

ScandArabian Art

Maryam Haji Aljanahi

Bahraini-born, Finland-based
visual contemporary artist





Victory

charcoal and varnish on paper

300cm x 800cm

2013



Victory

Representation of Bahrain at
Venice Biennale 2013.

Permanent display at the National
Theater of Bahrain.

Victory is inspired by Henri Regnault's *Automedon with the Horses of Achilles*, 1868. The work pays homage to that painting, with inspiration from great feminists. The artist is replacing Automedon with her self-portrait, but it is not only 'her self'; the depiction encapsulates other historical heroines from the East and West such as Shajarat Al-Durr, the Trung Sisters, those in *Shahnameh* and Rabaa Al-Adawiya, and women from the West like Joan of Arc, Brunhilde and Queen Artemisia. In this large-scale charcoal drawing, the artist, through the use of symbolism to create narrative, examines the subject of 'conquest' from the perspective of an Arab woman.



Artist Statement

My artistic practice engages deeply with the intersections between Western art historical discourse and contemporary Arab visual culture, situating the body as a nuanced site of paradox, resistance, and cultural negotiation. My work critically examines the complicated legacy of colonial influence and historical strategies of identity reconstruction prevalent among immigrant and diasporic communities. This has been realised as the practice of name-changing during my career; framing name-changing as both an act of assimilation and a gesture of defiance.

Central to my work is an exploration of the aesthetics of displacement and memory prevalent within contemporary Arab art, explicitly addressing themes of migration and fragmented identity. Concurrently, my contemporary pieces have introduced a tension by embodying apparent ideals of aesthetic purity and formal beauty.

Yet beneath their visual harmony, these works consistently challenge canonical norms by integrating narratives of migration, faith, hybrid identity, and belonging. This intentional layering critiques both personal hybridity and the broader political landscape regarding visibility and erasure experienced by Arab migrant identities within Western contexts.

2025 saw the establishment of my contemporary art business ScandArabian Art. This creative practice and company emerges through this lived background to create site responsive, spatial-design installations. Bringing contemporary art to new and reimagined locations. Rather than narrating individual identity within spaces, this practice distills it. Through reduced compositions, symbolic forms, and a controlled visual language, the installations translate individual festival experience into atmospheric collective immersive spatial interactions. Guided by my instinctual creative responses to spatial design and decades of experience, ScandArabian Art brings atmosphere into stillness, togetherness to individual experiences within space.

Premonition

Oil on canvas

*(left) Mariam Wrestling
the Lion*

600cm x 700cm

*(right) The Lion Being
Struck by Light*

500cm x 400cm

2012





Premonition

Exhibited at Bait Bin Mattar House, Bahrain

Premonition unfolds from the perspective of a Bahraini woman reflecting on the portrayal of European women in Renaissance art: idealised muse yet stripped of humanity. This work reverses the western gaze; charging the work with the aesthetic language of the Renaissance, yet re-centering woman's experience. Transforming the female figure from a passive emblem of holiness or desire, a tension still echoing within contemporary Bahraini society into an active, to mortal protagonist capable of resistance, struggle, and divine confrontation.

The work is a deeply autobiographical expressions of inner conflict between devotion and defiance, between the yearning to please God and the courage to challenge the constraints of religion as culture. Here, faith becomes combative, as illumination and enlightening occur not through submission, but through struggle.



Liberty

Pastel on paper

450 × 275 cm

2017





Liberty

Previously exhibited at UNESCO Paris - Bahrain Delegation.

Helsinki Cathedral Crypt, Finland.

Liberty is a large-scale pastel drawing that reimagines Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* through the language of spiritual force, moral tension, and symbolic transformation.

The work shifts a national allegory into an intimate and symbolic landscape. Horses move through the composition as witnesses of conflict, endurance, and awakening. The red field becomes both paradox and threshold: a space between rage and love, collapse and liberation.

At the centre of the work, the protagonist no longer carries the weapons of revolution. Instead, she holds a cup of wine in one hand and a bottle in the other. The cup evokes religious salvation, communion, and surrender to God; the bottle suggests temptation, excess, and human wanting. Between these two objects, liberty becomes a question of choice, the state of freedom, emancipation, and liberation, but also the power to move beyond ordinary limits.





Voice of Rain

Chinese Ink, acrylic paint and varnish on paper

100cm x 400cm

2015

Voice of Rain

Produced during the Famous Arab Artist Workshop, Beijing China.

