

Platform 009

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The Great Journey

Lidia Al-Qattan in conversation with Monira Al Qadiri

Monira Al Qadiri



Exterior, Mirror House.  
Courtesy Lidia Al-Qattan.

*He disappeared from me, and not a trace of him has remained  
except in my heart, and no news is heard from him  
And when he appears, the mirror shows his appearance  
in which houses full of images become visible.*

Rifa'a Rafi' Al-Tahtawi, 1826[1]

Lidia Al-Qattan is perhaps the most active living performer in Kuwait today. Born in Italy as Lidia Guiseppe Scagnolari, Al-Qattan lived through the cruelties of Christian boarding schools and 'El Duce' Mussolini's Italy before moving to Kuwait in 1960, over half a century ago. She witnessed the rapid modernization of Kuwait from an empty desert-scape to one of the wealthiest countries in the world. In 1966, upon looking at the shiny reflections of a mirror her daughter had broken, Al-Qattan began to cover her entire house in mirror mosaics.

Al-Qattan's house is located in a sleepy residential suburb but it has a flabbergasting presence. Inside and out – on the walls, floors and ceilings and in the kitchen and the bathrooms – there are mirror mosaics absolutely everywhere. The 79 year-old gives guided tours of her personal 'museum'. The rooms all have different themes, expressed in mosaics of dolphins and birds, planets and stars, and many a verse from the Qur'an, as well as devices and sculptures that emit colourful disco and Christmas lights, some moving thanks to hand-made electrical contraptions. Al-Qattan often plays Kitaro's 'Great Journey' in the background when giving tours, all of which ends in a gift shop.

In this cave of wonders, which the creator fondly calls a haven for 'art therapy', I see Al-Qattan as the centerpiece. She spends her days living inside her artwork, with only a mattress that she spreads on the floor to sleep. She makes her own clothes and shoes. She narrates her life story to strangers everyday. To me, it's as if the entire house is a performance piece: a performance of Lidia herself.

As a non-classically trained artist, the extremities of kitsch that she displays in this house simply manifest themselves as the universal aesthetics of instantly recognizable symbols, stripping them of their lowbrow connotations and transforming them into something completely otherworldly. The anachronistic nature of obsessions about outer space (reminiscent of the days of the space race), or really just the psychedelic hyper individualism of the 1970s, play out in a sincere and honest way that one cannot help but appreciate whole-heartedly. There is a naivety there but the sheer beauty and dedication renders her house a wondrous and unforgettable

experience – a real momentary transportation into another dimension.

I have always thought about whether Lidia saw herself as a performer and whether she felt accepted by the community around her in Kuwait. Had she created this epic dimensional time slip as an exercise in self-expression or as an escapist bubble from the social restrictions of Kuwaiti society? I wondered about her personal history and how all of this started – about what her notions of 'home' were. I also wondered how an artist could assimilate their body so fully and truly so as to *become* a part of one's own work. So I decided to meet her in March 2015 for an interview.

**Monira Al Qadiri:** I'd like to start with questions about your personal history and history as an artist and also about your relationship with Kuwait.

**Lidia Al-Qattan:** I came to Kuwait in 1960, which was a very different country from what it is today. I immediately fell in love with the people in Kuwait and if you love the people then you automatically love the country. I felt respected and I even felt loved. I was married to a man – Khalifa Al-Qattan – who gave me freedom of expression. It's because of him that you have this kind of house. A unique house in the world – people come and visit it from abroad nowadays.

**MAQ:** You were born in Italy. Where exactly?

**LA-Q:** It's a town called Rovigo, which is near to Venice. It's near a poor area called Veneto. All my childhood was actually spent at a Christian boarding school, which was a terrible experience. Until I became a teacher later, I was condemned to this place. Condemned for life.

**MAQ:** Condemned? Tell me this story. How and why did it happen? Were you punished by the church?

**LA-Q:** We were kids: I was just eight years old when I was sent to boarding school. From the very first day I was looking for any little space to get out, to fly away from that place. To begin with the food was deplorable. At home my mother used to cook fresh, organic food everyday. The spaghetti and pastries she made by hand. At the boarding school I could see the insects crawling inside the food. I'm sure it was all expired.

