

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.



The Year of the Elephant

2014

Diorama

105 x 70 x 75 cm



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.

أَلَمْ تَرَ كَيْفَ فَعَلَ رَبُّكَ بِأَصْحَابِ الْفِيلِ (١) أَلَمْ يَجْعَلْ كَيْدَهُمْ فِي تَضَلِيلٍ (٢)
وَأَرْسَلَ عَلَيْهِمْ طَيْرًا أَبَابِيلَ (٣) تَرْمِيهِمْ بِحِجَارَةٍ مِنْ سِجِّيلٍ (٤) فَجَعَلَهُمْ كَعَصْفٍ مَأْكُولٍ (٥)
القرآن، سورة الفيل، سورة ١٠٥

[105:1] Have you not seen, [O Muhammad], how your Lord dealt with the companions of the elephant?

[105:2] Did He not make their plot go astray?

[105:3] And He sent against them birds, in flocks,

[105:4] Pelting them with stones of hard clay,

[105:5] And He rendered them like eaten straw.

Qur'an, Surah Al-Fil



The Gods of Noah

2016

Diorama

110 x 70 x 80 cm



وَقَالُوا لَا تَذَرُنَّ آلِهَتَكُمْ وَلَا تَذَرُنَّ وَدًّا وَلَا سُوَاعًا وَلَا يَغُوثَ وَيَعُوقَ وَنَسْرًا (٢٣)
وَقَدْ أَضَلُّوا كَثِيرًا وَلَا تَزِدِ الظَّالِمِينَ إِلَّا ضَلَالًا (٢٤)
القرآن، سورة نوح، سورة ٧١

[71:23] "And they have said (to each other), 'Do not abandon your gods; abandon neither Wudd nor Suwa', neither Yagūth nor Ya'ūq, nor Nasr.'

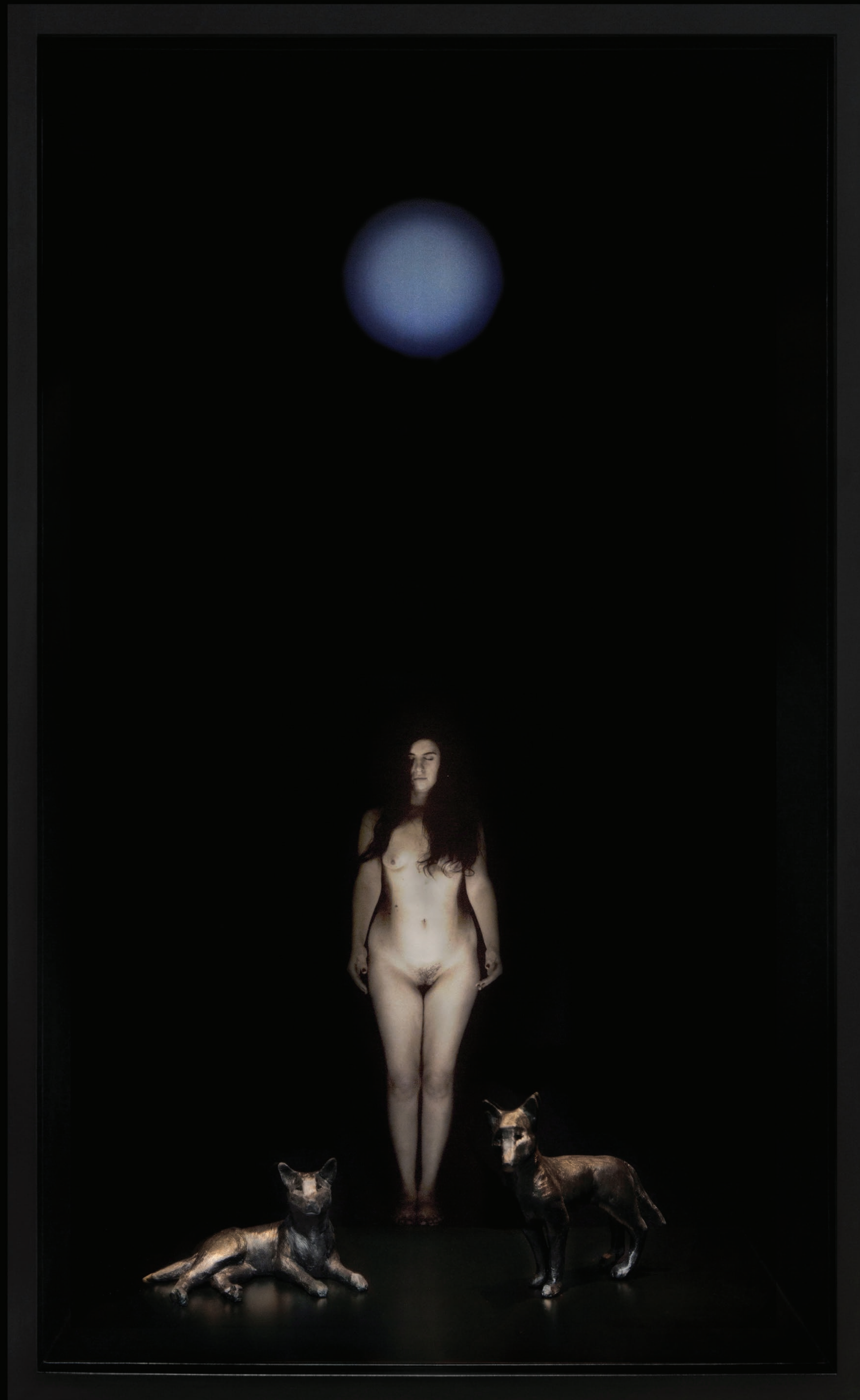
[71:24] They have already misled many, and (O Lord!) grant no increase to the wrongdoers except in straying (from the right path)."

