

## The Myth of Layla and the Autocratic Futurist Present By Carmen Hermo, Assistant Curator, Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Brooklyn Museum

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Amy Khoshbin's *The Myth of Layla*, contrary to its name, is less the story of its eponymous heroine than an allegory for the tortured present political climate, and a delirium of a doomed media-controlled future. Khoshbin began the project in 2014, developing the *Myth's* characters' worldview, and setting it in a series of residencies that collaged Khoshbin's own narrative—fragments of suburban comfort, immigrant expectations, and political activism—with global terror paranoia. Iranian-American herself, the artist has projected autobiographical anxieties onto Layla. She deposits her in a not-too-distant future where the U.S. is at war with a fictionalized Middle Eastern country akin to Iran, a hybrid media-government superpower controls everything, and environmental conditions are so deteriorated that citizens are asked to stay indoors at all times, experiencing life through their screens in a heavily mediated media landscape. *The Myth of Layla*, referencing myth-making in its title, is a science-fiction parable of the commodification of individuals and of the geopolitical struggles of the Middle East and the West. Layla's world is helmed by the Host of the Network, a hybrid government-entertainment entity that pits economic classes against each other, stoking fear of Middle Easterners, and streaming it all to the public in digestible and enticing formats.

Incredibly, Khoshbin's project precedes the ascendance of Donald Trump from reality TV stereotype to blustering and dangerous presidential nominee. As if the terrible future imagined by the artist only needed to be imagined to be subsequently realized. In the two short years since beginning work on *The Myth of Layla*, the reductive and digestible strategies of reality TV—where stereotypes become fodder for entertaining narratives—are suddenly a successful political strategy; users freely

provide personal data in exchange for the pleasure of a smartphone game; and the U.S. implemented travel restrictions on Iranian-Americans with dual citizenship, despite the fact that no Iranians have been linked to terrorist attacks on the West. The Donald, like the head of Layla's Network, glistens with an otherworldly color, signifying wealth and ample leisure time, his skin a phosphorescent orange; the face of the Host glows silver, an outward marker of status. The reality-show stagecraft of Trump's boardroom in *The Apprentice*, suffused with chiaroscuro drama, has transformed into mega-stages where Trump's face is projected over a battery of American flags, signaling import and patriotism. The aesthetic of the Network is reductive and almost child-like in its rapid movement, striking colors, and genderless frivolity. After either pauses for effect after a particularly pointed barb or revelation, they anticipate a *reaction*—laughter and jeering, a unity between the audience and the instigator. Both traffic in the emotional manipulation of reality TV, capitalizing on terror alerts and attacks as talking points rather than tragedies. Our current reality and Khoshbin's fictive future both pit the vulnerable individual against seismic forces of societal control; Layla, as the hopeful agent of change, represents the struggle between life as a successful member of these warped societies, and fidelity to one's conscience.

In *The Myth of Layla*, Layla's cultural connection to the presumed enemy allows for her to see through the media spin of Middle Easterners as contemptible and sub-human—she realizes that the war itself, with its attendant drones and media presence, are what dehumanize and destroy life. She creates a video in protest of the war, which becomes viral and attracts the attention of the economically and culturally omnipotent Network, which manipulates Layla's story for their own purposes:

the Host draws her into a reality game show, “Activists in Sexy Solidarity”, with the promise of attracting more views to her cause. It preys on her genuine desire for justice. Layla’s naive trust in her ideals and their power to supersede the governmental context is easily co-opted by the mechanisms of attention, fame, and cultural capital. Layla’s status as a cultural outsider, and the government’s surveillance and eventual cannibalization of her story, speaks to the erosion of control that characterizes current trends in social media, where one’s identity is defined, illustrated, and tracked, data-mined for consumer information, and geo-tracked all the while. This tension between the individual and society erodes the self: as Layla struggles against this fate, so does Khoshbin’s raucous, intoxicatingly experimental *Myth of Layla* counter forces of hegemonic culture and artmaking.

