retreat into the inner world of home and hearth to attend to others' needs. Trabulsi notes that one of the few Lebanese women artists who demonstrate the single-minded urge to create and devote her all to art is Rima Amyuni. The fact that Ms. Amyuni has not yet married or become a mother seems to prove Trabulsi's hypothesis.

One of Trabulsi's favorite women artists is Mary Kelly, an American painter who lived and worked in Lebanon in the 1960s, and who revolutionized many local artistic norms, either by reducing the shape of human bodies to their most linear expression, or by mixing cosmic subject matter with very minute, quotidian figurative details. She had the gift of moving the viewer, according to Trabulsi.

When asked whether she herself is still painting, Trabulsi responded that she has stopped because she is too much of a critic and self-criticism tends to inhibit

creativity. Instead, she leaves creativity to her protégés, with whom she has developed marvelous relationships of support and friendship, just like a family. Trabulsi is quite optimistic about the future of painting in Lebanon. She feels that the Lebanese have a lot to give; they are neither lacking in talent, potential, nor vision, and some have even been recognized and honored by Arab museums. She noted in particular the work of Youssef Aoun, whose style is reminiscent of the Spanish painter Tapies.

Trabulsi dreams of having enough money to be able to exhibit only the painters she herself believes in, but at present, she must make some concessions in order for the gallery to survive economically. Concerning her opinion of Arab feminists, it seems to coincide with her own self-appraisal: "It is a woman who has no violence in her discourse about men, who is not resentful about anything in her own life. It is a person who has maintained her femininity, her respect for men, and who has not tried to belittle them. However, if feminist principles are the same in the East as in the West, the attitude is different and the means to arrive at the same end are different, too."

*An announcement of a recent exhibition at Galerie Epreuve d'Artiste.*

galerie  
epreuve  
d'artiste

## NUHA AL-RADI

VERNISSAGE

MARDI 21 MAI 1996

18h00 - 21h00

L'EXPOSITION SE POURSUIVRA  
JUSQU'AU SAMEDI 1 JUIN

LA GALERIE EST OUVERTE  
DU LUNDI AU VENDREDI  
10h00 - 13h30, 15h30 - 18h30  
SAMEDI 10h00 - 13h30

GALERIE EPREUVE D'ARTISTE  
108, RUE SURSOCK  
IMM. LIVING - TEL : 01-201636



Nuha al-Radi, 1996 - huile sur bois - "Emira Khasthiyah"  
نهى الراضي - زيت على خشب "الاميرة خاستكية"

Nuha al-Radi, 1996 - huile sur bois - "Emir Fakhrredine II"  
نهى الراضي - زيت على خشب "الامير فخر الدين الثاني"

كاليري  
ايبروف  
دارتيس

## نهى الراضي

افتتاح

الثلاثاء 21 ايار 1996

الساعة السادسة مساء

يستمر المعرض

الى السبت 1 حزيران

تفتح الكاليري

من الاثنين الى الجمعة

من الساعة العاشرة الى الواحدة والنصف

ومن الساعة الثالثة والنصف الى السادسة والنصف

السبت من العاشرة الى الواحدة والنصف

كاليري ايبروف دارتيس

١٠٨، شارع سرسوق

ملك ليفينغ - تلفون: ٢٠١٦٣٦ (٠١)