

Samah Shihadi  
Spellbound



Director: Tania Coen-Uzzielli  
Chief curator: Doron Rabina

*Samah Shihadi*  
*Spellbound*

Recipient of the 2018 Haim Shiff Prize  
for Figurative-Realist Art

Jury: Dubi Shiff, Suzanne Landau,  
Doron Rabina, Doron Sebbag,  
Adv. Gil Brandes, Emanuela Calò

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## Foreword

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 of painting and drawing she scrutinizes issues pertaining to identity, her native traditional society and her political reality. Shihadi (b. 1987) was born in the village of Sha'ab in the western Galilee and lives and works in Haifa. She has an M.F.A. from the University of Haifa, and a B.Ed. in art from Oranim Academic College of Education.

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 Arab society, tradition and religious belief versus social and political reality, and local landscapes charged with history.

The prize in honor of Haim Shiff, a collector of Israeli art, awarded annually since 2008 by his son Dubi Shiff, commemorates his father by giving the prize to an outstanding artist in the field of

figurative-realistic art. We are also grateful to Dubi Shiff for his membership on the prize jury along with Adv. Gil Brandes, Doron Sebbag, Suzanne Landau, Doron Rabina and Emanuela Calò, all of whom we thank. We are grateful to Samah Shihadi for the valuable and fruitful collaboration; Natalie Tiznenko, manager of the Shiff collection and Iris Barak, its curator. Thanks to those who lent works for the exhibition; thanks to Emanuela Calò for curating the exhibition, and to chief curator, Doron Rabina, for his support. We thank graphic designer Nadav Shalev, photographer Elad Sarig, Hebrew text editor Dafnit Moskovich, translators and editors in English and Arabic, Sivan Raveh and Roaa Translation, respectively. Thanks to Raphael Radovan, head of curatorial services; Iris Yerushalmi, exhibitions and projects coordinator, and transportation coordinator, Barbara Ordentlich. Thanks to the staff at the Museum's Department of Registration, Shoshana Frankel, Hadar Oren-Bezalel, Sivan Bloch-Kimhi, Ophra Shoshtari; the staff at the Department of Conservation, Dr. Assaf Oron, Noga Schusterman, Sarita Markus, Klara Eyal-Kralova; special thanks to Neill MacManus, Amir Azoulay, Daniel Lev, and Irit Hadar, curator of Prints and Drawings. We thank the staff at Tel Aviv Museum of Art for their vital assistance in realizing the exhibition.

Tania Coen-Uzzielli  
Director

## Spellbound

### Mythical Time and Space in the Works of Samah Shihadi

Emanuela Calò

Samah Shihadi's work can be positioned between classical-figurative realism, with its desire to record and preserve, and a surrealism that is personal and fantastic. At the heart of her artistic pronouncement are memory and gender and national identity-politics in the Israeli society and the traditional Palestinian society, as experienced by a Palestinian woman in Israel. Shihadi, like other Palestinian female artists such as, Hannan Abu-Hussein, Anisa Ashkar, and Mona Hatoum, and Palestinian male artists such as Raafat Hattab who are active in Israel and abroad, creates practices of remembrance to counter the amnesia regarding the Nakba,<sup>1</sup> and dialogue between the personal and the public.<sup>2</sup>

Shihadi was born and raised in the Galilee town of Sha'ab and studied in Israeli institutions including Oranim Academic College of Education and Haifa University. She moves and maneuvers in both cultures, assimilating while also clearly expressing her intentions in each. Her works are frequently exhibited in Israel and abroad, and can be found in collections in Bethlehem, Lebanon, Tel Aviv and elsewhere. Shihadi's work derives from the tragic events that occurred on Palestinian land. Her family lived in the western Galilee village of Mi'ar, which was

destroyed in 1948, with her family consequently evacuated to neighboring villages.<sup>3</sup>

#### **Rupture, Preservation and Liberation: Renewal and Traditionalism**

Shihadi addresses narratives of Palestinian oppression committed in the name of Jewish-Israeli nationalism, and the oppression inherent in patriarchal Arab society. Her utterance comes forth within a fantastic, almost surreal, wondrously beautiful world of images that ranges from the private to the communal, creating dialogue between them. This is done through reference to land and village, place and dream, a body shining and wilting, recollection and amnesia, occultism,<sup>4</sup> surrealism and realism.

As a female artist who is also a member of the Palestinian-Arab minority in Israel, Shihadi's act of "confronting power"<sup>5</sup> in the name of deprived groups comes from a position perceived as both marginal and alien.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, from her standpoint as both woman and artist in a patriarchal society, who feels like an exile in her own country, Shihadi addresses Palestinian identity politics and traditional topics that describe the village, the family and the local customs. These integrate with prevailing discourse and attitudes in Western art pertaining

to body, gender, feminism and assimilation, and together create a world of inexplicable magic engulfed in a thin veil of mystery. The reading of Shihadi's work presented here does not avoid its sociopolitical contexts but extends them into the field of magic, which is expressed in many of her drawings, as has been noted by other writers.<sup>7</sup> This aspect joins first and foremost a dialogue of sorts Shihadi has with her native tradition. This is an endless cycle drawing her away from her tradition and back to it, positing the wish to preserve and the desire to break-away as two sides of the same coin. In her work, as in the mythical realm, time and space seem to stand still and to move in tandem, lending an exterritorial feeling to her creative space, which exists in a dimension that is both past and present.

