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Portrait of Maryam Yousif.

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Artist Spotlight with Maryam Yousif

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ArteEast is pleased to present an interview with artist Maryam Yousif as part of our Artist Spotlight series.

Maryam Yousif was born in Baghdad, Iraq in 1985 and lives in San Francisco, California. She received a Master of Fine Art from the San Francisco Art Institute in 2017, and received a Bachelor of Arts at the University of Windsor, Ontario in 2008. Yousif has had solo and two-person exhibitions with The Pit, Los Angeles; Andrew Rafacz, Chicago; Guerrero Gallery, San Francisco; / slash art, San Francisco; RSF Projects, San Francisco. Yousif's work has been featured in exhibitions such as Clay Pop, Jeffrey Deitch, Los Angeles; Wild Frontiers, The Pit, Los Angeles, California; Dog Days, The Pit, Palm Springs; Sleight of Hand, The Center for Craft, Asheville, North Carolina and The Lands Beyond, Anglim Gilbert Gallery, San Francisco, California. She is the recipient of the Fleishhacker Foundation Eureka Fellowship, a finalist for SFMOMA's SECA award, the Museum of Art and Design's Burke Prize. Her newest solo exhibition *Tamur Land* opens June 3rd, 2023 at The Pit Palm Springs.



Habibti in Artery Landscape Dress, 2023, glazed ceramic, 20.5 x 13.5 x 5.5 in

ArteEast: Can you tell us about your work in general and the main themes you return to in your practice?

Maryam Yousif: I'm interested in setting a scene. I love telling stories through the objects I make. I make sculptures out of clay that explore everything from Mesopotamian mythology and ancient objects to the history of clay, funkyness, humor, fashion and color. I build conical figurines adorned with sculptural dresses inspired by photos of women I admire, like my mother, MENA singers, and recent fashion runways, palm trees with personality or bag forms emblazoned with illustrations depicting different iterations of these motifs.

AE: Describe your solo show, *Tamur Land* at The Pit's Palm Springs gallery, opening June 3rd, 2023? What are some continuities that you explore as well as new elements that you introduce within your work?

MY: In thinking about having a show in Palm Springs, I thought about the date palms that are grown there and how they were transplanted from Iraq and other Middle Eastern countries. I feel an affinity towards them as we're both immigrants here. I wanted to create a tableau with figures, palms, and other forms as an ode to them.

The word "Tamur" in Iraqi Arabic means dates. I've been making the palm tree form for some time as it started to become another character or motif within my practice. The date palm and its fruit mean a lot to me; it's a symbol of resilience and nourishment. In ancient Mesopotamia and Assyrian depictions, it's revered and depicted symbolically and beautifully as fertility. I grew up offering baked goods with dates in them to guests that came to our home. It was a constant snack that provided a lot of nourishment and it replaced chocolate for me as a kid during the 90s sanctions in Iraq. It brought sweetness to our lives, it was something from our land. I build these palms with lots of love and they've started to twist and turn and tell stories of their own.

A new element in this show are the Iraqi coffee and water jugs that I've been making. I saw a huge version of one as a prop in an Iraqi music video and I wanted to try and replicate it. They are typically made out of brass, so it was fun to recreate them out of clay, especially the hardware.

AE: Could you share details about the artifacts and the array of sources you reference when creating your sculptural figurines/habitis? What are some of the traditions and histories you are working with and trying to evoke within your own sculptures?

MY: A couple of artifacts have actually generated much work within my practice. In particular, Sumerian Votive figures that were commissioned by elites to recreate images of themselves that could be carried into God's presence via the temples that only priests had access to. I was really drawn to their conical forms, their garments, and generic facial features. I decided to create my own version but wearing dresses that I sewed at the time and fashion that I was mining. I loved translating textiles and elements of creating a garment out of clay, like ruffles and volume. The way I drape the hair around the shoulders also came from an ancient fragment of a vessel depicting an image of a goddess.

AE: Talk about the personal significance that the medium of clay and ceramics has for you. What was the process of finding your aesthetic and conceptual voice through this medium, and reconciling traditional forms and ceramic techniques alongside contemporary iterations?

MY: I came to clay/ceramics in graduate school at SFAI. I had been painting at the time but was so intrigued by the ceramics studios and all the wild and fun objects that were being made there so I took a class. There is an immediacy that comes from taking a piece of earth and forming it into something familiar, like a face or a pot. It felt so rewarding and fun; I haven't looked back since. I feel an affinity to this medium, it's hard to explain, but when I'm really in it, I feel an out of body experience, like the knowledge is coming from somewhere else. It also collapses time, it can feel ancient and contemporary all at once, it can look old and new, technical and funky...it has the ability to be funny. I've continued to be a painter but now I draw and paint on clay.

AE: What or who are some of your major creative influences, and why?

MY: I'm inspired by my child Lukas, because I'm watching his soul and spirit blossom and that experience alone turns my world upside down. He's made me a better artist. My family, because everything I do comes from them and is for them. My mom was an artist in Baghdad and she was my first example of creativity. I saw her hang her paintings on our walls and she sculpted flowers. My partner Nick Makanna, because he's a brilliant artist and we always collaborate together. Being Assyrian and Iraqi inspires me; I come from a beautiful culture. My dog Arthur because he is so pure and loving and he helps me pause. I sit and watch him and try to take him in, he's so beautiful. Palm trees, fashion, flowers, eyes, music is everything, Fairuz, Majda El Roumi and all the amazing singers from MENA and the graphic design of their cassette and album covers. The Baghdad Modern Art Group, humor as a strategy in art, Bay Area Funk and figurative movements, San Francisco and Windsor, Ontario, my students and teaching.

AE: What are you currently working on and do you have any shows or projects upcoming in 2023-2024?

MY: I'm currently in an amazing group show called Funk You Too! Humor and Irreverence in Ceramic Sculpture at the Museum of Arts & Design in New York, my solo "Tamur Land" opens at The Pit Palm Springs on June 3rd and I'm also in a group show called Clay Pop at Jeffrey Deitch in LA that opens June 24th.

MARYAM YOUSIF ONLINE:

Website: maryamyousif.com

Instagram: [@Yyyammyyyy](https://www.instagram.com/Yyyammyyyy)