



## Palestinian artist Dima Srouji's Dubai show contemplates violence and hope

Staged at Lawrie Shabibi Gallery, the artist's first solo exhibition presents a range of multi-media artworks.

by Rebecca Anne Proctor | Published on : Jul 13, 2024



A multitude of blood red anamorphous shaped pieces of glass are scattered on the floor of Lawrie Shabibi Gallery in Dubai's Alserkal Avenue. From a distance, they appear to be haphazardly placed, yet upon closer inspection, one can see that they are suspended from the ceiling and are shaped in a formation that ever so slightly bends and turns – like a body of water. Aptly titled *The Red River*(2023), the hand-blown glass shapes by Palestinian artist Dima Srouji are part of her first solo exhibition, *Charts for a Resurrection*, on view till July 20.

"I have been contemplating greatly on ideas of death and rebirth," explains Srouji. "I wanted to find ways through art to reimagine a future Palestine – to return to life amid so much death and destruction."

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– Dima Srouji



Installation view of *Dima Srouji: Charts for a Resurrection* at Lawrie Shabibi Gallery in Dubai, 2024

Image: Ismail Noor of *Seeing Things*; Courtesy of Dima Srouji and Lawrie Shabibi

The show is divided into two areas: the terrain or land-focused area defined by artworks in the larger space of the art gallery and the chapel, a sanctuary of sorts in a smaller darkened room. The numerous red pieces of glass, located in terrain, refer to the Belus River, known to ancient writers like Pliny as the Belos River of Phoenicia – one that some historical narratives claim is the source of the sand for the first glass objects. The river, located south of Akka in the occupied territories of 1948, now part of the Northern District of Israel, metaphorically evokes the history, heritage and memory of Palestine, especially during a moment of intense upheaval. It also symbolises Srouji's personal memories, such as her displaced grandmother. The red hue of the installation reflects the water pollution caused by the nearby military factory of Rafael Advanced Defense Systems.

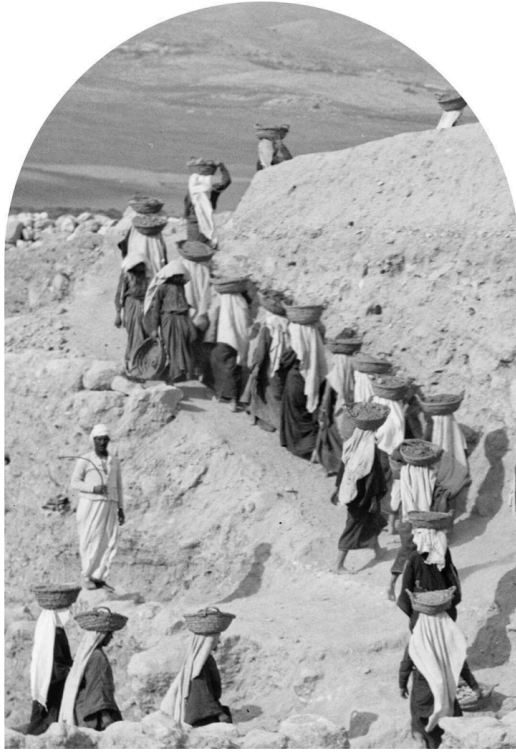


*The Red River*. installation of hand-

Viewed from one side of the gallery, *The Red River* frames seven stone-carved windows with coloured glass inlay titled *Late Monuments* (2024). They too resonate with the memory and heritage of Palestine, imagining what could be future archaeological monuments set within the Palestinian landscape and made using the traditional technique of Qamariya windows that can often be found in mosques in Egypt, Palestine and Yemen. "The idea behind The Red River project was to create a floating body of water where women historically used to go to cleanse themselves and heal their ailments," said Srouji. "Now the river is red due to the toxicity of the nearby weapons factory so there is a correlation between The Red River as an element offering healing and one that is now toxic for the body."



*The Red River* installation echoes another group of works on show: *Maternal Labour* (2024). The series of 18 black and white aluminium prints, arched in shape, are archival images commemorating Palestinian women, often dubbed "basket girls" by American archaeologists who hired them during the early 20th century to excavate their own land in order to discover valuable artefacts that were then removed. "The prints connect directly with the idea of women excavating the land to find ancient healing vessels and perfume vessels, while at the same time, there is this duality of forced labour...In many of the pieces there is this duality between horror and playfulness and healing and toxicity," explains Srouji.



