

JUXTAPOZ

Art & Culture

Back to Back: Maryam Yousif & Nick Makanna @ Guerrero Gallery

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[Maryam Yousif and Nick Makanna](#)

back-to-back shows at [Guerrero Gallery](#), the married couple separately demonstrate how clay has a resonance as primordial as it is universal.

Both the Quran and the Bible contain references to clay being the substance from which humankind was originally created. In Greek mythology, Prometheus molded men out of water and earth. Long before Islam or Christianity or Hesiod, the Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh formed a wild man made of clay, whose friendship taught the tyrannical King humanity. Science too connects clay and the human body through its shared elemental constituents: iron, calcium, oxygen, sodium, potassium, magnesium, hydrogen, carbon, nitrogen, etc.

Most people, when they harken back to grade school, can recall the joy of molding clay. It's an early, tangible encounter with imagination; a first taste of how it feels to shape the world in our own image. Curious then, that relatively few contemporary artists have managed to turn this medium of expression into an accepted fine art practice. One exception, of course, is the funk movement, which emerged in the Bay Area in the last century, as a reaction to and expansion beyond abstract expressionism. At best, viscera and, sensuous shapes emerge from a purity of unabashed, playful, and unconstrained feeling. As such, the clay becomes an act of three-dimensional liberation.



In *Puabi Live*, Bagdad-born **Maryam Yousif** infuses funk into her break-through, ceramic sculptures. Her glazed stoneware and porcelain showcase at SF's Guerrero Gallery imagines the modern incarnation of Mesopotamian Queen Puabi, whose lush life entails fantastical objects of adornment and adoration. Yousif, who received an MFA from the San Francisco Art Institute in 2017, draws us into Puabi's high-life world, beckoning viewers to keep up with the ancient city of Ur's precursor to Kim Kardashian and Princess Diana.

In the main gallery space, a low pedestal “tarp” has been laid out with an assortment of objects referencing an active archeological site, where carefully placed found artifacts await examination. Vases, a birdbath, strewn bead necklaces, stage props, crowns, punch bowls, artificial party flowers, and a large bust of Puabi, form a treasure trove of ancient shapes updated with pop colors and embellished with “selfies.”



Stone tablets affixed to the gallery walls, of the kind Moses might have carried from the temple, also command attention, allowing us to examine Queen Puabi's own collection of contemporary Arabic music cassette tapes. The impression of Puabi as a bit of a style maven is reinforced with a peek into her closet with a shelf full of handbags that feature recurrent designs, such as stars, scrolls, concert posters, and queenly eyes.

Amid the charm and beauty of Yousif's impressive constellation of fresh delights is the rub of recent history. The work is exuberant, infectious, and classic, with a twist of the swinging '70s, when the port town of Basra was known as the Venice of the Middle East and Baghdad's bookstalls and broad boulevards bustled with vitality. Most Americans don't know *this* Iraq. We know the country of Yousif's birth through grainy CNN images, presented as virtually indistinguishable from other countries in the region with which the United States remains at war.



Both her lyrical execution and creative choices commend Yousif as an artist. As the viewer comes to see her flirtation with Puabi, perhaps even as an alter ego, it is deeply affecting to welcome the notion of a dynamic and free-spirited modern-day Iraqi woman, who is capable of ruling her own life and showing the rest of us how it's done.

In addition to the Guerrero show, Yousif exhibited similar work that references mythical and historical figures as part of a three-person show, *Summer Sessions: Part I: The Lands Beyond*, at [Anglim Gilbert Gallery](#) in San Francisco.

Yousif reminds us that the thread of history weaves past and present, tragedy and comedy, war and play, and person to person. The human spirit is resilient if not triumphant, though the tenderness of loss is apparent everywhere. Makanna's sculpture gives a sense of weightiness impervious to harm, even if precarious, speaking simultaneously to loss and replenishment.

In a poem by Percy Bysshe Shelley, the shattered remains of a grand statue to an ancient Egyptian "king of kings" lies forgotten in the sand. All that survives of this antique ruler's arrogant claim to immortality is the hand of a knowing sculptor and the words of a poet. Art, Shelley seems to say, is stronger than tyranny and fear.

By Tamsin Smith & Matt Gonzalez

Maryam Yousif: Puabi Live! / July 20 - August 17, 2019, & Nick Makanna: Spiral Architect / June 14th - July 13th, 2019.