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An Interview with Helen Khal conducted by Ghena Ismail

Helen Khal, a respected American-born Lebanese painter, has been back in Lebanon for seven months now. Khal studied at the *Academie Libanaise Des Beaux Arts* (ALBA) with some of the most prominent artists in Lebanon, and at the Art Student's League in New York City. Before leaving Lebanon in 1976, she served as an art critic for both *The Daily Star* and *Monday Morning*. She also taught at the American University of Beirut and worked in the Jordanian Information Office. About her art reviews, she recalls that “although they did not pay very much, I enjoyed writing them.”

In 1976, due to the eruption of war and after receiving a job offer in the U.S. from the Jordanian Government, Helen Khal left for Washington, D.C., where she stayed for nineteen years. There, she worked for the Jordan Information Bureau as a publications consultant. Khal explained that in the U.S., she was not known as an artist but still continued to paint. Although she was away from Lebanon during the war years, Khal came for a visit every year or two, and participated in several individual and group art exhibitions. Hence, she remained established as an artist in Lebanon, despite her residence abroad.

The war had no major influence on Khal's perception of life. She views all violent conflicts as very stupid and senseless. “War only reinforces my sense of the tragedy of life. It was painful to see the disintegration of Lebanon during the war, as it is painful to observe the human misery in countries like India.” But then she adds that even in the United States, where most people are provided with all the physical comforts, they are not much happier than in Lebanon or India. According to Khal, the whole world is in great turmoil. She sees the paradox of modern society pursuing a life of self-sufficient isolation in a world in which all people have become inescapably interdependent. People are not taking care of each other as they should; the system of international food distribution, for example, is very poor. “We have countries where they throw food away, and other countries where people are dying of hunger. We are a civilization that is ending. We are moving from one civilization into another. The whole world is in a transition

between the past and the future and in the present there is a great deal of painful confusion. There are many things we continue to do in the old ways, and they don't work anymore. The system of education, for instance, is obsolete for these times.” In spite of Helen's sense of the tragedy of life, she does not see herself as a pessimistic person. She is realistic and sees life just as it is. “Although I feel strongly the tragedy that is part of life, I do also know the tremendous joy that life can hold.”

Just as the war did not change Khal's perception of life, neither did it influence her sense of national or confessional identity. Helen strongly hates confessionalism and doesn't believe in the superiority of any religion. She sided, in the first year of the war, with the people in Ras Beirut who wanted to have the religion category blacked out from their Lebanese identity cards. The Lebanese War, to her, was never a confessional one. It was rather a political power struggle between groups. Moreover, it was part of the regional problem. “Had there not been the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, we wouldn't have had a seventeen-year war,” Khal asserts.

In spite of the long war years, Khal believes that Lebanon will soon regain economic strength because of the remarkable skills and energy of its people. She also asserts that Lebanon will again become an important cultural center for the region, because there is more freedom in Lebanon than in any of the other Arab countries. Nevertheless, Khal can't see Lebanon becoming a strong national entity. “Lebanon is a country of individualists and businessmen. Despite all the public talk to the contrary, nobody seems to care about national unity. People here still have a tribal mentality; they lack any civic consciousness, and unfortunately, I don't see that changing easily.”

War did not have a major influence on Khal's art. The only slight effect, as she recalls, is that her colors became darker when she first went to Washington. “This may have been a reflection of my distress over the war. I was painting in dark colors because my spirit was feeling dark.”

As for women's general reaction to war, Khal thinks that it certainly differed from men's reaction. “Women were mostly concerned about their families, about providing their children with

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love, care, and a sense of security. Khal can see that women in post-war Lebanon, nowadays, are much more active outside the home. Yet, she doesn't know if this change in women's role is to be attributed solely to the war. What she does know for sure is that a lot of young couples wouldn't be able to get married today if the woman did not work. Inflation and the high increase in the cost of living, along with the increase in educational opportunities for women and the impact of Western trends, are all important factors which can account for the changes in Lebanese women's socio-economic role.

Apart from war and as an artist, Khal commented on the difference between male and female artists in Lebanon. She said: “I find the woman artist here, as I commented in my book, *The Woman Artist in Lebanon*, much more daring in expressing sexual themes than the male artist is.” The reason behind that, according to Khal, is that men seem to be very secure in their feelings towards sex, while women are not. Men are conditioned to express themselves sexually, whereas women are conditioned to repress themselves sexually. Khal adds, “Women are more interested in exploring sexuality. They are very curious about the meaning of sex in their lives.” Comparing the art of male artists with that of female artists, Khal states that the work of men is more general and social, whereas that of women is more personally oriented. The greatest satisfaction that she experiences as an artist is the process of painting itself. “I gain much peace and sometimes joy, in the hours I spend painting.” Another satisfaction Khal experiences is when she suddenly sees a painting which she hasn't seen for years. “It's just wonderful to look at your old work and be able to appreciate what you've done.”

Khal does not expect the Lebanese Government to do anything in the field of art, because it has much more important priorities right now. In general, she doesn't believe that artists should look to the government for support. “In principle, I don't agree with this approach. Artists are professionals just like anyone else, and if they can make a living out of their art, that's wonderful. Yet, if they can't, they shouldn't be expecting the Government to support them.” When the Government has discharged the heavy responsibilities it has right now and has the time and means to support the arts, Khal thinks that such support should aim at providing society with a stronger cultur-

al environment, and at the same time help in providing artwork for the lobby of each building. This enriches the cultural environment, and at the same time helps in providing artists with opportunities for work.”

Khal has high admiration and hope for the Lebanese woman. “The Lebanese woman is just remarkable. She can do so much; she has done so much, and will continue to do much.” She asserts that the American women are not better off than Lebanese women professionally. “In Lebanon's Parliament, for instance, we have 3 women out of 90 members, whereas in the U.S. you have 4 or 5 women out of 250 members. And in art, a third of the Lebanese artists are women. You don't have that high percentage of women artists in the States.” She adds that if the American woman is more free, it is mainly because the Lebanese woman hesitates to confront the challenge of being free. “She wants to keep what she has and still be free, and you just can't have it both ways.” Nevertheless, Khal believes Lebanese women's attitudes are bound to change. “Things never stay the same. The most important step is to educate women. As for women's lib campaigns, I don't believe that they really help. Educate women, and you can be sure that change will occur.”

Khal hopes to be around in ten years to see how Lebanon has improved. She warns, though, that if the problems of environmental pollution aren't dealt with seriously, Lebanese society will be in bad shape. As for the Lebanese Government's accomplishments during the past five years, Khal is not impressed. “The Government could do much more, but unfortunately, there are still many people who are dishonest in their work. After five years, we still don't have enough electricity or water, for example, which is rather discouraging.” Nevertheless, Khal believes in the Lebanese people, in their energy, skill and intelligence. “Whatever happens, they will cope. If the Government doesn't fulfill its responsibilities, the Lebanese people will manage on their own, as they did during the war.”

(Helen Khal is the author of *The Woman Artist in Lebanon*, published by the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World in 1987. Copies of this informative publication are still available from IWSAW.)