

SHADIYA

Sep 29 – Oct 12, 2022

The Project Space at NYUAD

ALMAHA JARALLA



SHADIA شادية

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Foreword

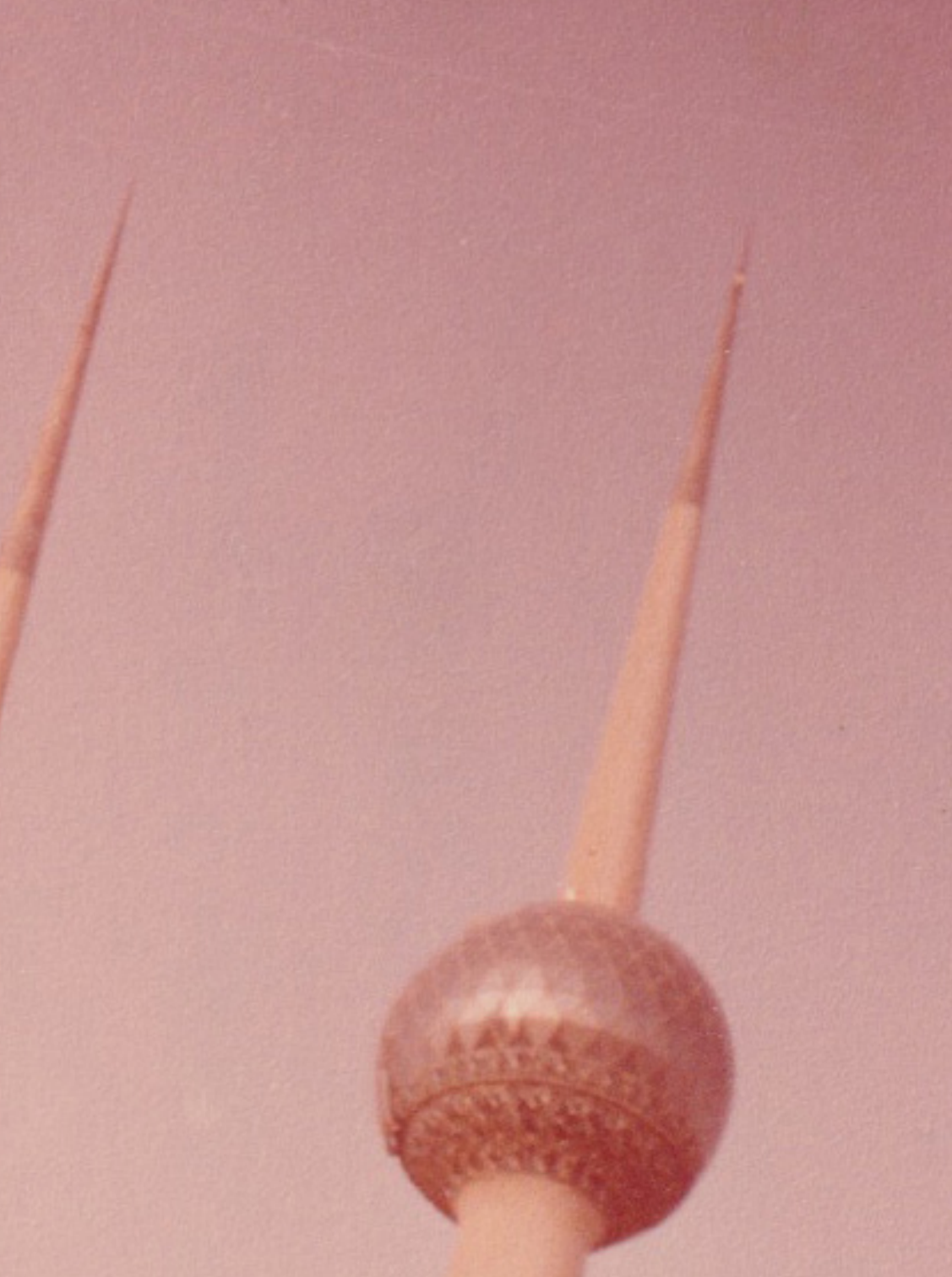
I have had the pleasure of seeing, experiencing, and curating Almaha Jaralla's work during her undergraduate studies at Zayed University, watching it evolve over time. As an artist, Almaha is an observer; she is restless and continuously scouring to portray the essence of her surroundings. Her time at Zayed University represented the beginning of a friendship and collaboration that continues today.

