



An Adventurous Heart

WITH NO IDEA OF WHAT A NEW PAINTING WILL LOOK LIKE WHEN IT'S FINISHED, HALLA SHAFEY ALLOWS HERSELF THE FREEDOM TO BE AMAZED.

By Ani Kodjabasheva

Halla Shafey has turned her studio into a “laboratory” where she constantly experiments. Her investigations include watercolor underpaintings, dabs of acrylic scattered like petals over the paper, and lines and scratches forming woven patterns.

She applies a variety of linocuts and monoprints as an underpainting for her pastels in order to provide textural interest and variety. The linocuts are her own designs, which she prints with acrylic—sometimes under the pastel, sometimes on top of it, but ultimately, she always covers the entire painting with soft pastel “so that it remains a pastel painting and not a mixed media one,” she explains. She imprints plants and leaves directly onto the paper. She’s always trying something new. “This is the most important thing: To be free in art is to have no pre-conceived ideas. You have to be a risk-taker,” she says.

To serve her vision, Shafey’s studio-laboratory is full of unusual objects—pieces of vegetables, bottle caps, a comb—“anything that will give me different textures,” she says, “absolutely anything. I take a lot of things from my kitchen upstairs [to the studio] and I work with them. This is the fun and exciting challenge art offers—an opportunity to discover and embrace happy accidents. Creating art is as much about enjoying the journey as celebrating the final product.”

A SEA OF WONDERS

Shafey describes starting a new painting as “an opportunity to plunge into an enchanting sea of endless wonders.” Her artistic development can be described in the same way. She didn’t realize she wanted to be an artist until the age of 40. Before then, she had built a career as an economist and international development expert. Her formidable CV from this period includes consulting roles for international

Untitled (pastel on acrylic on mount board, 31½x31½)



organizations, of which the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme, UNESCO and UNICEF are the most well known. She has worked for government agencies and cultural foundations in her native Egypt. She has conducted studies and evaluated projects for the European Union's aid programs and any number of non-profit organizations.

In spite of all her successes, she didn't feel at peace. "All the way, all the time, I felt there was something missing in my life," says Shafey. There was something aching. There was some creativity inside that wasn't able to come out." Shafey couldn't articulate this need until, one evening when she was hosting a reunion with school friends. They were excited, yet anxious, about entering their 40s. Then

Shafey realized what she wanted. "I told them, well, let's make this a very special year, and let's try to do things we've always wanted to do in our lives but never had the time to pursue." Shafey committed to taking a year off work and exploring art.

Although the artist grew up in a family that appreciated all kinds of art, she'd never received formal training. She enrolled in photography classes and tried mosaics and writing. She also started taking weekly lessons at the atelier of established Egyptian artist Magd El-Sagini. There she felt she'd landed in the right place. For four and a half years—from 2006 through the end of 2010—Shafey studied the foundations of classical drawing and painting. "We did still lifes; we did portraiture; we did landscapes; we did everything," she says.

