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EL-ZOHRA WAS NOT BORN IN A DAY

Sculptures and Dioramas

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Al-Jahiliyyah is a historical period that precluded the revelation of monotheistic Islam. In its philosophical sense, it describes a state of ignorance and darkness. This period and its rich cultural polytheistic heritage has been actively censored and remains, up until today, overlooked, underreported, and widely ignored. Later on, orientalist interpretations contributed to further conceal polytheist heterogeneity in the foundation of Islam's storytelling. Recently, the "Islamic State" has undertaken the destruction of some of the few remains of that historical period, mainly archeological sites, temples and sculptures of Semitic gods.

EL-ZOHRA WAS NOT BORN IN A DAY delves into archeological Near-East artifacts, the stories of the old Muslim chroniclers, the Qur'an, classical Arabic literature and the vast realm of pre-Islamic poetry to unearth hidden mythological tales from Ancient Arabia. The works presented in this exhibition are sculptures and miniature multi-media dioramas, each recounting an ancient forgotten pre-Islamic myth.

These repressed myths reveal obscured, unrepresented, and yet still powerful aspects of Arab history and collective memory. Uncovering these myths offers a more in-depth and nuanced perspective on the Arab people, their culture and religions. It involves an alternative storytelling that challenges the master narrative produced by successive systems of domination, religious or secular; thus challenging the dominant discourses that shape political identities by making visible the current symbolic constructions of religious and political storylines.

Using the diorama – literally "Through that which is seen" -, Randa Mirza questions the forms of representing and exhibiting narratives affected by aniconism, an interest expressed in previous photographic installations. Her research is a continuity of the use of the diorama, be it theatrical or didactic; an apparatus invented in the nineteenth century in France. The photographer refers also to the wonder box - Sandouk al ferjeh – used by the itinerant storytellers in the Mediterranean in the twentieth century. By coupling pre-cinematic aesthetics and different forms of expression such as photography, video, performing arts and sculpture, this project questions the time of the gaze; its poetry, its economy and its critique.

Al-Jahiliyyah est la période préislamique précédant la révélation de l'islam monothéiste. Dans un sens philosophique, elle décrit un *état d'ignorance* et d'obscurité. La richesse de cette période, sa culture polythéiste ont été activement censurés et restent, encore aujourd'hui négligés, peu diffusés et largement ignorés. Au XIX^{ème} siècle l'Orientalisme comme prisme d'interprétation et de diffusion contribua à cacher encore et toujours la précieuse connaissance autour de cette culture polythéiste. Culture considérée comme le point de départ des narrations et textes fondateurs de la religion musulmane. Récemment, les membres de l'Etat Islamique se sont inlassablement engagés dans une destruction systématique du peu d'héritages culturels provenant de cette période historique, principalement des sites archéologiques, des temples et des sculptures de dieux sémitiques.

El-Zohra n'est pas né en un jour plonge dans les artefacts archéologiques du Proche-Orient, les écrits des anciens chroniqueurs musulmans, le Coran, la littérature arabe classique et le vaste domaine de la poésie préislamique pour déterrer les contes mythologiques cachés de l'Arabie ancienne. Les œuvres présentées dans cette exposition sont des sculptures représentant des déités arabes et des dioramas, chacun racontant un mythe préislamique ancien, oublié, effacé.

Ces mythes refoulés révèlent les aspects obscurs et non représentés, peu rapportés tenant pourtant une place centrale et puissante dans l'histoire de la culture arabe et de la mémoire collective de ses peuples. La découverte de ces mythes offre une perspective profonde et nuancée sur le peuple arabe, sa culture et ses religions. Elle implique une narration alternative remettant en question le récit prédominant produit par les systèmes successifs de domination, religieux ou laïques. Elle conteste de ce fait les discours dominants qui façonnent les identités et cultures en rendant visible les constructions symboliques, religieuses et politiques.

En utilisant la forme dioramique, comme principe directeur de l'exposition - le diorama signifiant littéralement « *voir à travers* » - Randa Mirza questionne les formes de représentation et de mise en exposition des récits touchés par l'aniconisme. Elle développe dans le même mouvement un intérêt déjà manifesté lors de précédentes installations photographiques pour les *dispositifs de vision*. Sa recherche s'inscrit dans la continuité de l'utilisation spectaculaire puis pédagogique du diorama inventé au XIX^{ème} siècle en France. La photographe renoue par ailleurs avec les boîtes aux merveilles - *Sandouk al Ferjeh* - objets privilégiés de conteurs ambulants dans le bassin méditerranéen au courant du XX^{ème} siècle. Par la mise en relation de l'esthétique pré-cinématographique, de différentes formes d'expression tels que la photographie, la vidéo, les arts de la scène et la sculpture ce projet artistique interroge le temps du regard ; sa poésie, son économie et sa critique.