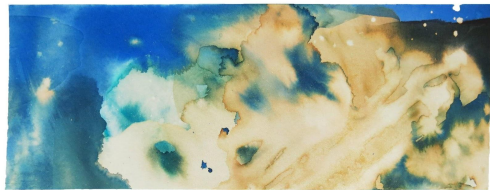
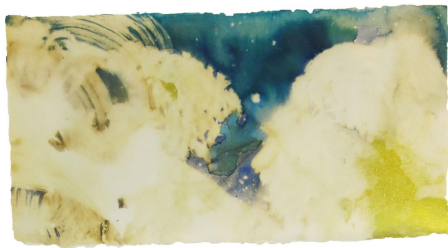
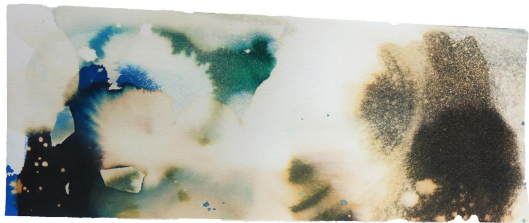
Collection of the Ministry of Culture for the People's Republic of China.

During the artist's spiritual phase, she was invited by the Ministry of Culture in China for the Famous Arab Artist Workshop. She travelled despite the pain in her body and towards the end of the workshop in Beijing, she left the ink on the canvas to dry out in the sun. The sky turned grey moments later and heavy rain poured down from the Beijing sky over her canvas. The rain distorted the brushstrokes and created a unique pattern on the canvas.

Quote from the artist: 'Voice of the Rain is a collaboration between the heavens and I. I dreamed about the water and the water came to my painting. It is very simple'.







Glory and Pain

ink, acrylic and pencil on paper

37cm x 71cm (3 works)