Through depiction, Shihadi seeks to preserve customs, spiritual heritage and traditional manual crafts and knowledge (such as breadmaking or plant gathering). A world of mystical magic is cast into her meticulous, laborious drawings that along with manual techniques act as agents of commemoration. Depictions of food serve as metaphors of her political, social and personal state, and bear witness to the customs and culture of the family and the village that are gradually disappearing. Farid Abu Shakra observed that: "She invests true effort in the protracted work of sketching, giving her the opportunity and time to formulate her decision and to connect the different elements of a willful and patriarchal society, which oppresses the individual and subjugates it to control and policing."<sup>8</sup> Shihadi's grievances are expressed in a polite yet provocative manner, at once beautiful and painful, traditional and new. It is as if she is trying to pull the thread

without it tearing. Just as her work **Tug of War**, 2016, tries to stretch the rope which may have been imposed on her or perhaps chosen by her, submissively and defiantly. Although she belongs, she must also pretend, as in **Pretending**, 2016.

#### The Search and its Paths – Nomadism

The beautiful and moving **Untitled**, 2018, the presence in which indicates a metaphorical and real absence, does well to express the experience of uprooting and migration. Metaphorically, the Palestinian fate is concentrated into the keffiyeh fabric bundle that contains an entire world and symbolizes the uprooting and wandering of Palestinians following the traumatic events of 1948. The drawing is part of a pair. The missing piece, (**A Bundle from Home/Bukhje with Hyssop and Zaatar**), 2018, belongs to a family living in exile in Dubai. It depicts the same scene, only here the picture of hyssop is replaced with a picture of the family's old house on Tiberias Street, as if seen through a window. The two drawings succinctly tell a general Palestinian story and a very personal one.

The keffiyeh bundle can also be read separately from the attempt to "confront power," in connection with a force and a magic<sup>9</sup> that arise from the link to tradition, the mother, flora and fauna (local herbs, medicinal plants and animals), with the power represented by the woman – the healer, the magician – with white magic,<sup>10</sup> prophesy, beneficial magic,<sup>11</sup> and popular magic<sup>12</sup> (as opposed to witches and black magic).

The bundle also joins the figure of the court nomad-fool-itinerant who, either innocent or

mad, can only speak the truth.<sup>13</sup> The keffiyeh bundle contains accumulated memories, accomplishments and possessions. It is carried on the shoulder or with a stick. Shihadi uses it as a symbol of escape, refugeeness, and forced nomadism (the residents of Mi'ar were expelled from their village three times and not allowed to return until it was finally destroyed in 1949).<sup>14</sup> Its association with picnics is represented in **Picnic**, 2018, where abandoned pots among the village ruins indicate hasty departure and escape. The pots remain with the cacti in the deserted landscape from which the people have fled.

Hyssop, and sage and olive oil, appear in other works touching on traditional-local food and join the local landscape and flora. Plant gathering, an activity usually performed by women, who know the land and the species that can be used for food or healing, purifying and purging evil-eye, ties the bundle and the hyssop to additional, alternative interpretations.<sup>15</sup>

Sage, hyssop and dates joined local folk customs, rites and arts and became traditions that passed down from mother to daughter and came to symbolize feminine practices. The painting **Still-Life (Date and Sage)**, 2018,<sup>[p. 16]</sup> depicts sage, *salvia* in Latin, from *salvus*, meaning saved, or *mirmiya* in Arabic, after the virgin Mary, who is believed to have sanctified it. Indeed, sage is a popular medicinal plant used for cooking and purification, it is believed to possess mystical and other properties.<sup>16</sup> In Palestinian culture sage is placed on the dead, and dates are served during mourning.<sup>17</sup>

Shihadi's enchanted landscape is more than a naturalistic translation and documentation of nature. It extends to places that verge on the

fantastic, magical and mysterious unknown; ceremonial realms of shamanism and occult magic. This same quality is found in her paintings of food, in her depictions of plants and herbs used in purification ceremonies, in the breadmaking ritual and in cooking, which is also an act of magic and transformation.

The magical mulberry tree planted for safekeeping in a barrel in the drawing **Mother and Daughter**, 2019, also symbolizes nomadism. The play of light and shade creates an illusion of an opening in the striped barrel, and of a staircase within it. Here the tree has grown to large dimensions in both height and width. Nonetheless, the tree planted in the barrel implies the possibility of moving it to another place, of it joining the journey, like the bundle. The grandmother planted the tree in the place where her house once stood and, according to Shihadi, her spirit still lingers there. Dressed in "traditional" clothes that recall a priestess or a sorcerer, Shihadi's mother places her hand on the tree in a manner recalling ancient Egyptian ceremonial gestures. It is unclear if she is leaning on it, drawing strength from it, or giving it some of hers. Shihadi says that since the death of her grandmother the tree has become a place where the family often gathers to unite with her memory, pray, eat its fruit and absorb the powers of the soil and the tree, as well as with what they believe remains of her or moved to another place. The tree thus became a magical-natural object of belief in perpetuity and of transmitting messages to other worlds. It symbolizes three female generations of the family and ongoing, infinite time that is not cut short even by historical rifts. Although it is transient and planted in suboptimal conditions,

the tree grows to great dimensions and produces fruit (red like blood, like passion) as in, “But the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad.” The tree, therefore, is also a metaphor for the fate of the family and the Palestinian people.

