

# TABARI

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**Terra (Un)firma**  
**Samah Shihadi Solo**  
**Cromwell Place, London**

**October 5-11, 2020**



The Good Shepherd (2020), charcoal on paper, 70x70 cm

## **Cromwell Place, London October 5, 2020**

We are delighted to announce that Haifa-based, Palestinian hyperrealist Samah Shihadi will make her London-debut with her solo exhibition, **Terra Un(firma)** in line with the launch of the highly anticipated Cromwell Place exhibition concept in South Kensington, London.

The body of work produced for Terra Un(firma) is divided into two segments, **The Living and The Land**, which take the artist's personal narratives and feminist outlook as a starting point from which to explore issues faced by women, across cultures, in the contemporary moment.

The Living is a reflection upon the artist's complex and conflicting internal (psychological) and external (social) worlds. As a dual marginal existing within a liminal space Shihadi navigates the clashes between individuality and responsibility that comprise contemporary womanhood in her society and extend towards women, globally, who face discrimination, marginalisation, identity crisis and other multi-faceted gendered issues. The selected works for The Land turn towards the physical space and natural environment as a site of connection, displacement and contestation, which the artist conflates with notions of the home, family and collective identity.

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Each large-scale work selected for the exhibition has been painstakingly produced over several months. Shihadi's work oscillates between classical-figurative realism, which dutifully captures and records that which surrounds her and fantastical surrealism that draws from the artist's preoccupations with mysticism. Shihadi employs a dramatic approach to hyperrealism sketching using chiaroscuro to form a magical reality which blends both fiction and fantasy. Symbolism - religious, ritualistic, political, and cultural - is interwoven into much of Shihadi's work, forming complex layers that the viewer must unpack in order to absorb deeper meanings.

### **The Living**

Shihadi is preoccupied with the female experience, and the struggles spanning honour killing, marginalisation, social silencing, and acceptance, that women continue to confront, internationally. Her figurative works, often turning inwards, include self-portraiture as well as reflections upon the women in her inner circle. Beyond those that she encounters in her daily life, such as her mother and sister, the artist draws from art history and impactful feminist figures from the art world.

Women artists such as Shirin Neshat, Frida Khalo and Georgia O'Keeffe are palpable influences who have, like Shihadi, been challenged by their social circumstances and have taken to art to synthesise and articulate their gendered experiences from a sublime space. These influences spill out into works such as *The watcher* (2020) that see a rooster, substituting Khalo's monkey, and twisting a rope around the artist's throat. The rooster serves as a representation of male dominance and the ongoing silencing of the female voice. Other works such as *The Good Shepherd* (2020) see the male depicted as a sheep in reference to the Middle Eastern adage which suggests a man that openly engages with a woman in equal dialogue is weak; pointing to the frustrations and limitations men also face in striving for equality.

While art often turns away from religion, Shihadi, exists in an environment, where faith can never be far from the fore. She has been exposed to and absorbed by the multiple ideologies that surround her from Islam to Judaism and Christianity. Magic and mysticism also run through Shihadi's work, apparent in icons derived from the zodiac and the practice of tarot card reading. The skull is regularly employed by the artist who is fixated upon both death and the divine. The icon recalls not only Georgia O'Keeffe but also the idea of a liminal space lodged between life and death and the sacrifice of women. The floating female form also recurs at regular intervals in Shihadi's practice and alludes to the artist's sense of inbetweenness. Through regular introspection, she questions her sense of self and status in a society that has challenging and complex expectations of her that throw up from multiple angles - cultural, moral, familial, social, and professional.

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Leaf of Faith (2020) charcoal on paper, 45x35 cm

## The Land

The landscape is a backdrop upon which the concerns of social groups play out and fall in and out of focus with shifts of power, in this sense Shihadi's natural surroundings are of deep concern to her. Shihadi's family were farmers before the dislocation from their village and this deep-rooted and powerful connection to the land is unleashed through rich symbolic elements. In a series of smaller 30x30 studies, the cactus or sabre is, for example, employed as a symbol of Palestinian resilience, indeed, Palestinians often refer to the plant as a marker of their 'patience' which they must practice in their daily lives. While in other works her country's ubiquitous olives speak out to confirm the artist's cultural identity.

For Fig (2020), the artist continues to meditate upon religion and its moral restrictions, adopting the fig leaf as a metaphor from Christianity, which is widely known to convey the covering up of an act or object, perceived to be distasteful, with something innocuous in appearance. In the Christian book of Genesis, for example, Adam and Eve take the leaf to disguise their nudity after eating the forbidden fruit. The artist also zooms out of her social sphere in order to explore natural elements in relation to wider topics such as gender violence, censorship and the social policing of women. In Under Threat (2016) the pear, perched under a row of knives in the kitchen, embodies the female form and the proliferation of familial violence that Shihadi witnesses in honour killings that continue to plague societies across the Middle East and beyond.

## Statement by Emanuela Calò, Associate Curator, Tel Aviv Museum on the practice of Samah Shihadi:

Samah Shihadi's works combine figurative-realistic art with a feminist pronouncement concerning the identity of the Arab woman both in Arab society and more generally. Her realism can be positioned between classical-figurative realism, with its desire to record and preserve, and a personal fantastic-magical surrealism. She offers a type of documentation that fluctuates between the personal, the social, the cultural and the mystical. Her family biography, a frequent point of departure, also serves as a representation of the tragic and traumatic local history of the Palestinian people.

