

## Layan Shawabkeh

By Tina Sherwell

The Palestinian artist Layan Shawabkeh, the winner of the A. M. Qattan Foundation's Young Artist of the Year 2008 Award sadly passed away in December 2009 at the age of 23. Despite of her short artistic career, she left behind a remarkably powerful caliber of work.

Her work in principal explores the female body, as it is sculptured by the experience of loss. The forms that Layan articulated in her paintings evolved from a large series of drawings that developed in her sketchbooks, and documented the different physical and psychological states in their manifestation in the female body.

Layan's paintings explore the presence of absence within the female form via representations of the experience of loss, grief and pain which transform the body. She also explored the complex relationship between self and body. For instance, her latest work *Loss*, which consists of paintings, explores the experience of alienation from within the female body and the endeavour to understand its transformations and mechanisms, both natural and unnatural. *Loss* engages in an interrogation of how the female psyche comprehends the space of body, and in particular the space of the womb, which is vividly portrayed there as a fleeing figure looks aghast at her form in horror and with an absence of recognition as to whether this is her body. However, it is not only 'loss' as experienced with the disappearance of someone or something held dear but the potentiality of loss, the loss of 'never having' as imaged in the void of the womb, which echoes a collective loss that is the inheritance of Palestinians; a loss which is etched and engraved on the body, contouring its form. In brief, her drawings were informed by images of loss in Palestinian society, found daily in newspapers as well as in retrospective personal experiences and pain.



*Absorption, Loss Series*  
Acrylic on Canvas, 160 x 160 cm



*Ladies of Gaza, Loss Series*  
Acrylic on Canvas, 243.9 x 233.7 cm

Yet her works do not only draw inspiration from her personal and Palestinian experience. She conveyed a strong interest in the history of painting, rigourously researching and reading on the subject. She had a particular interest in modernist artists such as Pablo Picasso and Frida Kahlo, among others. In her monumental painting *Ladies of Gaza* Layan makes direct reference to *Mademoiselles D'Avignon*, by Pablo Picasso which during its time challenged the representation of the female figures, who are not shown as desirably object but who confront the audience with their poses and gazes. The *Ladies of Gaza*, are naked and vulnerable, their bodies worn and weathered from the burden of over reproduction and loss. Their inflated forms appear artificial; almost as though they are separate entities from the female body. Their skin has become alien in colour; their breasts sag as beauty has vacated them and they appear to have been stripped of their sexuality by the magnitude of loss that they embody. It is as though the inside has been turned out, and the voids laid bare.

Layan's work is significant to consider, in light of the above, as distinct from the female form that has typically been represented and glorified by male artists in popular Palestinian nationalist art of the 1980's and 90's. Palestine was commonly imaged as the 'motherland and most typically 'figured' as the monumental woman in traditional costume, who reproduces and nurtures the nation. Layan explored a very different perspective of the female, focusing on the experience of the female body, making bold strides in questioning the Palestinian female representation as such.

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*Birth, Loss Series, 2008*  
Acrylic on Canvas, 60 x 80 cm



*Barzakh, Loss Series, 2008*  
Acrylic on Canvas, 145 x 190 cm