**Conceiving the body as a battlefield of place and identity**, and the country as both geographical location and emotional experience is based on feminist notions. These are expressed in the works of several artists, including the Cuban Ana Mendieta (1948-1985), for whom the connection between the female body and nature is influenced by patriarchy and its control over the female body via mechanisms of violence and sexualization. The Japanese artist Chiharu Shiota’s work **Try and Go Home**, 1998, drew attention to the metaphorical and physical impossibility of returning to the home and to the roots (to Japan, to the womb).<sup>18</sup> The female experience connecting land and spirituality appears in Shihadi’s **Mother’s House**, 2019, which shows the ruined wall of her grandmother’s destroyed house painted in evil-eye-deterrent blue, with plants above it, protecting, comforting and preserving as the house awaits its redemption.

#### Magical Food – “Palestine Land of Fables”

In her recent exhibition in Dubai, *Hungry for Home*, Shihadi presented her realistic-figurative drawings of traditional Palestinian food as a basis for examining deep-rooted cultural codes and memories. Eating, says the Palestinian culture and food researcher, Ranya Tabari Idliby, is intimate and powerful. The textures and flavors we encounter are absorbed into the body and enter the soul. In her drawings

Shihadi uses Palestinian dishes and communal eating customs to communicate the collective experience of loss of identity, uprooting, and finally, her desire to return home.

In an interview with Tabari Idliby, Shihadi said she uses the fruits and vegetables as symbols for treating social, personal, or political situations. According to her, *manakesh*, a flatbread made with local olive oil, hyssop sauce and red chili, common throughout Palestine and the Levant does well to represent herself and her life. The *manakesh* evokes memories of her childhood house and comforting recollections of her and her sisters preparing the dough. “I remember my mom sitting in front of the oven while my older sisters helped her prepare the dough and covered the surface some with olive oil and thyme sauce and some with red hot pepper sauce. I remember the smell of the bread rising all over the house and the whole family gathering at the table eating *manakesh* and fresh vegetables as our laughter rose to fill the space with joy. This memory wanders in my imagination every time I walk by bakeries in Haifa taking me way back to my childhood and home.”<sup>19</sup>

The magic of breadmaking: the wonderous rising of the yeast, kneading the dough, sprinkling the flour like magic dust cast by a fairy who will now use it to create something new, is a transformation of sorts and a metaphor for life and its creation. Indeed, bread has a role in the rituals and prayers of the country’s three main religions.<sup>20</sup> Forming the dough into bread, the magic of coffee reading, gathering traditional herbs and medicinal plants, are all perceived as the stuff of healing and as magical or sacred practices, like in the work that shows Shihadi’s sister sprinkling flour,<sup>[p. 10]</sup> which recalls the

painting **Love Magic**,<sup>[p. 10]</sup> 1478-1480, by an anonymous artist.

As for most immigrants, for Palestinians living in exile the table is an anchor, a place where families gather, and communities are built. The place where Palestinian loss is shared and where threatened Palestinian culture thrives. For every exiled community, by force or by choice, food becomes a powerful element for cohesion and for preserving native customs. According to Tabari Idliby, “The table is where I became Palestinian. It is where Palestinian pride was deliciously served on a plate. My parents are Palestinian exiles. In 1948 with the establishment of the state of Israel, they were never allowed to return home. The table I helped set for my family, three generations of Palestinian refugees, was so much more than just about food. In the absence of country, it became the anchor of our uprooted lives, and it fed our yearning for home. Palestine became a *land of fables*, ‘Tell me about Palestine,’ I would ask. Other children had fairy tales, I preferred the Palestine I imagined and tasted at the table. It was there that I fell in love with a homeland absent yet alive in the aromas and recipes of our lives.”<sup>21</sup>

Shihadi’s depictions of food charge mundane activities, such as the preparation of food, a picnic or a family gathering, with symbolism (recalling the American artist Robert Bechtle, b. 1932). The measure of expressiveness in the descriptions depends on the staging. Although Shihadi relies on photography, her drawings are not like those associated with cold photorealism. She does not adhere to the photographic source as do artists such as Charles Bell (1935-1995), Wayne Thiebaud (b. 1920) and Audrey Flack

(b. 1931). Shihadi’s meticulous drawing technique infuses her world of images which are permeated with sociopolitical messages and symbols that become the ground on which to present “difficult” and painful facts. It also becomes a leaping board for fantastic imagination and mythical time infused with forces, passions, memories, fears and desires.

#### Figures Reclining, Floating and Severed Heads

In a world of sorrow, hurt and loss, Shihadi presents an option that treads between pain and beauty, magic and fact, documentation and fiction, and past, present and unknown future. In still, frozen-like drawings of topics ranging from the personal to the objective, she seems to want to offer some comfort in a complex world full of struggles (personal-female, national, the fight against forgetfulness, against linear time that eliminates, the fight against the fear of death, between beauty and ugliness, black-and-white and color). Her penetrative documentary description is both comforting and painful. Indeed, the personal-social expression is joined with a local aspect and a connection to a physical, geopolitical place, itself tied to identity politics. This is expressed in her gentle, fragile, sensitive work that is at once determined and often challenging to the point of cruelty, touching on the fantastic-cosmic-magic, and at times the surreal, over which hovers a shadow of contemplative reflection and sadness.

In the works **Lying Down**, 2014, **Lying Down II**, 2015, and **Untitled**, 2015, Shihadi is depicted floating in the air as if hovering in an act of illusion or a magic show, in a dreamlike ambiance or surreal reality.<sup>22</sup> In **Untitled**, 2017, she is seen lying on a bed or platform in her

studio, as if in a world combining dreams, magic and creation.

