

LONDON
SARA SHAMMA



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THE CREATIVE ACT

In *Alien* (2016) a young boy studiously paints a fantastical creature, his dark eyes wide with concentration. *Alien* is one of eleven new works by Syrian artist Sara Shamma from her series 'London'. As if he is painting on glass we see the boy from the other side and watch as he looks right through us, oblivious to our presence. His confident line painting is a juicy amalgam of primary colours fused together to create whorls of peach, lemon, turquoise and lime. The 'Alien' pushes at the edge of the canvas, energizing all available space, clearly occupying the surface of Shamma's painting. The boy, meanwhile, floats behind in an undefined carmine space, his face spectral and blurred, as if nearly beyond our sight. Only the hand with the brush (the creative act) looms clearly into view.

In past series Shamma has not shied away from challenging her audiences, painting orgasmic nudes, men strung up like meat in an abattoir and the diaspora of exile. At first glance her new series, completed following her move to London in September 2016, may seem to reflect a more innocent subject, that of children painting. However at the heart of the series is her critique of strict Middle Eastern values of parenting and schooling and her own desire for a liberal multicultural education for her children. 'The children in the UK are free, happy children,' she says. 'They are well respected and can express themselves. In my country kids are always told to shut up, that they know nothing, but in the UK, in schools and in families, they are given the opportunity to do their own thing, to take the initiative, and this is very important.'

Shamma created this latest series in her London studio – a large room off the main hall in her own home. Her children come and go through the door and houseguests are often invited in. It is a welcoming space and reflects the centrality of her own life to her artistic practice. Shamma exudes warmth and positivity, but in the last five years she has experienced a double displacement, first from her birthplace of Damascus and latterly from her mother's hometown in Lebanon. 'Being in London really is a new beginning for my family and me, a new life,' she says. 'It is like being reborn. When you leave a country it is like death, but I accept that and you start everything new again. Different things have appeared in my personality, in my feelings – even physically I feel the change.'

Her pragmatic view of change echoes that expressed by Paula Rego, who said that every change – even a negative one – is a form of liberation. Both artists employ figurative narratives to channel their own experiences into their art. Consequently children – both Shamma's own and those of her friends – appear as her subject matter in the 'London' series. 'Children represent the beginning of life, the core of the human being,' she explains. 'I always try to feel the personality of each one, how they think, how they see, how they feel colour. I try to put myself inside their shoes.'

Eleven paintings form the 'London' series, with more planned. Most feature children in the act of creating their own works of art. Shamma invited them to draw in her studio, with a view to photographing them for the series. When she saw the honest intensity of their work she decided to add their creations to the surface of her own paintings – *Ghost* (2016) for example features a

careful transcription of her son's spooky drawing. The copied child's painting becomes the first thing you see; the children hover behind in their own worlds, out of focus and out of reach.

This is Shamma's first body of work to focus solely on children. She sees it as connected to her previous three series, all created since the outbreak of civil war in Syria in 2011. In 'Q' (2013) she commented on the 'collective stupidity' of people when they act as a herd rather than individuals. In 'Diaspora' (2014) and 'World Civil War Portraits' (2015) she considered the impact of collective stupidity as war raged in her country, forcing her to flee with her two small children. She acknowledges the impact of the war on her work but often she responds to it obliquely rather than directly. Instead her works all share a questioning of what a painting can be, an exploration of what is real, of whether we should believe all that we see.

Classically trained and precociously skillful, Shamma often distorts an initial portrait of a face or a figure with further layers of paint. Translucent veils of colour are overridden by broad gutsy brushstrokes, an explosion of energy that can be seen across the faces of children in *Satisfaction II* and *Dinner* (both 2016). In other paintings, such as *Horse* (2016) and *Space* (2017), figures threaten to dissolve or fade away like old photographs. Much of Shamma's own training as a painter came from studying Western masterpieces in art books, and she has a deep-seated understanding of the difference between the flat surface of a reproduction and the imaginative depth a painter can create in what is fundamentally also a two-dimensional space. She loves creating the 'air' in a painting, the perceived depth, yet also enjoys employing a zip of hot colour to tether the work to the surface. She crafts credible physiognomies and believable bodies that pull back into their own space yet she carves a plumb line of raw canvas into them, physically scratching into the surface with a scalpel, to show that the image is a chimera, a mirage. At times she employs *trompe l'oeil*, another device to nod to the artifice of painterly realism, as seen in *Dinner*, where a smudge of thick paint becomes a three-legged chair complete with its own shadow that appears to fascinate the young girl and distracts her from her supper.

