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ABDULLAH's
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HAYFA ABDULLAH: *Field of Dreams*

Artist's First New York Solo Show Captures Intimate Side of Royal Upbringing

by Daisy Prince ■ photographed by Malú Alvarez

Even though H.R.H Princess Hayfa Abdullah Al Saud has just flown in 13 hours, she's full of energy as she talks about her commitment to her art, her passion for the Surrealists and her late father, Custodian of The Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah Abdulaziz Al Saud. In town to promote her first New York solo show, at the Stellan Holm Gallery from April 21 to May 27, Hayfa is happy to chat about her thoroughly modern artistic journey.

Hayfa was introduced to the world of painting in 2000 by Mona Al-Qasabi, a well-regarded Saudi artist.

After meeting Mona, Hayfa decided she wanted to pursue art as a career, but knew it would be impossible for her to go to art school in the United States. However, when another artist friend surprised her with the registration form for the online program at the San Francisco Academy of Art University in 2015, Hayfa signed up immediately. It was a like a door had been opened for her.

Hayfa obtained her degree in fine arts with a focus on Surrealism without ever once setting foot on the campus. She submitted online weekly artwork to her teachers and, like most art students, found the experience challenging but ultimately rewarding.

"I was a good student," she says. "I'm not a nerd in real life, but I am in the art world. They were tough on me and I'm glad for it. I can see the difference in my work from Module 1 to Module 15. It's like they were teaching different people. They push you hard and harder, but at the end you had amazing results."

Hayfa is lucky; she has a Lean-In husband, H.R.H Prince Abdulaziz Nawaf Al Saud, who was completely supportive of her decision to get a degree. Married since 2002, the couple has three children together—H.R.H. Prince Nawaf 9, H.R.H Prince Abdullah 6 and H.R.H Princess Noura 3—and they live in the second largest city in Saudi Arabia, Jeddah. A coastal place with a laid-back atmosphere, it is a well-known Islamic tourist destination and, according to Hayfa, "has the best light."

Abdulaziz and she are first cousins, a fact which Hayfa says Americans completely "don't get," but is pretty standard in Saudi Arabia. Having attended the same kindergarten, they met again as

adults in 2002 in Paris, and were later married in a small (for Saudi standards) wedding of 200–300 people, where the bride wore Dior.

It was Abdulaziz who encouraged her to find a teacher in Saudi and eventually to pursue her academic qualifications. A tall, reserved man who was educated in the U.S. and is the son of the former Saudi head of intelligence, he is clearly proud of his wife's achievements. He looks admiringly over all the pictures from the photo shoot and occasionally speaks up in the interview to add to a story or embellish a detail, never interrupting the flow of his wife's thoughts. They seem truly connected and her liveliness bounces off his reserve in a nice way.

Hayfa is a strong, vibrant person—much like her paintings. When you look at her work, it is easy to see why she is so influenced by artists like Frida Kahlo and Salvador Dalí. One of the most powerful works in the show is *Spray*, which was painted after her father's death. It depicts a blue-haired woman coming out of a spray bottle, screaming. Hayfa says she painted it because after her father's death she wanted to express the emotion bottled up inside her.

It would be difficult to overstate the influence Hayfa's father had on her life. She clearly idolized him and tells me over and over again what a strong supporter he was of women and women's rights. (By contrast, her mother doesn't come up at all in our interview, a fact I subscribe less to her lack of significance in her daughter's upbringing and more to the overarching importance of Hayfa's father). But even more than hearing her thoughts on his political leanings, it's much easier to get a sense of the man when she talks about the way he raised his children (who numbered 36 in total, 16 boys and 20 girls. Hayfa is his 15th eldest daughter.)

"He didn't spoil us with gifts. He wanted us to be independent, but was sweet and always wanted us to work harder."

She tells a story indicative of a man who believed in imparting good values. When she was 10 or 11, she was once rude to the palace phone operator, within her father's earshot. Her father overheard the tone of her voice, and after the call was finished said to her, "Do you think this is your home? These people are working for me and you may never,

creative direction by Emily Barnes ■ fashion assistance by Kacey Bennett

hair and makeup by Bobby Bujisic using Shu Uemura Art of Hair & MAC Cosmetics for Judy Casey Inc.



White gold and diamond "Love Knot" ring and one of a kind "No. 77" cuff with 18k white gold hinged black jade and large diamond star element set with a center old mine cushion diamond surrounded by old European cut diamonds, circa 1875, both by Verdura. Available at Verdura, 745 Fifth Avenue, Suite 1205, 212.758.3388. Chiocciolina white diamond and white gold earrings by de Grisogono. Available at de Grisogono 845 Madison Avenue, 212.439.4220, degrisogono.com.



Right: Multi-shape diamond flower motif earrings (Diamonds 27.08 cts), multi-shape diamond Bombe ring (Diamonds 25.42 cts) both by GRAFF. Available at GRAFF New York, 710 Madison Avenue. 212.355.9292, graffdiamonds.com.

Left: Allegra Hoop Earrings with 148 white diamonds set in pink gold by de Grisogono. Available at de Grisogono 845 Madison Avenue. 212.439.4220, degrisogono.com. Gold and rock crystal "caged" ring by Verdura. Available at Verdura, 745 Fifth Avenue, Suite 1205, 212.758.3388.



