

SOUL SISTERS

Bazaar sits down with trend forecaster Rita Nakouzi and editor Shirine Saad for a conversation on sisterhood, feminism and shaping one’s identity

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“The universe works in mysterious ways,” says Rita Nakouzi, while curled up on a couch in the Brooklyn home she shares with her husband and two children. She’s recalling the first time she and her close friend Shirine Saad almost crossed paths. “I was visiting Lebanon in 2012, when a friend invited me to the launch party for Shirine’s book, *Boho Beirut*. I was unfortunately flying back to New York at the time and couldn’t make it,” says Rita, who received an email a few weeks later from her cousin, asking her to look out for Shirine who was moving to Brooklyn. “It was funny how her name kept popping up and we clicked the moment we met,” she adds, as Shirine walked through the door balancing bags of produce from the local farmer’s market.

Carefully laying out vegetables on the kitchen counter, Shirine recalled the launch of her book that summer with mixed emotions. By 2010, Beirut was experiencing a cultural renaissance thanks to a generation of Lebanese who were returning to the country after living abroad. “They brought a new energy and collectively redefined the country’s identity,” says Shirine, who set about documenting this period in Beirut, at a time when the city was buzzing with creativity. “It was an alternative guidebook that captured the city’s pulse through its many designers, musicians, artists and cultural figures,” she adds, noting that shortly after the book’s release the country was drawn back into regional conflicts that would temporarily halt many of these new developments.

It’s a reality that’s also familiar to Rita, who was born in Beirut at the start of the civil war, where she spent her early childhood in the neighbourhood of Jal El Dib. “Growing up there in the 1980s was a relatively peaceful existence, but there was always the hum of conflict in the background,” says Rita, who recalled the day shrapnel flew into their home. “I was 11-years-old and although it was an unusual occurrence in our neighbourhood, it made me realise how close the conflict was to our doorstep,” recalls Rita, who still carries fond memories of growing up in Lebanon, where she spent her summers playing with her cousins at her aunt’s house in the mountains.

Rita’s mother and grandmother also played an important role in shaping her identity. “I was lucky to be surrounded by strong women who taught me about the importance of grace and quiet resilience in the face of life’s ➤



Beirut-born Shirine Saad (left) and Rita Nakouzi struck up a friendship in Brooklyn

Rita and Shirine use their platforms to discuss issues of sustainability, identity and feminism



challenges,” she says, noting that her mother was a self-made woman, who began her career as a nurse and worked her way up to become a hospital administrator. “I was proud of how she managed to juggle a career as a single mother while being very present in my life. She never saw herself as a victim but chose to look at the world through rose-tinted glasses,” says Rita, while noting that food has played a central role throughout her childhood.

At her family’s home in Beirut, it was Rita’s grandmother and great aunt who ruled the kitchen, where they prepared the week’s menu of Lebanese specialties. “So much of my own cooking today is informed by them,” she says, while pointing to a large table that dominates her loft in the Fort Greene neighbourhood of Brooklyn. “This is the first piece of furniture I bought for our home, because sharing stories and laughter while congregating around food is so important to us,” says Rita, who hopes to pass along many of the recipes she learnt from her great aunt and grandmother to her children.

A few minutes later she joins Shirine in the kitchen to chop up mounds of fresh parsley, green onions and tomatoes. “I’m very protective of Shirine, because I’ve taken on the role of family and big sister. Even though we lead busy lives, we always make time to cook together, see an exhibition or play with my kids,” says Rita, who stays connected to her Lebanese roots through friends who’ve shared similar experiences. “When you’re the child of immigrants or have experienced the feeling of being different, it’s a relief to be around people who get you without the need to explain yourself,” she adds, while looking over to Shirine, who was born in Beirut and moved to Monaco with her family at the age of two.

Like many Lebanese who lived abroad during the civil war, Shirine also experienced a feeling of displacement and exile. “It’s a complicated position for anyone to be in, particularly for children. Although we moved there to be close to family, I still experienced a feeling of alienation and being misunderstood for having a different language and culture,” says Shirine, noting that many Lebanese immigrated to different countries to rebuild their lives during this time. Yet despite her years of growing up abroad, Shirine’s parents instilled in her a love for her Lebanese heritage and surrounded her with books on art, music, philosophy and culture.