Despite the warm rose palette and doe-eyed children, many of the works in this series retain a dark edge. There is something unsettling about the large hands raised in greeting by the squatting child in *Space*, the gleaming hazel eye in *Satisfaction II* that seems to have seen more than its subject's years. Despite celebrating the freedom many Western children are permitted, Shamma acknowledges that they are not always as innocent as they seem. 'There is an innocence in that the child is not aware of everything in life yet,' she concedes, 'but he has in his personality everything he will have as an adult, including violence.' This is something she is still exploring, and consequently the 'London' series will continue to grow as the ideas keep coming. Ultimately, she says, 'I have to surprise myself before surprising the viewer. The joy of painting is to discover something new in my work. If I am not discovering something new then I am not doing anything.'

Charlotte Mullins

Art critic, writer and broadcaster

SARA SHAMMA

Sara Shamma was born in Damascus, Syria (1975), to a Syrian Father and Lebanese mother, a family of intellectuals. They encouraged her love of painting which she developed as a small child, and by the age of 14, Shamma decided she would train as a painter. Shamma graduated from the Painting Department of the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Damascus in 1998.

Following her graduation, Shamma participated in a number of solo and group exhibitions including (solo): “*World Civil War Portraits*” curated by Sacha Craddock at The Old Truman Brewery, London, UK, 2015, “*Diaspora*” Art Sawa Gallery, Dubai, UAE, 2014, “*Q*” Royal College of Art, London, UK, 2013, “*Birth*”, Art House, Damascus, Syria, 2011, “*Love*”, 360 MALL, Kuwait, 2009, and (group): *The Royal Society of Portrait Painters Annual Exhibition*, The Mall Galleries, London, 2013, *Nord Art 2012*, Annual International Exhibition, organized by KiC – Kunst in der Carlshütte, Büdelsdorf, Germany, *Art Prize 2010*, Kendall College, UAE *Through Arabian Eyes*, the International Financial Centre, Dubai, UAE, 2008, *Syrian Artists*, Souq Wakef Art Center, Doha, Qatar, 2008, *The Waterhouse Natural History Art Prize*, South Australian Museum, Adelaide, South Australia and the National Archives of Australia in Canberra, Australia, 2008, *Panorama of Syrian Arts*, Catzen Arts Centre at The American University Washington, D.C. USA, 2007, *International Painting Prize of the Castellon County Council*, ESPAI (the Contemporary Art Centre), Castellon and the Municipal Arts Centre of Alcorcon, Madrid, Spain 2005, *Women and Arts*, International Vision, Expo Sharjah, Sharjah, UAE, 2005, *BP Portrait Award*, National Portrait Gallery, London, UK, 2004.

Shamma was invited to join the teaching staff of the Adham Ismail Fine Arts Institute in Damascus, where she taught for three years from 1998. Besides her own practice and her involvement in the education of young artists, Shamma has been consistently active in the Syrian art scene. She was a member of the jury for *The Annual Exhibition for Syrian Artists* held by the Ministry Of Culture, Damascus, Syria in 2006.

Shamma has been the recipient of various regional and international art awards including First Prize (The Golden Medal) in the 2001 Latakia Biennial, Syria, Fourth Prize in the 2004 *BP Portrait Award*, National Portrait Gallery, London, UK and First Prize in Painting, *The Waterhouse Natural History Art Prize*, The South Australian Museum, Adelaide, Australia in 2008, Fourth prize in painting, and Special Mention, Florence Biennial, Florence, Italy 2013. Shamma's works can be found in public and private collections in different countries including: Austria, Canada, Ecuador, Egypt, France, Germany, Japan, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, the Netherlands, Qatar, Spain, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom and the United States of America.

