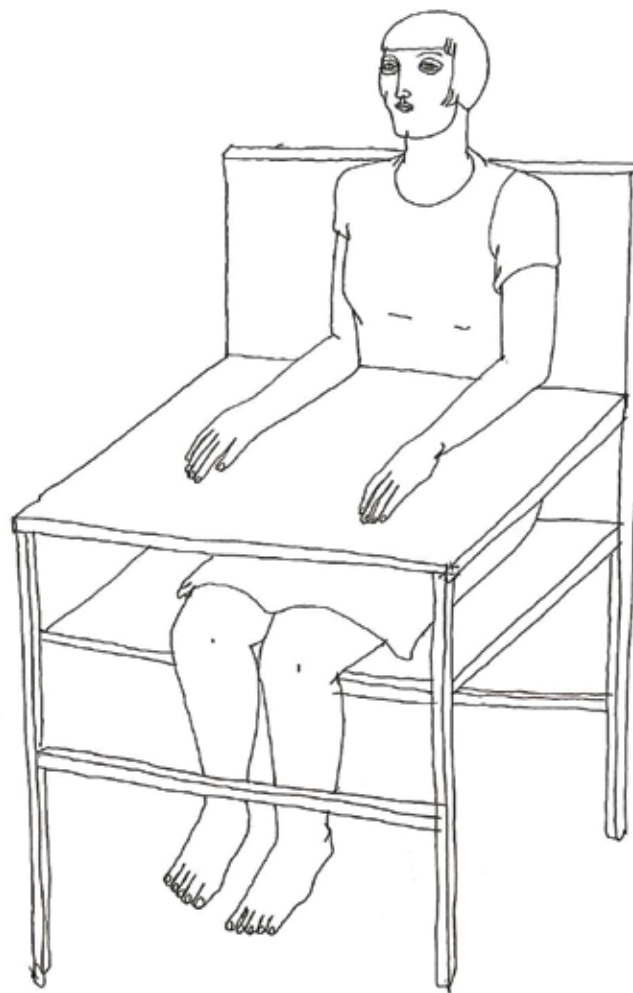




THESE PRETTY *GREEN BULLETS*

GHADAH ALKANDARI





confined to this chair.

Sept 28.

M myriad women gaze from the canvas. They inhabit a parallel plane, at once linked to ours and removed. Arched brows and rosebud mouths are framed by smooth bobs of hair, sharply cut jet-black fringes, a Jazz Age pin up, a Kahlo portrait, a woman who is strange and new. They are knitted from the same cloth, different faces of many women and one woman – heroines in a multitude of stories and adventures. Injected within each serene face is a piece of their creator. Blink and you are looking at Ghadah Alkandari. Blink again and you are off on an adventure.

Her *oeuvre* is characterised by its indefatigable energy – a vibrato that hums in the background and ties together her many different series. At 17, Alkandari discovered Salvador Dalí and while the work itself did not appeal to her, she loved his

In the prolific output of Kuwaiti artist Ghadah Alkandari, an entire universe blossoms. An ongoing narrative through which the artist lives and exists, it is as vital as breathing, as important as air, as **Anna Wallace-Thompson** finds out.

mind and how it worked – “the idea that everything seemed so impossible yet possible simultaneously.” This discovery cemented something Alkandari had known since she was introduced, a decade earlier, to the work of Kuwaiti artist Sami Mohammed. “His works excited me,” she recalls, “It allowed me to see that I could do what he was doing, to create these worlds and writings that didn’t make sense physically, yet could exist within the realm of writing and drawing.”

ILLUMINATED STORIES

Many years later, it is this marriage of writing and drawing that lies at the heart of Alkandari’s practice, perhaps most immediately evident in her journals. Words, stories and images bloom to create modern-day illuminated manuscripts,

which she shares on her blog, prettygreenbullet.com, established in 2009 as a place to display her daily works. “I love to tell a story and I like words,” she says. “The process is about me being happier and this is the by-product.” In her journals, the form, rather than the meaning of the script, takes centre stage along with the tactile experience of creation. “I love the whole 15th century aesthetic when I go to museums and look at these beautiful manuscripts, yet am unable to touch them,” says Alkandari. “But here I am with beautiful inks and I’m able to create notebooks that I can do whatever I want with. It’s about creating objects that make me feel better, maybe even physically, by touching them.”

