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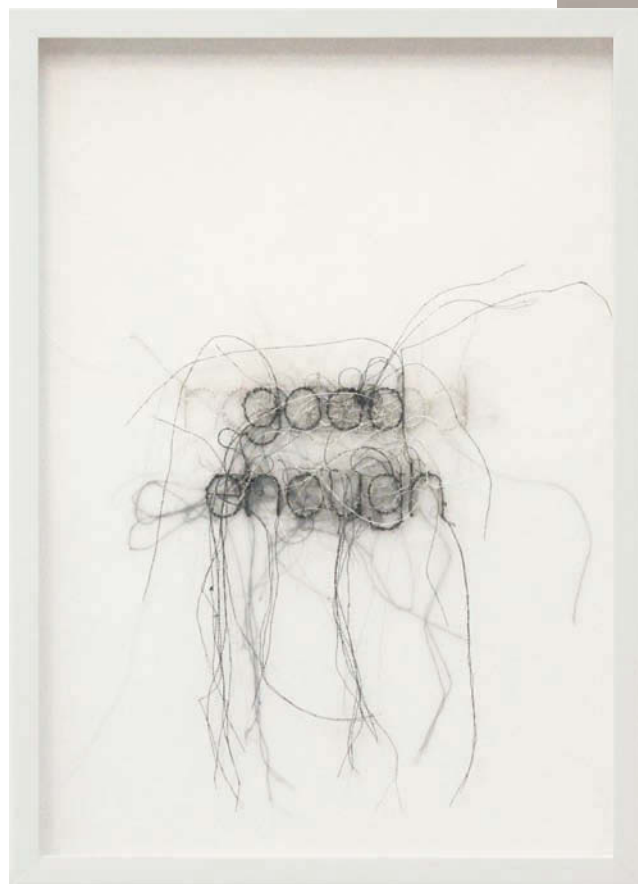
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THE ART OF HOPE

SAFWAN DAHOUL
AND HIS
DREAM-LIKE
CANVASES

Right: *For Self-Destruction*. 2014.
Concrete and embroidery thread.
Variable dimensions.
Below: *Good Enough-Not Good Enough*.
2012. Hand stitching on polyester film
paper. 44 x 32 cm.
Sara Al-Haddad. Photography by Simon
Coates



INTO ORBIT

At the end of 2012 Simon Coates interviewed Emirati artist Sara Al Haddad for Harper's Bazaar Art in an article entitled Sara Al Haddad: An Artist In Progress. It's early 2016 and Coates meets Sara again to see how things have changed



January 2016. It is an uncharacteristically chilly afternoon in Dubai and Sara Al-Haddad is home to see her family. She left the UAE in August of 2014 to embark on a Master's degree in Sculpture at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) in Baltimore after having obtained a scholarship from the venerated Fulbright Scholarship organisation. Sara will graduate later this year.

After gaining a degree from the American University in Dubai in 2012 Sara's fibre-based, deeply personal artwork immediately earned her solo exhibitions in Dubai's Pavilion and Gallery of Light spaces almost before she could catch her breath. Her use of fibre-knitted, knotted, crocheted, woven, battered and fearless approach to using her own feelings as inspiration enabled her to produce pieces the like of which had never been seen in the UAE.

I ask her what has it been like doing your Masters in the States. "I think my experience has been about learning how to live more than working there. From top to bottom till now, I'm still figuring things out." So if you'd come from London to Baltimore rather than from Dubai to Baltimore would it have been different? "Yeah there would have been a lot less to adjust to. A tutor had seen the Dubai desert in the *Mission Impossible* movie and asked if that was what life is like here.

Is it fair to say that you still had a lot of unanswered questions after you had finished your degree in Dubai? "It is but I have even more questions now," she answers. "I'm constantly doubting everything I do and that's a confidence thing." But, I says, that lack of confidence is the very thing that makes you create good artwork. "I see that and I agree to a point. However I am very confident in being doubtful and I still think I speak out of conviction. I also think that, because I don't like a lot of what I do, I will push myself into a transition period where I figure out what is wrong and find a solution."

I personally believe there is no such thing as a confident artist. Or there is, but those people are not true artists. What do you think? "Lacking confidence might be something that makes me me, and makes me good at what I do, but it also adds a kind of vulnerability to my work. I don't feel that I'm in touch with my own emotions any more, or I am less in touch than I was before. I think how I deal with that is part of the transition."

Last year Sara made a piece entitled *As You Try To Forget Me* and as with much of her artwork, the emotions on show are red raw, with a title that evokes a line from a letter of love unrequited. The sentiments in her early text pieces, some of which were shown as part of the *Beyond* exhibition section during last year's Abu Dhabi Art, are often heart-breaking in their honesty. Sara has no problem with using her work to let us know exactly how she's feeling.

I then ask her if her work has developed during the time she's been in Baltimore. "Being in a new space made me want to work with different things," she explains. "Like concrete. The studio floors are made of concrete and I think it's very beautiful. Plus I'm always interested in contrasts in materials—and also in



Above: Sara Al-Haddad. Photography by Simon Coates.
 Right: *For Self-Destruction*. 2014. Concrete and embroidery thread. Variable dimensions.
 Below: *Hence*. 2014. PVC, zipties and metal frame. Variable dimensions.
 Far right: *Oh Well*. 2012. Hand stitching on polyester film paper. 44 x 32 cm.



myself. I like extremes.” But have your work themes changed? “I think being insecure has become more of an issue, maybe. And there were more questions in my work (I love the question ‘why?’), so there was a phase of me trying to fit in and understand things. My work has always been about my interactions with people and I feel that my interactions have changed which has changed the way I interact with my own work. It’s become harder.” Harder? “Yes, because I’m trying to understand new things and new interactions,” she says. “Even though there are things that seem normal when you move to a new country you still have to deal with them.”

So is this why you’ve chosen the concept of home for your final Masters’ artworks—because you feel safe at home? “That’s the weird part,” she muses. “Home is not a place to me; it’s a set of thoughts that say what I think home should be. Or a set of things that make me think I am at home. And it’s not people or a certain person. It’s a certain interaction. Emotional giving. That fraction of an interaction is what I think of as home. Younger,

when I was sad I would go to the roof of my house and look up at the sky. I never thought that was something I could take with me but it is. Now, when I’m sad I can look up and I become happy again. Home is a space, not a place. And it can be experienced in different places around the world.”

There is nothing *soi-disant* about the insecure artist role Sara inhabits. Truly, this is she. And this demeanour also means that she is constantly and genuinely surprised (shocked, even) by any kind of praise. There’s no side or agenda here. No choreographed assimilation of the Contemporary artists’ creed. So, in private and often in the darkest hours, Sara’s work is gently conjuring a subtle and quiet storm. ■

Sara takes part in the *Not Really Here* exhibition at the Platform Gallery in Baltimore from 2-24 April.