In 2010, Shamma was invited to become the United Nations World Food Programme 'Celebrity Partner'. In 2010 she created a painting for them entitled: *Fighting Hunger* (2010). Impressed and touched by their work she continues to support them as her chosen charity.

She moved to London in September 2016 under the auspices of an Exceptional Talent Visa. She now lives and works in London, UK.



ALIEN
2016
Oil on Canvas
120 x 100 cm



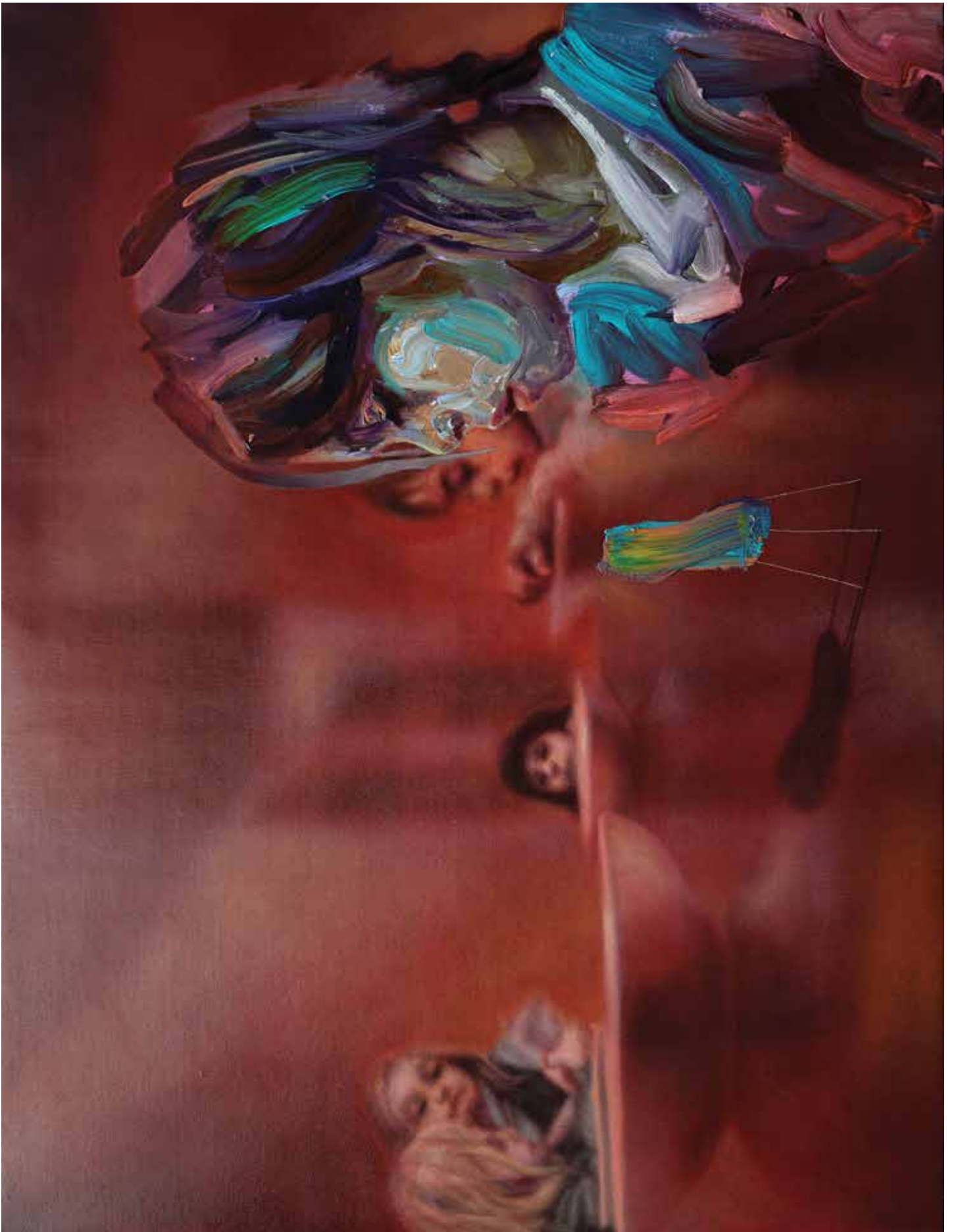
GHOST
2016
Oil on Canvas
125 x 150 cm



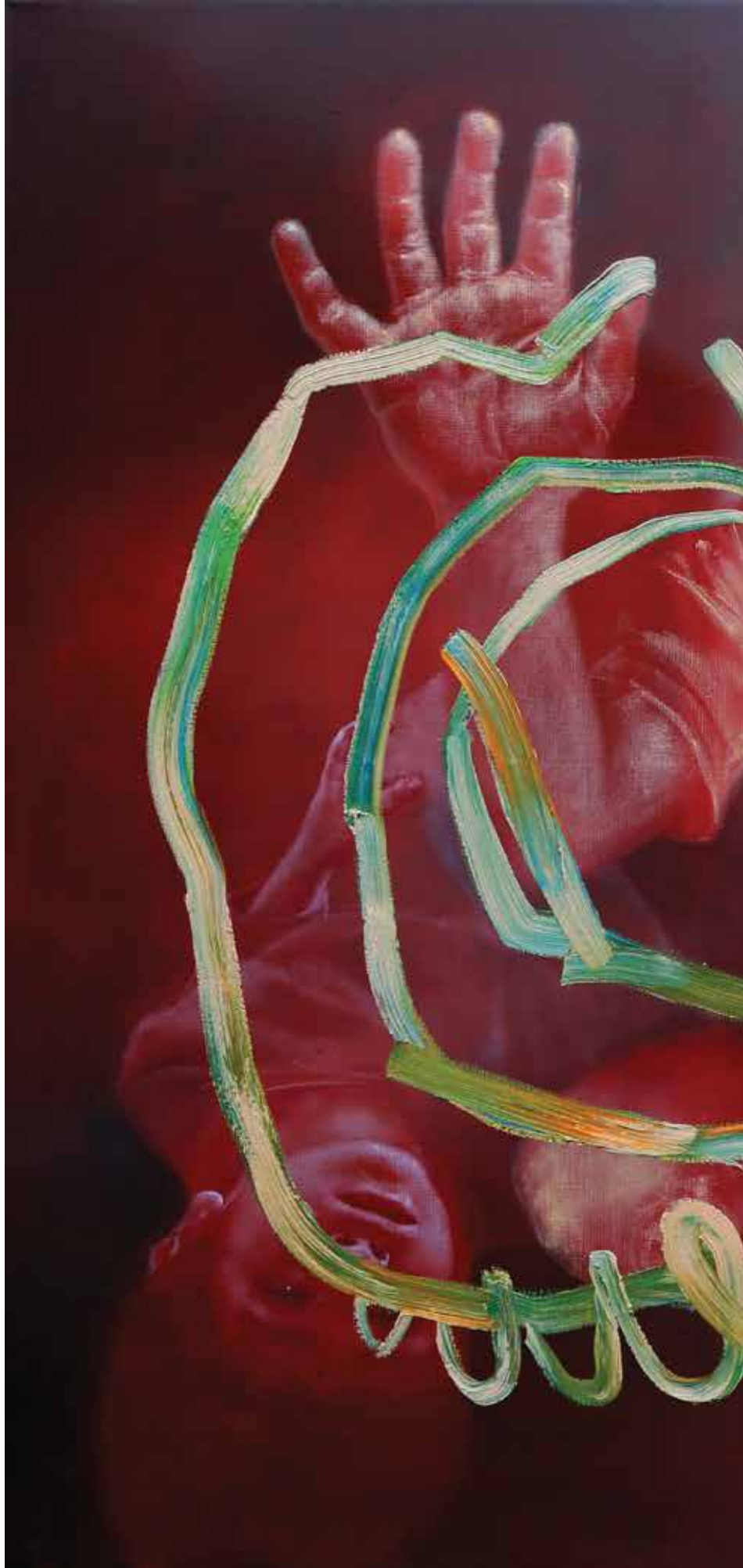
SATISFACTION II
2016
Oil on Canvas
120 x 100 cm