The Year of the Elephant

2014

Diorama

105 x 70 x 75 cm

Edition of 2 + AP



The Year of the Elephant refers to the year approximately equating to 570 AD, which, in Islamic tradition, is widely believed to be the year of birth of Prophet Muhammad.

The name is derived from an event that is said to have occurred in Mecca. Abraha, the Christian ruler of Yemen, a viceroy of the Kingdom of Aksum of Ethiopia, built a great church in Sana'a known as al-Qullays. Abraha attempted to divert the pilgrimage of the Arabs from the Meccan shrine to his church. According to Ibn Ishaq, an early Islamic historian, one of the men of the Meccan Quraysh tribe, angered by Abraha's scheme, slipped into the church at night and defiled it. Furious, Abraha launched an expedition of 40,000 men led by a white elephant named Mahmud, and marched towards the Kaaba, the sacred house of Arabs, to destroy it.

When news of the nearing of Abraha's army spread, Arab tribes united in defense of the Kaaba. However, Abdul-Muttalib, the prophet's grandfather, told the Meccans not to fight and suggested they seek refuge in the hills, saying that "The Owner of this House is its Defender, and I am sure He will save it from the attack of the adversaries and will not dishonor the servants of His House."

True enough, the elephant in the forefront of the army is said to have stopped at the outskirts of Mecca, knelt and refused to attack. As Abraha readied to enter the city, a dark cloud of small birds appeared. They carried small stones in their beaks and claws, and attacked the Ethiopian forces, annihilating them.



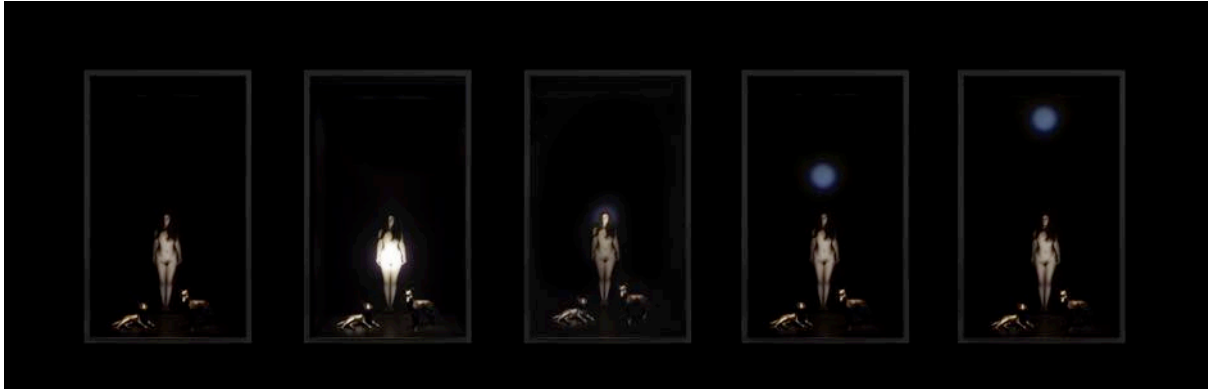
Venus and the angels Harut and Marut

2016

diorama

48 x 85.5 x 69 cm

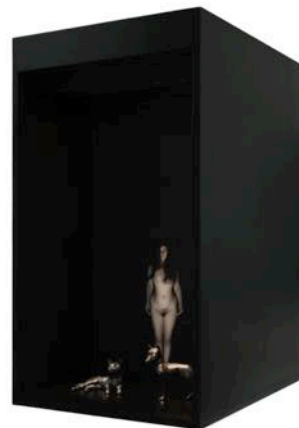
Edition of 2 + 1AP



When the angels complained to God about the disobedience of man, God told them that had they had human instincts, they would have acted in the same way, and hence would have sinned. To find out the truth, the angels elected from among them Harut and Marut to be given human instincts and sent to earth.

There, they meet Zohra and fall in love with her charm. Zohra agrees to give herself to them physically on the condition they teach her the secret words that allow her to ascend heaven. Zohra pronounces the magic words and is lifted towards the sky, however, when she wants to go back down to earth, she forgets the words and is transformed into the planet Venus. El-Zohra actually means Venus in Arabic.

The work inspired by this story emphasizes the verticality of the ascension of Zohra and her transformation into Venus. Harut and Marut are the two dogs at her feet – in Islamic tradition, dogs are fallen angels. The composition of the diorama is inspired by a bas-relief portraying Ishtar, an Assyrian and Babylonian goddess whose descendants are Aphrodite for the Greeks and Venus for the Romans.