The obsessive preoccupation with beauty is associated with death, like a plant that wilts at its peak, like the passion and love tied to fertility and life, but also to death. In the large-scale **Untitled**, 2015, Shihadi lies covered in a shroud painted with flowers, recalling the fabrics that are used to cover the dead in local mourning rites, and the figure of a nude Venus lying upside down, whom Shihadi covers, preparing the transcendental hovering body for its transition into another world. This recalls **Face to Face with God**, 1995, from the series **Women of Allah** by the Iranian artist Shirin Neshat (b. 1957).<sup>[p. 13, image 2]</sup> The dead woman, the artist herself, is seen covered in a pure white fabric with flowers; a weapon lies in her folded arm. The photograph addresses sociopolitical aspects of women in modern Muslim societies, touching on exiled identity and a martyr's death while pitting femininity against Islamic fundamentalism and Iranian militance, and confronting viewers with both the revolution and hostile images of women bearing weapons. However, there is also something submissive in these dead women. Like Shihadi's dead/sleeping/ dreaming figures, the female martyr recalls the dead Jesus, a link that is emphasized in Shihadi's **Lying Down II**, 2015, in which she appears in modern clothes with a cross dangling from her arm.

References to Christianity are also present in the two drawings of floating figures toward which many hands are extended, as if carrying them in the air. The figures hover against a bright background. They are detached from earth physically and metaphorically, defying

the law of gravitation. One refers to the Pieta or the Descent from the Cross.<sup>[p. 13, image 1]</sup> The other develops the notion of the horizontal-floating figures,<sup>[p. 13, image 3]</sup> with the hands evoking images associated with live music concerts and forms of adulation directed at members of rock bands such as Led Zeppelin (whose song Stairway to Heaven is the title of another of Shihadi's works).

The series **Cups**, 2014, includes paper-cups that have pencil drawings on paper depicting the artist's severed head attached to the bottom of each cup. Pins arranged at varying densities pierce the cups, at times almost covering the lip of the cup and the figure at its bottom, recalling magic paraphernalia and items associated with purification or spellcasting, removing a curse or protecting themselves and their homes from witches.<sup>23</sup> The cups also refer to coffee or tea leaf reading (Tasseography, from the French word for cup, *tasse*, which originates from the Arabic word *tassa*), a practice in which images formed at the bottom of the empty cup are read as signs for predicting the future. Head severing, like hanging and burning, was also a common punishment for witches during the witch-hunts.<sup>24</sup>

The pierced cups also recall African ritualistic items used to conjure assistance or harm. Idols laden with beads, horns, teeth, animal skin and other organic materials inserted into them were used to enlist the healing and protecting powers of the ancient fathers. These practices were common in animistic societies, especially in Africa, where everything in the world was believed to possess a soul. Nails and blades were inserted or attached to power idols as a means of expelling their magical power. As in Shihadi's

paper-cups, the attached nails, necklaces, mirrors and other organic materials make them especially impressive and frightening. These sculptures paved the path to 20th century Western assemblage art.<sup>25</sup>

The image of the severed head also recalls that of the first martyr, John the Baptist. Depictions of his severed head were popular in Christian art and still appear on the seals of sacramental bread. Sealing bread-dough intended for ritualistic purposes was practiced before Christianity and is known to have been performed on the bread served to the gods in Pagan temples.<sup>26</sup>

#### **White and Gray – Between Life and Death**

Unlike artists such as Ahlam Shibli whose photographs refer directly to documentation, Shihadi takes advantage of painting to choose location, stage, light and process, to add, remove, update and change the appearance of things. Her precise and scrupulous drawings in pencil, charcoal, and sometimes color, refer to and connect her with a seemingly objective view of the past. However, from the outset it is clearly indicated that the drawings are a working and staging of reality. This is emphasized by her choice of "other" subjects; topics that express her, the body, femininity, success and matters relating to tradition and the Palestinian village, including food, plants and landscape. This goes also for her works that touch on magic in a metaphysical world, and on traditions related to magic and occultism.<sup>27</sup>

In early works Shihadi often depicted herself before a white background, in sensitive, rich and intimate drawings. The recent works are composed gradually, layer upon layer of pencil

and charcoal, and are based on images she makes sure to photograph. Beyond their status as signs of the uprooting following the events of 1948, some are more abstract and shrouded in mystery, featuring a symbolism that seems to have been lifted from another, surreal, world. The current exhibition and text seek to shed light on this reality, and to trace its different and varied contexts.

Olive trees and cacti, painted in an almost black grayscale, appear in the two works **Landscape**, 2019. Their forlorn and enigmatic atmosphere is characteristic of several of Shihadi's landscape paintings, especially those devoid of people. In Shihadi's works, the sabra cactus symbolizes the Nakba, the borders of the destroyed Palestinian villages and survivability.<sup>28</sup> The plant originates in the American continent (it features on the Mexican coat of arms), from where it was brought to Spain in the 16th century and propagated in Europe and the Middle East. An adaptive plant by nature, it integrated well into the local landscape and was adopted, along with olive and other trees, by the Palestinians and later the Zionist ethos (as representing Jews born in the country) as a prime symbol of the landscape and homeland. Many Palestinian artists refer to it. Most famously the two Umm el-Fahem born artists, Asim Abu-Shakra (1961-1990) and Walid Abu Shakra (1946-2019). Many of Asim Abu-Shakra's paintings depict sabra cacti, at times as large bushes in the landscape, at times "domesticated" in pot-plants, recalling the mulberry tree planted in a barrel in Shihadi's **Mother and Daughter**, 2019. Abu-Shakra's pot-plant cactus expresses alienation and detachment, migration and uprooting. It is also tied to Christian motifs

of crucifixion, death and resurrection; a sacred object of contemplation, lamentation and mourning, symbolizing the knowledge of death (due in part to the cancer that led to his death), especially in works showing him besides scenes of the Crucifixion,<sup>[p. 14]</sup> Pieta or Descent from the Cross.<sup>29</sup> Tali Tamir quoted Abu-Shakra saying that: “The cactus fascinates me because of its amazing ability to flower out of thorny death.”<sup>30</sup> The Christian motifs that characterize many of Shihadi’s works are even closer to those of Walid Abu Shakra, who etches a journey between the spiritual and the political seeking to extract the hidden and mystical forces of his native landscapes, which also include depictions of olive trees and cacti.<sup>31 [p. 13, image 4]</sup>

