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Sama Alshaibi: Land is Body is Home

Claire C. Carter, Curator of Contemporary Art

In March 2016, after seven years of working in the Middle East and North Africa, artist Sama Alshaibi concluded her series of large-scale color photographs and videos “Silsila.” During this last trip, Alshaibi trekked through the sand dunes of the Erg Chebbi desert in Morocco. As she recorded her surroundings, she spoke to the Amazigh (Berber) guides about an inspiration for her artwork: the intrepid Islamic scholar and explorer Ibn Batūtah, who ranged across the vast Islamic territories of the fourteenth century. At the end of her explanation, her guides laughed and pointed to the man leading her camel, exclaiming, “We call *him* Batūtah.” This is how, in Morocco, on the final leg of her journey, the artist found herself being led home by Ibn Batūtah. Alshaibi would call such an occurrence *maktoub*—an Arabic word that translates as “it has been written,” or ordained by Allah.¹

“Silsila” is the embodiment of Sama Alshaibi’s personal search for meaning and connection. Since 2009, the artist has explored and documented predominantly Muslim countries in the Middle East, North Africa and the Maldivian islands in Southeast Asia. She embraces each exchange of language, culture and art as an opportunity to learn about the world, herself and the divine. As Alshaibi explained, this series “explores a vein of understanding and sharing, rather than exploiting, difference.”²

Alshaibi conceptualizes the world and her art practice in relation to Allah and her faith, Islam. She was born in Iraq to a Palestinian mother and Iraqi father. She spent much of her young life as a refugee without access to her family’s ancestral homelands. Early in the 1980 – 88 Iran–Iraq War, her family fled the violence, moving between Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. In 1985, the family moved to the United States. They were granted political asylum during the 1990 – 91 Gulf War. In 2000, Alshaibi became an American citizen. She honors her complex identity by specifying her nationality, ethnicity and place of birth.

Alshaibi studied photography and fine arts at Columbia College, Chicago, and the University of Colorado Boulder. Starting with her earliest projects, the artist used photography and video to record performances she would enact in front of the camera. She uses her own person to register her observations of gender, race, religion and violence: “Your body can be your own home...a way of connecting in an alienating land as an immigrant and a war refugee.”³ She describes her female, Arab, Iraqi-Palestinian body as “coded”—burdened with biased, often inaccurate, assumptions about her identity. But Alshaibi also finds strength in the act of photographing herself rather than being spoken for or about, stating that her “own life journey has meant crisscrossing the globe and negotiating ‘otherness’ within each community” that she encounters.⁴

This series of photographs and videos is named for *salāsila*, or the concept of the connections between humankind and the land, the self to the divine and individuals with one another. The Arabic word *silsila* (*salāsila* is the plural form), or “link,” can operate as a simple noun describing a point of connection, like a link in a chain. It can also be a verb, describing the act of joining discrete units, such as linking two things together. *Silsila* is also a concept fundamental to Sufism, a mystical Islamic tradition. In her work, Alshaibi explores the aspects of Sufi religious doctrine that emphasize purification of the self, mind and ego through meditation, prayer and asceticism. In Sufism, *silsila* describes the sacred passage of knowledge from teacher to student. This spiritual exchange extends back to the Islamic prophet Muhammad. For Alshaibi, *silsila* symbolizes the joining of individuals to one another, humans with the natural world and the self to the divine. Phrases evocative of Islam and Sufism title her artworks: *Muraqaba* (Meditation), *Al-Tariqah* (The Path), *Baraka* (Transmission of Grace).

