

MIXING MEMORY AND DESIRE

By: Anna Wallace-Thompson

April is the cruellest month, breeding Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing Memory and desire, stirring Dull roots with spring rain. Winter kept us warm, covering Earth in forgetful snow, feeding A little life with dried tubers. T S Eliot, The Wasteland

One enters by stepping around the bones of a wooden dhow, displayed like a dinosaur skeleton under the shade of palm trees, before passing through a wide avenue, flanked by architectural facades of various times, styles and sources. Upon entering the indoor space of the gallery, one walks into a strange, subterranean experience, in which the smells of earth and sand linger. Now imagine that smell: earthy, the scent of underground. The slightly metallic scent of crumbly brown soil, the salty dusty tang of desert sand on your tongue as it rises in the air like a fine powder. Palm trees and shrubs in varying shades of brown and rust are placed around the concrete floors, either piled up like small corpses on a trolley, or suspended from the ceiling like some great, pagan twig structure. It is human-like, a great scarecrow, flying above a sea of red desert sand. Around the walls, in stark contrast and even starker lines, are ink and paint drawings of winter roots, soft, smudged swathes of color in deep purples, greens and greys coming to rest within the gnarled and stringy crevices and sprouting ends of each root. A collaboration between Iranian artists Fereydoun Ave and Shaqayeq Arabi. *Roots*, was an exhibition that very literally delved into the effects of subterranean, dormant power and the cycles and concentrations of energy found within it. For Arabi, *Roots* can be seen as a thematic continuation of previous shows - collaborations with her partner Dariush Zandi. *Scraps* (2009) and *Sinking Ships* (2012) both drew Arabi and Zandi's travels around the Emirates and their subsequent retrieval and preservation of items discarded and otherwise forgotten. The result of a fire at an industrial space in the gallery's neighbourhood of Al-Quoz, *Scraps* featured sculptures comprising melted and disfigured items from the warehouse's burnt remains - knife blades, generators, toothbrushes and bicycle pumps - all rusted and bent into phantasmagorical new forms. *Sinking Ships* paid homage to disused and often decaying traditional wooden dhow boats that had been dredged from watery graveyards in Dubai's old Creek. Lovingly reassembled alongside photographs of old Dubai, they were a haunting memory of what once was, and a tangible reminder of what had been forgotten in the wake of modern skyscrapers and rapid urban development. This third iteration then, *Roots*, featured sculptural objects created by Arabi from the desiccated remains of plant life that had been uprooted and subsequently collected by her from various sites in the region alongside Ave's depictions of winter roots. "I think that we approach the same subject from different points of view. Shaqayeq has a gut instinct to protect that which has been uprooted, which, I have observed, is something one notices amongst Iranians. Perhaps because we have both been uprooted and have then laid down new roots in new countries," says Ave. Ave, in particular, suffered during the



Roots exhibition view - Shown in November 2014 in Dubai - United Arab Emirates. Courtesy of the artists.



Shaqayeq Arabi, Bushes # 1, Roots series, 2014, wood & glass, xxsizexx. Courtesy of the artist.

Iranian Revolution, losing Zand Gallery, which he had co-founded. However, to draw an analogy between Arabi and Ave as artists uprooted from their native Iran as solely forming the basis for Roots would not only be reductive, but would miss the point. Although both acknowledge the relevance of this observation, I do not think it is where the crux of their collaboration - nor the uniqueness of this exhibition - lies. Rather, in a desert environment such as Dubai, and one so characterised by the newness of its urban landscape, we are presented with a complex and nuanced examination of the cyclical nature of life: Roots is both a promise of, and elegy to, verdant abundance and its effect on all life forms. The yin and yang nature of the primal life force is reflected in the complementary duality of Ave and Arabi as a man and woman, established and mid-career artists, two-dimensional ink drawings and paintings and three-dimensional sculptures and objects as well as the creative cycles of each artist: where one is returning to the simpler pleasures of pen and ink, the other is breaking away from classical painterly training to explore sculptural works and forms. Just as the confiscation of Zand Gallery eventually led to Ave establishing what was to become the legendary 13 Vanak Street, so too all deaths herald a new beginning. Where Ave's depictions of roots sit fat, dormant, filled with the promise of a pregnant flourishing in spring, Arabi's uprooted palm trees and shrubs are like tenderly tended patients, some embalmed in death, others suspended in a state of stasis, half alive, yet not yet dead. We are presented with the end and beginning of an endless cyclical process, one that goes back to the very foundations of time. In essence, we are invited to explore the memory of what once was, alongside the vision and desire for what could be. Ave's work too is cyclical, oscillating between the masculine and feminine, from Rostam in the Dead of Winter (2009), depicting that most macho of Iranian heroes, to his softer water color and ink paintings featuring the bleeding shapes of dahlias and figs. *"This series was interesting because I've never concentrated on the winter season as such"* muses Ave. *"Rostam in the Dead of Winter is in fact about spring, for the whole idea is that there can only be rebirth if there is first death. There can only be a spring if winter first kills off what needs to be killed off, while life goes underground to wait for a time to come forth again"* Indeed, in Roots, Ave has gone back to basics by creating a series of pen and ink drawings and paintings depicting the winter roots, which, as a seasonal eater, he found lying around his Paris kitchen. *"This series was part of a holistic attitude towards the energy cycles that occur in the seasons. In winter there is this feeling that it is getting dark, and a sense of lethargy as comes on as energy descends to concentrate and gestate. Creating these drawings was, in essence, to make myself feel good. I think art is a survival lifeline. I thought, OK, now that I've realised what this winter lethargy is all about, I am going to get moving and so I began concentrating and meditating on the whole idea and concept of roots"*. Ave explains. The finished product resembles in places the natural history drawings found reproduced as plates in old books, as carrots, beetroots, sweet potatoes and celeriac are placed in rows, their gnarled and swollen shapes drawn in deft lines. Other works, predominantly the paintings, resemble subterranean environments, with Ave's more familiar abstract brushstrokes making an appearance.