Above: Earrings from the "High Jewelry Collection" featuring 10.17 carats of diamonds set in 18kt white gold by Chopard. Available at Chopard boutiques, 1.800.CHOPARD, us.chopard.com.



ever talk to them badly. They worked hard to get their jobs and you are not going to be rude to them."

He made her call the operator back and apologize. Young Hayfa was in a state of shock: her beloved father had never spoken so harshly to her. To this day, the lesson has stayed with her, and Hayfa has been determined to bring her children up to treat other people well.

When I tell her it's a little hard to believe that the king was such a hands-on father with 36 children, Hayfa assures me this is not the case. "He was amazing. He made time to manage the government, he made time for his children and he was always fair. Once, one of my half-brothers had to have his tonsils out and was frightened of the surgery. My father told him that if he went through with it that my brother would receive a gift. Well, the day after the operation he not only gave a gift to my brother, he gave all of us in the same generation a present too."

Much as she reveres her father, Hayfa doesn't believe that her artistic talent necessarily comes from him; she believes it came from her older sister Noura, an artist, who tragically died in a car accident when Hayfa was 6 or 7. Hayfa adored the newly wed Noura and used to visit her every Wednesday after school. One day, Hayfa noticed a large painting in the living room, half woman, half lion, and was dumbstruck by it. She was mesmerized by the fantasy and imagination with which her sister had painted the picture. Sadly, after Noura's untimely death, Hayfa's family never

wanted to speak about Noura, even many years later. Nonetheless, as Hayfa says, "From that moment on, I wanted to be an artist. And then I just fell in love with a mixture of colors."

While the interplay of color was what initially drew Hayfa to the Surrealists, it was the fusion of dreams and reality and

how the artists played with them that keeps her fascinated. She loves the wild ideas: "It's unreal to have a boy born out of an egg," she says, "but I love the conflict of real and unreal."

As she sees it, her work is a conversation between herself and her imagination. "I don't want to tell you what I meant by this painting because, to me, it's like I'm putting the painting in a cage. Whenever you're going to see it, you're going to see it through your own eye, not through mine."

Hayfa loves to work on her craft, but when the day is finished, she's happy to set her paints aside, and not talk about brushstrokes into the night. She doesn't mingle much with other artists at home, which Hayfa puts down to her shyness, but she hints that it's hard to go to galleries because of who she is. Hayfa also seems to prefer the company of her family, she is plainly crazy about her children and Abdulaziz.

Not that her time as a wife and mother takes away from her dedication to her métier: she's in her studio every day. She seems pretty disciplined about her schedule. Five days a week, after she's helped

HAYFA IS A STRONG, VIBRANT PERSON—MUCH LIKE HER PAINTINGS. WHEN YOU LOOK AT HER WORK, IT IS EASY TO SEE WHY SHE IS SO INFLUENCED BY ARTISTS LIKE FRIDA KAHLO AND SALVADOR DALÍ.

get her children ready for school, she works. When they come home, she either goes with them to sports practice or she'll do errands until Abdulaziz arrives back from his day. In the evening they'll see friends and family or put on an episode of *Sex in the City*, one of her favorite TV series. She is a die-hard fan, to the extent she took the *Sex in the City* tour when she and Abdulaziz came to New York on their honeymoon in 2005.

Having had a very fixed idea of what the city would be like from the show, she was terrified that the New York of her dreams might fall short of expectations.

Fortunately, Hayfa found New York far from disappointing: she and Aziz had a marvelous time zipping around the city in taxis ("I love yellow cabs," she declares, "I feel like I'm in a movie."), staying at the Four Seasons, going to Broadway shows and trying restaurants galore.

The one aspect of the trip that cast a bit of a pall over their happy time was the specter of 9/11 looming in the background.

The couple worried about the kind of reception they might receive when they told New Yorkers where they were from. "I kept wondering if we should apologize or say we were from a different place, but Abdulaziz said, 'No, we're Saudi and we are going to tell everyone we're Saudi.' What happened to the Americans is what happened to us years and years ago. The terrorists have been killing Muslims, killing their brothers and their families. They aren't stable people. They have hijacked our

religion and we hate them for that. They damaged our country before spreading violence to the rest of the world."

After all their trepidation about how New Yorkers would react to meeting Saudi Arabians, New Yorkers received the news in much the same way they react to anyone from out of town: with a shrug of polite indifference.

As our conversation draws to a close, the last thing to talk about is that the net proceeds from the sale of her pictures will go to

the Child Mind Institute, a nonprofit organization dedicated to transforming the lives of children and families struggling with mental health and learning disorders. When one of their children was diagnosed with ADHD, the Child Mind Institute was instrumental in helping them, and they want to give back.

As Hayfa and Abdulaziz get ready for their dinner, she changes into her New York street clothes: heels, tan trousers and a loose blouse. As they go, they could be any other couple in town for a weekend away. ♦



Left: *Mahjoob*, 2015, oil on canvas, 57 x 33 inches

Below: *Hookah*, 2015, oil on canvas, 57 x 33 inches



Spray, 2015, oil on canvas, 43 x 57 inches