While making “Silsila,” Alshaibi loosely followed Ibn Batūtah’s ancient paths through present-day Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Oman and The Maldives. Batūtah—born in 1303 or 1304 in Tangier, Morocco, to an Amazigh family—traveled for thirty years by foot, camel, horse and boat through North Africa, the Horn of Africa, West Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, South Asia, Central Asia, Southeast Asia and China. When he returned home in 1354, Moroccan ruler Abu Inan Faris engaged a scholar to record Batūtah’s accounts of the diverse peoples, landscapes, cultures, social mores and dialects he had experienced. The manuscript’s full title is *Tuḥfat an-Nuẓẓār fī Gharā’ib al-Amṣār wa ‘Ajā’ib al-Asfār* (A Gift to Those Who Contemplate the Wonders of Cities and the Marvels of Traveling), but it is often shortened to *Rihlat Ibn Batūtah* (Journey of Ibn Batūtah). It is considered one of the most important accounts of the fourteenth-century Islamic world. Sama Alshaibi’s peaceful interpretation of her Muslim faith is a meaningful facet of her artistic practice. The attention she pays to Ibn Batūtah derives, in part, from her interest in this prosperous and tolerant period in the history of the Middle East and North Africa.

The monotheistic religion Islam emerged in the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century. Promulgated by conquering Arab armies, by the 1200s it was practiced alongside other religions in India, the Middle East, North Africa, Sicily, Spain and Southeast Asia. In the Arabian Peninsula and the Maghreb area of North Africa, Islam flourished among heterogeneous populations: Arabs, Amazigh and Afro-Arab minority groups such as the Gwama and Haratin. Because practicing Muslims must read the Qur’an, Islam’s sacred scripture, Arabic arose as a common language. Streamlined communication in Arabic encouraged the exchange of ideas, stimulated trade and fueled advances in astronomy, architecture, art, farming, literature, mathematics and poetry. Reflecting on this thriving epoch empowers Alshaibi to imagine nonviolent, sustainable futures for these territories.

A defining creed of Islam is *tawḥid*, or belief, in “the unity and uniqueness of God as creator and sustainer of the universe.” *Tawḥid* doctrine evolved to link both public and private morality and behavior to religion, and by extension, to government. In Islam’s earliest incarnations, religion and state were unified. From the eighth to the thirteenth century, Islamic lands were often ruled

by a monarchical caliphate—a nation-state governed according to Islamic law by a religious successor to the prophet Muhammad. Such territories were termed *dār al-Islām*, an Arabic phrase that roughly translates to “abode of Islam” or “house of Islam”; it also may mean “home of peace.” Within *dār al-Islām*, both Muslims and the three Abrahamic faiths that predate Islam, namely Judaism, Christianity and Sabianism (a syncretic religion that draws on Greek, Egyptian and pantheistic traditions), can practice their faiths freely. Ideally, *dār al-Islām* is a region, real or imagined, where people can live in peace in relation to Allah and to one another. Alshaibi’s large-scale photograph of the same name depicts an outline of the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa etched into wet sand (Plate 1). The geographic boundary is mirrored horizontally and vertically within the image. Candles pressed into the sand create a circular medallion of light at the heart of the glossy chromogenic print.

Deserts, gorges, mountains, rivers, salt lakes and seas reveal the fragile, resplendent beauty and diverse ecosystems of the Middle East and North Africa. Alshaibi presents the human figure within the sublime terrain, and under the vast skies, of the Sahara and Arabian deserts (Plates 10 and 18). In *Fatnis al-Jazirah* (Fantasy Island) (Plate 19), the outline of a woman immersed in water merges with her mirrored reflection. Alshaibi explained how she constructs an image such as *Mā Lam Tabkī* (Unless Weeping) (Plate 7): “[you must] take the world as it is and imagine it as a set, and experiment with it, manipulate it, put your body into it, and then change what it means by your performance with it.”⁵ Ritualistic gesture is often depicted in “Silsila.” In *Tasma’* (Listen) (Plate 2), a shrouded figure kneels in *salat*, or prayer, amidst a precise arrangement of black rocks. In *Silsila* (Link) (Plate 5), a woman’s left hand peacefully gestures skyward. Alshaibi dresses her protagonists in garb indigenous to local customs and in the red, black, green and white emblematic of Pan-Arab unity. Feathers serve as a symbol of migration and transience, as well as death and new life (Plates 12 and 14). In addition, Alshaibi incorporates aesthetic tropes that allude to the formal traditions of Islamic art: jewellike colors, geometry and symmetry (Plates 3, 7 and 13). Like traditional Islamic artisans, she uses repetition and patterning as references to the infinite and universal Allah.