For *Shadia*, Almaha created works on canvas and traditional textiles often used for men's clothing. Working from old family photographs, she did not paint the intricate details seen in photographs, nor did she emulate their color palette. Instead, she focused on the atmosphere and the subject's expression, using an economy of brushstrokes. The paintings have an openness akin to feeling unfinished, creating tension and provocation for answers.

In preparation for the show, Jaralla returned to source material ranging from family photographs, her own photography of Abu Dhabi's landmarks, and interviews with her family members in the UAE and Yemen. This exhibition barely scratches the surface of Jaralla's rich family history, and I look forward to learning more through her continuous search for identity and belonging.

Walter Williams

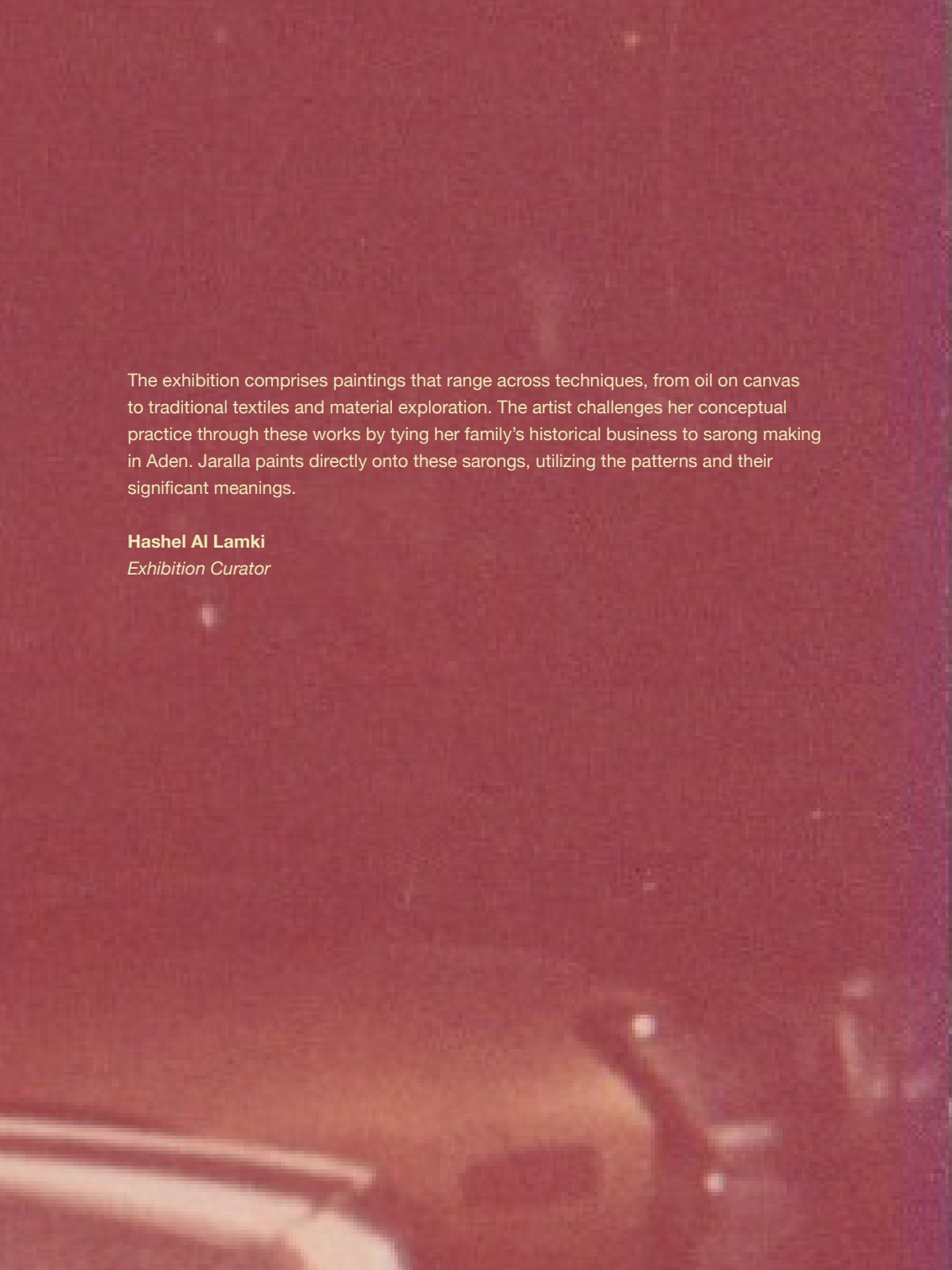
Zayed University



Introduction

Shadia is the latest body of work by Almaha Jaralla, and her first solo exhibition following her graduation from Zayed University with a BFA in Visual Arts. Here, the artist recounts her recent family history of migration in the Arabian Peninsula by observing collective memories of her maternal family members and their relocation within the region, while they sought comfort and surplus in their domestic living environments. The research spans archival family photos and documentation of recent site visits in Abu Dhabi. Jaralla's conceptual practice is informed by recent historical events that took place across the Arabian Peninsula. She documents the shift in the surrounding territories through use of color, and architectural and familial representation. The research focuses on transformation of the constructed environment, the deconstruction of shelter-seeking modes for fast-growing nations, and the changes in housing solutions from the pre-oil era to the most recent prefabricated housing complexes.

The exhibition follows Shadia, Jaralla's grandmother and a heroic character, who traveled alone through the Arabian Peninsula, as a direct result of lack of access to safety, economy, and prosperity. She left and collected marks in the hopes of seeking better living conditions. Today, at three million square kilometers, the Arabian Peninsula is the largest peninsula in the world. It includes Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen, as well as the southern portions of Iraq and Jordan. Though historically sparsely populated, political Arabia is noted for a high population growth rate, a direct result of a massive influx of migrant labor and sustained high birth rates. The demographics reflect a relatively young and heavily skewed gender ratio dominated by males.