In some of the new works that Shihadi created for the exhibition, she returns to paint her self-portrait and the portraits of other female figures, on a white background, such as her sister in the drawing *Eve*, 2019. The series *Disappearance*, 2019, depicts a dancer in three stages of spinning and dancing, as she gradually merges into the background, as if fading into it little by little. These topics appeared in Shihadi’s early works, when she was interested in the body’s movement and its dissipation. The double self-portrait in profile *Untitled*, 2018, also attends to dissipation. It shows Shihadi blowing white smoke on herself, screening her face, as if wanting to disappear, thus linking to her preoccupation with death. This obsessive experience recurs in Shihadi’s works and seems to resonate time, the laborious act of drawing and the endless return to associated topics that intertwine inseparably.

The painting *Between Life and Death*, 2019, is a life-size self-portrait depicting Shihadi

holding a cow skull in front of her hips and womb, by her lower abdomen, at which she gazes with contempt. Her enchanted figure is dressed in a toga of sorts, like a Greco-Roman mythological goddess or a priestess to the god Vesta and seems to have come from a sacrificial rite. Her enigmatic figure could just as easily belong to a futuristic film. Her hair recalls that of Frieda Kahlo (1907-1954),<sup>[p. 13, image 5]</sup> an artist she admires. Kahlo, in *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair*, 1940, painted herself dressed in a man’s suit and with short hair, sitting on a chair with a pair of scissors in her hand, surrounded by her chopped-off hair. Another drawing by Shihadi included in the exhibition, *Two Women in One (Self-Portrait with a Book)*, 2017, shows her sitting in a pose resembling Kahlo’s, holding a book by the feminist writer Nawal El Saadawi, whose title is repeated in that of the painting. Shihadi’s book replaces Kahlo’s scissors as the factor keeping men at bay (the inscription in Kahlo’s painting reads, I loved you for your hair, now that you are bald, I no longer love you.)

The link to the victim also relates to Jesus, Christianity and death. According to Shihadi the “dress” she is wearing is the same white fabric used to cover the dead, or to sew bridal dresses, thus symbolizing death as well as purity, cleanliness, new life and the future. The skull recalls the works of another artist Shihadi admires, Georgia O’Keeffe (1899-1987). In O’Keeffe’s painting *Cow Skull: Red, White and Blue*, 1931,<sup>[p. 13, image 6]</sup> the skull is tied to America’s identity, as she perceived it when staying in New Mexico, in 1929. More than the New York cityscape, it was the desert landscape, scattered with animal bones and skulls, that O’Keeffe felt symbolized and summarized the

real American spirit. The desert, its flowers, red hills and bones lent themselves to paintings infused with a mythical tone not seen previously in her works. O’Keeffe was fascinated by the abundance of bones, which she collected and sent to her studio in New York, where the painting was made. Shihadi, following O’Keeffe, found her cow skull on the village lands.

For Shihadi, the cow skull symbolizes victims and sacrifice, especially related to women, which is why she places it by the womb. A symbol of death for infertile women, considered to be unfeminine due to their inability to fulfil the expectations and dictates of the patriarchal society; unable to assume their main, and sometimes only, role in life. As in vanitas and memento mori paintings, Shihadi seeks to recall death related to fertility, to show the beautiful and ugly in them. The joy and pain of life. Life and death.

1. See Tal Ben Zvi, *Biographies: Six Solo Exhibitions at Hagar Art Gallery, Jaffa*, Jaffa: Hagar, 2006; Nekba means disaster, catastrophe or calamity. The term first appeared in *The Meaning of Disaster* (1948) by the Syrian historian and intellectual Constantin Zureiq, and it denotes the Arab defeat in Palestine, Tal Ben Zvi, *Sabra: Nakba Representation in Palestinian Art in Israel*, Tel Aviv, Resling, 2014, p. 27 [Hebrew].

2. Shir Meller Yamaguchi, *Samah Shihadi: The Way Home*, Kibbutz Hazorea: Wilfrid Israel Museum, 2019, pp. 4-6, n 4 [Hebrew].

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6, n. 1,3.

4. Occultism: the study or practice of mystics or secret or magical powers to gain access to hidden "truth"; supernatural reality that is not perceived via the regular senses and is not measured with rational tools or scientific methods.

5. The power is conservatism, dogma, stereotypes, official narratives, governments and corporations, scientific institutes, the media, etc. According to Edward Said, the role of intellectuals and artists is to criticize these powers and to promote freedom and justice. Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, New York: Vintage, 1996.

6. Recalling Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, whom Said describes as a provincial young man, the product of a colonial environment, who must develop critical intellectual awareness before he can become an artist, *ibid.*, p. 16.

7. See for example, Galia Yahav, "Palestinian women artists present their bodies in an artistic-political act," *Haaretz*, 15 June 2015 [Hebrew]; Ruth Oppenheim, "On Absenteeism, and Presence of Background in the early works of Samah Shihadi," in Meller Yamaguchi.