The Gods of Noah

2016

Diorama

110 x 70 x 80 cm

Edition of 2 + 1 AP



According to “the Book of Idols” written by the Arab scholar Hisham Ibn Al-Kalabi, Wadd, Suwa’, Yaghuth, Ya’uk and Nasr are five ancient gods represented as a man, a woman, a lion, a horse and an eagle. They were found on a beach in Jeddah after Noah’s flood.

In another version of the myth, the statues were found in the Sham lands which, at the time, comprised Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine. According to Ibn Hisham’s biography of the prophet, Amr ibn Luhay ibn Qam’ah ibn Khindaf traveled from Mecca to al-Balqa’ area, inhabited then by the Amaleeq, descendants of Imlaq son of Lawdh son of Sam son of Noah. He saw the Amaleeq worshipping idols and asked them: “What are these idols which I see you worshipping?” They told him that they adored them because when they pleaded to them to let the rain fall, they responded, and when they sought victory over their foes, they obliged. Amr said to them, “Could you please give me those idols so I may take them to the land of the Arabs to worship them?” Amr ibn Luhay took the idols to Mecca and started the ritual of making offerings to the statues, along with instating other pagan rituals.

Wadd is a pre-Islamic god known across Arabia. His idol was housed in a temple in the oasis settlement of Dumat al-Jandal, in the Northwest of today’s Saudi Arabia. According to Malik ibn Harithah, Wadd’s idol was “the statue of a huge man, as big as the largest of human beings”. Wadd symbolized the moon, the water and fertility, and also represented muruwwa and hamasa – the Bedouin concepts for masculinity and bravery.

Suwa’, the goddess of the night, was considered by the Minaean Arabs to be the ruler of the night sky along with her companion Wadd. Suwa’ embodied the feminine qualities and virtues of the natural world.

Yaghuth is the south Arabian god of strength and war, and his idol was a statue of a lion situated on a hill in Yemen. Yaghuth was worshiped for assistance and protection in any venture. Before a battle, tribesmen would call upon him to bless the warriors with might and courage.

Nasr is a south Arabian god whose idol was a sculpture of an eagle erected in a temple in the Yemeni village of Balkha. Nasr was venerated for his insight and sharp character; the god also represented the hostile and unforgiving features of nature and in particular, the desert. Nasr was a major god of the Himyarite people, before the majority of them converted from paganism to Judaism and then to Islam.

Ya’uq is the south Arabian god of protection and preservation associated with swift thinking and intelligence. Ya’uq had a temple in the village of Khaywin near Sana’a and his idol took the form of a horse.

Issaf and Naïla

2015

Diorama

92 x 77 x 49 cm

Edition of 2 + 1 AP



Issaf and Naïla are two Meccan deities that were represented by two large stone idols situated atop two nearby sacred hills close to the Kaaba.

The story of the deities has been told and retold across the centuries, with many a historian documenting his own account of it. According to Ibn Ishāq, an 8th century Arab Muslim historian, Issaf and Naïla are a couple who arrange to meet in Mecca during the pre-Islamic pilgrimage. Finding refuge within the premises of the sanctuary, they copulate inside the Kaaba. Their sins transform them into stone statues. Upon the discovery of the petrified, still intertwined lovers, the residents of Mecca separate them and place the statue of Issaf on the hill of Safa and that of Naïla on the hill of Marwah.



The polytheists of pre-Islamic Mecca traveled back and forth seven times to the idols of the god and goddess as part of their fertility ritual. The statues were demolished when the prophet Muhammad destroyed the 360 idols of the Kaaba. However, Muslims still perform the same ritual, the Sa'yi, as part of the Hajj pilgrimage. According to Islamic sources, this ritual serves to commemorate the running of Hagar between the two hills in search of water for her infant Isma'îl, the first son of Abraham, before her providential discovery of the Zamzam well.



Al Hâma

2016

Diorama

54 x 100 x 50 cm

Edition of 2 + 1 AP



Al Hâma, bird of the night.

Al Hâma is a wandering owl. Its root word, al Hiym, indicates thirst. Its cognate, al Hiyâm, means an unquenchable camel.

“It has been said that al Hâma is a male owl living in the graves, and that Bedouins claim it comes out of the head of a wrongfully slain man who has not been avenged, saying “Quench me, quench me!” until revenge is achieved. Some have argued that this bird represents the spirit of the dead, without specifically stating death by murder, but what is common among scholars is what had been mentioned in the beginning.

Bedouins also claimed that the dead man’s grave illuminates once he is avenged, but remains dim if his blood was shed in vain or blood money accepted.

The myth of al Hâma symbolizes darkness, thirst and death, and represents a bridge between the world of the dead and that of the living. The bird demands revenge, and tells the dead what they have become after their demise.”