“My dad is incredibly supportive of strong women. I didn’t grow up with rigid notions of wives and mothers as simply caretakers or individuals who have to constantly please, but as independent human beings,” says Shirine, who also looks up to her mother, a fashion designer who studied and worked in Paris in the 1970s, at a time when feminism, music and art experienced a period of cultural upheaval. “It was a time of great change, even in Beirut, and she was a part of that scene,” she says of her mother, who opened an influential boutique in Beirut after the family moved back to Lebanon in the early ’90s. Naming it Uppercut, she stocked pieces by avant-garde designers such as Dice Kayek, John Galliano and Comme des Garçons, together with her own designs.

“Over the year’s I’ve inherited a number of vintage items from her that I still wear today,” she notes, while scrolling through images on her Instagram to point out a sculpted metal necklace by Jean Paul Gaultier, an embroidered Kenzo top and an iconic flesh-toned Margiela bodysuit. “My mother really encouraged me to express myself through clothes and to not be afraid of standing out or having an opinion,” says Shirine, who also credits her aunt with inspiring her throughout her life. A university professor of economics and a free spirit, her aunt would show up to class dressed in Dries Van Noten and Margiela. “Being raised by these powerful and free-thinking women ultimately shaped who I am today,” notes Shirine, while helping Rita mix the chopped vegetables into a large bowl of cracked wheat. It’s this ritual of cooking together, which reminds Rita of her early years in Beirut, before she left Lebanon in the mid-’80s.

In 1982, as the conflict intensified in Beirut, Rita’s mother made the difficult decision to move with her daughter to the United States where they lived close to family in Connecticut. After one year they returned to Lebanon, when the challenges of adapting to a new culture proved too intense. By 1986, when Rita was 11-years-old, they decided to permanently relocate to the United States. “Moving to another culture from an early age shapes you in unexpected ways. In school I was trying not to stand out, which was hard to do when I felt so different from everyone else,” says Rita,

noting that she even had to approach personal relationships and friendships in a different way.

“In Middle Eastern cultures we tend to express affection through warmth and generosity, which doesn’t necessarily translate in the same way in a Western context,” says Rita, who learnt to navigate two different worlds, which taught her how to adapt to shifting situations and become resilient. At 16 she took part in an exchange program and moved to the Loire Valley, where she studied for six months in France. While on a school break, she visited a Picasso exhibition that would spark her interest in creating language and meaning around art. “That’s one of the reasons I decided to major in art history in college,” says Rita, who attended Fordham University in New York, where she found a sense of belonging. “I felt like I’d discovered my tribe, because I was surrounded by people with similar experiences. There was a huge sense of relief, as if a weight was lifted off my shoulders,” recalls Rita of that time in her life, when she studied under notable scholars such as Dr. Carmen Bambach, a curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Shirine would also go through a transformative period in her life after her family moved to Montreal when she was 15-years-old. Recalling the shock of her first Canadian winter, Shirine nevertheless embraced life in a new city that exposed her to different art forms and cultures. As a teenager, she listened to Pink Floyd and Fairuz, while watching films by Federico Fellini and Pedro Almodóvar. “I was absorbing everything around me and reading voraciously because I didn’t have access to these resources while living in Lebanon,” says Shirine, who regularly attended art exhibitions, theatre performances and poetry readings during that time. After graduating from high school, she pursued a BA in Art History and International Development at McGill University in Montreal.

While a student there, she landed a position as the culture editor for the school’s newspaper. “I was fascinated by Montreal’s diverse art scene and it was a way for me to get involved,” recalls Shirine, who also developed a marked interest in the ways in which art and culture can reflect changes in society. Her experiences at McGill and writing for various publications in Montreal and Paris lead her to pursue an MS in Magazine Journalism, as well as an MA in Arts and Culture Journalism at Columbia University in New York. “What attracted me to New York was this idea of a place where anything was possible,” says Shirine, who immersed herself in Columbia’s program, where her professors included Diane Solway, *W Magazine*’s features and culture director, as well as cultural critics Alisa Solomon and David Hajdu. “It was wonderful to be exposed to so many great thinkers and writers in a city that became my classroom,” adds the editor,

of an experience that was similar to Rita’s college years in New York.