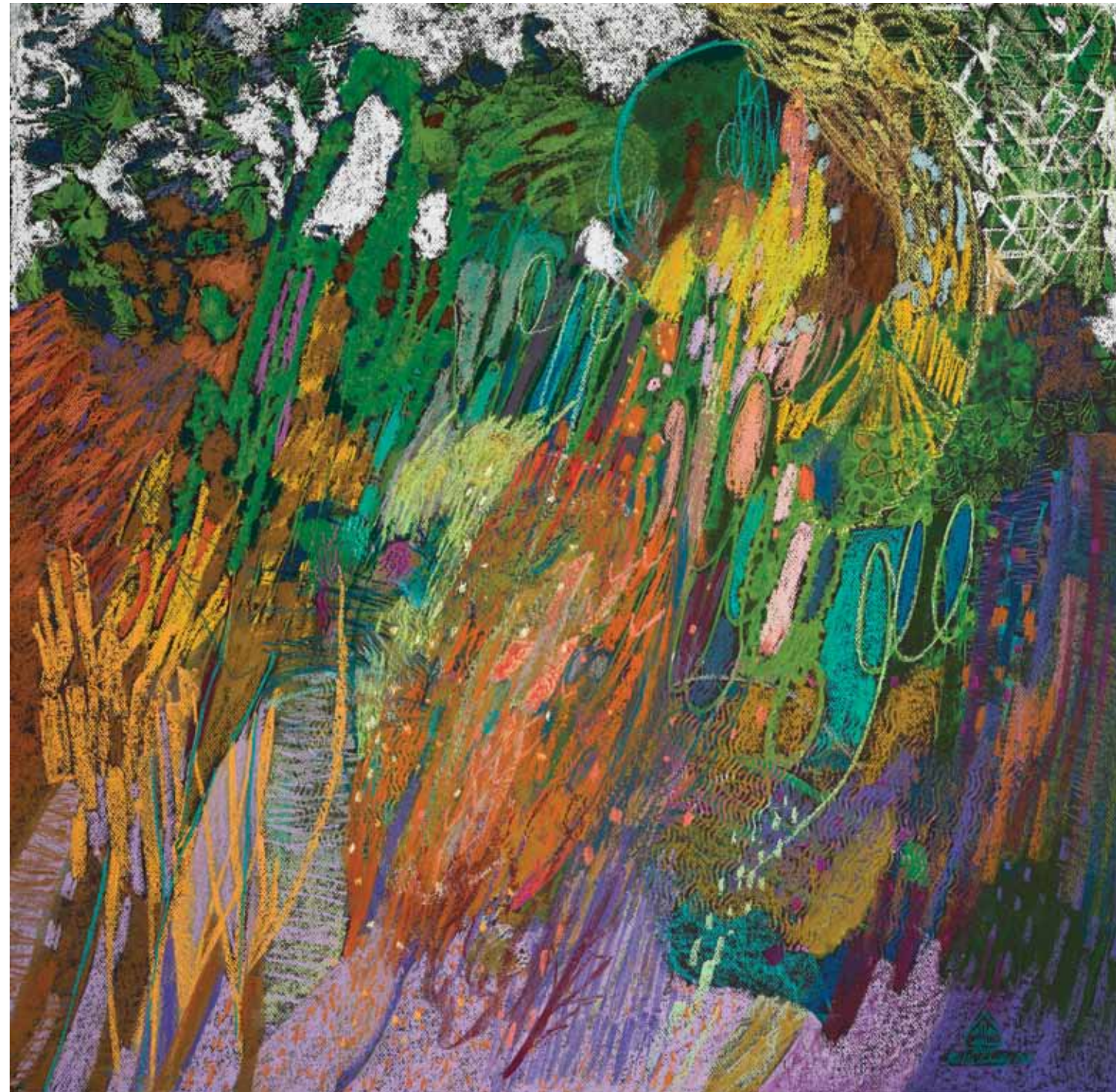
Toward the end of Shafey's training, in January 2011, the Arab Spring revolution brought excitement and unrest to the streets of Cairo, where Shafey lives, and interrupted her work as an economist. "The timing was incredible," she says. In that moment, Shafey made up her mind to leave her former career and focus on her art.

At El-Sagini's studio, Shafey was drawn to pastels. Realizing that she could use them in her own ways, not only as she was taught, she started doing research into the medium. At first, *Pastel Journal* was her guide: "[The magazine] would arrive at my husband's office," she says. "The day he would bring it home was so exciting for me because I'd been waiting for this volume to come, and I would spend the whole night going through the articles and looking at the different techniques and the different styles of the artists. I would say, 'Oh my god, am I going to ever, ever reach this level in my life?'"

Shafey quickly developed a body of work and had her first solo show in 2012. "After that, everything started rolling," she says. She gained memberships in prestigious international organizations, including the Pastel Society UK and the Pastel Society of America. She began to receive invitations to international salons and biennials and has since garnered numerous awards and recognitions. She discovered a global community of

"Some people are sitting safe on the shore, not wanting to set sail and worrying about the sea that might be rough. ... But you won't discover new things that way."

—HALLA SHAFEY



ABOVE
Untitled (pastel on acrylic on mount board, 47¼x11¼s)

OPPOSITE
Untitled (pastel on acrylic on mount board, 31½x31½)

