



Sara Shamma's artwork, Octopus. Courtesy Art Sawa

Syrian artist Sara Shamma unleashes the inner child in new exhibit

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"A child's drawing is pure imagination," says Sara Shamma as she reflects upon the paintings in her latest exhibition. "I am fascinated by the way they draw, without any preconceptions or thought. It is coming straight from them."

The works in the Syrian artist's show – titled *London*, as a result of recently moving to the United Kingdom after being awarded a visa for exceptional talent – explore this subject.

Shamma conducted several workshops with children and studied the way they drew, watching them as they played with pens, pencils and brushes.

She took those drawings and used them in her works. First she painted portraits of the children in incredible detail. Then she added another layer, copying the outline of the child's drawing on top of the child's image.

The effect is a masterstroke of perspective. On a flat canvas she has managed to create a 3-D effect, in which, in some cases, it seems as if the child is drawing on a window, with the viewer standing on the other side. In others, it is as if she has tried to capture the child's pure imagination.

"I want my paintings to be more than just portraits, I want to capture what is behind the eyes so that the faces are alive," she says.

"Working with children is amazing because they have the same emotions as adults but in smaller proportions and I feel I can sense it. I want my paintings to convey this feeling so that my viewers can touch a little bit of this, too."

The titles Shamma gave to the paintings come from the shapes the children drew, including *Alien*, *Octopus* and *Ghost*.

She also achieves a mesmerising effect in her work by playing with normal colour conventions. The background of each painting is a rich, dark red, with purples and pinks for tonal variation. The foreground, which features the child's drawing in most cases, is painted in lighter colours, such as blue, green or white – shades more usually associated with backgrounds.

"There is a trick with colour," Shamma says. "The blues and greens are supposed to be in the background and red is a bold colour, used more sparingly and to draw attention. This is what your eye usually understands – but I have done it in the opposite way to change your perspective and to attract the viewer."

In *Dinner*, a painting that shows children peering over a table top into their bowls during meal time, one child sits to the right of the drawing and his face has been partly obscured by the blue and green brushstrokes that denote imagination. He is staring at a smudge of thick paint of the same colour, to which Shamma has given a shadow, making it seem to jump out of the image, becoming the focal point. The painting cleverly invites the viewer to dive into the world of the child's imagination.

Managing to capture the subtlety of such an intangible subject as imagination is a difficult feat for any painter, but Shamma has achieved it with aplomb.

There is also a slightly ominous undertone to the works, which are not simply paintings of wide-eyed children and the innocent fruits of their imaginations. The portraits have a kind of ghostly quality and, in some, a shrewdness in their eyes that makes them appear older than their years.

In her previous work, Shamma, whose home country has been locked in armed conflict for years, has focused on the victims of war and the pain in their eyes after witnessing such bloodshed.

Although her latest series is supposed to be a celebration of the freedoms of children in the West, in most cases, as the child fades into the background, we are left to ponder on the preciousness of innocence and how quickly it can disappear.

• **London runs until May 20 at Art Sawa, DIFC.**

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