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CULTURE

Aidha Badr's Dubai Exhibition Blends Pretty Pigments with a Quiet Passion

For her solo show at Firetti Contemporary, Aidha Badr undergoes a creative metamorphosis through vivid paintings that illustrate the shifting sands of womanhood

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Photo: Aidha Badr in her studio

Walking into Aidha Badr's studio feels like being inside an actual scrapbook. Red silk, white lace and chiffon fabrics are draped over furniture, and on the walls are personal mementoes and memories – a photograph of Badr's mother dressed in all pink and notes from flowers that her husband gave her. "I love having all my thoughts and things gathered together, shaping the atmosphere around me. Just being surrounded by it feels like part of the work," says the Egyptian artist, who lives in Dubai. "The Sopranos or Gilmore Girls play on my iPad while I paint; other days I listen to Pitbull. I spend most of my day in the studio, even when I am not painting."

The results of her labour? Bold yet whimsical canvases depicting galloping horses and a woman bearing a clear resemblance to Badr. A fuchsia so vivid, it borderlines on red, contrasting with cobalt and powder-blue hues that paint a dreamy sky. Pink roses, gallant stallions and an enigmatic woman who exudes a stoic sense of confidence. *I'm Never Coming Back* is the title of this new body of work, on exhibit at Firetti Contemporary in collaboration with Hunna Art Gallery.



I Want to Leave, 2025. Aidha Badr

The series alludes to the mental space inhabited by Badr, who is a new mother. “The phrase came to me almost like a whisper while I was working in the studio,” she shares. “It actually inspired the first painting of the series – *I'm Not The Same And I'm Never Coming Back*.” The artwork portrays a fully formed horse, rising above a smaller toy horse – a symbol of the tension between who she was and who she is becoming. “The toy horse carries a sense of fragility, playfulness, innocence and past identity, while the fully formed horse stands proud with resilience, grace and the courage to move forward,” explains the artist.

Badr’s journey was inspired by a childhood spent observing her own mother make art. “She would sit for hours creating hyperrealistic pencil sketches of landscapes, cows and buildings,” recalls Badr. The piece that always stood out for her, however, was a drawing of Cleopatra. When she was 10 years old, she took her mother’s drawing to school and told her friends she drew it herself. “Everyone was so impressed, and in that moment I thought to myself, I’m going to spend the rest of my life chasing that feeling.”



Self Portrait with Rose, 2025. Aidha Badr

Along with traditional artistic supplies, a non-conventional medium also influenced Badr's approach toward painting – beauty products, specifically in the hands of Huda Kattan. "I actually found it easier to learn by watching make-up tutorials than anything else. This was during the peak of YouTube's make-up tutorial era around 2015, and Huda was really at the forefront of that moment," she recalls. Experimenting with contouring and highlighting was all the rage, and as Badr watched the rising make-up artist, she learned how light and shadow can reshape a face. "I realised very quickly that I could apply those same techniques to my portraits," she says. "When I paint portraits, I'm essentially contouring." The colours she uses are flesh tone, titanium white, burnt sienna and scarlet red – just like foundation, highlight, contour and blush. "Those four shades are enough for me to create depth, warmth and structure, just like make-up does. So in a way, Huda taught me to see the face as a surface you can sculpt and transform. It gave me a new way of painting that felt intuitive and unpretentious."



Anatomy of a Toy Horse, 2025. Aidha Badr

While Badr has typically favoured shades of red for their intensity, urgency and emotion, the palette for her latest work marks a shift toward softer, airier pigments. “Red is still there, but it now sits in dialogue with these calmer shades, weaving through the paintings with a sort of quiet persistence,” she explains. One oil on canvas, named *I Want To Leave*, depicts fluffy clouds in the shape of a horse, bordered by red and white stripes. In *Anatomy Of A Toy Horse*, the animal’s separate body parts float against a stark red background. Other paintings are intimate self-portraits – intriguing iterations of Badr robed in a pink dress with a ruffled neckline and wavy brown hair cascading down her shoulders. In some, she lounges against a backdrop of clouds, in others, she grasps perfectly formed roses in her manicured fingers. “I am inspired by the multifaceted nature of women, and their strength in roles that are often overlooked,” notes Badr.

“I am drawn to women who embrace vulnerability, who are brave enough to be wives, homemakers and mothers, carrying fragility without fear”

Female fragility, believes Badr, is often mistaken for weakness – even madness – but the subjects she paints are self-assured in their roles. “They uphold traditional ideals of beauty and femininity, while revealing that those very qualities can be a form of power.” Badr balances tenderness with a strong sense of presence in her paintings, and she says this is rooted in her Arab culture. “It has taught me so much about unspoken acts of love, and I think that subtlety lives at the core of my work,” she reflects. “It is often not in grand gestures but in the smallest, most intimate ones, like my mother kissing a piece of fruit before handing it to me or my mother-in-law saving the last fig for me.”



Somebody up there Loves me, 2025. Aidha Badr

Motherhood – one of the most meaningful shifts in her life – naturally seeps into Badr’s art. “It is not always direct or literal, but more like an undercurrent that shapes everything,” she confides. “There is a heightened awareness of time. That sense of transformation is at the heart of this body of work.” The ever-ticking clock and wish to preserve moments while knowing you need to keep moving forward are the emotions fuelling Badr’s brushstrokes. Some paintings are completed with poetic lines of text – fragments of thoughts that she catches and places on the canvas before they slip away. “In a way, the text acts like another layer of paint, another texture that sits with the painting and shapes how it is experienced,” she adds. Along these various stages of femininity and motherhood, longing and desire remain critical themes of Badr’s art. “Not loud or overt,” she says, “but in gestures of intimacy and closeness, and in the quiet bravery of women who love to love and who choose to be tender in a world that often demands hardness.”

I’m Never Coming Back is exhibiting at Firetti Contemporary until 7 November, 2025.

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