8. Farid Abu Shakra, *Samah Shihada: Wanted – The Expression of the Body in the Works of Samah Shihada*, Umm el-Fahem: Umm el-Fahem Art Gallery, 2015, p. 5.

9. In our rational-scientific time, magical thought is dismissed as illogical, yet it exists each time we believe that our thoughts and will can affect the world around us, or when there is no apparent causal connection between different events. Magical thought is often considered an application of fantasy through rituals. Magical thinking is personal and influenced by many factors, such as age, experience and mental state. Its various

forms and alterations are shaped in relation to different environments and the needs and traditions of different cultures. Sophie Page and Maria Wallace, "Introduction," in *Spellbound: Magic, Ritual and Witchcraft*, Oxford: Ashmolean, 2018, pp. 9-18; Barry Stephenson, "Ritual and Transformation," in *Ritual: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University, 2015, pp. 64-69.

10. White magic and white witchcraft were magic's legitimate option. It stood in opposition to black magic, which represented illegitimate or unorganized magic, and was connected to faulty sexual, religious and moral behavior, cannibalism, infanticide, bad cooking that was neither motherly nor nutritional, the devil and lustful demons. The business of white magic and white witches was to assist, improve and restore order through practices involving plants and rocks, and with the help of natural objects or materials, and rites describing good overcoming evil. It was, therefore, perceived as protecting against harm. Page and Wallace, pp. 9-18.

11. The "cunning folk" were those who performed local/folk practices and applications of magic. They provided a small-scale service but one highly valuable to society. For years they offered a wide range of magic services in their communities, assisting people with their everyday problems such as finding lost items, avoiding bad luck or spells, and attracting a lover or preserving the love of a husband for his wife. They also cured with plants, predicted fortunes, consulted the stars, and above all, they were the enemies of the witches and the spells they cast, thanks to the knowledge and powers they acquired through magic books or tales. They were considered to represent magic practices even more than astrologists or conjurers. Both church and country usually turned a blind eye to their existence and practices, discerning between what they did and the rare and sensational cases of harmful witchcraft. Malcolm Gaskill, "The Fear and Loathing of Witches," in *Spellbound*, pp. 97-142. The cunning folk performed rituals and made talismans as acts of beneficial magic. Among their many offerings were burned witches' bottles (bottles made from the mid-17th century to the 20th century in Germany and England). Their contents were suited for their purpose and they contained sharp objects such as

nails, pins, and thorns intended to cause pain to the suspected witch, and human hair and urine as well as things belonging to the spellbound person, such as hair or other bodily matter. The bottles were closed and then burned. They were found in houses, gardens, and cemeteries. Owen Davies and Ceri Houlbrook, "Concealed and Revealed: Magic and Mystery in the Home," in *Spellbound*, pp. 67-96.

12. Acts of folk magic were intended to ensure the safety of the house and its inhabitants or to promote good luck, protection and help. In medieval times natural substances that were carefully adapted into ritual objects such as wax, coral or rocks such as crystals, served as containers for protection- or aid-relics, such as inscriptions and images like the nails from Christ's crucifixion. Texts used by magic makers, witches and sorcerers, identified the creatures, forces and natural objects that could be used, convinced, bribed or appeased. The 12th and 13th centuries saw an increase in the flow of these magic texts from Jewish, Arab and Greco-Roman cultures that were translated into Latin in Spain. They described different rituals, such as how to heal, ensure fertility or crops, attract a lover, etc. Some of the texts promised spiritual beneficence to those performing them out of respect for God or the angels. These were known as Angelic Magic. At times they included acts of purification, fasts, confession, prayer and meditation before a picture, as means of spiritual contemplation. They also promised salvation of the soul. Texts like these were popular among priests and often included meditation before religious images. Sophie Page, "Love in a Time of Demons: Magic and the Medieval Cosmos," in *Spellbound*, pp. 19-63.

13. In Tarot, the nomad appears on the card of the fool or the madman and represents the beginning of the journey. He is linked to the perception of the madman or the nomadic fool who was often considered sacred, or to the figure of the joker in gamecards. Sometimes he is the court jester and sometimes he appears walking in uncultivated hills, far from settled places, thus as the outsider who does not fit within the structures, conventions and accepted values of society. He is associated with the

transient and with events that seem to occur by chance, and is considered unable to assume responsibility for happenings, danger and change, and well as fate. He is also the victim of past tensions that create unrest in the present. The card also signals a purpose and aim that will be revealed further along the way. Yoav Ben Dov, *Tarot: The Open Reading*, US: Createspace, 2013.

14. Meller Yamaguchi, p. 4, n 1, 3.

15. In medieval times plants such as the Mediterranean mandrake, thought to have powers due to its resemblance to the human body, and the coconut, believed to possess healing properties due to its rare exoticism (when imported to Europe from India), were related to magic and the production of amulets. Amulet making was practiced in medieval Islam and in Christian Europe, to where it arrived via books including the popular magic text *Liver de septem figuris septem planetis* (Book of Seven Figures of Seven Planets). This text, popular in both Arabic and Hebrew, describes the preparation of metal amulets in a ritual that includes purification with incense smoke or special plants and other materials. The plants were ascribed to a day and an hour according to the star associated with the purpose for which the amulet was being made. The amulet was worn on the body or around the neck or was placed in the foundations of the house or other places according to its intended purpose (victory in war, love, business, enemies, etc.). Page, pp. 41, 52.