The fragile boundary between water and land in the desert ecosystems adjacent to the Mediterranean Sea, Red Sea and Persian Gulf is a theme in “Silsila” (Plates 4 and 17). Alshaibi subtly depicts human-wrought damage to the landscape. In *Al-Sahra al-Bayda’* (The White Desert) (Plate 8), oil and tire tracks scar the ancient landscape. The effects of climate change are evident in images of receding oases and rapidly dying palm trees (Plates 15 and 16). Increasing atmospheric temperatures and rising sea levels are impacting the natural world; indeed, the disappearing Maldivian islands are harbingers of a future altered by global warming. Alshaibi’s concern for environmental deterioration is also tied to the realities of climate change – induced migration. As global warming increases the frequency and intensity of natural disasters and famine, indigenous populations will be displaced and territorial disputes will continue to escalate.

For “Silsila,” Alshaibi intentionally eschewed images of suffering, war and conflict in favor of subjects that connect and unite us. “War will always be an important, foundational concern of mine,” the artist explained. “But as I grow older, I also want to speak about possible solutions

to the root cause of war, which is basically the competition and control over resources, land and bodies.”⁶ Alshaibi is much more interested in the physical topography that unites these lands than in the dictates of contemporary political demarcations or borders. In her artwork, she introduces her figure as the literal embodiment of interwoven languages, cultures and histories of the Middle East and North Africa. As Alshaibi eloquently stated, “My body, then, became a tool to describe the idea of people, homeland, nation.... That adaptability helped me realize the potential my body has to be anything, to survive everything, to represent anyone.”⁷

Notes

- 1 Allah is the Arabic name for the God of the Abrahamic religions.
- 2 Sama Alshaibi, interview, in Isabella Ellaheh Hughes, ed., *Sama Alshaibi: Sand Rushes In* (New York: Aperture Books, 2015), 107.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 105.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 107.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 104.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 106.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 105.





