

# KUBRA KHADEMI

From the Two Page Book  
 “حکایت های کتاب دو ورقی”  
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Kubra  
 by Atiq Rahimi

What inhabits her, the young Afghan artist Kubra Khademi, I asked myself. What makes her work so carnal, profane and bold, yet so ethereal, sacred and extraordinary? Her childhood? For sure. The history of her country? Also. As soon as I cross the threshold of her studio, I forget all my pressing questions; my gaze is captured by her painted ochre figures and my ears by the tales she recounts in her wonderfully lilting Persian, our shared mother tongue. It strikes me that she is not inhabited by anything at all, that it is she who inhabits her creations. She inhabits her works, in shadow from her childhood and bodily from her present.

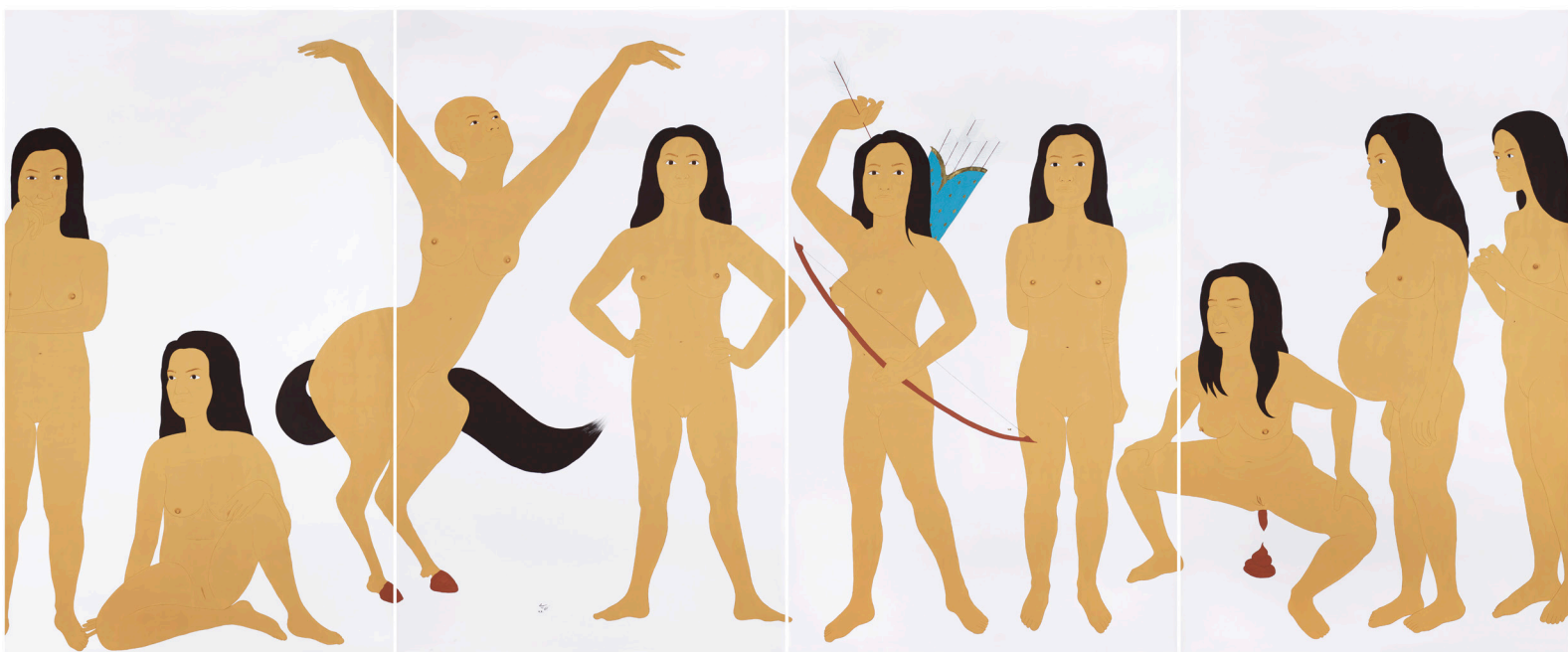
Standing over her huge paintings spread out all over the floor, she tells how she keeps revisiting a scene from her childhood: her innocent look meets for the first time with the nakedness of the women in the women-only public hamam of her village at the lower end of the Bamyan Valleys. The bodies of those women are her imaginary models, nourishing her work across time and borders. They are neither forgotten nor invented. She knew them in the flesh and blood, observed them so as later to draw them: timid, childlike, secret drawings to be kept hidden from her parents. With a degree of devilry she tells me how she hid her nude drawings under the mattress, until the day her mother found them, tore them up, and punished the budding artist; the same mother with the penchant for breaking every taboo in the book by employing the crudest of vocabulary in conversation with her own girlfriends. It was a counterpoint that inspired Kubra Khademi, whose work celebrates the maternal body and the dilemma of desire and constraint associated with it.

