

## **Media Interview: 'BREAKING THE VEILS'**

### **A view to transcend religious borders**

**Friday, November 2, 2007**

**An interview with Prof. Khalid Khreis, by Miriam Cosic, Arts Editor, The Australian**

**Jordan is showcasing female artists living under Islam, writes Miriam Cosic | November 02, 2007**

KHALID Khreis is an optimist. Sort of. The Jordanian artist and museum director is confidently talking up the power of art to transcend borders, promote understanding between cultures and allow potential enemies to see each other as dignified fellow humans worthy of respect, even admiration. Is he optimistic, then? He takes a moment to answer.

"Before eight years ago, yes," he says, then pauses. "At that moment we said, 'We will finish with this problem and everything will be OK.' Now, I don't know ..." He trails off, and sighs.

In 2000, the Arab-Israeli peace talks still seemed realistic. Israel pulled out of Lebanon. But later that year the second intifada ignited. Then came September 11, 2001, the invasion of Afghanistan, the war in Iraq.

Although Jordan is calm -- "Thank God," Khreis says, and the sentiment sounds heartfelt -- and is tolerant of the Christian and other non-Muslim faiths in its midst, the region around it roils. Jordan borders Israel, including the West Bank, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Iraq. There are one million Iraqi refugees in Amman. They are only the most recent arrivals: Palestinians make up more than half the Jordanian population.

When Israel invaded Lebanon earlier this year, the images of wounded children he saw on television drove Khreis back into his studio. He worked off his feelings for nights on end, producing a triptych which, he says, is very strong. "It was a need; I had to do something," he adds. These are hard times for a man whose main purpose in life these days is to promote peace between East and West.

Khreis was in Melbourne last week to open an exhibition from the Jordan National Gallery of Fine Art, where he is director general. The exhibition, called *Breaking the Veils: Women Artists from the Islamic World*, contains 68 art works by 51 artists working in 21 Islamic countries, from Indonesia to the United Arab Emirates, curated from the gallery's collection. Not all the women represented are Muslim -- there are also Christians, Hindus and Buddhists -- but all live in Muslim societies and Muslim culture has formed their world view.

The show was put together in 2002 and inaugurated in Rhodes, where it was opened by Queen Rania. It has toured throughout Europe: Melbourne is the 17th city to take the show.

Curated by Princess Wijdan Al Hashemi, who founded the gallery in 1980, and hosted in Australia by the Interfaith Centre of Melbourne, it is intended, among other things, to show the diversity of attitude and expression in different Muslim regions and to confound stereotypes of women. Indeed, in Jordan, Khreis says, there are more female artists than male.

Covering the gamut from abstraction to socio-political comment, in paintings and etchings, the show has a wider perspective than feminism.

"It's not just the veil of women but the veil we have, each one of us; the masks," Khreis says. "We have to take these masks off and be honest with each other. The people in our countries have a bad image of Western people and in the West it is the same for us.

"I think with these cultural activities, art activities, we can change these ideas. We have to do this; as artists, it's our obligation."

Khreis studied in Cairo before earning his PhD in Barcelona: his thesis was on Arabic calligraphy and its function in Islamic art. He met his wife there, a Spaniard who is also an artist. One of their daughters is studying fashion design in Barcelona, the other the performing arts in Bournemouth, England.

Between his family and his day jobs -- Khreis is also professor of painting in the faculty of arts and design at the University of Jordan -- he has to crib time for his own art when he can. He goes on jags, working every night until two or three in the morning for weeks on end. "I am travelling too much, and stability is very important to the artist, to spend hours working," he says. "You cannot have the inspiration only thinking; inspiration comes when you start to work."

That sentiment could apply to the many Iraqi artists who have sought the peace to think and work in exile. They are helping to swell the Jordanian art world, which has grown rapidly since the 1990s, Khreis says, both in terms of the number of artists practising and the size of the art market, and to make Amman an artistic centre in the Middle East.

When he took over running the gallery in 2001, Khreis immediately set about extending the premises -- there are now two buildings, joined by a sculpture park -- and consolidating the gallery's mission. It constantly sends exhibitions to Europe and hosts exhibitions of European art in Amman. As soon as he returned to Amman from Melbourne, Khreis was off to the south of Italy to prepare for a Jordanian culture week.

There is less commerce with the gallery's Arab neighbours, however, perhaps because the dialogue is less pressing, and none, Khreis admits, with Iran. Some Jordanian artists have shown in exhibitions in Tehran, he says, but as individuals.

Breaking the Veils: Women Artists from the Islamic World is at Span Galleries, Melbourne, until November 9.

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