The exhibition comprises paintings that range across techniques, from oil on canvas to traditional textiles and material exploration. The artist challenges her conceptual practice through these works by tying her family's historical business to sarong making in Aden. Jaralla paints directly onto these sarongs, utilizing the patterns and their significant meanings.

Hashel Al Lamki

Exhibition Curator



The Curator

Hashel Al Lamki is an artist and curator based in Abu Dhabi, UAE. Al Lamki graduated with a BFA from the Parsons School of Design in New York in 2011. He is a co-founding member of Bait 15, an artist-run gallery space in Abu Dhabi that provided a home for local artists to engage in critical dialogue (active 2018-2021). He co-curated several exhibitions for Bait 15 and Abu Dhabi Art 2019, one of which is *Bait Juma*, a group show of family members “coming together to produce art.” In 2020, Al Lamki curated *Almost Home*, a group show that unpacks the spaces of belonging and childhood through a sense of “home,” which goes beyond the embodiment of physical space. *Shadia* marks the artist’s first curatorial project entailing a solo exhibition. Al Lamki’s curatorial practice centers on storytelling with a particular focus on narratives of diaspora throughout the Arabian Peninsula.

Al Lamki is an artist in his own right. His practice as an artist focuses on social innovation, sustainability, environmental, and philanthropic practices. In 2016, he was awarded the Salama bint Hamdan Emerging Artists Fellowship (SEAF) as a member of the fourth cohort.



Courtesy of Noor Althehli

The Artist

Almaha Jaralla is a conceptual artist whose practice centers on color theory. She focuses on Abu Dhabi's modern history in the timeline and the shift in the constructed environments through the age of digital media.

Jaralla questions how living environments can become personal portraits, and alludes to socioeconomic dynamics and ancestral histories. The question of land and confined spaces remain at the center of her research. As an undergraduate student at Zayed University, Jaralla served as President of the Student Council, where she explored ways of reaching out to art communities by organizing field trips to neighboring Emirates. She has exhibited her work in several group exhibitions, including *Connected, Collected* by Engage 101, Sotheby's (Dubai, 2021); *East-East Vol.4: The Curio Shop*, HB.Nezu (Tokyo, 2021); *Almost Home*, Warehouse 421 (Abu Dhabi, 2020); and *EMERGE III; Converging Lines*, DD47 (Venice, 2019).