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Shihadi's delicate charcoal drawings are meticulously created in black-and-white. A thin veil of mystery surrounds them, making it seem at times that she is spellbound and enchanted by the threads of forgetfulness. The drawings appear serene and silent, often dissolving into the background.

The work **Sticks and Stones** (2018) sketches a desire of homecoming to the familiar landscape. Shihadi depicts her little niece playing with stones found in the area suggesting that she appears to reconstruct shades of the past and the family home.

In other works family scenes and the landscape of the village Miár where her mother's family used to live until 1948 refer to reflections of Édouard Manet on the Parisian social-sphere and his natural surroundings. It is an example of fusion of a well-known painting from western art with her own subjects, taken from her life and personal narratives. Manet's scenes placed in an everyday context, engage with issues such as women's gaze - looking directly at the viewer, he criticises the bourgeois and common habits of the passing of time and challenges the official and artistic taste of his time. Another example of fusion of an iconic work of western art with her own themes is Shihadi's self-portrait, **The Observer** (2020) showing her sitting in a pose resembling Frida Kahlo's.

Magical thinking is expressed in many of her exhibition works, which unfold a fabric of local Palestinian, Israeli and Western traditions and beliefs that are gradually disappearing. Female practices such as plant gathering, healing, purifying and protection from evil-eye, express a connection to these traditions and beliefs, which also stems from Shihadi's preoccupation with female empowerment and the status of women and women artists in Palestinian and general society.

Thus, for example in **Mother and Daughter** (2019) the mulberry tree planted by Shihadi's grandmother inside a barrel symbolises wandering and transience in the local Palestinian context, evoking the traumatic events of 1948 and the expulsion – and in addition it symbolises the intergenerational link between three female generations of the family – grandmother, mother and daughter. Over the years the tree has become a place of gathering, commemoration and recollection for the family, and a protective object from which power and strength are drawn.

Emanuela Calò

-ENDS-

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**Samah Shihadi's work will be on view at Cromwell Place, London between October 5 and 11, 2020**

**Visit: 1-5 Cromwell Place, London, SW7 2JE, United Kingdom | <https://cromwellplace.com/get-in-touch/>**

## ABOUT SAMAH SHIHADI

Shihadi (b. 1987) was born in the village of Sha'ab in the western Galilee and lives and works in Haifa. She has an M.F.A. from the University of Haifa, and a B.ED. in art from Oranim Academic College of Education.

Shihadi, is among the modern generation of young female Palestinian artists and one of the unique voices in the local field of art. Through her chosen media of painting and drawing she scrutinizes issues pertaining to identity, her native traditional society and her political reality.

In her work, Shihadi offers realistic insight and a feminist stance which address female identity in both Arab culture and the world at large. Her delicate drawings, made with great precision touch on topics central to contemporary art, and offer a pronouncement and visual report that fluctuates between the internal, personal, social and cultural. Her drawings, created in a slow, meticulous, and prolonged work process, also evoke a sense of urgency and immediacy regarding subjects in the here and now: the status of women in Arab society, tradition and religious belief versus social and political reality, and local landscapes charged with history.

## ABOUT TABARI ARTSPACE

Tabari Artspace, formerly Artspace Dubai, was established in 2003 by art collector Maliha Tabari, with the aim of promoting Middle Eastern art to a global audience. Strategically located in Dubai, seventeen years ago the gallery embarked upon an ambitious programme of exhibitions with the aim of cultivating an international community and creating fresh discourses centered around

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contemporary Middle Eastern art. As a pioneer of this movement Tabari Artspace played a pivotal role in establishing the careers of the Middle Eastern Masters that are collected and exhibited internationally today. Tabari Artspace continues to honour the masters it built in the past while introducing a new generation of artists that have matured in an era of technology, globalisation, and unprecedented socio-political issues. In 2017 the gallery rebranded from Artspace Dubai to Tabari Artspace. The name 'Tabari' stems from Lake Tiberias and brings into focus our understanding of borders, space, and identity - just some of the universal topics tackled by the Middle Eastern artists of the 'now'. As Middle Eastern art continues to flourish in front of an international audience Tabari Artspace puts forward a programme of artists that challenge its conventions, push boundaries, and break down borders with fresh approaches. "As our geographical borders blur in our era of mass-migration art has the ability to capture and communicate key social issues that are relevant for all. We now welcome a new wave of Middle Eastern artists that uphold an international outlook. A generation that seeks change and progress." -Maliha Tabari, 2019

### **ABOUT CROMWELL PLACE**

Cromwell Place is a membership organisation offering a first-of-its-kind exhibition and working space for art professionals. Created as a solution to changing industry demands, their flexible services include exhibition space, viewing rooms, art storage, handling, working facilities, events and a Club Room. Set in the heart of London's museum district, their terrace of Victorian townhouses are already home to some of the world's most exciting galleries, institutions, dealers and advisors, with specialities ranging from Antiquities and Old Masters through to the 19th Century, Modern and Contemporary art.

### **VISIT TABARI ARTSPACE**

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