

# TABARI

ARTSPACE

## Terra (Un)firma



### Samah Shihadi and Michael Halak Dual Exhibition

**Tabari Artspace, DIFC, Dubai**  
**February 16 - March 16 2021**

We are pleased to announce the dual exhibition of Haifa-based, Palestinian hyperrealists Samah Shihadi and Michael Halak at our Dubai gallery.

**Terra Un(firma)** was originally intended to be the solo exhibition of Samah Shihadi, scheduled to take place at Cromwell Place in London, October 2020. As with many events and expectations over the previous year we were forced to adapt as London moved into lockdown. As such the exhibition has evolved in unexpected ways, first with a digital showcase and now with a physical exhibition in Dubai which now encompasses a body of work by fellow Haifa-based hyperrealist, Michael Halak.

#### Samah Shihadi

The body of work produced by Shihadi 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. 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.

**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 30 x 30 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.

## **Michael Halak**

While Shihadi's art is often rooted in the past or observe the present through the lens of fantastical-realism Halak's photo-real paintings are fixed firmly upon the current moment. Halak's art follows western traditions of realist, illusory painting, but diverges in content which conflates local and global realities. This combination opens up the opportunity for multiple readings of his work and urges the viewer to consider more closely the contents with which they are presented.

For *Terra (Un) Firma* the seven selected paintings by Halak capture the faces, social scenes and landscapes which immediately surround him. In these works flora and herbs such as olives and thyme prevail as a symbol of Palestinian identity but also speak to the universal viewer. The artist understands thyme as an emblem of origin and freedom, but as soon as it becomes confined to flowerpot, it loses its freedom; pulled up from its original soil to become a marginal decoration. His landscapes are charged with the central tension that shapes both his life and his work – the question of the connection between man and place, and related concerns regarding presence and absence, identification and disidentification, visibility and invisibility. His scenes bespeak a process of bifurcation that gives rise to two separate yet inseparable worlds. At first glance his paintings may appear as harmless depictions of rural landscapes or social settings such as the Haifa marketplace however, in a similar manner to Shihadi, his works are loaded with symbolism and multifaceted meanings. Works depicting the old streets of Jerusalem, for example, appear to relay routine daily life, however, upon closer inspection symbols of conflict and contradiction such as soldiers and flags rise to the fore.

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### **ABOUT SAMAH SHIHADI**

b. 1987

Samah Shihadi, recipient of the 2018 Haim Shiff Prize for Figurative-Realistic Art, 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, hyperrealism, she scrutinises 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 society, tradition and religious belief versus social and political reality, and local landscapes charged with history. Shihadi has an M.F.A. from the University of Haifa, and a B.ED. in art from Oranim Academic College of Education. A multiple award winner, Shihadi has exhibited extensively internationally and her work has been collected by several institutions including LACMA.

### **ABOUT MICHAEL HALAK**

b. 1975

Michael Halak's art moves along the frontier between hyperrealism and conceptualism. The illusion of reality represented on canvas may be seductively beautiful and perfect, but equally conveys feelings of disruption and disintegration. The perfectly constructed and executed works depict landscapes, feeling, often impermanence, hybridity, entrapment or categorisation. Halak plays with our perception to make us feel what he feels, to experience his reality: a life in transition, in a place that is not really his.

After studying Fine Arts at Haifa University, Halak won a residence scholarship to attend the Florence Academy of Art, Italy in 2005. He graduated with an MFA from Haifa University in 2009. Halak has exhibited extensively internationally across the Middle East, Europe, and the USA. Halak has received several awards including the Ministry of Culture and Sports for contemporary artists (twice) and the Rappaport prize for a young painter amongst other accolades. Halak's art can be found in several public and private collections.

### **ABOUT TABARI ARTSPACE**

Since its inception in 2003 Tabari, Artspace's mission has been to foster fresh dialogue between the artists of the Middle East and an international audience.

Established in Dubai, eighteen years ago, Tabari Artspace embarked upon an ambitious programme of exhibitions and special projects to cultivate a global community centred around Middle Eastern art. As a pioneer of this movement, the gallery played a pivotal role in drawing international attentions towards Middle Eastern Masters such as Adam Henin, Mohamed Abla, Adel El-Siwi, Hussein Madi, and Khaled Zaki. Today these artists are collected and exhibited by such institutions as *British Museum*, *The Guggenheim*, *Centre Pompidou*, *The Barjeel Art Foundation*, *Institut du monde arabe*, and *Seoul Museum of Art*.

The name 'Tabari' stems from 'Lake Tiberias' and foregrounds notions of borders, space, place, and identity - some of the universal topics that are tackled by the Middle Eastern artists of the contemporary moment. As a reflection of the Founder's belief that art is a powerful tool to dismantle social boundaries and ignite greater cultural understanding, Tabari Artspace continues to honour the Masters it built in the past while introducing a new generation of artists that are deeply engaged with the present and push forward perspectives - male and female - from far-reaching social and cultural contexts including: hyperrealist, Samah Shihadi; painter, Tagreed Darghouth; and visual artist, Hazem Harb.

At the core of Tabari Artspace's missions are community engagement and wider social access to Middle Eastern art, as such its programming is supplemented by talks, publishing, workshops, and community events. In 2020 the gallery expanded its presence, opening a second location at Cromwell Place, London. 2021 will witness the inauguration of the Tabari Artspace global residency programme, *Home from Home*, which encourages the artists of the region to develop their practice amid new communities and environments.