



# Harper's BAZAAR

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# ART

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# THE COLLAPSE

*Ayyam Gallery's upcoming show features a diverse group of work by photographer **Sama Alshaibi**. Rachel Aima speaks with the artist about her conceptual approach, the importance of the body and the fragility that binds us all together*



*Collapse*, 2013-14, Archival print on paper, 50.5 x 180 cm



ALL IMAGES COURTESY THE ARTIST AND AYYAM GALLERY



*Al Tanqah (The Path)* from the *Silsila* series. 2014. Diasec. 166 x 250 cm

**D**uring the Nakba, a young Palestinian girl fled to Iraq. They thought the exodus was temporary; she would forever mourn the loss of their photographs. During the Iraq-Iran war the same girl—now married to an Iraqi—escaped Basra with her young children; photographs and Super-8 films were the only possessions she brought. They spent the next few years in extranational limbo moving around the region, yet she was determined not to repeat her parent’s experience of waiting for the war to be over, for a return that would never happen. They decamped to the USA, long overstaying their visas before finally having their deportation order in 2001. The woman’s daughter would grow up to become artist Sama Al Shaibi. The family never returned to Iraq.

From her parents Sama learned to revere the photograph as archive and witness. “It translated an idea,” she explains. “I don’t even have a birth certificate—there was a proof that we somehow counted, and we had a history.” Despite having since been granted political asylum she cautions, “I don’t have a trust that my home is a home. My families have lost two generational homes and they have no access to their land; I know what it feels like to be in a country and your body has no right to be there.”

This multi-generational chain of displacement has seeped into the very DNA of Sama’s practice—the body’s relationship to land as refracted through national identity. It equally suffuses her solo exhibition *Collapse*. With work spanning seven years, the photographs, films, and installations speak to themes of perpetual war and an inherited history that seems doomed to repeat itself.

Aggravated by the post-9/11 mediascape that painted the Middle East as a hotbed of terrorism while erasing its people—and silencing concurrent genocides like Darfur—Sama decided to become a war photojournalist. At school in Chicago she began covering the subtler forms of socioeconomic warfare around her, but quickly realised there was a specific story she wanted to tell, which had to do with where she came from. Heavily influenced by Sontag’s writings on commodifying the suffering of others as well as the generative possibility of magical realism, she shifted gear. She began incorporating performance and her own body into her work, writing on walls as well as her skin.

In these earliest works, made before US citizenship enabled her to travel, “there’s no landscape, there’s no background. The body is the site of the country, of the issue, of the people.” Using her body also became a means to sidestep the vulturous dangers of photographing others, especially when vulnerable. Alshaibi is emphatic about accessibility, saying “it didn’t matter to me if someone was affected because they had a deep knowledge of something that was happening in Iraq. It mattered to me that they understood what loss was.”

Yet as Afghanistan segued seamlessly into Iraq, Sama began to struggle with the burden of representing a country she last saw in 1982. She was also frustrated by the ease with which her work was misinterpreted as a



*Tasma’ (Listen)* from the *Silsila* series. 2014. Diasec. 166 x 250 cm

comment on gender politics. “Just the fact that I’m female and Arab should not be the overlying way to read everything!” she exclaims. One strategy of evading this codification is seen in *Negative’s Capable Hands* where, emptied of meaning, dismembered hands gesture at the violent exploitation and hoarding of the earth’s scarce resources. There’s a careful ambiguity in the symbolism she chooses to deploy—a green rope suggests both a Green Line and a Green Area of safety, while white piles in the dirt could be either flour or Israeli white phosphorus. Stripped of identifying markers—a military uniform perhaps, or a *keffiyeh*—the hands aspire to a sort of universality and humanity.

“We have a lot to learn from all histories and all kinds of conditions and I feel like we don’t,” Sama adds, pointing to

**“JUST THE FACT THAT I’M FEMALE AND ARAB SHOULD NOT BE THE OVERLYING WAY TO READ EVERYTHING!”**

the normalisation of perpetual war. A recurring motif in her practice, she sees this cyclicity reflected in the desert—a fluid body constantly reforming itself and which is, like the refugee, constantly trespassing borders while serving as a testament to the human will to survive. The desert becomes the main protagonist in the ongoing multimedia project *Silsila*, which traces the 14th-century journeys of Ibn Battuta to carve up a new regional cartography of aridity, nomadism, and precarity.

Sama’s aesthetic grammar intriguingly takes on faintly Islamic overtones in the desert, historically a site of spiritual discovery. Uprturned palms and kaleidoscopic forms suggest early Muslim and Sufi scholars whose “desire to understand god through the land was a mathematical representation of perfection and the repetition towards the infinite” as expressed in the circle. Sama also sees this wholeness as analogous to a land—and indeed a people—undivided by borders, ethnicities and religions. She offers, “You know, mankind has never been one to stay in its position—we’ve gone to the moon and at the same time we have this contradiction of trying to hoard and separate,” citing in particular the European response to the Syrian refugee crisis.

This contemporary situation—most directly addressed in *Exodus*—intersects with her own past in *Collapse*, similarly excised of semiotic clutter. Here, the demise of a honeybee colony serves as a metaphor for a community collapsing due to environmental factors. On one side of the split-screen video, sheet music burns on a stand in an expanse of parched earth that suggests the drought and urban migration that ignited the Syrian civil war. On the other, a child plays the violin amidst smoke and a shower of falling bees. While the smoke used to pacify bees immediately invokes teargas as a human pacifier, Sama explains that it is ultimately about the relegation of responsibility to creative communities and “the inheritance of what we’re passing on to the next generations. If not me, and people like me, then who?” ■

*Collapse* runs until January 14th at Ayyam Gallery, 11 Alserkal Avenue. [ayyamgallery.com](http://ayyamgallery.com)