Shortly after graduating in the late ’90s, Rita landed a position at a contemporary art gallery in Chelsea. “It was an extraordinary time for contemporary art in New York. I learnt a great deal and met a lot of interesting people during that period,” says Rita, who briefly transitioned to a career in PR, before being approached for a job at Promostyl, the Paris-based trend-forecasting agency. “They were looking to expand their team in New York, and it felt like the right fit since analysing trends was similar to studying contemporary art,” adds the trend forecaster, who went on to become the managing director of the agency’s US office, where she worked with clients such as Estée Lauder, Ralph Lauren, Swarovski and L’Oréal.

After some 10 years at Promostyl, analysing and reporting on global trends with a focus on fashion and beauty, Rita launched 4.5 Productions in 2005, a trend and luxury branding boutique agency. “The biggest challenge I faced was around the time of the 2008 recession, while trying to balance the administrative and creative sides of running ones own business,” notes Rita, who has gone on to work with several high profile brands such as Hermès, which gave her the opportunity to visit the luxury house’s workshops in and around Paris. Today, she works on diverse projects from identifying global trends, to conceiving brand strategies and inspiring a collection’s direction so that companies can remain competitive.

After graduating from Columbia University, Shirine went on to work with numerous publications and media platforms such as *Elle*, *L’Officiel*, MTV, *The New York Times* and *NOWNESS*. “What drives me as a writer is a sense of curiosity. I love to learn about and research new ideas and movements,” says the editor, who over the years has written about ►

Palestinian poetry, Japanese eco-architecture, Finnish punk bands and Puerto Rican street art. “A great story encourages us to dig deeper beneath the surface,” adds Shirine, who recently returned from the Coachella Valley in Southern California, where she wrote a story on the Desert X art biennale. Looking beyond its sculptures and installations, she uncovered layers of history, while reporting on the indigenous people who had once occupied the land, as well as the hidden environmental costs of building modernist homes in the desert. “I left Coachella completely transformed because it was a lesson in culture, politics and society,” says the editor, whose inquisitiveness has taken her as far afield as Lapland, the Tunisian desert, Vietnam, Brazil and Uruguay.

In addition to her work as a lifestyle and culture editor, Shirine’s also consulted with brands such as Converse, Tag Heuer, Ralph Lauren, L’Oréal and Swarovski to orchestrate cultural projects and events for them. “For me these projects are interesting, because of the huge platform these brands have. So I use it as an opportunity to promote ideas around cultural pluralism and social change,” says Shirine, who also organises talks and panel discussions, such as one on art and activism during the New York African Film Festival. “I love creating a space where artists come together to discuss important topics. It’s those moments, which create change or trigger different ways of thinking,” says the editor, who sees such moments as an opportunity to highlight influential women.

Today, Rita also takes part in conferences and talks with prominent designers and individuals working in fashion, to raise awareness around sustainability in an industry that’s the second largest polluter in the world. “How we go about consuming fashion responsibly, while keeping the wellbeing of individuals and the planet in mind, is a core value of my practice,” says Rita, noting that when she first launched her agency, sustainability wasn’t on the agenda of most luxury brands. Today, some of her clients are reconsidering their supply chains, from the raw materials they use, to the humanitarian impact on the people making their products. “Brands are thinking more deeply about sustainability beyond what fabrics they use. They’re also considering the end life of their products and how they navigate a circular economy,” adds the trend forecaster, noting that travel and exposure to other cultures has also become an integral part of her creative process.

“Beyond fashion, I also try to visit Milan’s Salone del Mobile every year, which is a great venue for seeing the latest in furniture and object design from around the world,” says Rita, who will look for global trends in colours, materials and forms. Currently on her radar are places such as Mexico City, Barcelona, Santa Fe, New Mexico and Marfa, Texas, where she plans to visit the Judd Foundation. “It’s important to be exposed to different cultures and places outside ones comfort zone, because that’s where fresh ideas will often emerge,” Rita adds, noting that it’s also an interesting time to explore culture and design in the Middle East and North Africa.