Qur'an, Surah Nuh

According to "the Book of Idols" written by the Arab scholar *Hisham Ibn Al-Kalabi*, *Wadd*, *Suwa'*, *Yagbut*, *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.

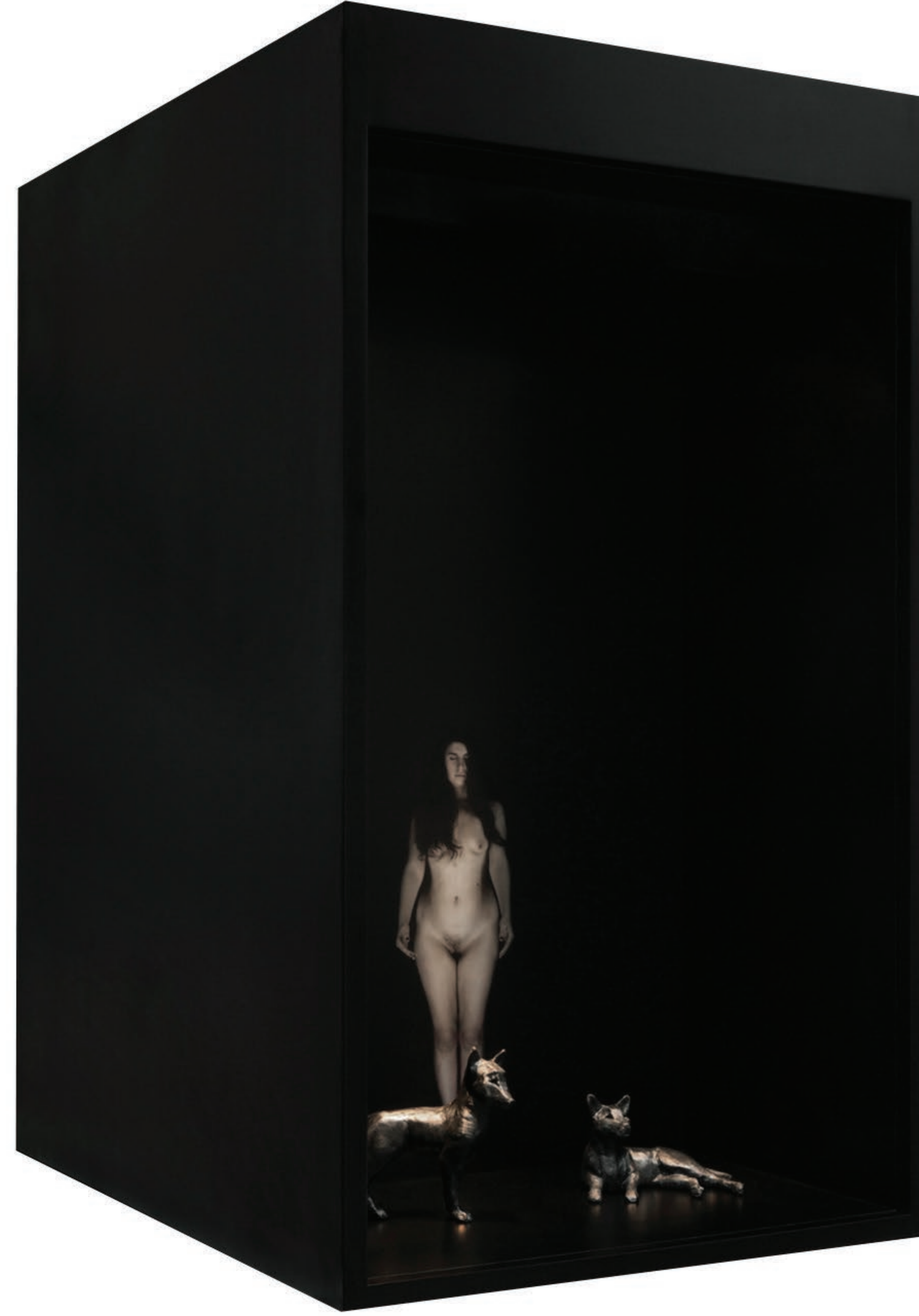


Venus and the angels Harut and Marut

2016

diorama

48 x 85.5 x 69 cm



وَاتَّبَعُوا مَا تَتْلُوا الشَّيَاطِينُ عَلَىٰ مُلْكِ سُلَيْمَانَ وَمَا كَفَرَ سُلَيْمَانُ وَلَكِنَّ الشَّيَاطِينَ كَفَرُوا يُعَلِّمُونَ النَّاسَ السَّحْرَ وَمَا أُنزِلَ
عَلَى الْمَلَكَيْنِ بِبَابِلَ هَارُوتَ وَمَارُوتَ وَمَا يَعْلَمَانِ مِنْ أَحَدٍ حَتَّى يَقُولَا إِنَّمَا نَحْنُ فِتْنَةٌ فَلَا تَكْفُرْ فَيَتَعَلَّمُونَ مِنْهُمَا مَا
يُفَرِّقُونَ بِهِ بَيْنَ الْمَرْءِ وَزَوْجِهِ وَمَا هُم بِضَارِينَ بِهِ مِنْ أَحَدٍ إِلَّا بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ وَيَتَعَلَّمُونَ مَا يَضُرُّهُمْ وَلَا يَنْفَعُهُمْ وَلَقَدْ عَلَّمُوا الْمَنْ
اشْتَرَاهُ مَا لَهُ فِي الْآخِرَةِ مِنْ خَلَقٍ وَلَبِئْسَ مَا شَرُّوا بِهِ أَنفُسَهُمْ لَوْ كَانُوا يَعْلَمُونَ (١٠٢)

القرآن، سورة البقرة، سورة ٢

[2:102] And they followed [instead] what the devils had recited during the reign of Solomon. Solomon did not disbelieve, but the devils disbelieved, teaching men magic and that which was revealed to the two angels at Babylon, Harut and Marut. But neither of these two taught anyone until they had said, "We are for trial, so do not disbelieve [by practicing magic]." And [yet] they learn from them that by which they cause separation between a man and his wife, but they do not harm anyone through it except with Allah's permission. And the people learn that which harms them and profits them not. But the Children of Israel certainly knew that whoever purchased the magic would not have in the Hereafter any share. And wretched is that for which they sold themselves, if they only knew.