The performative installation is a total artwork, a cacophonous combination of live performance, costume, and videos. Some of the material is controlled by the Network, some of it is rooted in its opposition; Khoshbin’s imaginative weaving between the two creates a science-fiction projection into our potential future. In dialogue with today’s currents of paradoxical paranoia and over-sharing, *The Myth of Layla* is as embedded in our contemporary culture as the Italian Futurist with their “serate futuriste” events were in regards to the pre-World War I era. In an unnerving parallel, Futurists recognized the potential for media to disseminate artistic ideals, identifying the theater as the ripest platform upon which to join art and life. Between 1910 and 1914, saturnalian evenings of poetry, politics, art, music, manifestos, and hearty diatribes were staged in front of increasingly engaged crowds, where passions would obliterate individual response until the audiences became teeming masses of response. Khoshbin has described these “serates” as antecedents to her presentation of *The Myth of Layla*, where the audience is embroiled in the drama, its energy feeding into and furthering the narrative. Considering the eventual war-mongering instincts of the Futurists and their predilection for Fascism, there is also a clear connection to the statecraft and spectacle of the Host and the Network.

Khoshbin’s aesthetic is intentionally sloppy: costume designs, though eye-catching, are asymmetric, and performances of the work allow for protracted moments of audience confusion and awkward silence that typically precedes participatory art. This oppositional stance counters our current culture, where high-definition resolution and selfie-improving filters signal perfection and desirability to the American consumer. This handmade

aesthetic belies a controlled combination of imagination and texture—in Khoshbin’s videos, a magnified excerpt of watercolor pooling on paper becomes foreboding mushroom clouds, and contemporary riffs on Persian miniatures animate Layla’s memories. Layla is also an imperfect heroine, often voicing her self-doubt and teetering on the edge of treason; this makes her less mythic as a subject, but more evocative and relatable to the viewer.

As it unfolds at Mana Contemporary, the piece begins with a live-feed piped into the expansive lobby, a jolt of color and action to pique the interest of visitors. Descending into the BSMT space, the subterranean gallery acts a bunker for *The Myth of Layla* and its eponymous, self-sustaining fictions. The space will pulsate with projected videos of Layla’s viral drone protest and the Network media, an immediate vision of the dueling ideals fueling Khoshbin’s phantasmal world. At the point of entry, producers will prompt visitors to create usernames on the spot, transforming the passive viewer into an active participant, ensconced in the presumed safety of the avatar. Wild costumes and handmade props await activation during challenges, where the viewer is pitted against Layla: their agency palpable, but ultimately overcome by the puppetry of the Network’s co-opting of our protagonist as their mascot. The space’s scenography is akin to a reality TV set: there is a central platform for challenges, and an expectant confessional booth, set in front of a green screen, for audience testimonials (both scripted and off-the-cuff). These captures will be live green-screened into the Network’s programming, implicating and exposing the viewer in media creation, disrupting the complacent passivity of media consumption by prompting evaluation of our often automatic engagement with media platforms.

The work is regenerative, reforming itself through meta-performances of acting, directing, and editing that create a kind of feedback loop between the dark machinations of the Network’s editing team, and the reality of editing and control at work behind the artwork itself. These performances are reality TV-show shoots, and the spectacle of the artwork is propelled by the user-generated content of its activation. The shoots are real, and Khoshbin will create a subsequent long-form video from the footage and experience gathered through the live elements, capturing the thoughts and identities of participants at the crucial and surreal moment before the November presidential election. In the installation space between performances, a visible editing booth allows for viewers to directly engage with Khoshbin and understand the resulting video. Khoshbin will play a left-leaning

editor, against a right-wing opposite. Both editors will use the same source video content to live-spin the narrative to their divergent political goals. Together, they are cyphers of media transparency, each using Layla and the videos of *The Myth of Layla*'s participants to their own ends, exposing images and identities as vulnerable, malleable, and unfixed.

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