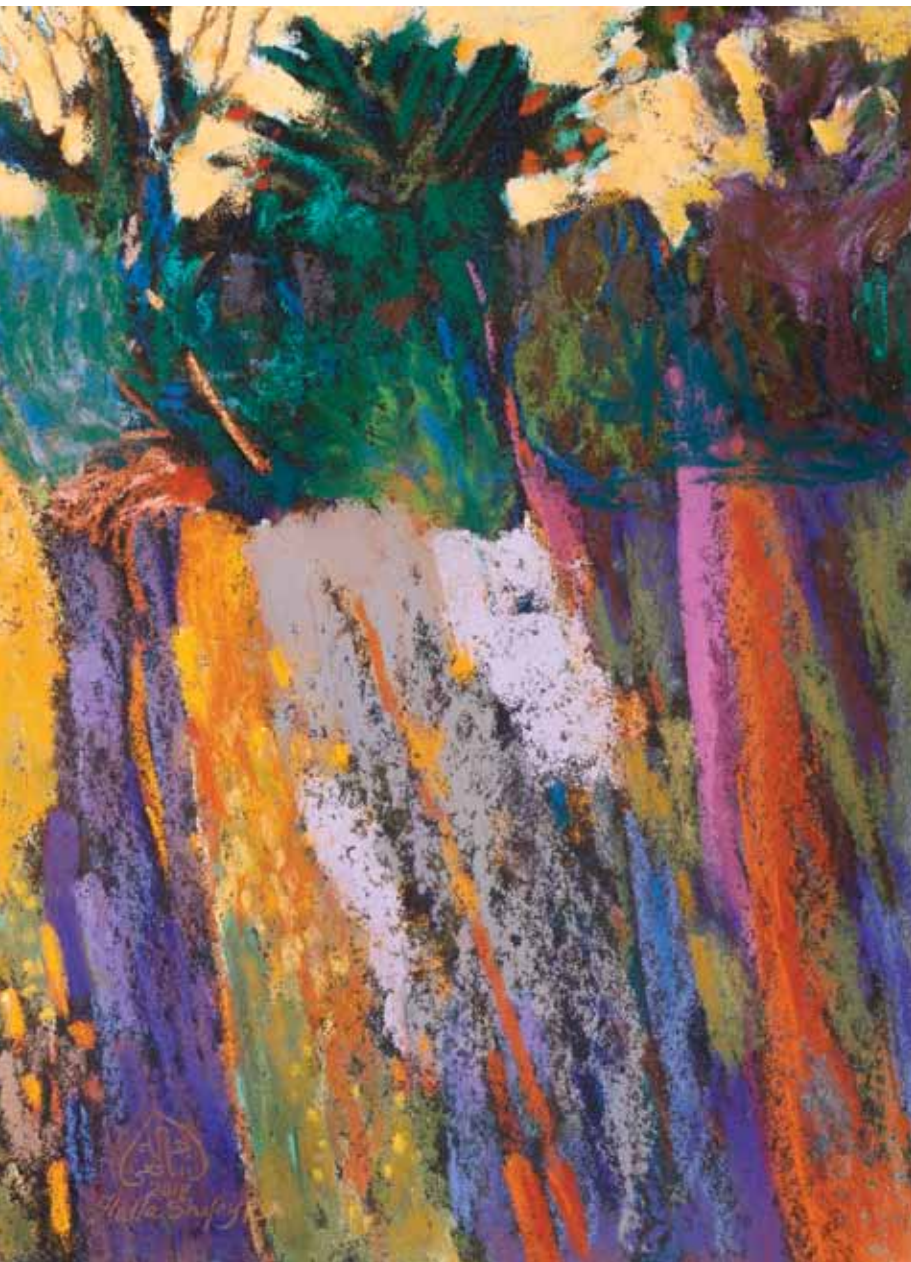
artists she now belongs to. “I found what I wanted, finally, in my life,” Shafey says. “It started late. When I had my first exhibition, I was 46 years old. But I’m blessed; I’m happy; I’m grateful.”

She takes a philosophical view of her late start as an artist, admitting with some poignancy, “Sometimes I think, ‘wow, if I had started art 20 or 25 years earlier, I might have been in a different place,’” She also recognizes, however, that her singular path made her who she is today. She wasn’t straitjacketed by the rules of the art world. Once, a colleague told Shafey, “No, you cannot do that,” when she mentioned mixing acrylic and pastel. “It doesn’t work.” Shafey informed him that, because she was not bound by theory, she had tried it, and it worked. “I come to art with an adventurous heart,” she says.