It is prettygreenbullet.com that not only provides a showcase for these works, but allows for a place that gives Alkandari a voice that is at



“If I didn’t have something to draw on as a child, I’d draw in the air.”

once public yet private. The act of writing, both her thoughts, and playing with the form of the letters themselves, is therapeutic. “A lot of the writing is quite banal – it’s about the physical act, not necessarily the content,” she says. “I write and draw and it drives me crazy. Then scan it and put it on the blog and it’s out in the world and I feel better for having put it there.”

What is important about Alkandari’s journals is that they feed directly into her role of storyteller, something also evident in her paintings. Completely open to interpretation, with no onus on the viewer to try to disentangle any deeper meaning than what they see, each painting is

nevertheless the result of a meditative process that, for the duration of the act of painting, sees Alkandari as both the story and the storyteller. “There are so many layers of paint under each painting, and that’s where the stories are,” she explains. “What you see as the final product is one thing, but I lived in them while I was creating them. It’s very narrative intensive.”

DEPTH AND BREADTH

Alkandari’s painterly style – a use of blocky colour and bold, yet delicately defined lines – melds traditional poses with absurd daily

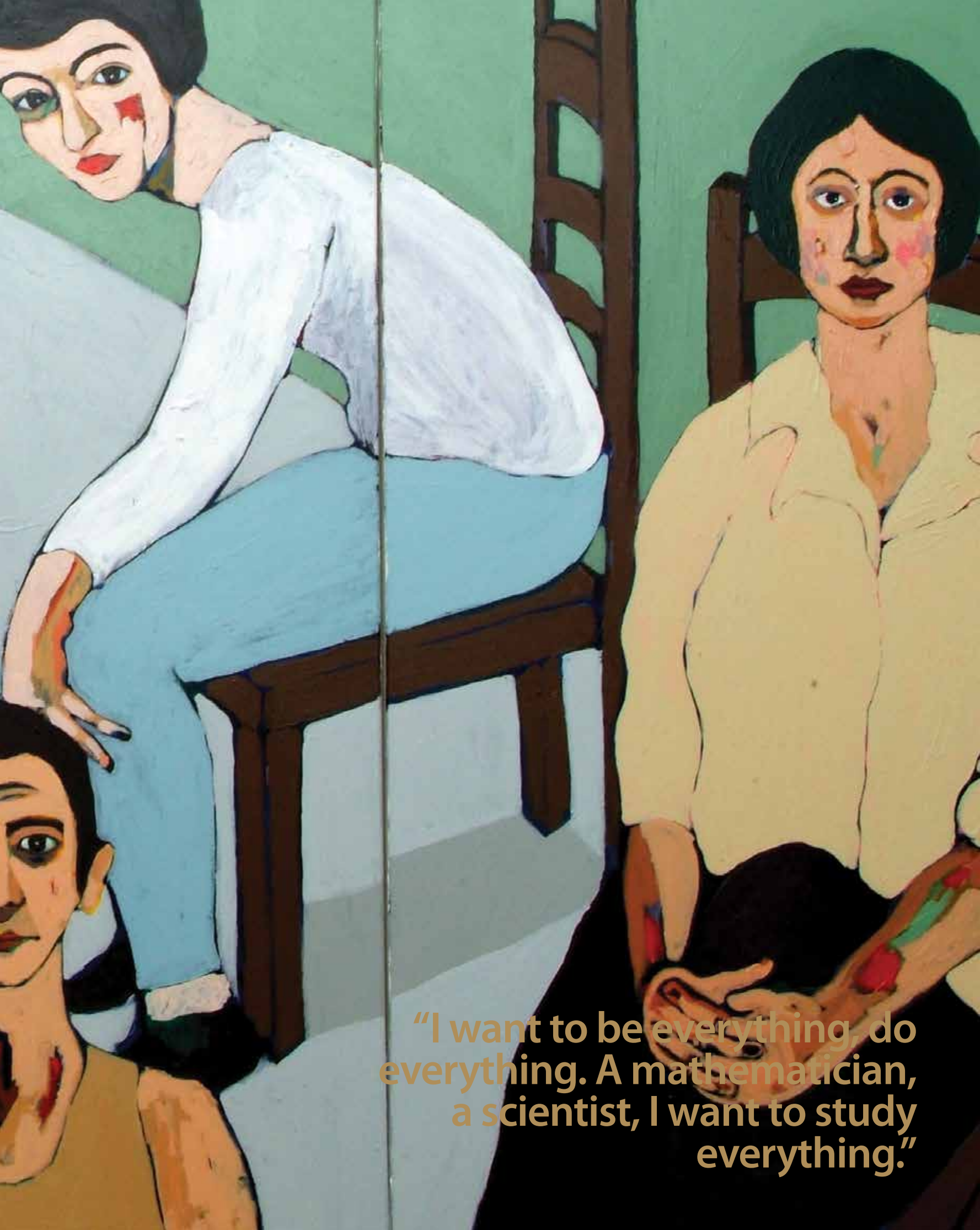
Opening spread:
Her Prognosis. 2012–14.
Carbon paper, acrylic,
fluorescent light.
50.5 x 246 x 30 cm.
Photography by Waqas
Farid. Image courtesy
Mathaf: Arab Museum of
Modern Art, Doha.

