



# HYPERALLERGIC

GALLERIES

## From Ancient Forms, an Artist Shapes a New Lexicon

Bansie Vasvani | June 1, 2016



Simone Fattal, “House” (2012), clay, 33 x 57 x 35 cm (image courtesy Hubert Fattal Collection)

SHARJAH, United Arab Emirates — [Simone Fattal](#)’s ancient-looking artifacts beckon from afar. In [her solo show](#) at the Sharjah Art Foundation’s exhibition spaces, many knobby, roughly hewn shapes of animals and houses, alongside her rarely seen lava stone, text-based

paintings fill the space. For the sprightly 74-year-old Damascus-born, Paris-based artist, notions of identity and nationalism developed out of her immersion in the history, archeology, poetry, and religious texts of Lebanese and Middle Eastern culture.

The show, curated by the Sharjah Art Foundation's director Sheikha Hoor Al-Qasimi, features some of Fattal's abstract, pink paintings from the late 1970s, which she made while living in Beirut during the Lebanese Civil War of 1975–90. "Afternoon" (1978) and "Mount Sannine" (1978) capture the snow-capped Sannine Mountain peaks in Lebanon, suffused with color at sunset. Fattal's paintings, which, like her sculpture reference the landscape of her country, were first shown in Paris in the 1970s at an exhibition organized by fellow painter and friend [Etel Adnan](#). In the 1980s, Fattal would move to California, found the [Post-Apollo Press](#), and embark on a career of clay sculptures.



'Simone Fattal' at the Sharjah Art Foundation, installation view

Her playing with coarse, organic forms gradually materialized into Fattal's impressive signature leggy shapes, inspired by fables of [Dionysus](#) and legends of king Gilgamesh from Arab mythology. Here, two large bronze sculptures, "Abdel Wahab" (2006) and "Zhat El Himma" (2006), from the epic of the Sira, are placed in the courtyard adjoining the exhibition space; the

warriors reflect Fattal's reverence for archaeology and lore, and their sturdy arch-like formations become symbols of fortitude and resilience in the long history of struggle in the Middle East.

Reminiscent of relics from Mesopotamia, a series of works titled *Stele*, translated from Arabic as a tall, slender stone monument with inscription on its surface, appear like plaques recording the memories of lost land, people, and the past. In her work, Fattal uses basic, rudimentary forms to communicate her meaning. For example, a simple, three-pillared structure with a flat, oblong roof and inscriptions on its sides, and another box-like sculpture with steps running along the center speak to the fundamental need for shelter, and the primeval instinct to call a place home. Similarly, "House," (2012) recalls flat-roofed houses with ladders propped on their sides in villages in Lebanon and on which bread is baked and tomatoes are dried and ground, evoking the rituals of the home.



'Simone Fattal' at the Sharjah Art Foundation, installation view (all photos by Alfredo Rubio, all images courtesy Sharjah Art Foundation unless otherwise noted)

Texts, crucial to Arabic culture and an important feature of the exhibition, are rendered in dramatic, black oxide words painted on volcanic lava stone. In a series of paintings titled *Nour Ala Nour*, translated as "light upon light," or illumination from god, the word "Ekra," meaning "read" or "recite" — the first word spoken by the archangel Gabriel to the prophet Muhammad

— appears in large, black, stylized letters alongside other text-based paintings. The Arabic phrase “The rain will always be made with bullets,” taken from one of Etel Adnan’s poems, is inscribed on one painting that is paired with another that lists the names of Palestinian villages destroyed by Israel. Placed at the far end of the gallery, seven clay balls inscribed with the 99 names of Allah express the significance of faith and religion for Fattal.



‘Simone Fattal’ at the Sharjah Art Foundation, installation view

Hanging in the exhibition is the artist’s collage “Palmyra” (2014), comprised of a found map of the Middle East from the Ottoman Empire, with images of the temple of Palmyra in the Syrian desert before it was destroyed. In this context, Fattal’s texts such as, “I didn’t do it but it’s god who did it” and “Justice is the shadow of unity,” engraved on flat sculptures, become highly potent in an environment of war, destruction of territory, land grabbing, and the influx of refugees the world over. Although Sheikha Al-Qasimi did not intend the show to be a large retrospective, representative works from Fattal’s oeuvre amplify the magnitude and destruction of a culture that is more than 3,000 years old, as the enormous fragility of life reverberates throughout the exhibition.



'Simone Fattal' at the Sharjah Art Foundation, installation view

[Simone Fattal](#) continues at the Sharjah Art Foundation (Al Mareija, Al Shuwaihean Area, United Arab Emirates) through June 12.

 **comments (1)**