OPPOSITE TOP
Untitled (pastel on acrylic on mount board, 31½x47¼)

OPPOSITE
BOTTOM
The Displaced
(pastel on acrylic on mount board, 31½x31½)

BELOW
Untitled (pastel on touch paper, 40x30)



WORLDS OF COLOR AND TEXTURE

Part of the reason Shafey was drawn to pastel is her innate love of color. “I consider color the oxygen I breathe,” she says. “The luminosity and vibrancy of the color you get with pastel is unparalleled in any other medium. There’s something magical, really, about the intensity and the saturation.” For Shafey, to paint with pastel is to celebrate color. “You’re applying luscious colors in pure pigment form. I never lose the excitement this gives me,” she says.

The artist attributes her appreciation and sensibility in regard to color to her mother. The family’s home was decorated with polychrome rugs, curtains and upholstery. Shafey remembers her mother taking her to markets where hundreds of fabrics were sold—an early glimpse of the abundance and diversity of the world. “And then the idea of matching fabrics together—fascinating!” says Shafey.

This experience still informs Shafey’s art. In her fabric-like paintings, she combines fields of pure color and a variety of textures. She compares her work to tapestries or embroideries. The surfaces are rippling like water, grainy like sand or soft like earth. Often 2½ feet or more in width, her paintings open luminous, tactile worlds to the viewer.

BALANCE AND HARMONY

Shafey trained as a realist painter but found that, rather than depicting objects or ideas, she preferred the freedom of abstraction. She has developed an artistic process that lets her plunge into the unknown and come out on the other side in a new place.

She works without external references—no photographs, sketches or design in her mind. She compares her creative process to a mathematical equation; she puts down one element and then balances it with another. “You have to add and subtract elements all the time in a very dynamic way,” she says. This exploration leads to self-discovery as she finds the colors, values and textures to convey a certain feeling. Periodically, she has to



stop and ask, “Does this ring true, or does it need more work?” Bringing in another metaphor, Shafey compares herself to a composer who tests a few notes, keeps the harmonies that work, discards the notes that sound false and then keeps going.

For Shafey, the hardest part of the creative process is the initial application of color: “I don’t like interruptions during this phase,” she says. “I have to be concentrating so, so much!” Her open-ended process doesn’t always work out. “A lot of times, I won’t get my balances right. A lot of times things will go wrong,” she says. “What I’ve learned over the years is that I have to be very kind to myself and say, ‘Okay, this one isn’t working yet.’ Before I became more experienced, I’d say, ‘No, no! This is a total failure,’ and I would tear it or throw it or abandon it. Now, with experience, I’ve learned to say, ‘Well, this is the start. I’m going to use this as the first layer of color, and then I’ll start fixing it and applying more



OPPOSITE
Untitled (pastel on
acrylic on mount
board, 31½x47¼)

RIGHT
Untitled (pastel on
acrylic on mount
board, 31½x31½)

BELOW
Untitled (pastel
(pastel on acrylic
on mount board,
31½x31½)



layers on top.” Shafey keeps going until she knows she cannot put down “a single extra dot of color,” and the composition is complete.

“In the end, I look at the painting, and say, “I never knew it would look like that,” says Shafey. She views her works as “poetry without words and symphonies without sound.” Her hope is to “conjure a kind of awe, a kind of wonderment.” Her practice is related to her love of nature and Sufi Muslim meditations. For her, painting is a celebration of the natural world. “It’s how I relate with the stars, the clouds, the trees, the birds—the universe in its entirety,” she says. “It’s the way I view the world with humanity’s place in it as a tiny element in the bigger picture.”

SETTING SAIL

Shafey encourages aspiring artists to open up to new kinds of practice. “Some people are sitting safe on the shore, not wanting to set sail and worrying about the sea that might be rough. Well, okay, that’s fine. But you won’t discover new things that

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—HALLA SHAFEY



way,” she says. She advises giving yourself permission to experiment—and patience. “A lot of artists deprive themselves of the pleasure of even just a day of experimentation. Give yourself a day off and say, ‘I’m going to do art differently. I want to go through the experience of working spontaneously, without any plans, without any sketches.’” She encourages her art students to loosen up and develop their signature style through “greater dependence on imagination, intuition and the unique visual memory everyone possesses..” **PJ**

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Halla Shafey (facebook.com/halla.shafey and instagram.com/halla.shafey.egyptian.artist) is an internationally acclaimed artist residing in Cairo. She’s an Egyptian member of the Federation of British Artists, an elected member of the Pastel Society of England and a Signature Member of the Pastel Society of America. She also offers online tutoring and mentoring.