This page:
*Thirty-Six Eyes Looking
At You*. 2006. Acrylic on
canvas. (Quadriptych)
240 x 300 cm.

Facing page:
Confined To This Chair.
2012. Ink on paper. 15 x 21
cm. Photography by Waqas
Farid. Image courtesy
Mathaf: Arab Museum of
Modern Art, Doha.



This spread:
Asylum. 2006. Acrylic on canvas.
(Triptych) 270 x 150 cm.

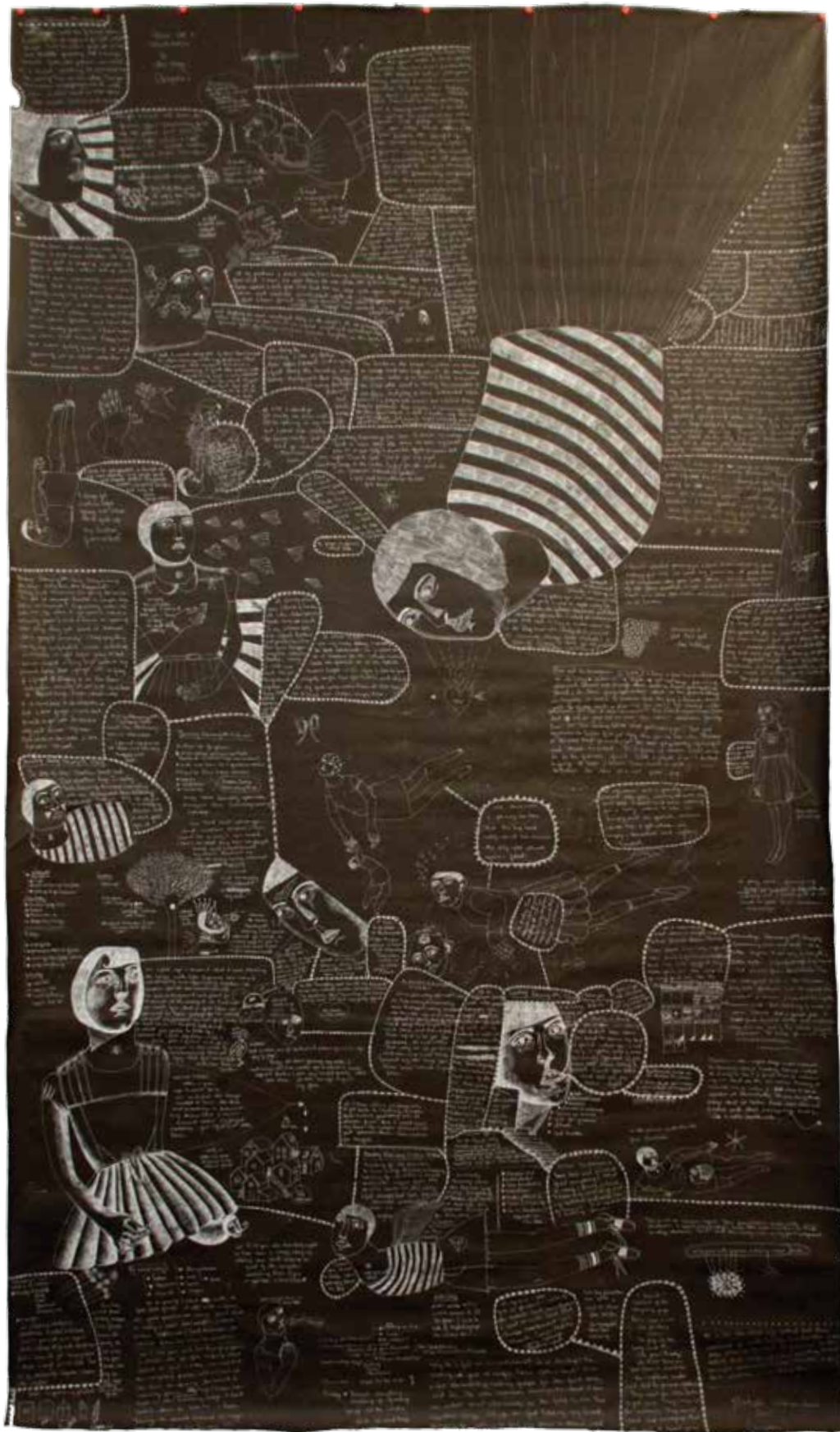


"I want to be everything, do everything. A mathematician, a scientist, I want to study everything."

Right:
The Scroll. 2013. Correction
 film and acrylic on canvas.
 150 x 280 cm. Photography
 by Jana Alnaqeb.

Facing page:
 Left: *Attached To Her*
Chair By A Shadow. 2012.
 Watercolour, ink and
 newspaper on paper.
 10 x 15 cm.

Right: *Ina And The Ten*
Orbs. 2012. Watercolour,
 ink and newspaper on
 paper. 10 x 15 cm.



**“People often ask me who these women are.
 In effect, they are all me. But they are also
 the me that I would have like to have been.”**



humour, such as in *Eve Takes A Profile Pic* (2010) or *Eve Chatting With Eve* (2011). It is a form that has evolved over time as an extension of her very being – a Pandora's box of thoughts, emotions and ideas that eternally spills out of her, waiting to be captured on paper, canvas or any material within reach. "I was always drawing," she says. "If I didn't have something to draw on as a child, I'd draw in the air."

Alkandari has participated in a number of exhibitions with highlights that include the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris (2006) and Dubai's The Third Line the following year. Her output encompasses other media, notably *Etna And The Baby*, presented at Pecha Kucha Night at Dar Al-Athar Al-Islamiyya in Kuwait in 2009. Consisting of a single drawing with layers and objects added until saturation point, images

were then scribbled over and crossed out until darkness filled the space. Alkandari narrated each stage of the project to explain the numerous details, back stories and emotional intricacies in a familial saga. She also keeps sketchbooks, among other things, telling poignant and absurd stories. Recently, she has turned her attention to sculptural work, in part inspired by her recent residency at Doha's Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, which saw her inhabit a dedicated space for a week, creating an exhibition and seeing some of her sketches and paintings brought to life in sculptural form. "I want to be everything, do everything," she says. "A mathematician, a scientist, I want to study everything – I would love to study architecture. I should build my own stuff – I want to do too many things."

