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FARIDEH  
LASHAI  
AND HER  
ENCHANTING OEUVRE

AFRUZ AMIGHI'S  
UTOPIAN  
TOWERS

WINDS OF CHANGE  
MIDDLE EASTERN ART  
*at the* GUGGENHEIM  
NEW YORK

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# Bringing SHARJAH to DC STREETS

Emirati artist **Ebtisam Abdulaziz** sits down with *Suzy Sikorski* and speaks about the evolution of her arts practice and the challenges she faces as an artist today

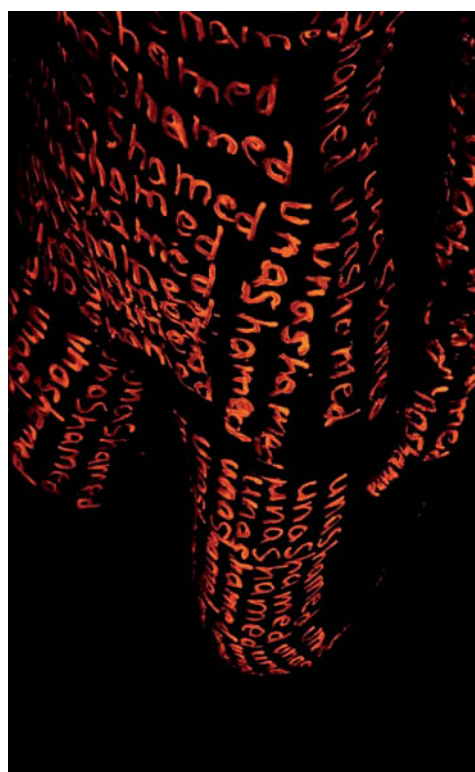
Extending her creativity to the Washington DC streets, artist Ebtisam Abdulaziz shares her newest projects at DC Arts Studio's *Spring Open Studios* group exhibition this April. Before meeting with the artist, I had the chance to survey the works of painters, dancers, sculptors and jewelers until I laid my eyes on the photographs of Ebtisam's performance piece. Entitled *Unashamed*, the work showcased the artist outlining her entire body in orange neon words. These glowing, fiery letters resonated with me, leaving an indelible image of her painted body as the beginning of a long conversation with one of the UAE's most pivotal Emirati female artists.

Obsessed with exploring the intricate nature of creativity within mathematics and documenting daily habits, she welcomed me into her five-month studio surrounded by her geometric, abstract patterns, and scraps of graph papers buzzing with numerical systems. Since painting an entire plastic bubble in Yves Klein Blue at Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi in 2003, she has chosen to incorporate the colour within her own artistic development. Greeting me in a long blazer in that same deep blue hue, Ebtisam envisioned this as a perfect colour for the opening night of the DC event. "Yves Klein Blue is my window to freedom," she tells me. "The colour symbolises my own liberation in choosing to become an artist and wearing this jacket reminds me of my persistent confidence and composure to explore new spaces."

Leaving her home in Sharjah and assimilating with DC culture, Ebtisam has embraced the new experience as a chance to further explore how to articulate herself within the city streets, subways systems and highways. In her 2015 work *Remapping DC*, she reexamines the city's infrastructure she explored in her 2013 *Remapping Al Fahidi* series of UAE streets of the Al Fahidi Historical Neighbourhood. Her new work continues to incorporate experimental photography and painting by using the negatives of the space between the buildings and the local streets in the DC region. Unlike her past work, which explores the missing elements destroyed throughout the UAE's development projects, this new series focuses on future city construction. Within the negative spaces, Ebtisam delicately paints street construction signs that she finds etched throughout the streets, warning pedestrians of street changes such as new gas and electrical lines. Despite this future transformation of the street, Ebtisam is concerned with preserving the memory of the



Above: Ebtisam Abdulaziz during *Spring Open Studios*. Courtesy of the artist.  
 Right: *Unashamed*. A still from a Ebtisam's 2015 performance. Five minute and 45 second video. Image: 45 x 70 cm.  
 Below: *Blue Freedo*. 2013. Installation sphere and performance. Documentation of 10 photographs (100 x 80 cm) Two videos, 3 minutes  
 Facing page: Untitled. 2016. Acrylic on canvas. 91.9 x 121.92 cm.





space through numerical documentation. Each street edition contains a number and location of the exact street, allowing the viewer a chance to revisit the space, observe its development, and ultimately preserve the original street architecture through her physical work.

Sitting closest to her desk lies two rows of her latest additions to her 2016 *Autobiography-Sketch Diary Book*. Painting these since her arrival in DC, Ebtisam devotes one day to a single drawing. “It is as if I am writing my autobiography without saying words,” she says. “Instead, my doodling allows my subconscious mind to flow onto the graph paper.” Despite the hundreds she has made since the project began in 2012, patterns or colour variations cease to repeat, allowing these sketches to be seen as organic, free flowing thoughts completely unabsorbed by imitation.

Although much of Ebtisam’s work relies on direct, mathematical answers, some ultimately relate to the fluidity of our identity and its ensuing personal challenges. Ebtisam explores her own physical existence through live body performances, most readily seen in her 2015 creation, *Unashamed*. Wearing a black suit in a darkroom underneath UV light, she writes the words in fluorescent red and acrylic paint. “The work is boldly clarifying the state of a female Arab artist who uses her body in her art,” says Ebtisam. “This is something that is too often misunderstood and censored by society. It is hard to explain my own sense of independency

when people are constantly questioning me.” Documenting her agency through the power of writing, Ebtisam sees this as one of the most emotionally and physically tolling works throughout her residency program. Not only did Ebtisam unleash anger and anxiety from her body during the actual writing process, but she also had to patiently wait hours for the paint to dry onto her body suit. It’s then and there that she imagines embedded memories and future worries of her own path as an artist from the UAE.

Continuing to explore how systems operate within society, Ebtisam films another body performance piece that features the artist again in a dark room wearing a black suit. This work, created in 2015, is entitled *Structures* and features the artist enclosed within a glowing neon cube outlined in fluorescent red tape. Attempting to break free by shaking the cube’s walls and trying to force her way through its invisible sides, Ebtisam ultimately smashes the walls into small glowing fragments and abandons the destruction by exiting the video clip.

Bravely facing the DC winter when arriving this past December, and especially so after living in the UAE heat, in this new city Ebtisam is also leaving her footprint on the local streets. She is recognising, bit by bit through her art, a new and empowered perception of herself within a new place and culture. ■

*DC Arts Studios: Spring Open Studios ran from 9-10 April 2016.*  
[dcartsstudios.org](http://dcartsstudios.org)