

INTERVIEW



Mona Trad's paintings depict women taking pleasure in leisure activities, such as smoking narghileh (left) and sunbathing nude (right). Lately, in a nod to Lebanon's endangered cultural heritage, Trad has begun framing her paintings in old windows (below).

Images of real women highlight real inequality

Painter Mona Trad's 'Life Is Beautiful' uses colorful humor to assert the rights of Arab women

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BYBLOS: It could be any balmy Saturday evening in the summer. Beirut's well-toned, well-coiffed set is milling around one of Lebanon's poshest beach clubs, Edde Sands, munching on finger sandwiches and chatting about art. But interspersed among the usual suspects is a smattering of scantily clad and, shall we say, zafiq (i.e. fleshy) women.

One curls up seductively on a sofa to read the poetry of Omar Khayyam. Another bares her bulging tummy in a traditional belly-dancing outfit. Another savors a narghileh. All of them are relishing these private, pleasurable moments, oblivious to the collective gaze of those milling around the surrounding cocktail party.

The occasion is the opening of Lebanese artist Mona Trad's latest exhibition, and these Rubens-esque women are her painterly creations. Although they are only brightly colored, two-dimensional figures rendered in oil on canvas, to Trad they represent the true essence of Arab femininity.

"I'm not concerned with the anorexic, silicone women. You know, driving big cars in high heels. I care about a more conservative woman, the genuine oriental," explains Trad, a petite, bubbly, self-described feminist, speaking a few days after the opening in the Tabaris studio she shares with her 27-year-old daughter, who is also an artist.

Even by liberal, Western standards, Trad's latest subjects are far from conservative. But for



the sake of viewer sensitivities, she has divided the paintings for her current exhibition, entitled "Life is Beautiful," in two. The nudes are on display at Edde Sands, an exclusive, Cannes-style beach club that sprawls along the coast of this ancient port city and plays host to its own fashionable flesh fest every weekend. Works featuring more modestly attired women are hung in Edde Yard, the more public of the two venues located in a labyrinthine, still operational souk.

As with previous shows, Trad says "Life is Beautiful" deals with the "authentic" oriental woman and the unfair hand she is dealt in Middle Eastern society — whether she is a field worker in the Bekaa or a wife in the Gulf.

"I think that women in the bourgeois society are trying to [disguise themselves]," she

says. "Maybe it's easier to be a woman in Lebanon. Maybe our society is more permissive. But still the laws and rules are the same and women don't have the rights they should have. If I die my children can't inherit my nationality. That is not right."

|| 'I'm not concerned with the anorexic, silicone women'

Sometimes Trad chooses to present subjects that are at odds with their context, exhibiting nudes in Dubai, for example, or images of lower-class rural women in urbane Beirut.

As she sits in her Ottoman-era atelier, discussing the decline of culture in Beirut and dropping references to the

bourgeoisie like an Orientalist might talk about Arabs, one is tempted to dismiss Trad's concerns as champagne socialist posturing. On what authority does a privileged, French-educated woman speak of the plight of a poor, uneducated woman in the Bekaa?

Well, for one thing, her husband is from the Bekaa. (He is Sunni. She is Christian. They married in 1975, and they spent the years of Lebanon's Civil War living in Cameroon.) For another thing, she has done her research. She has spent many nights with village women in the Bekaa, listening to their stories and jotting them down (at first they thought she was a journalist).

"Who cares about women in the country?" asks Trad. "Nobody cares about them. Women don't care about them, as long as they have their dresses and their high heels. [A woman in rural Lebanon] works all day long, has I don't know how many children and when she does her cooking she's the last one to eat. But she takes it all with a sense of humor. Like a philosopher, that's life."

Trad's sense of humor is another quality that lends her work credibility and makes her art appealing. Though she readily admits that her paintings have a social message, she embraces the dual potential of her medium — using it as a political soap-box and a leisurely diversion. Trad communicates her points in an ironic, tongue-in-cheek way.

"This is a very serious issue — the rights of Arab women," she says.

"But I prefer to talk about it in a funny aesthetic way. This is my way of being — laughing

about serious things and my painting is like me, fresh."

What's more, and at the risk of oversimplification, Trad's work is nice to look at. One long-time fan told *The Daily Star* at the opening that she likes Trad's paintings because they are amusing.

"Don't you just love her stuff?" asked the Pucci-clad guest, pointing to a huge canvas depicting two large women lying naked and supine on a beach blanket.

"I mean usually fat women are not usually very attractive, but Mona makes them pretty."

Her figures are flat and one-dimensional. Her contours are made from bright colors rather than shadows. And her art historical influences are crystal clear — Gauguin (without the tribal voyeurism), Matisse (without the elongated figures) and the artist Trad considers "the god of painting," Ingres (minus the idealization).

Also crystal clear in her art is the impact of the Civil War and what Trad refers to as the "savage" reconstruction of the country, something which, she adds, "makes me suffer."

"Forget about politics," she says. "Something is going wrong with our society. People say after wars, society is always very nouveau riche, and the nouveau riche have nothing to do with culture, even if they try." Trad covers her mouth with her hand and stifles a laugh. "I shouldn't say that, the nouveau riche will not by my work anymore."

Mona Trad's "Life is Beautiful" is on view at Edde Sands and Edde Yard through July 24



Real women have curves

Mona Trad paints full-bodied women taking pleasure in private moments. While her works are pleasing to the eye, they also expose Trad's tongue-in-cheek humor. **Page 12**