Courtesy of Farah Al Qasimi

The Red of Shadia's Memories

A Conversation with Almaha Jaralla

SALEM AL SUWAIDI

This is, interestingly, your first time exhibiting primarily portraiture rather than landscape painting, especially given that it is also your first solo exhibition. What motivated this decision?

Usually, when I paint architecture, I treat these houses as portraits. I see what their personalities are and read the characteristics of these houses; who would live and build a house like that, and how would they want to be presented as people? It's like people wearing clothes. So if I'm going to study Abu Dhabi and share my perspective, I need to start with my parents and grandparents. I wanted my first solo to be about the beginning, even before I was born. To understand me, to understand all the generations that passed me. I'm treating this show as an introduction. To me, to my work, to both.

What role does the urban environment play in your family's history? The streets, the buildings, the people, their clothes.

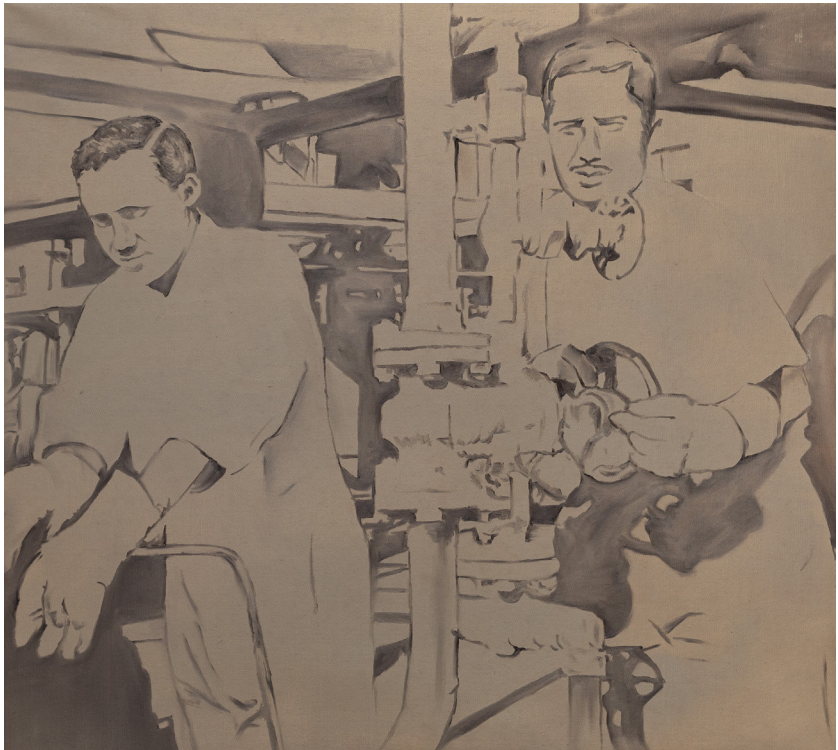
I haven't thought about this before. Some people say they are desert people, [others] sea people. But I'm a city girl. My family grew up in a city; I was in Al Wahda. That's the only thing we know. The only time we went to the Burr (desert) was because of a fake safari trip. I think that's why I want my end result to be in Abu Dhabi, in Al Wahda, away from Aden. The story [of the exhibition] ends when I was born.

Was this out-of-body experience—exploring stories of yourself before you were born—difficult?

Some of the stuff I didn't know, no one talks about it. I had to do the research, and when looking at these images, I couldn't believe it. My reality in Abu Dhabi, growing up here, is so different. You see it in small things. My grandmother advising me not to wear this and that but then telling me to get a degree to make sure I'm secure when I get divorced—'Get your degree, so you can divorce your husband in the future.' It's these small comments.

I had to dig through and talk to my family members, to build and connect stories. I try to live and imagine myself in that time. Getting them to [share] was also hard; I'm their granddaughter, so they wouldn't want to influence me badly. [Simultaneously], my grandmother immediately said: 'Of course, share my photos. I'm beautiful.' The environment is just different. Every time she comes, she's very loud.

Almaha Jaralla's personal and explorative narrative *Shadia* delves into her grandmother's spontaneous life as she travels across the MENA, Asia, and Europe. Mobility is central to this journey as it is a catalyst for familial complexity, the anchor of fruitful encounters, and a contributor to our beloved city-scapes. Jaralla's use of muted, pastel colors and bold, and sometimes fragile strokes reconstructs archival photographs as memorialized paintings of relationships and identities, focused on themes of labor and love, matriarchal epistemologies, and subjective materialism.