**MAQ:** Then you left the boarding school and you went to study art?

**LA-Q:** No. I'll tell you the whole story. I was eight and a half years old when my father died. The trouble was that my father was a merchant and my mother knew nothing about his business. She insisted that my sister and I go to boarding school, which needed a lot of money. By the time we left school the family was bankrupt. When I tried to get in line for a job there were 47 people in front of me. There was no way that I could become a teacher. Then there was this recruitment office where you could go and volunteer and each time they would give me a different job to do, for instance making cappuccinos, sticking labels or whatever. Eventually, I got fed up with this kind of thing. Every time I went to them they would give me a different job.

So I went to the nearby hospital and I told them I'd like to become a nurse. They asked if I had someone to sponsor me. I said no, but I will be working and studying at the same time. They told me I would still need a sponsor. I didn't have one, so I went back to the recruitment office that afternoon. The person at the office smiled and said: 'Lidia, would you like to go to England?' I thought: what is the catch here? They said there was an offer to go and study there. I said yes immediately and told them to start organizing the papers. They asked: 'Lidia don't you have to consult your mother first?' I answered: 'She will agree. Just make the arrangements.'

**MAQ:** And you met your husband Khalifa in England, right?

**LA-Q:** Yes. Within a month I had a passport issued, tickets and a student permit to go to England. I felt really happy and that night I went back to see my mother and told her I'm leaving in three days. She asked where I was going and I told her England. She laughed and said: 'In your dreams you're going to England.' 'Oh yes I am going to England!' I said back. She asked if I was joking and I showed her the passport and papers and everything. She was so upset. 'How dare you go behind my back and do things like that? Your father died, what am I going to do here alone?' I told her she had my brother and my sister. They're older than me. She shouted and told me I could never go. That day, she took me to see an older friend of the family and he gave me a big lecture. He said: 'You can't go, you're too young.'

**MAQ:** How old were you?

**LA-Q:** 16 and a half. So he kept on lecturing me and finally made a promise that he would get me a job. I laughed and told him I hadn't studied to become a teacher so instead I had to jump from one job to another and so he had let me go. At least I would learn a new language (I knew French, but not English) and a new trade. That would be the best thing for me.



Exterior, Mirror House.

*Courtesy Lidia Al-Qattan*

He insisted I was too young. I said never mind about being too young. You must let me go. He kept saying that he would find a job for me within a month. A job as what? I asked. 'As a teacher of course!' I knew about the 47 people waiting in line to become one in front of me. 47! How could I just pass them like that?

**MAQ:** He was lying, of course.

**LA-Q:** So I said okay, put all this in writing, sign it and give me the paper please. He looked at me, smiled and said no. When I heard him say that I was convinced this man was bluffing. After a little while my mother came out with a red angry face. Then she took me to see the local bishop. I told her, 'Mother why are we going to see the bishop?' and she said: 'He'll put something in your brain to stop you.' He gave me a big lecture and basically said the same things as the other man: that he's going to find a job for me and so on, so I gave him the same answer.

**MAQ:** Give me a paper.

**LA-Q:** Yes.

**MAQ:** That's so smart.

**LA-Q:** I had to be smart! I could tell these people were bluffing. So my mother had no choice but to let me go. Before I went I bought a book: Teach Yourself English. But when I got there nobody could understand me. Phonetically, I couldn't pronounce English. I'm Italian – we speak differently. So I bought a little dictionary and every time I heard a word I'd write it down on my hand to memorize it. When I began to feel that I was starting to understand more, I went ahead and took the English language exam. The written part was fine but I was scared of the oral examination: before you enter they make you wait in this dark corridor, very scary. When my eyes got used to the dark, I saw that someone was sitting opposite me. I asked: 'Where do you come from?' He said, 'Kuwait'. I said 'What?' He repeated: 'Kuwait'. I wrote it down because I had no idea where that place was.