Her work endows her mother with a carnal, earthly, human body, but a shadowless one, volatile, as it were. And then that body suddenly becomes ethereal and utterly weightless, even in “*Première ligne*”, which depicts a woman – her mother, perhaps? – “exonerating” (or relieving) herself. This is extraordinarily audacious in a culture that prohibits the depiction of the body in such organic and intimate terms.

Born in a region of Afghanistan of outstanding natural beauty, Kubra Khademi for me embodies the spirit of the civilisation that held sway in these valleys for centuries before Islam, a civilisation that witnessed the coming together of two great cultures, those of Greece and of the Indian subcontinent. It was this coming together and the cross-fertilisation and cultural symbiosis it entailed that gave birth to Gandahara artforms, all of it lying dormant for centuries in the region’s deepest recesses and in the memory and hearts of its people. It is those forgotten expanses that she inhabits through



Kubra Khademi, *The Two Page Book* "کتاب دو ورقی"  
 150 x 114 cm gouache and gold leaf on paper. Production Fondation Fimincio



Kubra Khademi, *Première ligne* "خط مقدم" quadriptyque, each panel 250,5 x 150,5 cm gouache and gold leaf on paper Production at Fondation Fimincio

her art and her body. But inspiration comes also from Islamic poetry, miniatures, manuscript illumination and calligraphy. Without even a hint of “world art” syncretism about it, Kubra Khademi’s work is both deeply authentic and disregarding of the spatial and temporal boundaries that separate cultures, artforms and materials. It embraces human intimacy where the human quintessence lies, and so the language of her creations is universal.

Her paintings echo the whole gamut from naïve art to sophisticated Persian miniature painting, some even alluding to Japanese prints. She has an interest in Persian calligraphy too, as in her illustration of a tale of “zoophilia” by the great Rumi. The story is tale 59 of the *Masnavi*, a tale that Rumi likened to the Koran. It relates the story of a woman who made love to a donkey.

This is unquestionably sacrilegious in the countries where Rumi is venerated as a prophet; no-one dares offer so profane an interpretation as Kubra Khademi. The scene, which represents the poem’s most pornographic passage, is a perfect and faithful illustration of Rumi’s words. It is devoid of *scandale intime*, devoid of provocation, yet replete with it. It’s an innocent universe of illusion and allusion that takes me to another dimension, that of the Persian miniature, which captured entire worlds and induced in us a sense of *ahyran* (wonder) at its beauty.

Realism banished, and in its place splendid paradisiac colours; shadow banished too, a divine light gently suffusing everything;



In the Realm "در قلمرو" 188 cm x 150,5 cm  
gouache & gold leaf on paper  
Production at Fondation Fimincio

human bodies absolved of the suffering induced by their heaviness on Earth; faces similar to each other, round with slanted eyes; sparse of emotional expression, the language of silence spoken universally, no crying out, no sense of pain. Even scenes of violence were devoid of drama, with serenity, peace, eternity in its stead. Movement was absent too. “Tamed by the image,” as a Persian poet described it, everything suspended in the time and space of the blank page. A mystical and metaphysical attitude, as I would call it, to be found throughout the classical literature of the Middle East in epic and romantic poetry alike.