DINNER
2016
Oil and Acrylic on Canvas
150 x 115 cm



SPACE
2017
Oil and Acrylic on Canvas
250 x 200 cm





OCTOPUS

2017

Oil and Acrylic on Canvas

120 x 100 cm



CASTLE
2016
Oil on Canvas
150 x 125 cm



SATISFACTION I
2016
Oil and Acrylic on Canvas
75 x 150 cm



HORSE
2016
Oil on Canvas
150 x 75 cm



AIR
2016
Oil on Canvas
100 x 120 cm



PAC
2016
Oil on Canvas
125 x 150 cm



LONDON

Sara Shamma's "London" is her first new body of work since her relocation to the UK on being awarded a rare and prestigious Exceptional Talent Visa.

The paintings draw their inspiration from her early experiences of the city as an artist and mother, and her insights on life as a settled resident, freshly welcomed into her local community.

This is a second move for Syrian-born Shamma and her young family, who in 2012 fled war in Damascus to the safety of her mother's home country, Lebanon. This mingling of historical events and personal circumstance gave rise to works reflecting the experience of the individual in the face of collective catalysts to civil unrest and diaspora: phenomena of the artist's time and place, but common to humanity throughout place and time.

Witnesses to physical and mental anguish, her paintings from this period trace the visceral imprints of terror on the body and its expressions. They are figurative evocations rather than portraits, composite characters drawn from real faces and bodies, through the filter of the artist's mind's eye. These works distil experiences of conflict, whilst touching on the imponderables of what gives rise to conflict in the first place. A regular visitor to London where she has exhibited on several occasions, Shamma arrived this time at the beginning of the academic year and was plunged headlong into the currents of British domestic and family life. Choosing a school for her children and settling herself into the close circle of parents, teachers and friends in her neighbourhood, Shamma's most striking and immediate observations centred around the extraordinary contrast in attitudes between her children's primary school classmates and their peers in the Middle East. Where a guarded deference still characterises relations between children and adults in that region, Shamma discerns a refreshing and joyful fearlessness and freedom in the way her children's new friends relate to teachers, family and other authority figures, much more in line with the way that she herself (an exception due to the liberalness of her own upbringing) was brought up, and the spirit in which she and her husband have parented their two young children.

Shamma believes strongly that children who are encouraged to express themselves freely and without fear of reprisal, to be messy and embrace the full playful exuberance of discovery each day, will grow to perpetuate the values of peacefulness and freedom which form the strongest bulwark against civil strife. Happy children will beget more secure adults, who do not readily fall prey to becoming tools in the hands of those who would manipulate their grievances to destructive ends. Whilst they may not be a guarantee against violence and war, they are a prerequisite for democracy, and with it any hope for abiding peace. Shamma decided her first work in London should explore and celebrate the spirit of imagination and possibility embodied in the children she has met in these first months. She invited them into her home to sit for a series of portraits which will stand as counterpoints, even antidotes, to her Q, Diaspora and World Civil War Portraits: a visual proposition of what a "good beginning" can look like.

During their visit to her studio, the children were given art materials to experiment with, and elements of the resulting paintings and drawings have been selected by Shamma and transposed onto the child's portrait, integrating their nascent creativity into the work, and making it in a sense a collaboration, as well as a personal evocation of a particular and precious moment in these young lives. By reaching out into the community that has welcomed and given her new hope and inspiration, she is consolidating the city's place in her work as well as her own place within it. To audiences in the Middle East, these paintings are an insight into a more liberal regime of childhood, but they function also as reminder to slightly jaded Londoners of conditions they take for granted, but which are by no means given and immutable.

