

# Behind the Lens

*A look into the life and passion of Ghada Khunji, who started her career as a freelance photographer in the fashion industry during early nineties*

TDT|Manama

**Harpreet Kaur**

**G**hada Khunji is a graduate of the Parsons School of Design and the International Center of Photography's Documentary Programme, both in New York. She started her career in the early nineties as a freelance photographer in the fashion industry in New York City, and spent two years as a research assistant for photo agencies, including Black Star and Magnum, followed by eight years as a printer and print manager for a high profile clientele including Annie Leibovitz and Steven Meisel.

Khunji's photographs are known for documenting both landscapes and people from all over the world and the inherent dignity of the human element. In her latest work, she focuses the lens on herself by exploring her innermost feelings, thoughts and identity as a woman.

Khunji a recipient of a significant number of awards, including the Lucie Discovery of the Year (2006), American Photo Magazine's Image of the Year Award (2007), as well as the Golden Lights Award for Travel. She has exhibited widely in the US and Europe, and in recent years, in London, Spain, and throughout the Middle East. As the recipient of the Julia Margaret Cameron Award (2012), where she won the first prize in the category of portraiture. One of her recent works was acquired by the Abdul Latif Jameel Community Initiatives (ALJCI) in 2013.

In the same year, she was nominated for the Prix Pictet, the global award in photography and sustainability.

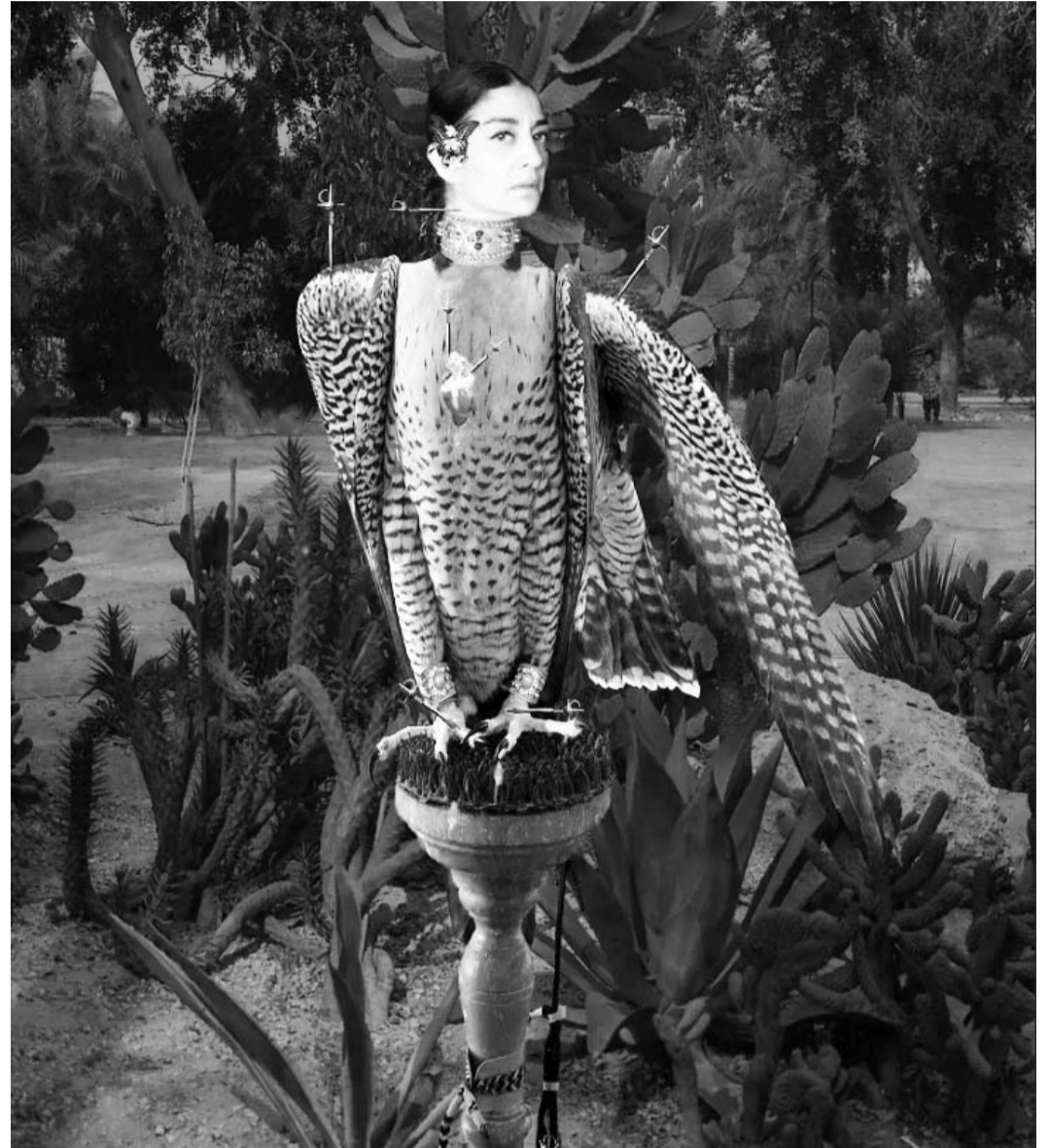
Two years ago she participated in The Colombo Art Biennale which was held in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Last year she participated in Art Abu Dhabi.