BP, 2022
Oil on canvas
110 x 120 cm

Labor plays the role of an actor, an agent of mobility, throughout these paintings, motivating the subjects to move from one place to the next. In *BP* and *ATI*, we are introduced to a relationship between a grandfather and grandson. Jaralla's father was the oldest of his siblings, and so was his father. The same goes for Jaralla's mother, grandmother, and now herself.



A7I, 2022
Oil on canvas
110 x 130 cm

Where are they in these first images?

My great-grandpa studied mechanics in Holland to work in the British Petroleum, and with him is his brother-in-law. I named the other one *A7I* because they continue to wear these outfits till this day. They're actually in the first KFC in Abu Dhabi. I wanted it to be obvious it was an archive. And through these colors, I wanted to be careful with choosing what dominates the painting.



Al Wadi, 2022
Oil on canvas
60 x 90 cm

Your grandparents both got degrees internationally and then went on to teach. Why does the passing of education become so crucial to this history? How has that influenced the stories you've selected about the movement?

Grandma was the first one to work in petroleum labs. She used to teach Emirati men, which is fascinating to me. She said Sheikh Zayed opened the academy, and her dad told her to take a picture with him, but she was scared—‘We had to teach them how to carry the responsibilities.’ It’s much more beautiful hearing it from an old woman.

Anyway, I don’t know why, but I also love teaching. Maybe we’re just a family that likes to educate.

Why the invasion of an almost solid black?

This is the only picture that was staged. The majority of the references are daily pictures of people just living. This was the only one taken in a studio; it’s the Jaralla family, and it’s a black-and-white picture that was painted. It’s interesting because it looked flat to me when I first saw this. There’s nothing. They’re just standing and intentionally looking at us.

In *Al Wadi*, a Bedouin man takes center stage of a black backdrop, and on the right is Jaralla’s great-grandfather. The matriarch and patriarch of the household are dominant forces throughout these narratives—the strings of an instrument guiding the artist to their final piece.

There is then this sudden burst of color in the *Lawlaki*, *Ahwam*, and *Dalina* photographs from Aden and Kuwait, and times of leisure.

Firstly, I wanted to show that feeling of the 70s. Secondly, people in Aden, there's a lot of them, it's crowded, they're shouting, and their personalities are just as loud.

In *Ahwam*, you can see Shadia crossing her legs, writing some letters in Kuwait when she did training for her job. In front of her, there is a birthday party for her daughters. This picture made me very emotional. Some of the people have passed. It was a different time, and now everyone is in a different city.

Can you talk more about your grandmother's story then, Shadia, and why you're focusing on her?

Shadia is my maternal grandmother's name. I thought it was funny telling my friends her name because they immediately thought she was Egyptian. I think it's because of Egyptian media, and I think they named her after Shadia, an Egyptian actress and singer known for her roles in sitcoms from the 1950s and 1960s. At that time, there were only two Arabic television programs, a Khaleeji one and an Egyptian one.

Effectively, Jaralla starts to paint the story of movement through labor as a muted one that potentially erases familial histories. Still, through her research, Jaralla attempts to piece them back together to create an everlasting memory beyond the monetary fruit of this labor.



Ahwam, 2022
Oil on canvas
110 x 110 cm



Lawlaki, 2022
Oil on canvas
110 x 110 cm

I thought it was interesting that they ended up drifting more towards Egyptian culture—maybe because of the styles, clothing, and the [shared] history of colonization. If I ask her about Khaleeji actors, she wouldn't necessarily know or relate to them. I started this show thinking about Shadia, but also Asia, my paternal grandmother. They were from the same city but had different paths; Shadia stayed in Aden, and Asia went all around.

There seems to be another person in *Lawlaki*, why is he cut off?

Life is not perfect. I'm not gonna perfect it.

Red embodies Shadia. The color follows her everywhere she goes. Jaralla calls her "badass," a woman that takes out a cigarette and sits outside, red lipstick slathered across her lips, loud and proud, socializing with people from different parts of the world in other parts of the world. A world that maybe was not kind in the past, inheriting migration throughout the lineage from one end of the earth to the other.

