

The print, power and politics of Mandy El-Sayegh

Inside 'the mess' that has inspired a triple bill of solo exhibitions

“You can step on everything,” says artist Mandy El-Sayegh, gesturing around the loft of a former glassmaking factory in south London where walls and floors are covered with layer upon layer of canvas, fabric and paper. Red paint gathers in sinister pools. All around are screen-printed snippets of text. “Sex Attack” jumps out in red. “Sea Breeze” catches the eye in a colour El-Sayegh calls “institutional green”. “I can’t make the work if I don’t have a mess,” she says. “The studio is like a big brain really.”

When we meet, El-Sayegh is gearing up for her current show at [Thaddaeus Ropac](#)’s London space. “I like to bring the studio into the gallery,” she says of her immersive installations, which usually feature collaged walls and floors. “I also never know [what I’m going to do] until quite close to the show because I like to work intuitively.” It is a breakout year for the artist following her debut at Chisenhale gallery in 2019. This will be her third solo exhibition of 2023, following one at Lehmann Maupin in New York in April and another in Zürich with the [Tichy Ocean Foundation](#), which continues into November. Later this month, she will open a second show in London, in collaboration with Algerian-French artist [Kader Attia](#).



The artist working with red paint © Alex Lockett



Prodrome Anatomy, 2022, by Mandy El-Sayegh © Alex Lockett

Today, she is dressed all in black – a vest top, paint-splattered jogging bottoms and fluffy black slippers, her mermaid-long hair coiled away from her face. Her studio – the nexus of a practice that spans painting, installation and performance – sits between her bedroom and a library, “a chaotic archive” crammed floor-to-ceiling with inspiration, ranging from pages of anatomy books to copies of the *Financial Times*, which she loves for its “fleshy tone”.

“I don’t throw anything away,” she explains. “It’s more like hoarding than collecting.” Materials, or “fragments”, are brought together in a process she says is “like surgery” – creating dense assemblages that are collaged, screen-printed and painted over with either figurative elements or abstract forms.



Mandy El-Sayegh in her studio in south London © Alex Lockett

The 38-year-old was born in Selangor, Malaysia. “My mum is Malaysian Chinese and my dad is Palestinian, but they moved here when I was sixish, so I’m pretty much a Londoner,” she says. Her mother was a midwife, her father a calligrapher – his penmanship is often brought into her work – who went on to work fixing computers.

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Mandy El-Sayegh

After graduating from the Royal College of Art in 2011 with an MA in painting, El-Sayegh worked as a carer for young adults with non-verbal autism for five years. “But because of the government cuts it became a really sad state of affairs – especially for the service users,” she says. “But [that job] also wasn’t good for me. And that was when I realised that I could only do this.” Her works intertwine the subtle and the visceral, the personal and the political, playing with a duality of meaning. “You can

read [my] work forensically, piecing together my story, or equally you can look at it as abstract painting,” says El-Sayegh. “I think that me just being here – and the fact that my dad is from Palestine – is political.





El-Sayegh working on a canvas in her studio



© Alex Lockett (4)

“No matter how transparent I am, there is still going to be an enigmatic element to the work,” she adds. Nonetheless, she is happy to share the thought processes behind her recurring motifs. The grid frequently handpainted over her canvases is, for instance, “a way of holding everything together so it doesn’t overflow. It’s also such a robust motif.” The repeated “Sea Breeze” text, meanwhile, is one of a series of military operation codenames – a specific reference to a raid by Israel on six civilian ships of the “Gaza Freedom Flotilla” in 2010.

For Julia Peyton-Jones, curator and senior global director of Thaddaeus Ropac, the “build-up of all the references – her personal history, the history of art, and the world around us – is utterly fascinating.” She highlights the way in which El-Sayegh’s painterly palette often resembles bruised flesh – she “deals with the bruising elements of the human experience”.



El-Sayegh's Thaddaeus Ropac London show is her third solo exhibition in 2023 © Alex Lockett

Back in her studio, El-Sayegh picks up a medical journal from the floor.

“This is an image I was looking at yesterday; it’s an eye injury. But the colours are so beautiful. It’s weirdly pacifying. It’s less anxiety-inducing than an abstract threat.” Among her shelves there are also jars of animal parts that she and a former partner – the composer and artist Lily Oakes, with whom she continues to collaborate – used to preserve in formaldehyde. “It focuses your energy because you have to be very precise. But I don’t do that any more.”

In 2020, she suffered a breakdown. “I couldn’t stop pacing. So there was no capacity to sit and paint. My work is all about breakdowns of systems and rebuilding of form, and I guess that happened to me in my body and psyche.”

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From this experience, however, came a new practice: performance. *Your words will be used against you* was performed as part of the [Frieze 2020 Live](#) programme. Based around the concept of a mirror, it featured El-Sayegh alongside a series of dancers – including her ongoing collaborator Alethia Antonia – and a soundtrack composed by Oakes. “It’s an exorcism,” she says, simply.

Her current show at the [Tichy Ocean Foundation](#) is titled *In Session*: it’s an installation inspired by Sigmund Freud’s consulting room, with vitrines and shelves of objects and an antique examination couch alongside paintings. A sound work, meanwhile, includes a recording of one of El-Sayegh’s own psychoanalysis sessions. At Thaddaeus Ropac’s gallery, Freud’s study is the starting point for a “rich red room”, she says. “It will look like my studio, super-layered, with paintings on top and rugs on the floor... I want to create an oppressive psychological feeling – the idea of being inside my head.”



"I can't make the work if I don't have a mess," says El-Sayegh © Alex Lockett



Source materials in her studio, including Hell money and Penthouse magazine © Alex Lockett

Lately, she's been thinking a lot about money; about how "painting is like printing money" (one of her Net-Grid paintings sold for £75,600 at Phillips last year), which manifests in her canvases as collaged play money and screen-printed bank notes.

Of her growing success, she says: "It makes me quite paranoid. I thought about changing my name to Mandy Wong – my mum's name." But "it feels very meaningful to achieve some level of visibility from what my parents struggled through to get us [three kids] here... From abject poverty on my mother's side, I'm like bourgeoisie now," she laughs. "I have [my own] place. I go to a shrink. I went to art school."

When I ask what she does outside of making art, El-Sayegh exclaims: "Oh my God, now I'm going to have to go to my shrink! The last time I stopped making art, it wasn't good. I don't do anything else really. It's a blessing and a curse. You're so glad that this is your life, but it doesn't turn off, does it? Because the work is you."

Interiors is at [Thaddaeus Ropac](#), London, from 1 to 30 September, with El-Sayegh's performance *Akathisia* on 12 September, [ropac.net](#). A two-person show with Kader Attia is at [Lehmann Maupin](#), London, from 21 September to 4 November