**MAQ:** That happened during the exam!?

**LA-Q:** Yes! He was just waiting there. I wrote it down quickly so I could look up later where this 'Kuwait' is. After a little while he asked me: 'Well, where do you come from?' I replied 'Italy'. He nodded and said: 'Ah, the country with so much art and culture.' I felt ashamed because he knew so much about my country but I had no idea about his – not even where it was! Anyway, we stayed quiet for a while until he broke the silence and said: 'If I go first, can I wait for you?' I said okay. They called him first, then immediately after that they called me. I went in and there were three women sitting there in front of me. I was shivering. I was trying to remember the right grammar. One lady tried to comfort me. After that I started feeling comfortable – you know, *adardish* [Kuwaiti expression for feeling refreshed.]

**MAQ:** 'Adardish!'

**LA-Q:** I told them I was okay now; that they could start asking me questions. They told me that the exam was finished! They reassured me that it all went well: all they needed to know was if I was able to express myself. After I heard that I was so relieved, I felt like I was walking on a cloud. I completely forgot that Khalifa was waiting for me. I made my way to walk out until I heard a voice from behind asking how it went. I looked behind me and it was him.

**MAQ:** So Khalifa was in England studying art at the time?

**LA-Q:** No, he was studying woodwork engineering. When he graduated, that's when he started to open his mouth. Until that point we were only friends, sometimes we would meet, go dancing at the international club. Young people of every nationality would go there. But that was it.

**MAQ:** So when did you start making art?

**LA-Q:** It was in me all the time, but it came out when I moved to Kuwait.

**MAQ:** But for Khalifa Al-Qattan, your husband, it started earlier, right?

**LA-Q:** Yes, Khalifa started in 1953. But for me, when I was at high school they would ask me a lot of things. One of the questions was if I wanted to get married and I said I have no interest whatsoever in getting married but that if (and that's a big if) I ever do, I would like to marry either an artist or a poet. I never knew Khalifa was an artist until he brought me a portrait he painted. I looked at it and said, 'Wow, this is a beautiful thing. Who painted it?' and he replied, 'I did.' 'You're an artist?' I was so surprised. After that I also found out that he was a poet. Then when he graduated with two honour degrees he proposed to me. He proposed on the very day he graduated. 'I'd like to get married to you Lidia.' I was shocked and told him 'You've been keeping this from me all this time and I didn't know anything about it?!' Kuwaitis are so secretive, they don't tell you anything.

So I told him it would be alright if my mother agreed. He accepted that and decided that on the way back to Kuwait we would pass through Italy and ask my mother. And so we did that and she agreed.

**MAQ:** And you both went to Kuwait after that?

**LA-Q:** He went before me to establish himself. Then he sent me the tickets and I went to Kuwait.

**MAQ:** When you first came, how did you feel about the city, the space and the people?

**LA-Q:** We were staying in Nuzha, in his family home. And when his mother saw me she started spitting on me!

**MAQ:** Ah, you mean the ritual where you say *Mashallah* (God protect you) and spit a few times as protection from bad spirits.

**LA-Q:** Yes, I didn't know what she was doing and said, 'Khalifa she's spitting on me!'

**MAQ:** That's so funny!

**LA-Q:** While I was in England I bought a copy of the Qur'an. It all started there. When I left boarding school I had absolutely no religion. I still believed in God but I was no longer a Catholic or anything. So one day Khalifa and I were talking and the subject of religion came up. I told him I didn't believe in any religion. He was shocked: 'That's impossible! Everyone has a religion.' I answered *not me!* 'I thought you were Roman Catholic?' he asked. I said I'm considered Roman Catholic because when I was a baby they took me to church and put some water on me and so on. But in reality I'm nothing. When I came out of boarding school I was completely out of it. I actually became quite interested in Buddhism at the time. Buddhism has some connections with Islam.

He asked me if I had ever read the Qur'an. I told him I had heard about it, but I'd never read it. He smiled and said he would bring it to me the next day and he did. I started reading the first page and it surprised me very much. 'In the name of God, creator of all living things – *read.*' I told Khalifa that if it starts like that with an introduction telling you to read – to look at life around you – it must be a scientific book. It spoke to the mind. So I liked it and I started teaching myself Arabic using language books before I came to Kuwait. But when I talked to people, nobody understood me. '*Min ayna ataytom?*' (where are you from?) I would ask, using classical Arabic that nobody used.