Kubra Khademi imparts an “erotic” dimension to this *suspended world*, where the naked bodies of women turn out to be akin to those of naked fallen angels. It’s an act of subversion against the religious and social morals of her country, which see the body as a perishable envelope of dried clay and petrified mud. Nudity is a sin, and everything associated with it too: desire, sex, sensuality. The body is admonished, imprisoned, hidden away, unlike in the two Greco-Buddhist civilisations wherein even the deities were naked, sexual, amorous.

Such are the underlying strata of the valleys where Kubra Khademi came of age.

The bodies she depicts are forbidden shadows there: bodies banished and ostracised, whence their suspended state.

Similarly, the style of calligraphy Kubra employs is called *Nasta’liq*, meaning “suspended”.

In fact, the entire world Kubra Khademi inhabits is

suspended. She inhabits her suspended world through her art, but also through her life as an exile. Her wanderings began in childhood and have continued ever since, and as for anyone living outside their homeland, reinvention of self has punctuated her life. Not entirely unlike Rumi, her favourite poet, who opens the great Masnavi with the following poem on exile:

*From reed-flute hear what tale it tells; What plaint it makes of absence' ills:  
«From jungle-bed since me they tore, Men's, women's, eyes have wept right sore.  
My breast I tear and rend in twain, To give, through sighs, vent to my pain,  
Who's from his home snatched far away, Longs to return some future day.*

....

*Who's separated from he who speaks falls mute, Even if he has a hundred melodies.*

Rumi had just turned twelve when he left with his entire family for today's Turkey after the Mongol horde attacked his home town of Balkh in the north of today's Afghanistan.

Some interpretations describe this poem as addressing the original experience of exile, or the infant's separation from the body of the mother. The reed-flute, cut from the jungle-bed, cries as does the infant whose umbilical cord has just been cut.

Birth may well be the original experience of exile, but what remains of it in memory apart from the trauma deep inside and the scar on our bodies?

For Kubra, the body of the mother-woman is both her land of origin and her land of refuge through the trials of her proscribed life. With its freedoms, its violence, its joy and its sorrows.

*A woman's nakedness  
carries more wisdom than a philosopher's teachings.*

Paul Éluard

*\*Nasta'liq: Whereas Arab calligraphers found their inspiration in the traces left by horses in the desert sands, the fifteenth century Persian calligrapher Mir Ali Tabrizi claimed to have been visited in a dream by Imam Ali, who told him to observe geese in flight and to base a new form of calligraphy on what he saw. The Ta'liq style of calligraphy emerged as a result, with each part of the goose's body becoming a letter. It was an ingenious way to loosen the grip of arabesque artistic styles: by invoking the name of Imam Ali and inventing the story of the dream, the calligrapher avoided sinning against the sacrosanct rules laid down by the Arab aesthetes who held religious and political sway there at the time. The invention of the new style brought about great changes in writing. Calligraphy had previously been highly geometric, with letters following abstract, rigid and static forms. The new Nasta'liq style was more sensual, more fluid, and more poetic; Persian calligraphers were more inclined to set down poetry than verses of the Koran. Lending the sacred letters clarity, inflection, carnality and body: what a daring feat!*

Atiq Rahimi

## ABOUT KUBRA KHADEMI

Kubra Khademi was born in 1989 in Afghanistan. She lives and works in Paris. Through her practice, Kubra explores her life as a refugee and a woman. She studied fine arts at Kabul University, before attending Beaconhouse National University in Lahore, Pakistan by UMISAA. In Lahore she began to create public performance, a practice she continued upon her return to Kabul, where her work actively responded to a male dominated society by extreme patriarchal politics. After performing her piece known as *Armor* in 2015, Khademi was forced to flee her home country. She is now exhibiting her works worldwide and was given the title of Knight of Art and Literature in 2016 (Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres) by the Ministry of French Culture. Since 2017, Khademi is member of Atelier of Artists in Exile in Paris & 2017-2019. In 2019, she was nominate in Revelations Emerige, before wining the 1% award of the city of Paris. Kubra Khademi is in residency at Fondation Fiminco and laureate of the Salomon Foundation Residency Award 2020.

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