For the past few years, Shirine’s been spending time in Kingston, Jamaica, where she’s researching a book on the country’s creative scene through the prism of local musical genres such as Reggae and Dancehall. Her love affair with Jamaica began several years ago while on a reporting trip, when she met and befriended noted musicians, producers and artists who would inspire her book. “I found the island so incredibly dense in terms of its culture, history, music, architecture and landscapes. It’s become another home for me now,” says the editor, who’s been reading the work of Jamaican authors, while closely following the island’s music, art and film scenes.

An hour later, the pair sit down to a simple lunch of fragrant tabbouleh. It’s served with a side of smokey baba ghanouj, prepared by Rita who has long championed the importance of self-care. “I prioritise culture and the arts in my life, because it’s what feeds my soul and provides a window into

the human condition,” says Rita, who recalled seeing Cafe Muller/The Rite of Spring, a dance performance choreographed by Pina Bausch that dealt with loss, love and oppression through the dancers’ movements. “I take my kids to museums and performances on weekends, because art often addresses issues in very productive ways, without the need to put someone down or express divergent opinions through anger and hate,” adds the trend forecaster, echoing a sentiment shared by her friend Shirine.

When not travelling the world working on stories or consulting with brands, Shirine can be found DJing at events in Brooklyn and Rockaway Beach. “I grew up listening to my parents’ eclectic record collection and my dad even plays in a blues band. So music has always been an important part of my life,” says the editor, who began DJing at her university’s radio station in Montreal. A collector of vintage record albums featuring Soul, Reggae and Afrobeats from the ’50s-’70s, Shirine’s interest in music also reflects her thoughtful approach to telling stories that bridge cultures and complicate identity.

“Unfortunately when western publications cover the Middle East, it’s often through an orientalist or colonial lens. There’s this element of surprise when writers discover the region’s thriving contemporary art, fashion and design scenes,” observes Shirine, noting that the Middle East has had a long and sophisticated history of arts and culture. “If the media are going to write about the region, then there’s a responsibility to grasp the complexities of its history and contemporary culture,” adds the editor, who’s working to shift this narrative through her work by including diverse and under-represented voices. “It ultimately ties back to this idea of identity, especially for a region that’s been colonised and occupied by so many cultures over the centuries,” says Shirine, whose writing offers nuanced perspectives on identity through the prism of art, feminism and multi-culturalism.

It’s also a conversation that Rita often has amongst family and friends, as the mother of two children who are growing up bi-cultural. “My husband is African-American and it’s important that our kids know their Lebanese and African-American heritage. But we also want to give them the space to figure out who they are,” says Rita, while noting that there’s never been a more interesting time to explore what identity means today. “We live in a moment when people are pushing back against binary ways of thinking, even when it comes to unpacking what it means to be a woman,” adds the trend forecaster, who recalled a point in her life when she considered moving back to Lebanon, only to realise that she didn’t quite fit in there as well, because her notions of identity had expanded over the years. “Our kids are growing up in a very different world. They’re at an age when they’re becoming aware of issues impacting race and immigrants in this country, and that certain privileges aren’t necessarily given to everyone,” adds Rita, who believes that although these conversations aren’t easy to have, they’re nevertheless important.

“Rita’s a powerful, honest and talented woman who inspires me everyday,” says Shirine, as the friends settle back into the couch with cups of herbal tea. “Women understand the struggles we’re going through, they feel what we feel, and when we join forces, we create a very strong energy. We can see that in the incredible politicians making changes in Washington at the moment,” adds Shirine, who describes her tribe of women as her sisters, friends and allies, whom she leans on and supports during challenging times. While Rita shares Shirine’s point of view, she also credits male colleagues and friends with supporting her throughout the years, at a time when there’s a need to rethink the concept of masculinity. “There should be a space for men to be vulnerable and question how things are, in order to move forward in ways that feel equal to men and women,” concludes Rita, who together with Shirine, are part of a generation of Arab women who are defining their own identities in an increasingly global world. ■



A longtime believer in self-care, Rita stays centered through yoga and meditation

“RITA’S A POWERFUL, HONEST AND TALENTED WOMAN WHO INSPIRES ME EVERYDAY”

Shirine Saad



Although they lead busy lives, Shirine and Rita carve out time to cook together, take a walk in the park or see an exhibition