Al-Lāt

2015

Marble Sculpture

160 x 50 x 50 cm

Edition of 3 + 1 AP



Al-Lāt is the mother goddess whose seat of worship was a well-known shrine in the west Arabian town of at-Ta'if in the Hejaz region. All forms of life within her sanctuary were considered sacrosanct: No plant could be gathered, no tree could be felled, no animal could be killed and no human blood could be shed in accordance with the sacred law. According to "The Book of Idols" by the Arab scholar Hisham Ibn Al-Kalabi, the idol of al-Lāt was a white stone cube.

In the pantheon of the Hejaz, al-Lāt was one of the three main goddesses of Mecca, along with Manāt and al-'Uzzā. The three goddesses were considered the three daughters of the god Allāh. Al-Lāt had many epithets including Umm al-Alilah (Mother of the God) and Umm ash-Shams (Mother of the Sun).

Al-Lāt is associated with fertility, soil quality and favorable weather. She was called upon to show mercy and grant ease, prosperity and well-being to the worshiper. She was also beseeched for vengeance against aggressors, and protection during travels as well as against enemies. Animals that were considered sacred to al-Lāt included gazelles, lions and camels, among others that were region - and tribe - specific as the cult of the goddess spread all across the Arabian Peninsula, reaching as far as Palmyra in southern Syria.



The Golden deer of Mecca

2016

Copper and Gold

66 x 66 x 10 cm

Edition of 3 + 1 AP



Surah Al-Masad has long been associated with the stance of Abu Lahab and his wife from Islam as they led a fierce opposition, from within the Quraysh tribe, against the new religion. The Surah reveals a forgotten incident that shook the Arab world – that of Abu Lahab stealing the deer of the Kaaba.

Ibn Sa'd in "The Book of the Major Classes," Ibn Habib in "Almounamaq," Al Mas'oudi in "The Meadows of Gold" and Al-Tirmidhi in "The Appearance of Muhammad," are among the many Muslim writers who told the story of the theft of the Kaaba's deer.

Hisham ibn Muhammad reports to us, on behalf of his father, on behalf of Abu Saleh, on behalf of Ibn Abbas, about the story of two golden deer that belonged to the tribe of Jurhum. When the tribe departed from Mecca, they buried the deer, along with seven swords and five shields, in the Zamzam well. Abdul-Muttalib, the prophet's grandfather, found them while digging and hung them on the Kaaba's door. The next day, three men from Quraysh stole the deers.

The number of deer remains inconsistent among historians. Some accounts mention only one deer, looted by a gang of bandits from Quraysh, led by Abu Lahab.

The story of the golden deer's theft was linked to major myths from the Jahiliyyah period revolving around the religion of Abdul-Muttalib, the conflict over Mecca and the digging of the Zamzam well. These folk tales reveal patterns of hostilities among families in the tribal society that characterized Arab communities. These clashes were caused by differences in interests, beliefs, culture and history, with the Kaaba at the heart of the discord.

Randa Mirza Biography

Randa Mirza (born in Beirut 1978) is a visual artist. She works mainly with photography and video. Her practice is often related to identity with a focus on gender studies and postcolonial discourses.

“Mirza’s work urges us on to bewilderment, identifying the invisible place where fiction is concealed. Mirza observes and recreates fantastical visions that take us away from the fold of reality but which oblige us to reconsider our interpretative categories of the real horizon. ” Elettra Strambouli.

Her work has received numerous prizes, including les jeux de la francophonie(2005), le Prix la Photographie - Maison Blanche (2013) and the No Limit award at Les Rencontres Photographiques d’Arles (2006); an international prize for artists and photographers whose work takes the medium beyond currently acknowledged boundaries.

Mirza has shown her work in solo exhibitions at the Finnish Museum of Photography, Sfeir-Semler gallery (Hamburg) and Galerie Tanit (Beirut and Munich), with her latest solo show at Photomed festival in Beirut.

She exhibited within Moving Walls (NY), Phillippe de Pury (London), FIAC (Paris), Miami Basel, Armory Show (NY), Art Dubai, Paris-Photo, Fondazione Merz (Torino), Witte de with (Rotterdam), Raster gallery (Warsaw), Kashya Hildebrand gallery (London), Fotomuseum Winterthur (Zurich), Darat al-Funun (Amman), Aleppo international photography festival (Syria), Fotofestival Mannheim-Ludwigshafen- Heidelberg (Germany), Kunsthalle Wien (Vienna), ZKM museum (Germany) and at Beirut Art Center (Lebanon).

Her work received grants from AFAC (Arab Fund for Art and Culture) and Al-Mawrid Al-Thaqafi, as well as a scholarship from the Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores de Mexico. She was artist resident at NIFCA (Nordic Institute for Contemporary Arts), HIAP (Finland) and at fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa (Venice).

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