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Like a Single Pomegranate: When Souad Abdelrasoul's surrealist Egyptian art adorned London

Exhibited at the Almas Art Foundation, Souad Abdelrasoul's Like a Single Pomegranate draws on interdisciplinary methods to illustrate how women evolve in oppressive patriarchal environments, weaving the feminine and the emotional to offer bold hope.

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Surrealist paintings and anatomical collages, some reminiscent of Dadaist photomontage, adorned London's Fitzrovia Gallery.

Creatives and spectators gathered for the opening night of *Like a Single Pomegranate*, the solo exhibition of Shubra-born, Cairo-based artist, Souad Abdelrasoul (<https://www.instagram.com/souadabdelrasoul/>) in October.

The collection was curated by Sahar Behairy and commissioned by the [Almas Art Foundation](https://eur01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Finstagram.com%2Falmasartfoundationuk%3Ffigshid%3DOGQ5Zdc2ODk2ZA%3D%3D&data=05%7C01%7Cbenjamin.ashraf%40alaraby.co.uk%7Cb68664106b2d44a2abe08dbdba68419%7C200ddc5744b44644a90ac43bb1c88f6f%7C0%7C0%7C638345280456370642%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWljiMC4wlJAwMDAilCJQljoiv2luMzliLCJBTiI6K1haWwiLCJXVCIMn0%3D%7C3000%7C%7C%7C&sdata=aT3pTzitmTd7Dm316ETGWwLp4QnR25WUuCiXnyHbWDk%3D&reserved=0) (<https://eur01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Finstagram.com%2Falmasartfoundationuk%3Ffigshid%3DOGQ5Zdc2ODk2ZA%3D%3D&data=05%7C01%7Cbenjamin.ashraf%40alaraby.co.uk%7Cb68664106b2d44a2abe08dbdba68419%7C200ddc5744b44644a90ac43bb1c88f6f%7C0%7C0%7C638345280456370642%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWljiMC4wlJAwMDAilCJQljoiv2luMzliLCJBTiI6K1haWwiLCJXVCIMn0%3D%7C3000%7C%7C%7C&sdata=aT3pTzitmTd7Dm316ETGWwLp4QnR25WUuCiXnyHbWDk%3D&reserved=0>), UK.

I sauntered through fixing my gaze on the characters in the paintings staring back at me. These abstract figurines set the tone of Souad's landmark exhibition, and distinguish her surrealist style.

They have a certain mystique. Their faces are lugubrious and haunting, washed over in a pomegranate hue resembling a desert storm mist.

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“My work is about me,” the multi-media artist says at the opening night.

"The exhibition succeeds in capturing the inner contradictions of the artist's state-of-mind, and resonates with people from countries and continents beyond the Middle East"

Through these abstracted characters, Souad explores the human condition.

“Could they be a window into her psyche,” I overhear an inquisitive attendee query.

“My inspiration comes from my own lived experience,” she tells *The New Arab*, adding that her life as an [Egyptian woman \(https://www.newarab.com/opinion/egypt-must-end-state-oppression-women-and-girls\)](https://www.newarab.com/opinion/egypt-must-end-state-oppression-women-and-girls) navigating the culture of patriarchal authority, occupies a central place in her work.

“It’s how I express myself in a conservative society,” she adds.

"These peculiar characters," as she describes them, “look like me and the people I know.” They capture different stages of her journey of self-discovery and invite audiences to wade through the fog of her unresolved feelings.

They signify universal themes of motherhood, womanhood and marriage, and transcend beauty standards.

Her quietly radical ethos is that art aims to provoke thinking and that the role of the artist is not merely to produce pretty work that satisfies the gaze of the onlooker.

Souad is adamant that her work is self-referential, “it’s about my own personal crises.”



Often using familiar myths and legends, Souad paints stories through her figures that question the roles women hold in society and cultural history in disruptive and thought-provoking ways

Whilst organising the content for the show, Sahar was struck by the duality of Souad’s configurations.

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The curator sees in Souad’s work a “transformative interplay of destruction and renewal”. A delicate waltz, in other words, between life and death. This duality is also represented by the central theme of the exhibition – the pomegranate.

The opulent fruit is an enduring and recurring symbol in Arabic works of poetry, literature and not least, [Islamic art \(https://www.newarab.com/features/glossed-customs-gender-and-sexual-diversity-islamic-art\)](https://www.newarab.com/features/glossed-customs-gender-and-sexual-diversity-islamic-art) – a legacy that subtly seeps into the artist’s visual language.

Although it appears only anecdotally in the collection, for Souad, the highly sought-after fruit seems to exemplify female formidability and fertility.

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The fruit is foregrounded in the largest painting in the collection. It hangs proudly on the back wall, and its name, ‘like a single pomegranate’, has inspired the title of the exhibition.

We see 11 prematurely formed figurines, neither adults nor children, gathered around a table. At the head of the table is a man clad in black. He reaches out for a pomegranate, which lies next to its half-eaten counterpart.

He is surrounded by figures that appear to be in deep deliberation.

The painting invites a multitude of interpretations. However, the story Souad seems to be narrating is about the place of a woman in a man’s world (<https://www.newarab.com/features/arab-women-demand-action-after-femicides-bleed-society-dry>): marginalised and still the central object of his desire.

The subtext is that the fate of women – widely seen as prized possessions – rests precariously in the hands of men.



Souad Abdelrasoul’s art encapsulates moments of both struggle and triumph experienced by women navigating the complexities of a patriarchal system

Dotted around the gallery we find other portraits of female figures, alone and seemingly free. The azure blue hue of these paintings offsets the sandy, reddish tones of others.

Souad incorporates nautical motifs in these works. There are riverboats and fish that dwell in the Nile, Egypt’s lifeblood, and the backdrop to her childhood, as well as date plans.

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The white linen dress donned by [ancient Egyptian women \(https://www.newarab.com/features/deep-dive-lost-harbour-egypts-pyramid-builders\)](https://www.newarab.com/features/deep-dive-lost-harbour-egypts-pyramid-builders)is also omnipresent. These symbols bind the artist to a broader corpus of Egyptian indigenous folk art while reinforcing Souad’s personal identity.

The most emancipatory aspect of her visual language, however, is the depiction of the female body, celebrated in its organic, undecorated state.

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Arab culture Nazli Tarzi

Souad’s appreciation of the human form is also visible in her anatomical collages that take pride of place in the gallery.



“I began drawing on maps and anatomy books of animals, insects, plants and humans for over a decade now,” she explains in a newly released video monologue about her career.

She explains that her experimentation with collage resulted in figures “that resemble no one”, disfigured, dismembered, and reassembled.

Still, they feel autobiographical. Her Frankenstein approach blurs the line between reality and absurdity – a visual alchemy that articulates Souad’s worldview. “We live in a surrealist world after all,” she says.

The exhibition successfully immerses viewers in Souad’s state-of-mind, and captures the inner contradictions of conservative societies (<https://www.newarab.com/features/male-guardianship-customs-bind-egyptian-women-patriarchy>), which undoubtedly resonates with people from countries and continents beyond the Middle East.

However, the display left much more to be desired, and our understanding of the depth and breadth of Souad’s work feels incomplete, like only being able to peer into an artist’s studio through the keyhole.

Perhaps the next display will encompass a greater constellation of works that allow for a holistic reading of Souad’s work, and in particular, its transgressive content.

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