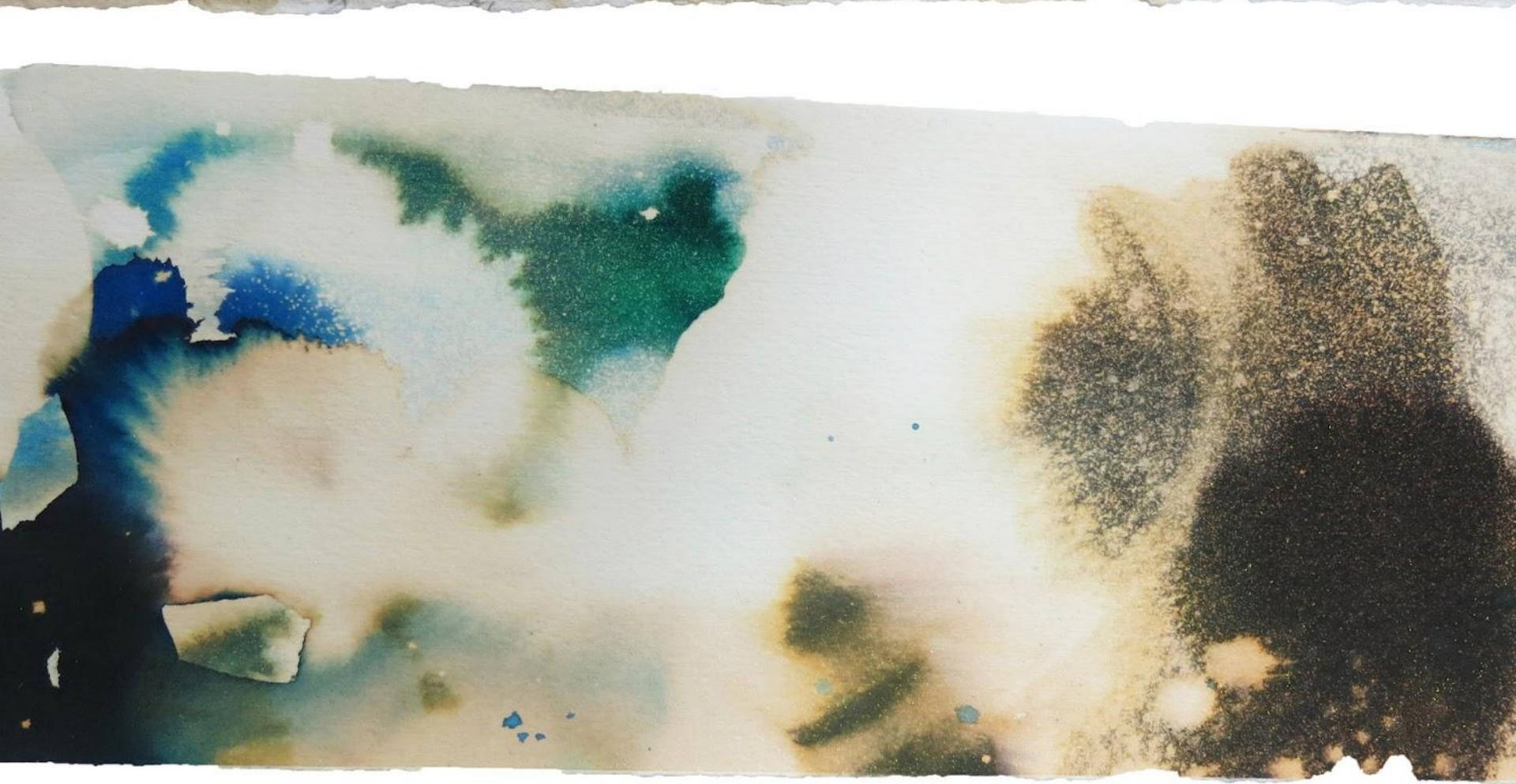
2015



Glory and Pain

Exhibited at the Mine Gallery, Dubai

In these thought-provoking drawings of women at war, the rigid rules of society and culture are cast against those who hold opposing views. Showcasing an ethereal ink style, this work begs the question, which of the two render themselves closer to God: the punisher or the punished?



Immigrant Wife

*gold-leaf, with
charcoal, varnish
and pastel on
paper,
400 x 400cm
2019*





Immigrant Wife

Exhibited at Mänttä XXV Art
Festival, Finland 2021

An autobiographical story visualising intercultural, interracial marriage from its inception to finality. The works represent the transformative stages of the artist's love to her partner, the endurance that marriage requires. It documents her transition to motherhood, and the boundaries of their interracial relationship and their religious beliefs.



A Crown of Glory

charcoal and pastel on paper
aluminium-mounted paper
149 × 155 cm
2025





A Crown of Glory

Previously exhibited at le pave
d'orsay, Paris

In *A Crown of Glory*, the artist reworks the myth of Medusa through the image of the swan. The snakes of the classical myth are replaced by swans: creatures associated with grace, fidelity, transformation, and watchfulness.

The artist as Medusa. Transforms the monstrous and unyielding power of the scorned feminine, associated with the tragedy of medusa, betrayal, and injustice. However, in this remaking of the myth, it is swans that crown the artist's head. An act of post divorce portraiture. Here the artist confronts the mythological, the symbolic and the culture of the cursed woman reinforcing her transformation into righteous resistance and resilience.





4 Horsemen

drawing on paper

300cm x 162cm

4 Horsemen

Exhibited at Helsinki Cathedral, 2022

Horses have always carried more than riders. Across time, geography, and belief systems, they have served not only in labor, war, and ceremony, but in myth, art, and scripture as mirrors for human desire, instinct, and downfall. In the vision of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, this symbolism reaches a crescendo.

The horses do not gallop they wait. Still. Watching. Aware. Their presence asks: what do we carry toward our own end? What are we riding into? In a time where the world feels increasingly apocalyptic, ecologically, politically, spiritually; these silent creatures offer both warning and prayer.





Vices and Virtues 1 & 2

*Charcoal and pastel
on paper —
Aluminum base
110cm x 90cm
(2 works)
2026*





Vices and Virtues 1 & 2

Previously exhibited at
Kulturhuset Grand, Porvoo,
Finland 2026

Vices and Virtues 1 & 2 relays a metamorphosis from betrayal and conflict to nurturing and rejuvenation. The horse symbolism here emanates familial, maternal bond and embodies freedom, strength, loyalty to loved ones as they move through the breaking of relationship, fidelity and love. In the end the maternal bond remains strong and enduring, the black horse standing graceful and proud and the swans of fidelity wither and pass.



Biography

Drawing is foundational to Mariam Haji's practice. Largely executed in charcoal and pastel on paper, oil and pastel on paper, the works emphasize gesture, scale, and physical engagement with space.

Mariam Haji (Maryam Aljanahi) is a Bahraini multidisciplinary artist based in Porvoo, Finland, and the founder of ScandArabian Art.

Working across drawing, installation, sculpture, video, and painting, her practice explores atmosphere, cultural identity, symbolism, and the relationship between artwork and place.

She represented the Kingdom of Bahrain at the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013 after receiving Bahrain's Dana Award in 2012 under the artist name Mariam Haji. In 2022, under the name Meri Helmi Särkkä, she became the first Arab artist to present a large-scale exhibition in Helsinki Cathedral. Her work has since been exhibited internationally, including at the Bahrain National Museum and Suomenlinna Church, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Today, working under the artist name Mariam Haji, she leads ScandArabian Art while continuing her contemporary artistic practice through exhibitions, artist talks, and international collaborations. Her work is held in permanent public collections, including the Ministry of Culture of the People's Republic of China (Voice of Rain) and the National Theatre of Bahrain (Victory).

Contact

Maryam Aljanahi

AKA **Mariam Haji** Visual Contemporary Artist
Founder/ Creative Director, ScandArabian Art

Email: info@scandarabianart.com
Website: www.scandarabianart.com



ScandArabian Art

ScandArabian Art creates site-responsive drawing atmospheres through large-scale works on paper, installation, movement, and symbolic storytelling.