

## Hidden in plain sight

by Muhammad Yusuf

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Sara Shamma's 'London', on view at Artsawa gallery, Dubai, (Apr. 18 - May 20) is her first new body of work, since her relocation to the UK, on being awarded the rare and prestigious Exceptional Talent Visa.

Her 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. Her works reflect the co-mingling of historical events and personal circumstance. They show, through her eyes and compositions, the angst of displacement and disenchantment. Full of anguish, the paintings project the visceral imprints of terror's impact on the body.

A regular visitor to London where she has exhibited on several occasions, Shamma arrived this time at the beginning of the academic year in 2016 and was plunged headlong into the currents of British domestic and family life.

Choosing a school for her children and settling into the circle of parents, teachers and friends in her neighbourhood, her most striking and immediate observations centred around the extraordinary contrast in attitudes between her children's primary school classmates and their peers from the Middle East.

Where a guarded deference still characterises relations between children and adults in the region of her origin, Shamma discerned a refreshing and joyful fearlessness and freedom in the way her children's new friends related to teachers, family and other authority figures. It was much more in line with the way that she herself (an exception due to the liberality of her own upbringing) was brought up, and the spirit in which she and her husband have parented their two young children.

She believes strongly that children who are encouraged to express themselves freely and without fear of reprisal, emboldened to be messy and permitted to embrace the full playful exuberance of discovery each day, will grow to perpetuate the values of peace 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 – unlike perhaps what is happening in Syria today. While they may not be absolute guarantees against violence and war, they are a prerequisite for democracy, and with it any hope for lasting peace.

Isn't there something about the Battle of Waterloo being won on the playing fields of Eton? And about the child being the father of the man?

Shamma decided her first work in London should be about the children she met in the early months. She invited them to her home to sit for a series of portraits. During their visit to her studio, they were given art material to experiment with. Elements of the resulting paintings and drawings were selected by her and transposed onto the child's portrait, making it in a kind of collaboration.

They could have been made in the serene or perhaps boisterously hectic environs of a studio. But what we have are stark reminders of the fact that what we take for granted might not necessarily be givens and immutable. War and violence could be waiting just outside the doorstep.

The images are ghostly; the kids look haunted and seem as if pursued by unspoken terrors. Their vulnerable bodies are made more fragile by the monochromatic background, often blood red in colour.

They are not smiling, but are grim faced. They plead silently. What should be playful doodles in their hands, have become painful scrawls. Instead of causing delight, they are chilling and nightmarish.

The images are disorienting, alienating, unsettling, discomforting and radiate a sense of bereavement. They knock one off his comfort zone. An ordinary event like kids sitting for their portraits, is been given an abnormal twist. Maybe you want to hug the kids, maybe you want to give them a wide berth. No doubt, they are there in the flesh. But one can see the skeletons ...

It is a world away from that of Harry Potter. This is more like Silence of the Lambs. The title itself is an anachronism. We usually associate London with global finance, cultural vigour and of it being a tourist's dream destination. But here the name conjures up scary scenes.

Shamma has the recognised ability to bring together different languages in one pictorial plane. She can unite past with present, the real and the imagined, and she pushes and pulls till she has achieved her chosen state of balance.

After six years of conflict (in 2016), Syrians are facing the largest humanitarian crisis in the world, with grave protection and human rights violations occurring daily. Children have paid the heaviest price in the conflict, and in 2016, their suffering hit rock bottom, in a drastic escalation of violence.

The UNICEF says that over six million children now depend on humanitarian assistance, with almost half forced to flee their homes. 8.4 million children are in need inside Syria and in neighbouring countries. 2.4 million children now live as refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt.

6,000 schools can no longer be used. 2.8 million Syrian children are out of school. More than 1.7 million children within the country were not attending school because the buildings are destroyed, damaged or are being used for other purposes. A major problem for Syrian children is the lack of access to medical care and basic medical supplies, which make otherwise preventable diseases a serious problem.

About 652 Syrian children were killed in 2015, and more than one-third of the deaths occurred at or near a school, the report says. The number of child deaths had climbed by 20 percent from the previous year and was the worst since child casualties documentation started in 2014.

Another 850 children were recruited to fight in the conflict in 2016, and some extreme cases included children recruited as executioners, suicide bombers or prison guards, UNICEF said. "The depth of suffering is unprecedented. Millions of children in Syria come under attack on a daily basis, their lives turned upside down", Geert Cappelaere, UNICEF regional director for the Middle East and North Africa, has said.

Shamma, however, is not a political artist. In an interview, she said that though she was not one, she couldn't help being "contaminated by the situation around me", though she doesn't take sides through art.

She also does not see a solution to the situation in Syria in the near future. "Not in the time of my children", she has said. "I don't see anything positive for me in the near future. Maybe for some other party there is a positive aspect. But I hope to go back one day. My children would love to go back. But life has to go on. One finds a new place, gets used to it ... that's life".

Meanwhile, the drawing board helps in little ways ...

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