Qur'an, Surah Al-Baqarah

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.



Al Hâma

2016

Diorama

54 x 100 x 50 cm



فَشَارِبُونَ شُرْبَ الْهَيْمِ (٥٥)
القرآن، سورة الواقعة، سورة ٥٦

[56:55] *And will drink as the drinking of thirsty camels*
Qur'an, Surah Al-Waqi'ah

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.”



Issaf and Naïla

2015

Diorama

92 x 77 x 49 cm



واتخذوا إسافا ونائلة، على موضع زمزم ينحرون عندهما. وكان إساف ونائلة رجلا وامرأة من جرهم -

هو إساف بن بغي، ونائلة بنت ديك - فوقع إساف على نائلة في الكعبة، فمسخهما الله حجرا.

السيرة النبوية، ابن إسحاق، توفي عام ٧٦٧م

“(the Quraysh) adopted Issaf and Naïla by the place of Zamzam, sacrificing beside them. Issaf and Naïla were (originally) a man and a woman of Jurhum – Issaf b. Baghy and Naïla d. Dik - who copulated in the Ka’aba, so God transformed them into two stones”.
Sirat Rasul Allah, Ibn Ishaq, Died 767 AD

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’il*, the first son of *Abraham*, before her providential discovery of the *Zamzam* well.



Al-Lāt
2015
Marble Sculpture
160 x 50 x 50 cm



أَفَرَأَيْتُمُ اللَّاتَ وَالْعُزَّىٰ (١٩)
وَمَنَاةَ الثَّالِثَةَ الْأُخْرَىٰ (٢٠)
القرآن، سورة النجم، سورة ٥٢

[52-19] So have you thought upon al-Lat and al-'Uzza?
[52-20] And Manat, the third - the other?
Qur'an, Surah An-Najm

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.

