

RUSH hour

At the dawn of a *new era*,
HRH PRINCESS HAYFA
BINT ABDULLAH AL SAUD
is *redefining the boundaries*
of what it means to be
a *Saudi woman*

Photography BOO GEORGE Fashion director KATIE TROTTER Words MANUEL ARNAUT

عباءة من :SLOUCHYZ
فستاتان من SH STUDIOS
لدى FASHION EXCLUSIVES

ABAYA, SLOUCHYZ;
DRESS, SH STUDIOS AT
FASHION EXCLUSIVES



قميص: LAYEUR، بنطال
STUART، أحذية: BLUGIRL
قفازات: WEITZMAN
ELISABETTA FRANCHI

SHIRT: LAYEUR, PANTS,
BLUGIRL, SHOES: STUART
WEITZMAN, GLOVES,
ELISABETTA FRANCHI



It is one of those unlucky days, definitely not ideal for a photo shoot. The wind blows vigorously and the dancing sands of the desert of Dhahban, 50 minutes outside Jeddah, paint the sky brown. This doesn't seem to worry HRH Princess Hayfa bint Abdullah Al Saud, whose firm voice I overhear from the private area where she is being prepped for her first-ever magazine cover. "People think that princesses are spoiled and that we live in an ivory tower. Let's not forget I'm a Bedouin," she declares amusedly, ready to face the sandstorm.

Although we've known each other for three years, it is only the second time I've met with the princess face to face. She looks exactly as I remember. Her hair is still black as the feathers of a raven and her unique perfume – a combination of scents difficult to identify – fills the room. But more than any physical features, it is her true regal aura that I remember the most. While speaking or walking towards the sand dune where photographer Boo George awaits us, the princess exudes a natural assertiveness and grace that remind us that she is, in fact, a real royal.

household. "He loved to play games with us, to tell jokes, to ask us about our days... He had a tremendous presence. We knew there were boundaries, and he could communicate this to us without speaking. I was close to him and knowing that he had a vital role in our country made me respect him even more. But it was important to our parents that we did not think we were special or different from others." She adds firmly, "My father had a saying: 'We are from the people, and the people are from us.' We knew we had a lot and we were privileged, but at the same time we had to remain down to earth and humble."

Maybe inspired by the example of her entrepreneurial father, the princess defies clichés and enjoys an active and full life. Not relying on an army of nannies, she is seriously involved in the education of her three young children, the result of her 2005 marriage to Prince Abdulaziz Bin Nawaf Bin Abdulaziz. She also dedicates herself to her successful career as painter, something she conquered with effort and perseverance.

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Even for a foreigner, the weight of the princess's regal blood is evident just by driving around her hometown, Jeddah. Her father was King Abdullah, and the city holds a number of important buildings that remind of his legacy, including King Abdullah Sports City, also nicknamed The Shining Jewel, and King Abdullah Economic City. Besides grandiose real estate, it was also during his period on the throne, from 2005 until 2015, that women gained the right to vote for municipal councils and to compete for the first time in the 2012 Summer Olympic Games in London.

"In some ways, my father was like any father – he loved his children and felt very close to us," shares the princess when asked about growing up in a royal

When the wind wins us over and we are obliged to pause the shoot, we share a coffee in the *majilis* of the desert property. After offering me dates and desserts, Princess Hayfa takes me back to her younger days, when, at the age of nine, she was swept away for the first time by an art piece. It was a painting by her older sister, Princess Noura, who passed away tragically, and it featured an enigmatic creature, half woman, half lion. "I remember looking at this image and finding it fascinating," she says with nostalgia. Later, it was Salvador Dalí that grabbed the princess's heart. "I found his surrealist work to be thrilling. He got me right away!"

It was only after graduating high school that Princess

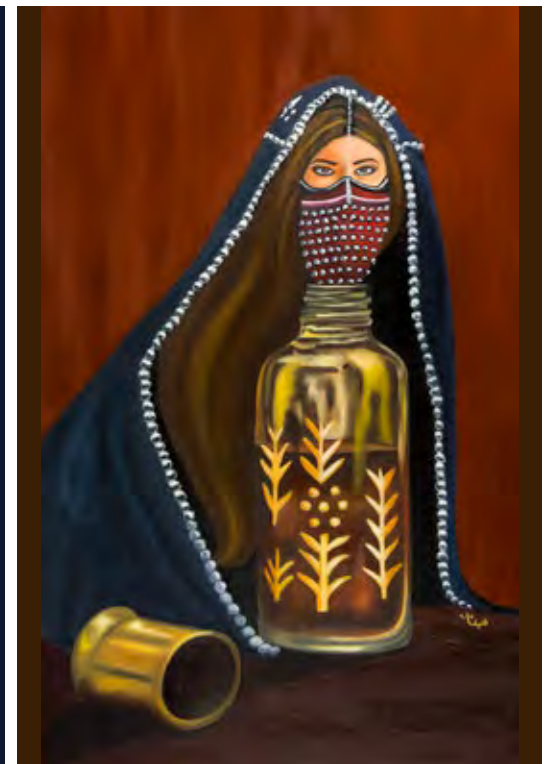


عباءة من SLOUCHYZ
SH STUDIOS من
FASHION EXCLUSIVES لدى

ABAYA, SLOUCHYZ, DRESS,
SH STUDIOS AT
FASHION EXCLUSIVES



“ When I started PAINTING seriously most of my family thought it was a *joke*. They said I was in a phase. The phase has *lasted* almost TWO DECADES ”



ABOVE THE PRINCESS'S PAINTINGS - A PORTRAIT OF HER FATHER; SPRAY (2016); AND MAHJOOB (2016), BOTH EXHIBITED AT STELLAN HOLM GALLERY IN NEW YORK CITY



فستان من
:MISCHKA COUTURE
ونجاح بخص
منسقة الأزياء

DRESS, BADGLEY
MISCHKA COUTURE;
SCARF, STYLIST'S OWN

Hayfa started contemplating a serious career in the arts. In the searing summer of 2000, she met with Saudi artist Mona Al-Qasabi; an encounter that changed her life forever. “Mona Al-Qasabi was really the starting point. After she taught me how to mix colors, I began to paint seriously. Most of my family thought it was a joke. They said I was in a phase. The phase has lasted almost two decades.”

