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featured exhibition



LONDON



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April 4, 2017



featured exhibition

Art Sawa, DIFC

Dubai, UAE

18 April – 20 May 2017

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

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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.

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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.