THE FACES OF EVE

The daughter of a diplomat, Alkandari's childhood and early teen years were spent in far flung destinations such as India (the country of her birth), Algeria, Spain, Iran, Syria and Egypt. The latter fed her artistic formation and was where she received her BA in Mass Communications from the American University in Cairo in 1992, followed by a painting course at the School of Visual Arts. "I was at the point where I was most susceptible to change and where one formulates a lot of ideas," she says. Returning to Kuwait as an adult, although she had held exhibitions since her early 20s, it was only after a painful divorce in 2008 that she found the courage to call herself an artist. "I had to go into survival mode and focus on actually selling my work," she says. "That's when I finally felt



This page:
Left: *The Yellow Tape Portraits (Seven)*. 2009.
Acrylic and oil pastels
on canvas. 91 x 152 cm.
Inset: Journal, 10
November, 2013.

Facing page:
Portrait Of A Dysfunctional Family, from the *48 Women, A Kitten And Pelé*
series. 2006. Acrylic on
canvas. (Diptych)
200 x 150 cm.

All images courtesy
the artist, unless
otherwise specified.

OK with calling myself an artist. Before, it had always simply been 'this thing that I am.'

The result of all of this was *The Yellow Tape Portraits* (2008–09), created initially in response to what Alkandari refers to as "vitriolic comments" left by a family member over her separation, but which transcended from a mere reaction into a series of work that became positive protectors. The many faces, so iconic now of her painting style, have a utilitarian uniformity that nevertheless betrayed various expressions, aloof yet absolutely alive. Where earlier works had meandered through different forms and subjects, such as *Cultural Expressions 101* (2003–04), depicting men at work and traditional street scenes, by the mid-2000s, Alkandari had begun to focus on the archetypal female figure that would go on to become Eve. In fact, preceding *The Yellow Tape Portraits* was the series *48 Women, A Kitten And Pelé* (2005–06), an exploration of fictional portraits of various female family members, along with the titular cat and football legend Pelé. "People often ask me who these women are," says Alkandari. "In effect, they are all me. But they are also the me that I would have liked to have been." In *Stories Of Eves* (2011), these fictional selves took off – an army of women away on adventures, at once absurd and heart-breaking, from *Eve Spills A Bowl Of Spaghetti* (spaghetti makes a few appearances in her work) to our heroine staring at the viewer clad in a wedding dress, tears running down her face in *Eve Shreds The Note*.



“I don’t think there’ll ever be a niche for me – I’m niche-less.”

TO BE NICHE-LESS

With the proliferation of women in her work, it is tempting to find a reason why this is so. Alkandari, however, is having none of it. “I’m Kuwaiti but I don’t feel Kuwaiti at all – there are so many of us who are these international beings that are sort of plopped somewhere – that’s how I feel. How did this happen to me?” she explains. “Then there is this niche that I feel I have to fit into – of an Arab woman living in Kuwait. Of course I’m a woman, but as an artist, I’m just me, Ghadah. I draw women because I happen to be a woman – that is how I project myself in my work, but I don’t paint ‘women’s issues’. We feel the need to put people in little compartments, it helps us orient, I understand. But what’s wrong with being this international, messed up person? I don’t think there’ll ever be a niche for me – I’m niche-less.”

Together, Alkandari’s journals and paintings present a sort of cycle – stories told through words that act as images and images that are laden with thoughts, encased within layers of paint. Essentially, word becomes form and form becomes word. Above everything, Alkandari is a teller of stories. She creates them, lives, breathes and inhabits them, allowing them to unfurl, free, wrapping around her as they spill from her mind and body to take shape on canvas, paper and a myriad other media that act as extensions of herself. She shoots them, these capsules of narrative, these pretty green bullets, out into the world. “I don’t want to be famous,” she says sincerely. “I just want people to see my work. That’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

For more information visit www.ghadahalkandari.com