Plate 2

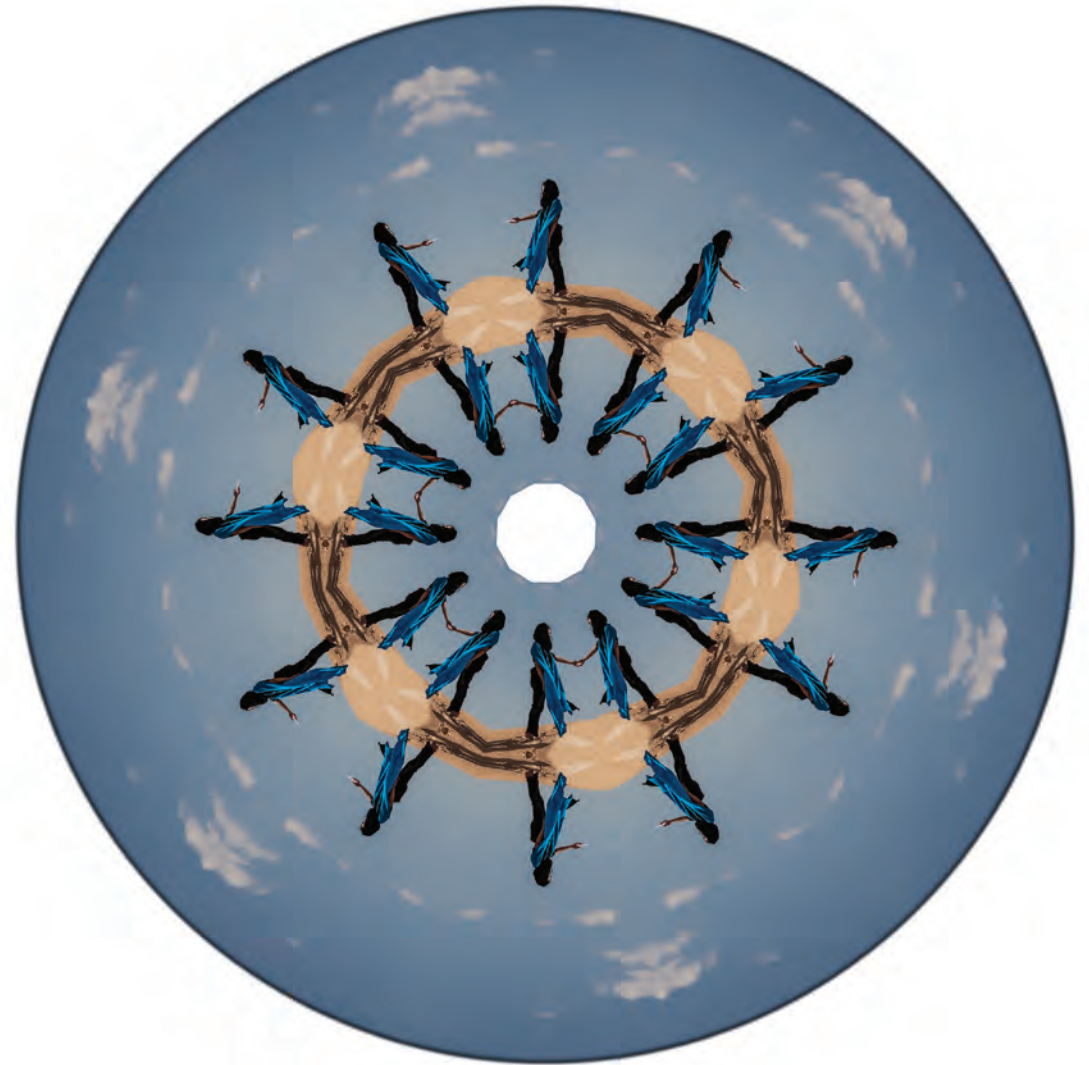


Plate 3



Plate 4



Plate 5



Plate 6



Plate 7



Plate 8



Plate 9





Plate 11



Plate 12



Plate 13



Plate 14



Plate 15



Plate 16



Plate 17



Plate 18





Plate 20



Biographies

Born in Basra, Iraq to an Iraqi father and a Palestinian mother, **Sama Alshaibi** (b. 1973) is based in the United States where she is Chair and Associate Professor of Photography and Video Art at the University of Arizona, Tucson. Alshaibi also holds a BA in Photography from Columbia College, Chicago and an MFA in Photography, Video and Media Arts from the University of Colorado Boulder. Her works in public and private collections including the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Nadour Collection, Monheim am Rhein, Germany; Barjeel Collection, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates; Rami Farook Collection, Dubai; and the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Tunisia. Alshaibi was awarded the Fulbright Scholar Fellowship as part of a residency at the Palestine Museum in Ramallah, Palestine. Most recently, Alshaibi has been featured in solo and group exhibitions at Ayyam Gallery, Dubai and London (2015); the Honolulu Biennial, Hawaii (2014); the Maldives Pavilion of the Venice Biennale (2013); Venice Art Gallery, Los Angeles (2013); Madrid Palestine Film Festival (2013); The Museum of Modern Art, New York (2012); HilgerBROTKunsthalle, Vienna (2012); Institut Du Monde Arabe, Paris (2012); and Maraya Art Centre, Sharjah (2012). *Sand Rushes In*, Alshaibi's first monograph, was published by Aperture Foundation, New York in 2015. Her work will be included in the 2016 Tashkent International Biennale of Contemporary Art in Uzbekistan.

Claire C. Carter is Curator of Contemporary Art at SMOCA.



Exhibition Checklist

Sama Alshaibi (American, b. 1973, Basra, Iraq)
Lives and works in Tucson, Arizona and Ramallah, Palestine

All works from the series “Silsila,” 2009 – 16
Courtesy of the artist and Ayyam Gallery, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Video projections, dimensions variable.

Music composed by Grey Filastine; performed by Brent Arnold, cello and Abdel Hak, violin.