*Maternal Labour 2*, print on raw aluminium, 2024, Dima Srouji  
 Image: Courtesy of Dima Srouji and Lawrie Shabibi

Also relayed – particularly through the strong emphasis on archaeology – is the relationship between the body and the land – a land that has become debated and no longer considered one's own. Next to *Maternal Labour* is a nine square grid installation made from steel, hand-blown glass and soil mounted on the wall. Glass vessels in soil on each grid appear to be in the midst of being excavated, with the vessels themselves haunting replicas of the originals that were excavated decades ago by western archaeologists from ancient tombs. They were unearthed by the Palestinian “basket girls” seen in *Maternal Labour*, with the glass vessels themselves constituting cosmetic items and elegant perfume bottles – pieces that the deceased planned to take with them in the afterlife.

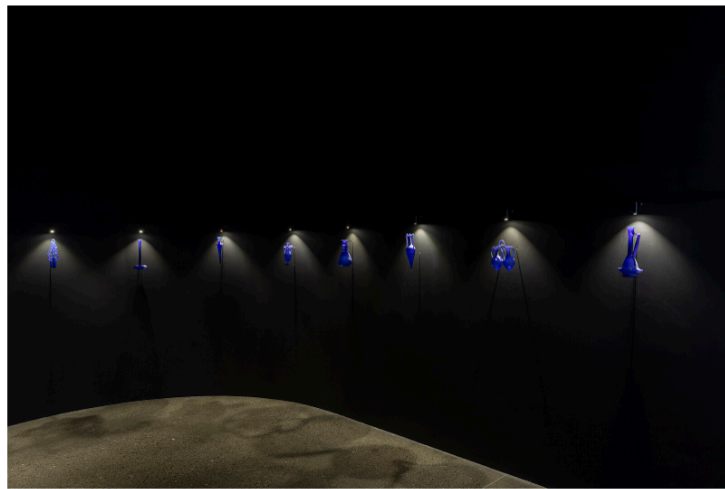


*Late Monuments*, seven stones with coloured glass, 2024, Dima Srouji  
 Image: Ismail Noor of Seeing Things; Courtesy of Dima Srouji and Lawrie Shabibi



This exhibition, with its mixed media artworks carefully curated to evoke dialogue among the works, is Srouji's way of making sense of the myriad tragedies that have beset her homeland while striving to offer hope for a psychological and metaphorical way to transcend the horror. "[The works reflect] this idea of excavating the body, excavating the self and the maternal history or the intergenerational history as well as excavating the land," says Srouji. "In terms of the overall feeling of the show, there is definitely some kind of element of the sublime."

The mystical and otherworldly quality of the sublime can be found also in the darkened and more intimate gallery space called the chapel. Here, a mixture of installations and archival prints merge imaginary future archaeological sites with historical artefacts.



Installation view of *Grave Goods*, hand-blown glass, 2024, Dima Srouji  
*Image: Ismail Noor of Seeing Things; Courtesy of Dima Srouji and Lawrie Shabibi*

Ironically, it is within the dark chapel that the most optimism and resourcefulness can be found. On entering it, the visitor immediately confronts floating replicas of archaeological vessels – historically used as gifts for the dead to take with them into the afterlife. The vessels, titled *Grave Goods*(2024) are made from blue hand-blown glass, echoing their ancient originals. Displayed elegantly aligning the wall with a soft spotlight amid the darkness, the vessels within the intimate setting offer a space for mourning, contemplation, meditation and resilience.

It is here that ideas of death and rebirth come into existence offering imaginary ideas of future liberation. In the chapel, says Srouji, one can potentially feel both physically and mentally safe. "In this space, where spirituality can reign, liberation becomes possible," says Srouji. "It's like a prayer for resurrection."

It is also like a manifestation. It is as if through Srouji's art and visual imagery freedom has the possibility to finally become a reality, first in the mind and then in reality. Her works in this show are a testament to a metaphorical way forward – ways to find optimism, resilience and faith amid constant destruction, violence and erasure.