Currently, she is in an ongoing group show, 'I AM', under the patronage of Queen Rania which debuted in Jordan, then London and now touring in the US. Moreover, her upcoming project is a group show inspired by Kahlil Gibran's, The Prophet, which will be held at Sotheby's in London in August.

## 'I consider myself a documentary photographer'

Ghada Khunji told *Tribune*, "Firstly, a" lot of people think that I am a photojournalist by the kind of images I shoot, but I consider myself a documentary photographer. Although closely related to photojournalism there is a unique difference. A journalistic piece is assumed to be a news story because it professes a certain truth. But as we know in our time, not even photojournalists have control of the output of the message. They are merely messengers putting their own lives at risk. Photojournalism is the show that everyone's watching. Documentary photography is more intimate. It's when you're backstage.

"For example, when I travelled to Cuba, I did not want to



Images of Ghada Khunji's latest work

focus on its politics but rather on how the locals are living and surviving. Photojournalists cover what is newsworthy and tragic in war-torn countries every day. I would rather show the other side where life exists and goes on regardless.

## Breakthrough moment

Khunji got her first camera at the age of 8. "I remember being around 8 years old when I was given my first camera; at that time, I would photograph my family and surroundings."

"Although I went to college to study business, I kept photographing my friends, family, and college life merely for my own pleasure and for the college yearbook.

"It was not until I took my degree in Public Relations, where one of my courses was photography, that I discovered my passion for photography.

"I still remember developing my first black & white film roll and printing an image from the negative in a dark room with a hint of a red safelight.

"The excitement of watching an image slowly appearing in front of my eyes was a breakthrough moment for me."

## Documenting Life

"Once I graduated I decided to move to New York and pursue a degree in photography. I was first interested in fashion photography but I soon discovered I was more interested in documenting real life. I was especially into capturing portraits of people.

"I took it upon myself to travel abroad when I had a vacation from college. I started with The Dominican Republic where I

documented local villages. The warmth of the people immediately made me realize what my photographic goal would be, to bring awareness to people and cultures that might otherwise go unnoticed."

Photography wasn't common among women back then. "When I started there did not exist many female photojournalists but today the ratio has grown where more and more females are covering front lines; expressing a woman's view and perspective in war zones.

"Being a documentarian photographer threatened me a lot less than what photojournalists face although the threat was there. That said, it comes down to faith and will, not male or female."

## Stronger, determined

Being a graduate of the Bahrain school, back in 1985, it was a challenge for Ghada Khunji to live abroad away from my family. It took her time to adjust but felt "stronger and more determined," as she sees it. According to her, "those years abroad were supremely important for one growing up."

"I learnt to be independent and to work hard to achieve the greatest heights of achievement even through times of struggle and tears. As Frank Sinatra sang, "If you can make it in New York, you can make it anywhere."

She told *Tribune* that it was not about proving herself as a women photographer that mattered. "I did not find it difficult to prove myself as a woman photographer; I only had to prove that I was great at what I did."

"Being female has helped on

many occasions, especially in some of the cultures I have visited, you need to be able to gain their trust, to be able to reassure them that you aren't going to demean them or exploit them. Because I am a woman and because I am of Middle Eastern descent, other women in these quieter, less sought out places, see someone they might be able to relate to, meaning they are more likely to let me into their lives; to let me take their picture."

## Exhibitions in Bahrain

The Kingdom, Ghada Khunji said, has produced some very great shows & showcased wonderful photographic exhibitions. "I think what would help is involving more media and publicity so that we can attract a wider and more international audience."

"Since returning from New York, I have expanded beyond documentary photography. As an artist one has to progress to the next level otherwise to vanish in the now. "I have made two grand installations in Bahrain and now I'm working on my third. It will be a surprise; one clue is that the theme is unity. In the meantime, I've been producing two bodies of work that now encompass photomontage.

"As a documentarian, I was true to reality and now I'm creating the opposite; my own imaginary reality. I photograph personal objects; use myself as a muse and montage them as if I'm a painter. The two themes are, The Dark Ages, symbolizing biblical scenarios; and FARIDA, a homage to the great Mexican artist, Frida Kahlo," Khunji added.