**MAQ:** Yes language books are usually focussed on classical Arabic.

**LA-Q:** So when I came to Kuwait I converted to Islam and we got married.

**MAQ:** And when did you move into this house in particular?

**LA-Q:** In 1960, when it was ready, we moved out of the family home and came here. Khalifa warned me that there would not be any electricity yet. I said I didn't care: I just want my own home. For a full year, we lived without electricity.

**MAQ:** So then you moved here and started to make artworks? I just want to try to pinpoint when all of this started.

**LA-Q:** In 1972. Because Jalila, my daughter, started going to school in 1972. But it was actually in 1966 that I made that cabinet covered in mirrors. She had broken a mirror and I decided to use it as decoration for that piece of furniture. I always make things without being very conscious of it. Stuffed birds, things like that. I wanted to have beautiful things in the house. But I really began to make serious art in 1972.

Jalila was young and was drawing all over the walls, which were painted in emulsion paint. When I tried to clean it it would come off and leave a horrible patch. Khalifa said we couldn't get the painters to come back again so that's when I had the idea, which came out of the cabinet, to start a mosaic on the wall. I didn't really cut any shapes. I just dropped a mirror on the concrete floor and it broke. I stuck the pieces to the wall in the living room and that's how it started. But then the place where the mirrors were attached started to look bad. In the beginning I thought it was damp but then I found out there were termites.

**MAQ:** The termite story is quite famous: you mentioned it to me the last time we met as well.

**LA-Q:** Yes, they had already eaten through the shoe cabinet. I thought I could fight them using the mirrors, so I taught myself to properly attach them to the wall using materials that are more solid, and began to redo everything. I started using a special cutter for the mirrors. I completed the whole design. Now, every room is different and have different themes. From the ceiling to the corners, from the wall and to the floor, everything is different. This room is planet Earth. On the ceiling you can see the sun with all the planets and on the wall there is a big jumping fish in the middle.

**MAQ:** So in an effort to protect the house, you started spreading the mosaics everywhere? The house can also be seen as a representation of your battle with the termites?

**LA-Q:** Yes! They won the battle but I won the war! I discovered the termites in 1985. So I stripped all the mosaics down and restarted everything again. You must be really mad to do that. We artists, we are mad people.



Exterior, Mirror House.  
*Courtesy Lidia Al-Qattan.*

**MAQ:** This is something I really wanted to ask you about. For me, as an artist there is always this sense of madness in my work. Especially when I was living in Japan for ten years, which was very far away from my home. There are these moments where I lose myself because I am so far from where I started, so there is this inherent madness in there and it shows in some of my works. Do you feel like this happened to you in Kuwait? This moment where you feel you are not in your place, or you feel that the society surrounding you is different to who you are?

**LA-Q:** No. Never.

**MAQ:** You feel accepted?

**LA-Q:** Yes. I really just liked to work, and make beautiful things. I have never felt like an outcast

here. You see, I was in a boarding school all my life: that is where I was really alienated. I was ostracized. Can you believe that during the time I was at boarding school, from the age of eight to 16, I never saw Venice? I was grounded all the time.

**MAQ:** That must have been awful.

**LA-Q:** I never even saw the carnival. Not once. They were wicked to me.

**MAQ:** So when you came to Kuwait you felt your life started anew – that you could start fresh again. Do you see this house as an artwork, an expression of yourself and who you are? Do you think it could also be seen as a performance?

**LA-Q:** Absolutely.

**MAQ:** The tours you give here are amazing.

**LA-Q:** You know, in the beginning Khalifa was more proud of this place than I was. When I saw the reactions from people who were coming in from all over to see it, I started to recognize its value. 'Well, we did not expect all of that,' they would say when they stepped out the door. I felt like I had accomplished something. I get a sense of satisfaction in giving joy to others through this place, which is a unique house.

**MAQ:** I wanted to ask about your interest in outer space, which you can see everywhere in the mosaics and the paintings. When did you begin to become fascinated by the stars and the planets?

**LA-Q:** Ever since I was born. We were living on a farm when my father was still alive. We would be on the move all the time. In my eight years with him we changed houses 12 times. This is why I don't feel attached to Italy or feel like it's my home. During the war we went north, near Venice. Every time something happened we would move so I have no real roots in that place. But on the farm I would love to go out at night and look at the stars. They were so clear; I could see the Milky Way – as a child I thought it was a cloud. I didn't really understand the concept of stars but I loved looking at them.