"Shadia got married to the Gulf," at a time when borders were less restricting and cars freely moved, an image almost impossible to grasp. Living under various regimes, a household indulges in each culture before they are isolated and are left to find solace elsewhere. But the matriarch navigates these obstacles. Shadia navigates through red.



Red Boots, 2022
Oil on canvas
240 x 110 cm

What is the story of these boots in *Red Boots*?

My mom and sister are in this image. The story behind the red boots is that my grandmother used to work in the post office in Aden. They didn't have many choices for clothes, the city was closed from all sides, and they weren't allowed to get things from the outside. Under this Soviet regime, everyone dressed the same, so she used to [sneakily] order things from outside. Mom said she used to wear these boots in the city because she was the only one. She felt special.

Is your mom loud too?

She's very quiet, but I love that they're enjoying red boots.



Al Dayan, 2022
Oil on canvas
130 x 110 cm

Ali, 2022
Oil on canvas
100 x 100 cm



In *Ali Dayan*, the red replaces the family as the subject. Am I valid in saying that?

I wanted the red to dominate. This picture screams grandma. You know the Alpha man? That's what I'm getting at with this. Everyone is behind her. And her deciding: "I want the new curtains to show!" Her mind was on the curtains, no one else. It's her and the curtains. When I have a picture of my dad's family, it's a very different feeling.

[Referring to the painting *Ali*] This, this is a family photo! Everyone is laughing, they're having fun, just in a garden. My dad's the oldest; he's the family guy; you depend on him. You see him always with the kids. There's usually no one his age. I feel it too. My cousins all see me as the one they depend on.



Landscaped Gardens, 2022
Oil on canvas
110 x 110 cm

As we follow her father through Abu Dhabi, the beige and blue of the first set of images returns in *Landscaped Gardens* and *Waterfront*. Once again, the blue reflects the imagery of playfulness, while the beige emphasizes responsibility. Like in previous paintings, her father is on duty—the mature soul. The muted aura of Abu Dhabi, a liminal city destined to be an economic hub for labor, subdues the red spirit of Shadia.



Waterfront, 2022
Oil on canvas
115 x 100 cm



Sakher, 2022
Oil on canvas
110 x 110 cm

What is with the return of splashes of color in *Ba Sudan*?

They used to live in the Souq in Crater, Yemen, and Shadia's dad had a shop making these *mo'awaz* fabrics by hand, manually. It's part of their culture; it's what their dad used to do. Shadia is driving all these men. She's the alpha again, in my eyes. But then suddenly, they're just wearing this modern clothing. You can do both. These people are literally not significant to this story, I don't know them, and I feel that happens with the clash of brown with modern 70s colors.

Then we have another family portrait with *Aida*?

To be honest, I also don't know these women. I look through my family pictures and suddenly see all these random people. I asked my grandmother, Shadia, why do you have these. She said: 'We'd all just send each other film to develop and end up with each other's pictures.

This blue becomes faint and unclear, almost dismantled and erased in *Sakher* as we travel to Kurdistan. "If I don't know the person personally, I don't have the ability, or I even think the right to paint them," Jaralla shares, as she explains this was a simple shot captured on a stop her father took while driving to Iraq. Temporariness and randomness spontaneously become essential motifs to the narrative. And with that marks the return of joyful, warm, and experimental colors.



Saif, 2022
Oil on canvas
110 x 200 cm

And with the painting *Saif*, is it an orchestrated image too? Is it real? It looks disconnected.

No, this is really in front of the pyramids. The pyramids definitely look disconnected, but it's not organized to look perfect, it's just random stuff happening in a picture, and I like when that happens. Firstly, I thought: 'What the heck is my grandmother wearing?' And then I thought: 'Wow, they used to travel!' [Traveling] wasn't significant to my family. But here I saw my dad, and I asked my grandmother what they were doing there. And she said her siblings used to study in Cairo, so they would visit.

My dad looked so cute as a baby. He's sitting on top of a car. There's a bag on the right. I really don't know what's on the left. I wanted to continue the scene.

This was the first painting I started. Very experimental.