"Maybe the winter is a masculine season" muses Ave. "It doesn't give birth, but rather features the concentrated internal energy of seeds and roots waiting to come forth. The more you look at roots, the sexier they become. The more I worked with them, the more they started to do what your subconscious starts to do with a shape when you are repeating and redoing it over and over". Hung on the walls around the gallery space, Ave's works presented these roots at eye level, giving the viewer the feeling of seeing them at ground level, as if the entire space itself were partially submerged under the earth. Spread out over the gallery floor, encircled by these roots, lay Arabi's sculptural installations of dry, preserved and dormant palm trees and shrubs. Where Ave observes, Arabi has sought to preserve, collecting uprooted and dried flora during trips to the desert. Many come from dried out oases, while others have been collected around the urban environment of the UAE. Those living in the region may have observed the idiosyncratic approach to the vegetation seen in public spaces - much care, money and time is spent on planting and installing irrigation and watering systems. However, perhaps due to the extreme heat of the summer, many plants do not survive long, and rather than nurture them, they are often simply pulled out and discarded for fresh replacements. "Seeing these uprooted plants fills me with great regret and shame, that we don't take care of things with the value and love they deserve. It is important to cherish life - trees, plants and soil, these are the very essence of nature. So much care and effort has gone into the nurture of these palm trees, and then they are left uprooted in the sand to die" explains Arabi. Where Ave's roots are dormant in winter, waiting for new life, Arabi's are in the winter of their life, making way for those roots. Arabi gathered, carried home, then gently cleaned, bathed and polishes her rescued plants. This ritual of washing and cleansing can be likened to that of preparing a body for burial - and, sadly, it is only in death that these plants are given the tender care they deserved in life. However, in doing so, it is as though in death these objects are also given new life.

In *Roots*, viewers were presented with great palm trees suspended from metal chains from the ceiling, or small palms, still partially alive when they had been uprooted, the last vestiges of green still clinging to their leaves, like feeble pulses on a heart monitor. They were carefully swaddled in cloth and sprayed with water, while elsewhere, wax-coated shrubs were illuminated in a glass vitrine, adorned with colored string and beads, a cold, white light coming from below: The shrubs have been picked up out of their original context and have become precious, an object to be showcased behind glass. "You store different things in your heart and your head. I collect certain objects unconsciously, without knowing why or when I will use them. I put them on shelves in my studio as well as in my memory" says Arabi. What becomes uncomfortable is how human-like some of the figures are - both Ave and Arabi drive home the links that bind all living things together - the suspended palm tree very clearly has a head and limbs, while some of Ave's winter roots more than strongly resemble mandrakes, themselves held to resemble human figures since Biblical times. It is a sobering thought that all living beings are so closely bound through their very fragility and dependence on the forces of nature and those of us who have an impact



Shaqeque Arabi, *Bushes # 1* Roots series, 2014, wood & glass, xxsizexx. Courtesy of the artist.



1. Fereydoun Ave. Winter roots # 3, Roots series, 2014, pen & ink, mix media on canvas, xxsizexx. Courtesy of the artist.

2. Fereydoun Ave. Winter roots # 1, Roots series, 2014, pen & ink on paper, xxsizexxx. Courtesy of the artist.

3. Fereydoun Ave. Winter roots # 4, Roots series, 2014, pen & ink on paper, xxsizexxx. Courtesy of the artist.

on them. It reminds us that we are at once both masters and victims of our own destinies.

"Crossroads present a space where things can come together and be seen by many different kinds of people who then leave, for wherever they are going to or coming from, because that's what crossroads are about - comings and goings" muses Ave.

"The phenomenon of uprootedness is something everybody has observed within this city, and so they had an immediate connection with the work. They were able to connect with it and speak of their own experiences. On the other hand, we are planning for the exhibition to travel to Tehran. Just outside of Tehran there is an orchard made up of pomegranate and fig trees, deserted for years, and all of the trees within it are dead. I begged the owners not to remove them! I think there could be a real chance to do something interesting with them within the Iranian context if we are able to show a new version of this exhibition there" says Arabi.

Roots provided a new way to life around us. Indeed, in a cultural scene that is more often than not obsessed with proving its ability to push the conceptual envelope with the best of them, an exhibition that saw concept and execution in harmony with each other, with a subject matter rich and multilayered enough to stay with the viewer long after they had left.

"There is a time for everything and everything in its time" concludes Ave.

About the Writer

Anna Wallace-Thompson currently handles communications at London-based Kashya Hildebrand Gallery on Fitzrovia's Eastcastle Street. She is also a freelance journalist specialising in Middle Eastern art and culture. Graduating in 2003 from Helsinki University with a BA in English Philology, she also studied at Sydney University, receiving her MA in English Literature in 2005. Wallace-Thompson has written for *The Art Newspaper*, *Frieze*, *Harper's Bazaar Middle East*, *Shawati*, *Vision* magazine and *Alef*, among others. She is Sub-Editor of *Sorbet* and is London Correspondent for *Canvas*, where she was previously Assistant Editor and worked for five years before moving to London after 16 years based in Dubai. Something of a global nomad, she has also lived in Germany, Singapore and Italy, and is currently working on a collection of short stories inspired by the Middle East as well as her first novel. Her creative writing has been published in the *Aesthetica Creative Writing Annual* and *Les Autres: Of Others*.