**MAQ:** Then you began to read about the planets and astronomy as you got older?

**LA-Q:** Yes, because that's the next frontier. Humanity is like that, very curious. Without imagination there is nothing. Unfortunately, in Kuwait they stunt the imagination; they just expect children to memorize things endlessly. Let the children look at life, investigate and analyse things!

**MAQ:** When did you start making clothes? You do make your own clothes, correct?

**LA-Q:** Absolutely. And I made Khalifa's clothes as well; his *dishdasha* (traditional dress), pants, jackets and so on. Because Khalifa was so open-minded, even if I made something crazy he would put it on. I would ask him not to wear it, but he insisted on wearing it each time. I even made him his ties and shoes.

**MAQ:** You really had a great relationship.

**LA-Q:** We were on the same mental track. We always had that kind of relationship of mutual respect. Khalifa really respected everyone around him.

**MAQ:** Did Khalifa influence you as an artist?

**LA-Q:** Actually, I think I was the one who influenced him. Once, I was working on my mirror mosaics in the kitchen and he was sitting in the living room painting. I looked at the painting and told him what he was doing was 'Circulism'. He didn't understand what I meant. I went on to explain that the cubism he was working on before that work was frozen, static, but that in this work he began to develop that idea. The cube had developed into a circle. There was a dial-looking thing down there. And that's when I began to write about his work. I felt he had come up with a new innovation in art. I believed it very strongly. Sometimes the artist themselves might not see it, but someone else will. The first paper I wrote was called 'Circulism and Life' in 1968 or 1969.

I was also working on 'Circulism' in my own way, but differently to Khalifa. His work was about drama and tragedy, whereas what I was doing was poetry. I feel my work is a poetic expression. I see all the positive things in life.

## **A sample of Lidia's tour:**

*Your journey begins here, in the Room of the Universe. You can see the planets above you – Saturn, Uranus, Venus. By listening to the music and the flashing lights, you feel relaxed. This here is the Big Bang. Matter and anti-matter begin to form after three seconds. When they collide, there remains a little fraction. That little fraction is where everything we see exists. And here is the super black hole that controls the universe. Here you see images that suggest movement. Without movement none of these things would happen. There would be no Big Bang, there would be no time, no space, no gravitation. You need movement. If you read about Quantum physics you would know that it's the basis of all things. When we start to really understand these things as well as the proper methods of recycling, human beings will begin to live in space.*

**Lidia Al-Qattan**, (née Giuseppe Scagnolari) is an Italian born artist and writer, married to the Kuwaiti artist Khalifa Ali Hussein Al-Qattan. Lidia Al-Qattan has had a long and prolific artistic career beginning with her first solo exhibition in 1979, sponsored by the Kuwait University. She is also a writer, having contributed articles to The Kuwait Times, The Arab Times and the monthly magazines Al Ayam, Al Kuwait, and the Journal of Kuwait Armed Forces as well as having written a number of books including The Prophecies of Khalifa Al-Qattan in 2004. Lidia Al-Qattan is arguably best known for her 'House of Mirrors', a project whereby she transformed her house into a unique mirror-covered art-piece that covers the entire ground floor. The project, which took 27 years of intermittent work, has been open to visitors since 1981.

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[1] Tarek El-Ariss, *Trials of Arab Modernity: Literary Affects and the New Political* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), p. 34.

## **About the author**

### **Monira Al Qadiri**

**Monira Al Qadiri** is a Kuwaiti artist born in Dakar, Senegal, in 1983. Having lived through the 1990–91 Gulf War, she became fascinated by Japanese animation as a means of escaping the harsh realities she experienced. At the age of 16, she moved to Tokyo on an art scholarship

from Kuwait's government. In 2005, she completed her first animated film, *Visual Violence*. Since then, she has been conducting research into the relationship between psychology and art, and on the aesthetics of sadness in the Middle East. In 2010, she received her PhD in intermedia art from Tokyo University of the Arts. Her work has been shown in group exhibitions and film festivals in the USA, Russia, Germany, the UAE, China and Japan. Al Qadiri is also a member of the GCC collective.