From Economics and Development to the World of Abstract Pastel Art

Article in *Al-Qahira*, an interview conducted by the distinguished newspaper published by Egypt's Ministry of Culture, features an interview conducted by the visual artist, writer, and art critic Ms. Heba Fikry.
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On the occasion of the selection of Egyptian visual artist Halla Shafey as a member of the international jury for the *Pastel 100*, the renowned annual competition organized by the specialized publication *Pastel Journal*, in October 2026, and the acceptance of one of her works in the 17th Annual Master Circle Exhibition of the International Association of Pastel Societies (IAPS), also taking place this month, we had the opportunity to sit down with her for this interview.

From the Corridors of Economics and Development to the World of Abstract Pastel Art

Every soul has a story unlike any other, and every individual has a unique path toward self-discovery and the creation of their own legend. Halla Shafey is one such extraordinary story.

Prior to becoming an artist , Shafey spent 25 years working in the field of economics and human development, moving through the corridors of international development organizations before embarking, 14 years ago, on an entirely different journey—one that was more intimate and spiritual: her artistic exploration of soft pastel.

Recognized in Egypt and internationally for her unmistakable artistic signature, Shafey has developed a distinctive approach to this medium, in which she specializes. She is among the few artists worldwide who use soft pastel in an abstract manner. Her works have been collected at home and abroad .

Shafey has held numerous solo exhibitions and participated in many group exhibitions in Egypt and abroad . She has received 24 international awards, and her work has been published in various international art publications. She has been elected to membership in both the Pastel Society of America and the Pastel Society of the United Kingdom, as well as the Master Circle of the International Association of Pastel Societies.

In Egypt, she contributes to the country's cultural life through her membership on committees within the Fine Arts Sector of the Ministry of Culture and the Cultural Development Fund. She currently serves on the Fine Arts Committee of the Supreme Council of Culture, responsible for policy advice and strategic planning for culture . She also teaches with the Pastel Society of America and has served as an international juror for pastel exhibitions and competitions around the world.

In 2025, the American University in Cairo honored her with its Alumni Excellence Award in the field of visual arts.

Q: The Role of Family and Upbringing in Shaping your Personality and Artistic Inclinations

I never explicitly dreamed of becoming a visual artist. Perhaps that was because art had always been part of my everyday life from early childhood, simply as a hobby.
I grew up in an academic family. Both my parents were university professors, and my brother and I were raised in an environment that cherished reading, knowledge, and openness to the world's cultures. This exposed us to a wide range of cultures, perspectives and possibilities.

My father used to draw and paint with me, and together we made collages and greeting cards. My mother was my first teacher in the language of color. From her, I learned to appreciate beauty, develop a refined sense of aesthetics, cultivate a diverse visual culture, and a boundless love for music, fashion, and cooking etc.
We frequently visited theaters, auctions, libraries, and fabric shops, where I developed my fascination with color. Traveling and living in different countries also played a significant role in enriching my imagination and expanding my visual vocabulary.

We grew up in a generation that enjoyed considerable freedom, without the burden of private tutoring or rigid weekly schedules filled with organized sports and activities. This allowed our interests to flourish, our imaginations to expand, and our dreams to unfold.

I loved drawing at school. Later, when I joined the Economics Department at the American University in Cairo, I became President of the student art society and enrolled in numerous courses on the history of Western art and Islamic art and architecture.

Q: Your Professional Career Before Art, and how it Influenced Your Artistic Journey?

I began my professional career while pursuing a master's degree in economics, working at the Export Development Bank. I then worked at the World Bank in Washington, D.C., as an economic consultant before joining the United Nations Development Programme in Cairo.
During that period, I traveled to various Egyptian governorates and supervised development projects addressing informal settlements, education, literacy, children's rights, and women's empowerment.
Afterward, I worked as an independent consultant for international organizations and government ministries, preparing studies, designing projects, raising funds, conducting evaluations , strategic planning and published several books and studies .
This work equipped me with practical experience, life experience, and maturity. It also gave me a deeper understanding of the fabric of Egyptian society and its intricate

developmental challenges. Some of these social issues subsequently found their way into my artwork, particularly girl rights and women empowerment .

Q:How Did Your Artistic Journey begin, and Why Did You Choose Pastel in Particular?

My artistic journey began in 2006, when I felt that something significant was missing from my life. It was a calling to discover other worlds within myself, despite my love for my profession and the success I had achieved in my career.
I enrolled in formal art studies with my teacher, Magd El-Segini, under whose guidance I studied classical drawing and painting for five years. Afterward, I left my job to devote myself entirely to art in 2012.
I fell in love with pastel because of its luminous colors and distinctive properties, and I decided to specialize in this medium.

I began conducting independent research into the world of pastel, exploring its history, following contemporary pastel artists, and corresponding with art societies abroad. I constantly experimented in my studio to develop my own artistic style.
I researched papers specifically designed for pastel use and visited art supply stores and pastel manufacturers whenever I traveled.

I participated in competitions despite the challenges of shipping artwork abroad. Yet I approached these opportunities with a sense of national pride, motivated by my desire to see Egyptian art represented internationally in this field.

I subscribed to specialized pastel publications and studied them passionately, often wondering whether I might one day reach the international standards represented by the artists featured in their pages.

Years passed, bringing with them a great deal of self-directed learning, hard work, and setbacks. Thankfully, my work eventually began to appear in these specialized publications and even on their covers. I won awards and became an international competition juror—sometimes judging competitions in which my own work had been rejected at the beginning of my journey!

Q: Tell Us About Your Current Artistic Project and How You Arrived at This Point.

I began my artistic journey by learning classical drawing and painting, producing works that depicted nature. Over time, my work became more expressive, telling stories and revealing aspects of my own life, as in my exhibition *I have A Garden*.
I then moved toward conceptual art, addressing social issues such as early marriage and the rights of women and girls.
My current project is more contemplative and abstract.

In my last three solo exhibitions, I explored existential questions, contemplative and mystical themes, and our relationship with the Creator and the universe. I also explored a range of interconnected subjects, including the rivers and gardens of Paradise and the gates of heaven. All these themes are connected to the search for self-discovery and spiritual elevation.

Because my works are abstract, they open a direct dialogue with the viewer, allowing each person to receive and interpret them in their own way.

Q: Your Work Belongs to Abstract Expressionism, with Color Playing the Most Fundamental and Important Role. Could You Tell Us More About This?

Color is the oxygen I breathe, and I cannot bear to live without it. I cannot feel psychologically at ease unless I am surrounded by color in every aspect of my life.

Color is a spark of light and a very special language whose secrets I began learning in childhood. Over time, I became deeply enamored with it and exceptionally sensitive to its nuances—much like someone raised in a musical family who naturally develops a musical ear.

A substantial part of my artistic practice revolves around color and celebrating it as an abstract value in its own right, capable of evoking a wide range of emotions.

I believe that an artist can study color theory academically, but understanding the very essence of color and knowing how to play its strings in a harmonious symphony is something entirely different.