16. Racheli Gilboa, *On Taste and Scent: Herbs and Medicinal Plants*, Israel Nature and Parks Authority, p. 9 [Hebrew].

17. Several types of sage are found in many places in the country and the Mediterranean. It has been used for centuries in traditional local herbal medicine, as well as in nutrition, culinary and ornamentation, for example as tea, food seasoning and for purification. It has symbolic and mystic significance. Different types of sage are mentioned in the Talmud. Due to its use in disinfection and healing, it is considered in mystics as possessing powers. Likewise, hyssop is considered a purifying plant and was also used in rites, for example in temples. On incense use in the Temple see Noga Hareuveni, *The State Sign: Its Roots in the Israel Land and Heritage*, Neot Kedumim, 1988 (1966), pp. 10-14 [Hebrew].

18. Emanuela Calò, "The Piranesi Effect," in

*Piranesi/Shiota: Prisons of the Imagination*, Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv Museum of Art, pp. 140-145.

19. "Samah Shihadi: Hungry for Home with text by Ranya Tabari Idliby," in [www.tabiriartspace.com](http://www.tabiriartspace.com) (20 November 2018).

20. See Noam Ben Yossef (ed.), *Bread: Daily and Divine*, Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 2006.

21. Carmen McIntosh, "Hungry for Home – Interview with the Artist and Writer," *Positive*, (7. November 2018).

22. Yahav; Oppenheim, p. 8.

23. These ritualistic objects – artifacts and items hidden in houses and yards and used to scare off witches, demons and spirits, and also to cast spells – are the single physical proof attesting to the existence of the magical beliefs, ceremonies and acts, which in most cases were not documented in writing, and provide evidence not found in written archives. These findings reveal that popular beliefs and practices concerning fear of magic and other evil spirits existed with little differences throughout the 18th-19th centuries and the 20th century. The study of these historical objects constitutes the field of archaeology of ritualistic magic. The objects contributed to the continued existence of anti-magic practices during and after the witch-hunt trials. They add information about witchcraft, the fear of it, and anti-magic, and bear witness to the frequency of these practices, the amount of effort invested in them, their popularity, and the intensity of the belief in them. Brian Hoggard, "The Archaeology of Counter-Witchcraft and Popular Magic," in Owen Davis and Willem de Blécourt (eds.), *Beyond the Witch Trials: Witchcraft and Magic in Enlightenment Europe*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2004, pp. 169-186; piercing natural things, such as an animal's heart or a lemon, was a common reaction to the fear that the spell is causing damage to the house. Page and Wallace, pp. 9-17; iron horseshoes were thought to have the power to protect the house from evil forces, and they remain a ubiquitous sign of good luck. At times it is difficult to identify these kinds of objects, as in the case of a toad studded with thorns, which served for spell casting or prevention, Gaskill, pp. 97-102.

24. Witches were women accused of practicing witchcraft with magic intended to cause evil. In the middle ages witches

and their rituals were considered aberrant and a threat to the natural and desired social order and ruling authorities, and a threat to existing lineage and established hierarchies (which remained in place at least until the 20th century); an order marked by God, the prophets, the church and patriarchalism, and well-established hierarchies from time immemorial. The practice of magic, through witches who were thought to be companions of the devil, was considered rebellion against the social order, church and state. It was a threat on property, feminine practices such as cooking and childbirth, and the image of the ideal woman and mother, who prepares nutritious food. This ideal was frequently inverted in depictions of witches' kitchens that featured in prints and in art and in the *Hammer of the Witches*, a 1486 text that was the summary of the demonology on which were founded Catholic and Protestant witch-hunts, and included ideas that summed up notions that came to fruition in medieval church literature, and led to what is known as the big witch-hunts of the 16th and 17th centuries. Shulamit Shahar, "The Witches," in *The Fourth Class: Woman in Medieval Society*, Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1990, pp. 237-247 [Hebrew].

25. See *Power Figure*, Nail power figure (Nikki nkondi) Muserongo people, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Dorit Shafir, "Accumulative Art in Africa," *Hidden Power in Africa*, pp. 90-96, 79-78, fig pp. 94, 26-29.

26. See Tania Coen-Uzzielli, "Christian Bread Stamps in the Holy Land," in Ben Yossef, pp. 165-187.

27. Tal Ben Zvi, "Ahlam Shibli: Location," in *Hagar – Contemporary Palestinian Art*, Jaffa: Hagar, 2006, pp. 59-70.

28. Ben Zvi, 2014, p. 147.

29. Ellen Ginton, "The Asim Abu-Shakra Passion," in *Asim Abu-Shakra*, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 1994, p. 8, 90-91.

30. Tali Tamir, "The Shadow of Foreignness: On the Paintings of Asim Abu-Shakra," *ibid.*, p. 87.

31. Farid Abu Shakra and Irith Hadar, *Walid Abu Shakra: Mintarat Al-Batten*, Umm el-Fahem Art Gallery and Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2011.