Al-Tarīqah (The Path), 2014

Single-channel digital video projection with audio;
run time: 5 minutes, 8 seconds

Baraka (Transmission of Grace), 2013

Single-channel digital video projection with audio;
run time: 5 minutes, 30 seconds

Dhikr (Remembrance), 2013

Single-channel digital video projection with audio;
run time: 5 minutes, 54 seconds

Ilhām (Intuition), 2010

Single-channel digital video projection with audio;
run time: 1 minutes, 13 seconds
Front cover image

Muraqaba (Meditation), 2013

Single-channel digital video projection with audio;
run time: 5 minutes, 1 second

Noor (Illumination), 2013

Wood, sand and single-channel digital video with audio;
run time: 6 minutes, 16 seconds

Chromogenic prints mounted on Diasec

Dār al-Islām (Abode of Islam), 2014

4 feet 9 ⁷/₈ inches × 8 feet 2 ³/₈ inches
Unique print
Plate 1

Tasma¹ (Listen), 2014

47 ¹/₄ inches diameter
Edition 1 of 3
Plate 2

Ma Ijtama' t Ayydinā 'alā Qabdhī illā wa-Kānat

Mu'attalah (What Our Hands Joined Was Broken), 2014
47 ¹/₄ inches diameter
Edition 1 of 3
Plate 3

Mā Lam Tabkī (Unless Weeping), 2014

5 feet 5 ³/₈ inches × 8 feet 2 ³/₈ inches
Unique print
Plate 7

Al-Rub' al-Khālī (Empty Quarter), 2014

47 ¹/₄ inches diameter
Edition 1 of 3
Plate 13

Yamkuth (Remains), 2014

47 ¹/₄ inches diameter
Edition 1 of 3
Plate 14

Sabkhat al-Milḥ (Salt Flats), 2014

47 ¹/₄ inches diameter
Edition 1 of 3
Plate 17

Al-Jawāhīr (The Jewels), 2014

47 ¹/₄ inches diameter
Edition 1 of 3
Plate 18

Inkjet pigment prints

Wāhat Siwā (The Siwa Oasis), 2013

27 ¹/₂ × 39 ³/₈ inches
Edition 1 of 5
Plate 4

Silsila (Link), 2013

27 ¹/₂ × 39 ³/₈ inches
Edition 2 of 5
Plate 5

Jarasun Yaqrā' li-l-Mawt (Death Knell), 2010

27 ¹/₂ × 39 ³/₈ inches
Edition 4 of 5
Plate 6

Al-Sahrā' al-Bayḍā' (The White Desert), 2011

27 ¹/₂ × 39 ³/₈ inches
Edition 1 of 5
Plate 8

Sihr Halāl (Permissible Magic), 2014

27 ¹/₂ × 37 ⁵/₈ inches
Edition 1 of 5
Plate 9

Al-Tarīqah (The Path), 2014

27 ¹/₂ × 39 ³/₈ inches
Edition 2 of 5
Plate 10

Mā Bayn al-Maḥallayn Khidā'

(The Lie Between), 2016
39 ³/₈ × 27 ¹/₂ inches
Edition 1 of 5
Plate 11

Idhā Intahā Thumma Yabtadi'

(If Over and Then Begins), 2016
39 ³/₈ × 27 ¹/₂ inches
Edition 1 of 5
Plate 12

Iṣrār (Persistence), 2010

39 ³/₈ × 27 ¹/₂ inches
Edition 2 of 5
Plate 15

Rās Abū Galūm, 2011

39 ³/₈ × 27 ¹/₂ inches
Edition 2 of 5
Plate 16

Fātnis al-Jazīrah (Fantasy Island), 2014

27 ¹/₂ × 39 ³/₈ inches
Edition 5 of 5
Plate 19

Collaborative Works

Sama Alshaibi and Michael Fadel
(American, b. 1984, Bhanness, Lebanon)

Swell, 2014, from “Model of Motions,” 2014

Anchor, sand, wood and mechanical elements
Boat: 57 × 14 × 45 inches; installation dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artists
Plate 20

Footsteps, 2014, from “Model of Motions,” 2014

Single-channel color video, run time: 5 minutes,
16 seconds
Courtesy of the artists

southwestNET

Sama Alshaibi: Silsila is the sixteenth exhibition in the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art's ongoing series “southwestNET,” which presents mid-career artists in the southwest region of the United States and Mexico.

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Sama Alshaibi, artist
Claire C. Carter, curator and essayist
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