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Change made visible: Interview with artist Mandy El-Sayegh

Based on assemblage and cultural hybridity, the work of Malaysian-Palestinian artist Mandy El-Sayegh uses artifacts from contemporary culture to speak of the current political climate



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Malaysian-Palestinian artist Mandy El-Sayegh .[Photo Abtin Eshraghi. Courtesy of the artist and Lawrie Shabibi]



by Naima Morelli



naimamorelli



One day, Mandy El-Sayegh went to an Egyptian doctor to have her wisdom teeth removed. One tooth snapped on both sides, and the root was left behind. As the doctor was rocking her skull back and forth to remove the tooth, he said “That is a very Palestinian molar.”

Persistence, resilience and an enduring belief are characteristics that Mandy El-Sayegh associated with her Palestinian family roots. Born in Selangor in Malaysia in 1985, this rising star in the international art scene of mixed Middle Eastern and Malaysian-Chinese heritage is today based in London.

Her art is her way to navigate her different identities, allowing different fragments to come together organically. Much in the same way, her identity was built up throughout a nomadic life: “I feel alienated from her ancestry in a sense because, from a young age, I grew up in Britain,” she says.

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“I’m collecting images and objects without knowing too much as to why. I’m just attracted to certain things. I collect them and assemble them.” She responds to colour and form until the works reach a harmonious point. “Once I have assembled all of the different elements, these fragments speak to each other in ways that I am not fully in control of.”

The artist looks at the part-to-whole relations in philosophy and science, and how kernels of information can be re-formed to generate new meaning. Her approach to visual storytelling is described by curator, Raza, as embodying the rebellious spirit of punk’s DIY visual culture, breaking down systems of order, be they bodily, linguistic or political.

“As a collagist, I am taking pre-existing forms – whether that is a tabloid newspaper, sentences, anatomy, installation or architecture – and rearranging those things,” says the artist. “This means that the relations we previously understood are disturbed. You can see the absurdity of the original, or become aware of how the things that we normally consume without question are constructed.”

The show “A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose” in Dubai

El-Sayegh’s latest show at the gallery Lawrie Shabibi just concluded on 4 April, 2024. Curated by Sara Raza and called “A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose”, the show was described by the artist as a culmination of conversations

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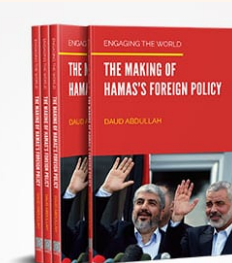
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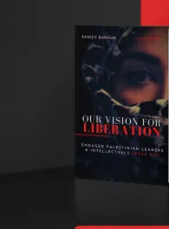


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and collaborations alongside the political events unfolding since October 2023.

“The works in the exhibition are all part of a new body of work for me, which deals with ideas of censorship and symbolism taken from different parts of my ancestral history.”

The exhibition space was transformed to recreate an immersive experience that imitates the space of her own studio. El-Sayegh’s paintings hang within an installation composed of layered newspapers, painted and screen-printed textiles covering the walls.



“I don’t really create, I assemble,” says the artist. “I see myself primarily as a collagist, and whatever material or scale I am working on, the methodology is always a process of collecting, selecting, putting together.”

The exhibition’s title borrows from a line in Gertrude Stein’s modernist poem “Sacred Emily”, which reflects on the practices of daily life, through the repetition of words and the reclamation of language, actions, events and objects.

“I have always used the idea of fixed structures that are repeated in my work,” says the artist. “I think of repetition as a way to see change, over time – something has to be fixed in place, so that change becomes visible.”

“I believe that all artists are always making the same work, but what is happening at the same time changes the way that people receive or understand the work,” concludes El-Sayegh.

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In the show, the artist used a selection of different newspapers in the exhibition, both local and global: *Financial Times*, *Khaleej Times*, *Asharq Al-Awsat*, as well as other tabloids. Some of them have been selected to show how different magazines publish quite different narratives on the same world events. Other newspapers have been used solely because of their palette.

“There is a green tinge to *Asharq Al-Awsat*; *Financial Times* is the colour of tissue inside the body,” says El-Sayegh. “Those two colours form a lot of the palette in my paintings, and the base for other colours, which also often relate to bodily substances, like blood, bile and urine. The

palette can appear very sweet and pastel-toned, but this is where the references come from.”

Performance piece

The show included a performance, realised in collaboration with sound artists, Sami El-Enany and Chelsea Gordon, centred on the concept of the square as a site for liberation and resistance. The performance draws from prayer rituals, chants and trance-like states, to evoke the current tragedy of Palestine, while also calling for healing.

“Sami and I had been talking about how we had been affected, as artists, by political events, and the difficulties we were both facing making work under these conditions,” reflect El-Sayegh. “Our conversations were around dealing with that creatively.”

Already collaborators in the past, El-Sayegh, El-Enany and Gordon discussed crossovers in their respective practices, collaborative exchange and participation. El-Enany brought in his own associations with the square, which were around protest movements, such as Tahrir Square during the Arab Spring in 2011, as well as many other instances.

“We were thinking about these squares as sites for congregation and solidarity, but also violence,” explains Mandy. “So, dealing with dual realities, and how this abstract form can speak to those moments of unrest, struggle and change.”

The artist points out that the square also has connections with histories of abstract and geometric painting, which is also a long-term area of exploration: “I wanted to disrupt the gallery space, and bring in other elements to bring out the live-ness or the present-ness of the works, especially as they are dealing with current events,” says El-Sayegh. “I think both sound and performance do that well because they are time-based. They infuse the work with a bodily presence.”

When asked if she perceives her work as being political, the artist points out that, in a sense, all work being made in its time is political. “It’s because it speaks to that time, even if it doesn’t explicitly have political themes.”

Upcoming projects

El-Sayegh’s next project will build on the previous one, as is customary in her work. “I am working on the themes that are in this show, developing those themes, which are of trance-states, the idea of censorship, poeticism and symbolism, cross-culturally and infusing gallery spaces with participatory impulses.”

Her next big project will be a range of performances for the Art Basel Parcours programme in Switzerland this June, which takes place in empty or abandoned spaces throughout the city.