## Biographical Notes

Born 1987, Sha'ab (lower Galilee)  
Lives and works in Haifa

### Education

- 2013-2015 M.F.A The Art Department, Haifa University  
2008-2012 B.ED Art and Education, Oranim Academic College of Education

### Solo Exhibitions

- 2019 Samah Shihadi: Spellbound, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Tel Aviv  
The Way Home, Wilfrid Israel Museum, Kibbutz Hazorea  
2018 Hungry for Home, Tabari Artspace, Dubai  
2015 Drawing-Report, Mahanayim Art Gallery, Kibbutz Mahanayim  
Wanted, Umm el-Fahem Gallery, Umm el Fahem

### Group Exhibitions

- 2018 What is Pyramida Doing Here? Pyramida Center for Contemporary Art, Haifa  
CAB international Art Symposium, Jordan  
I to Eye, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem  
Khamsa, Khamsa, Khamsa, The Museum for Islamic Art, Jerusalem  
The Elephant in the Room, Hankin House, Kfar Yehoshua  
Motion Trap, Samah Shihadi and Michael Halak, Idris Gallery, Tel Aviv  
2017 A Sight of Disjunction, Manjmi Haifa Culture Lab, Haifa  
50 Hamsin, Time of Awakening? The Collaborative Art Center, Givat Haviva  
2016 Heads & Tails, Binyamin Gallery, Tel Aviv  
The Return of Paper/Reflection on Drawing, Traces VI, Jerusalem Artists' House, Jerusalem

The Recipients: Ministry of Culture and Sport Awards in Art and Design, Herzliya Museum, Herzliya  
Zoom 2016, Young Israeli Artists, Ticho House, Jerusalem

The Identity of the Palestinian Artist, Umm el-Fahem Art Gallery  
Fresh Paint 8/2018, Tel Aviv Port

- 2015 We Will See the Other Days, Gabirol Gallery, Tel Aviv  
Personal to the Bone, The House of Culture and Art, Nazareth  
Graduate Exhibition (M.F.A), Haifa University, Haifa

Palestinian Artists Exhibition, HerzLilienblum Museum, Tel Aviv

- 2014 Contact, Hecht Museum, Haifa

- 2012 Low Tech, Wadi Gallery, Haifa  
Graduate Exhibition (B. ED), Oranim Academic College of Education, Tivon

### Awards and Scholarships

- 2018 Haim Shiff Prize for Figurative-Realist Art  
2016 Ismail Shammout Fine Art Award, Bethlehem  
2015 Young Artist Award, Israel Ministry of Culture and Sport  
2015 Excellency Award, Haifa University  
2014 Promising Artist Award, Galilee Paint Art Fair  
2013 Pais Culture Council Support in Exhibition and Catalogue

### Collections

Dubi Shiff Collection, Tel Aviv  
The Lauren and Mitchell Presser Collection, USA  
Rivka Saker Collection, Tel Aviv  
Ann and Dr. Ari Rosenblatt Collection, USA  
Private collections in Israel and abroad

## List of Works

[pg. 79, 81, 83]

**Disappearance**, 2019

Charcoal on paper, 103×70 (each)

Courtesy of the artist, Haifa

[pg. 77]

**Untitled**, 2017

Pencil on paper, 70×100

Courtesy of a private collection

[pg. 75]

**Eve**, 2019

Charcoal on paper, 80×80

Courtesy of the artist, Haifa

[pg. 73]

**Untitled**, 2015

Pencil on paper, 151×205

Courtesy of the Dubi Shiff

Art Collection, Tel Aviv

[pg. 71]

**Lying Down II**, 2015

Pencil on paper, 151×207

Courtesy of a private collection

[pg. 68-69]

**Tug for War**, 2016

Pencil on paper, (each) 70×50

Courtesy of the Dubi Shiff

Art Collection, Tel Aviv

[pg. 67]

**Paper Cups**, 2014

12 paper cups, pencil on paper,

cardboard, pins

8×7.5×7.5 (each)

Courtesy of the artist, Haifa

[pg. 65]

**Self-Portrait**, 2014

Pencil on paper, 69×50

Courtesy of the Dubi Shiff

Art Collection, Tel Aviv

[pg. 63]

**Untitled**, 2014

Pencil on paper, 69×50

Courtesy of a private collection

[pg. 61]

**Two Women in One**

(**Self-Portrait with a Book**), 2017

Pencil on paper, 50×33

Courtesy of Meir Kotler, Tel Aviv

[pg. 58-59]

**Wanted**, From the series **Wanted**, 2014

Pencil on paper, 33.5×27.5 (each)

Courtesy of the artist, Haifa

[pg. 57]

**My Father**, 2012

Pencil on paper, 33.5×24

Courtesy of the artist, Haifa

[pg. 55]

**Landscape**, 2019

Charcoal on paper, 150×200

Courtesy of the artist, Haifa

[pg. 53]

**Landscape**, 2019

Charcoal on paper, 70×100

Courtesy of the artist, Haifa

[pg. 51]

**Picnic**, 2018

Charcoal on paper, 50×70.5

Courtesy of the Ann and

Dr. Ari Rosenblatt Collection, USA

[pg. 47, 48-49]

**Shade of the Past**, 2018

Charcoal on paper, 50×65

Courtesy of the artist, Haifa

[pg. 45]

**Our Home**, 2019

Charcoal on paper, 138×188.5

Courtesy of the artist, Haifa

[pg. 43]

**Mother and Daughter**, 2019

Charcoal on paper, 140.3×190

Courtesy of the artist, Haifa

[pg. 41]

**Untitled**, 2018

Charcoal on paper, 70×100

Courtesy of the Ann and

Dr. Ari Rosenblatt Collection, USA

[pg. 39]

**Between Life and Death**, 2019

Charcoal on paper, 200×150

Courtesy of the artist, Haifa

[pg. 37]

**Mother and Rooster**, 2019

Charcoal on paper, 50×70

Courtesy of the artist, Haifa

[pg. 35]

**Untitled**, 2018

Charcoal on paper, 49×64

Courtesy of the Ann and

Dr. Ari Rosenblatt Collection, USA

## Catalogue