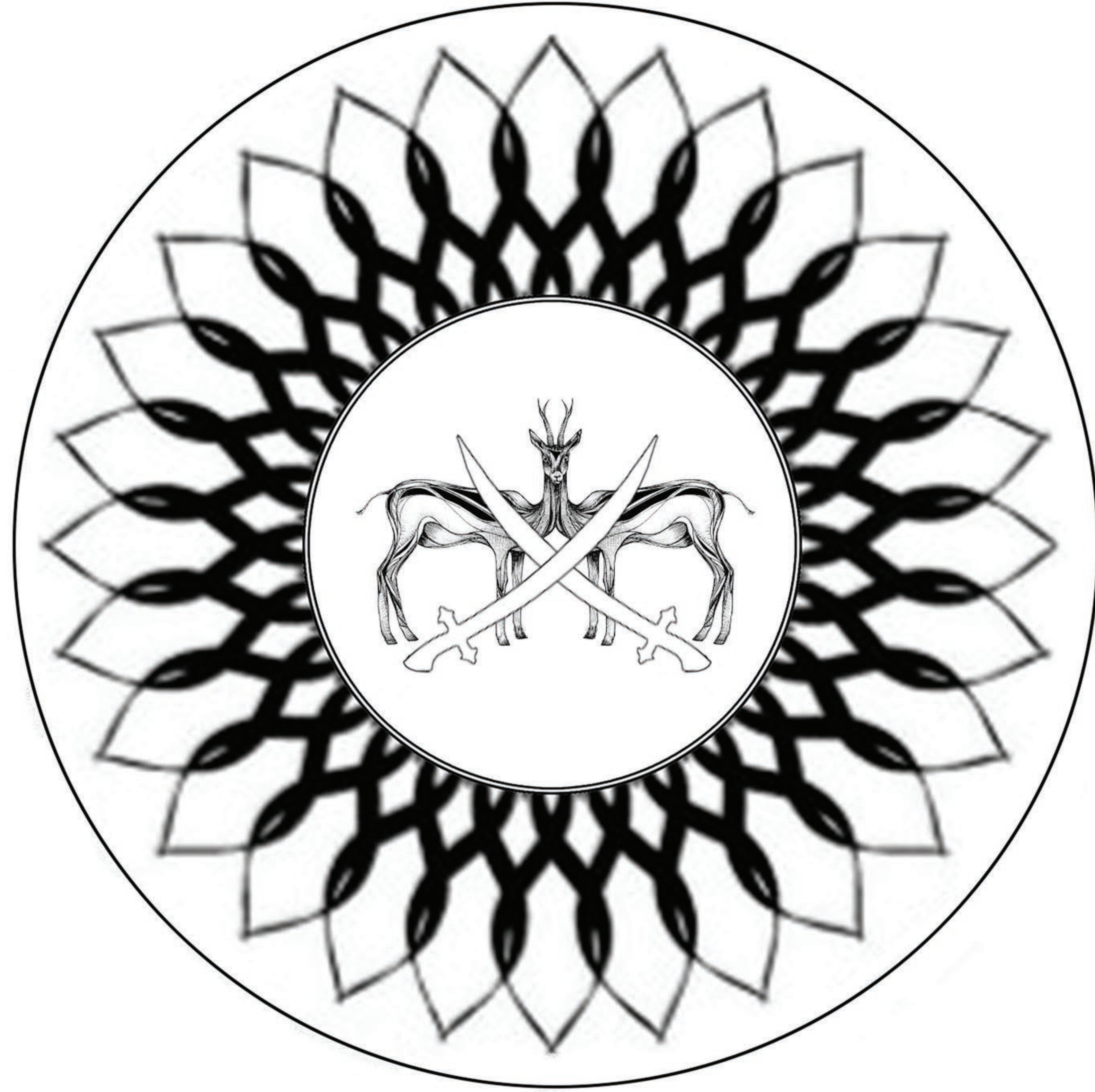


The Golden deer of Mecca

2016

Copper and Gold

66 x 66 x 10 cm



تَبَّتْ يَدَا أَبِي لَهَبٍ وَتَبَّ (١) مَا أَغْنَىٰ عَنْهُ مَالُهُ وَمَا كَسَبَ (٢) سَيَصْلَىٰ نَارًا ذَاتَ لَهَبٍ (٣)
وَأَمْرَاتُهُ حَمَّالَةَ الْحَطَبِ (٤) فِي جِيدِهَا حَبْلٌ مِّن مَّسَدٍ (٥)

القرآن، سورة المسد، سورة ١١١

[111:1] *May the hands of Abu Lahab be ruined, and ruined is he.*

[111:2] *His wealth will not avail him or that which he gained.*

[111:3] *He will [enter to] burn in a fire of [blazing] flame*

[111:4] *And his wife [as well] - the carrier of firewood.*

[111:5] *Around her neck is a rope of [twisted] fiber.*

Qur'an, Surah Al-Masad

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

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

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 (Munich), with her latest show El-Zohra was not born in a day at Galerie Tanit (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).

Randa Mirza is represented since 2011 by Galerie Tanit (Munich-Beyrouth).

www.randamirza.com

EL-ZOHRA WAS NOT BORN IN A DAY

is an exhibition by visual artist Randa Mirza in collaboration with Riccardo Clementi and Eric Deniaud.

The exhibition was on view at Galerie Tanit (Beirut) from 17 November 2016 until 7 January 2017.

GALERIE TANIT - BEYROUTH
Naila Kettaneh Kunigk



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