

SHAMMA'S DIASPORA

By: Edward Lucie-Smith

Much more so than most artists based in the Middle East, Sara Shamma possessed an international reputation long before the pictures presented in this exhibition were made. She has been the recipient of major prizes in countries as far apart from one another as Britain and Australia, and has participated regularly in major international exhibitions in Britain, Germany. However, because of the current situation in her native Syria, both tragic and dramatic as all the world now knows, the images shown here possess a special resonance, and are perhaps the most powerful that she has created in the course of an already distinguished career. Many of them were created in Syria itself, others were made in Lebanon, where she and her two small children have taken refuge from the war. If one looks to see what the paintings have in common with one another, and what seems to divide the later ones, made in Lebanon, from those painted while she was still living in Syria, the similarities and the differences are instructive. The style of all the canvases is extremely bold and painterly, and underlying the swirls of

paint there is a very solid structure of drawing, which demonstrates her firm grip on three-dimensional form. There are images of very young children, and others, combined with these, that we can read as self-portraits. In some paintings there is a sudden shift of texture. Parts are rendered in near monochrome, in a quasi-photographic way, but are they juxtaposed with forms rendered in bold swirls of paint. Some paintings play with the idea of double vision. There are also moments when the swirls of paint threaten to swallow the forms completely, and reduce them to incoherent chaos. Underlying all the works, even those made before the artist's move to her place of exile in Lebanon, there is a powerful, unmistakable feeling of anxiety - an emotion focused, one senses, on the threat to her children, rather than herself. Though no overt statement about it is made, one can read these earlier compositions in the series as allegories about the way in which the situation in Syria was then deteriorating. They are, however, much less forceful in this respect than the more recent compositions.



PANIC ATTACK, 2012. Oil & Acrylic on canvas, 2x1155x1751 cm.



UNTITLED, 2012. Oil & acrylic on canvas, 2x1155x1751 cm.

The later paintings in the group belong to a tradition that is, in its remoter reaches, rooted in the *Sturm und Drang* painting of the late 18th century - I am thinking here particularly of Fuseli's celebrated canvas *The Nightmare* (1781), or maybe perhaps in the *Caprichos* of Goya (1797). One can also point to certain aspects of early 19th century political art, notably an early masterpiece by Delacroix, *The Massacres at Chios* (1824). One might also cite a work from somewhat later in the 19th century, the Russian artist Vassily Vereshchagin's terrifying *Pyramid of Skulls* (1871). A major difference, however, is that both the Delacroix and the Vereshchagin are direct references to public events. *Pyramid of Skulls* evokes the campaigns of the Scourge of God, Tamerlane. In contrast to this, the imagery of these recent paintings by Sara Shamma is carefully non-specific. They are not 'war pictures' in any descriptive way. What they do is to evoke a climate of metaphysical horror. They put together images that have much greater power when placed in (apparently irrational) conjunction with one another than they could possess if viewed in isolation. In part, our ability to read these images is due to our experience of Surrealism. There is, nevertheless, a distinction to be made. Surrealist paintings usually, in fact almost invariably - refer to the interior self of the artist. The major exceptions to this are certain paintings by Dalí, for example his *Soft Construction with Boiled*

Beans (*Premonition of Civil War*) (1936), now in the Arensberg Collection in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Dalí's own description of the picture "as a vast human body breaking out into monstrous excrescences of arms and legs tearing at one another in a delirium of auto-strangulation" certainly resonates with the vibe one gets from some of Shamma's recent paintings, though her compositions are much more painterly in handling. This painterly lines might perhaps prompt a different comparison - with the work of Francis Bacon, but this, I think, would be misguided. Under the swirling paint that is such a feature of some of Shamma's work one is always conscious of a firm structure of 'academic' (in the good sense) drawing. There is also, however, yet another comparison to be made, which is one with the world of film. In the most recent paintings images slide in and out of focus, are present and then dissolve, in a way that invites the spectator to recreate the composition, internalizing it rather than simply passively looking at it.

This is something that is essentially cinematic. The old traditional way of making images is subtly reconciled with our experience of modern technology. This is interesting in itself, at a time when many enthusiasts for new technological forms of art, video in particular, have tended to imply that images made with paint on canvas are somehow archaic, and therefore in the process of being marginalized.



UNTITLED, 2013. Oil & Acrylic on canvas. 100x120 cm.



UNTITLED, 2013. Oil & acrylic on canvas. 100x120 cm.



Most people know the much-quoted Chinese malediction: "May you live in interesting times". The impressive images exhibited here demonstrate that personal and public misfortunes, the high drama of those "interesting times", do have the power to provoke the creation of major art.

Sara Shamma's Bio

Born in Damascus, Syria (1975), in a family of intellectuals. They encouraged her love of painting which she developed as a small child, and by the age of 14, Shamma decided she would train as a painter. Shamma graduated from the Painting Department of the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Damascus in 1998. Following her graduation, Shamma participated in a number of international shows including solos in the Royal College of Art in London in 2013, Art House in Damascus in 2011, 360 MALL in Kuwait in 2009. She also participated in many group shows in The Royal Society of Portrait Painters Annual Exhibition in London in 2013, Nord Art in Kunst in der Carlshütte, Büdelsdorf in Germany in 2012, Art Prize in Kendall College in 2010, Art House Damascus in 2009, Souq Wakef Art Center in Qatar in 2008, The Waterhouse Natural History Art Prize in South Australian Museum in Adelaide (Australia) in 2008, Catzen Arts Centre at The American University Washington D.C. in 2007, International Painting Prize of the Castellon County Council, ESPAI (the Contemporary Art Centre) Madrid (Spain) in 2005 amongst others shows Shamma was invited to join the teaching staff

of the Adham Ismail Fine Arts Institute in Damascus, where she taught for three years from 1998. Besides her own practice and her involvement in the education of young artists, Shamma has been consistently active in the Syrian art scene. She was a member of the jury for The Annual Exhibition for Syrian Artists held by the Ministry Of Culture, Damascus, Syria in 2006. Shamma has been the recipient of various regional and international art awards including First Prize in the 2001 Latakia Biennial, Syria, Fourth Prize in the 2004 BP Portrait Award, National Portrait Gallery, London, UK and First Prize in Painting, The Waterhouse Natural History Art Prize, The South Australian Museum, Adelaide, Australia in 2008, Fourth prize in painting, and Special Mention, Florence Biennial, Florence, Italy 2013.

Shamma's works can be found across the world, selected public collections include: The National Museum of Damascus, The British Council Collection Damascus, The Spanish Cultural Center Collection, Damascus. Shamma's paintings can be found amongst private collections in: Austria, Canada, Ecuador, Egypt, France, Germany, Japan, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, the Netherlands, Qatar, Spain, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom and the United States of America.

In 2010, Shamma was invited to become the United Nations World Food Program 'Celebrity Partner'. In 2010 she created a painting for them entitled: Fighting Hunger (2010). Impressed and touched by their work she continues to support them as her chosen charity.



1. SELF PORTRAIT, 2013. Oil & Acrylic on canvas. 2x(125x200) cm.



2. UNTITLED, 2013. Oil & Acrylic on canvas. 200 x 200 cm.

3. UNTITLED, 2012. Oil & Acrylic on canvas. 150x150 cm.