The relationship between woven fabric, unique to her heritage and upbringing, and the painted linen canvases is effortlessly fluid. These patterns clash against the characters, forcing them to be contextualized in a time and place. Characters that, to Jaralla, play no role in her life nor her family's present. This experimentation with pastel colors, gentle brush strokes, and the use of fabric encapsulates the fragility of time and the metamorphosis of a family, community, and tribe.



Al Salam, 2022
Oil on canvas
110 x 110 cm

Shadia's red is much warmer and more subtle now. We see it on the facade of these buildings—and within the walls and voices of these houses. Loud. In-motion. Expressive.



Al Muroor, 2022
oil on canvas
60 x 120 cm

Why this return to detailed paintings of buildings in *Al Muroor* and *Al Salam*?

Al Muroor, specifically, has those old houses that were untouched from the 80s. The choices they made are very interesting to me. We're talking about different times and styles, and they were even limited by the material.

I didn't want to highlight [my family's] houses because they're no longer there. I wanted to capture their time, though. But the *Al Salam* house, every time I enter Abu Dhabi, this house falls on my eyes. The architecture at its time was spectacular; no one thought of doing something like that. It's a very weird house that's either usually empty or has no lights.

Work and leisure, family and stranger, man and woman, these constructs melt into one another, and what is left behind is nothing but geography. The city is similarly transformative, yes, but forever grounded in the present reality. Evidently, Jaralla returns to landscape paintings.

Tell me about *Al Wahda*, the magnum opus of this show.

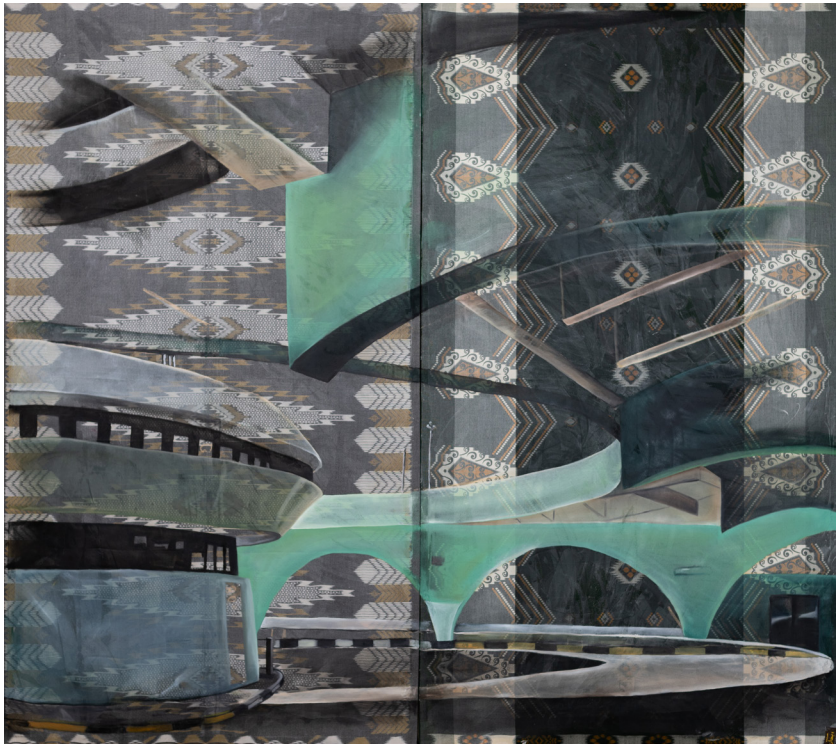
This place is very, very, very beautiful. Do you know the story of Abu Dhabi?

They wanted the city-plan to match New York's, but the thing is, the land was a greenfield site. They didn't know what fit the weather and land. It was very experimental.

We have this huge empty land. Go experiment with it. I feel like all the engineers and designers came here to try new shapes and colors. And it's so much fun, with such weirdness. This building is iconic for this reason. I grew up next to this bus stop, next to Al Wahda Stadium, and I wanted the story to end when I was born. The middle of the city, screaming personality.

All of a sudden, a green personality.

It's a place people go to, to go around the Emirates. People come here to move.



Al Wahda, 2022
Oil on canvas
200 x 230 cm



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Curator: Hashel Al Lamki

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Almaha Jaralla, *WTC*, 2019
Digital print
Abu Dhabi, UAE

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Courtesy of the artist's family archives





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