Years later, while studying painting at the Academy of Art University at San Francisco Art School (she graduated in 2015), the royal started to feel confident enough to slowly share her work with the world. And as in any other “normal” household, it was in the palace that she found her biggest supporters, but also her toughest critics. “In one of my earlier portraits of my dad, in 2008, I showed him a picture of the piece when it was almost done. He said, ‘It doesn’t look like me. The nose is wrong,’” she laughs. “He began to give me lots of feedback, and I fixed it in front of him. By the time it was finished, it looked nothing like him. Even my sister said there was almost no resemblance anymore. I guess the moral of the story is that it’s hard to please your family!”

opulent Oscar de la Renta tulle skirt, to be paired with a hat with a generous brim, promises a sculptural couture-inspired silhouette. Is it on purpose or a happy coincidence? Before I have time to inquire, it is a sleek white blouse and pants look, combined with a white veil and black leather gloves, that makes its way to the dressing room.

We are now back to the heart of the desert, where the team and a vintage red convertible awaits the princess. This will be the cover shot, and magic will have to happen. As the royal takes the driver’s seat and confidently places her hand on the wheel, we experience one of those rare moments in life when you are struck by the conviction that something meaningful is unfolding in front of your eyes. While in other countries women have been driving cars for decades, it is on the 24th of this month that Saudi women will officially be allowed to drive for the first time. This decision – along with other brave moves such as allowing women into football stadiums and lifting a 35-year ban on public movie theatres – is part of the transformative set of reforms established by the government, who is aiming to modernize the

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This small setback didn’t slow down the young artist, who continued to perfect her signature surrealist style, where vibrant colors paint dramatic scenes, many times blinking the eye to elements of Arab culture. Since 2016, Princess Hayfa has shown her work in well-attended group and solo shows, both in Jeddah and New York. For the exhibition See, involving 30 leading Saudi artists, she donated 15 paintings, with the proceeds benefiting the Ebsar Foundation for the visually impaired. Also in Jeddah, at Roshan gallery, the artist showcased more than 200 paintings, covering 15 years of her work. In her debut New York City venture, 25 daring pieces were on display at Stellan Holm gallery, with net proceeds of the sales benefiting Child Mind Institute, a non-profit organization that supports children and families struggling with mental health issues. “My family is very loving and supportive. It was actually my husband who helped me find my way to art school,” Her Royal Highness concludes, as she realizes that the strong wind outside is now a softer breeze, allowing us to resume the shoot. “Now my kids think it’s really cool that their mother is a painter.”

As I approach the styling rail carefully curated by *Vogue Arabia*’s fashion director and the princess’s personal stylist, I realize that part of the wardrobe could also fit one of the royal’s surrealist paintings. A red embroidered kaftan by Badgley Mischka reminds me of *Alice in Wonderland*’s Queen of Hearts. An

country by 2030. Nevertheless, having an illustrious female member of the royal family gracing the cover of a magazine – and driving – will set an unprecedented example for the region and the world. Calling it an extreme act of bravery is nothing but fair.

Later that evening, Princess Hayfa and Prince Abdulaziz invite the team to gather for a much-deserved meal. Over a plate of sashimi, the conversation gravitates towards women’s place in the new Saudi society. “In our country, there are some conservatives who fear change. For many, it’s all they have known,” the princess justifies. “Personally, I support these changes with great enthusiasm.” And how does Her Royal Highness digest the fact that in the Western world, many are pointing out that these changes are coming too late? “It’s easy to comment on other people’s societies and think that your own society is superior, but people must remember that each country is specific and unique,” she says. “We have strengths and weaknesses but, invariably, it’s our culture, and it’s better to try to understand it than to judge it.”

By the time we finish dinner, we walk towards the valet of that Jeddah hot spot, where an overwhelming collection of shiny luxury cars is parked in front of us. Before the goodbyes, I can’t hold a last question, and wonder if, any time soon, it will be the princess driving the prince home. “Yes, I would love to drive,” she smiles. “But never in rush hour.”



“In our country, there are some CONSERVATIVES who FEAR *change*. Personally, I *support* these changes with great ENTHUSIASM”



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 فستان من SH STUDIOS
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ABAYA, SLOUCHYZ, DRESS,
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عباءة من HEKAYAT ABAYA: تنورة
من OSCAR DE LA RENTA: قبعة
من ELISABETTA FRANCHI

ABAYA, HEKAYAT ABAYA: SKIRT,
OSCAR DE LA RENTA: HAT,
ELISABETTA FRANCHI

HAIR TALAL TABBARA MAKEUP
PETROS PETROHILOS AT STREETERS
USING MAC COSMETICS PRODUCTION
SNAP14 PHOTOGRAPHY
ASSISTANT MARK LINCOLN FASHION
COORDINATOR ARAM KABBANI
FASHION ASSISTANTS MOHAMMAD
HAZEM REZO, DANICA ZIVKOVIC
PRODUCTION COORDINATOR
JUMANA ZAHID DIGITAL TECH BROR
IVEFELDT RETOUCHING STUDIO RM
SHOT ON LOCATION AT DEERATNA



قميص من LAYEUR: قبعة من
ELISABETTA FRANCHI

SHIRT, LAYEUR: HAT,
ELISABETTA FRANCHI