

The Entrance to Paradise



Lies

At
Your
Mothers
Hands

Lara Chamas //

Lara Chamas

a little boy
inside the
mosque waiting
for his mother
to finish prayer,
eager to play
with his new
toy gun



حاشا
لا تطلق النار

**NE TIREZ PAS
DON'T SHOOT**

worn on shirts
by press during
the civil war my
parents fled

Derived from a quote from The Prophet Muhammad, the title of this exhibition strikes out feet and replaces it with hands. Hands allude to the mother's agency, what she creates, gives, passes on, feeds you with, that's where heaven lies. This exhibition aims to tell a story, and each object flows on to another in a constellation. Featured are semiotic and semantic disruption of visual language and lexicon, splicing the two together to illustrate the ambivalence and juxtaposition between love and war, nurturing and violence, and nourishment and destruction of the body, so prevalent in the Middle East.

Lara Chamas is a second-generation Lebanese, Australian artist, based in Naarm (Melbourne). Her practice investigates topics of postcolonial and migrant narratives, specifically within the context of her cultural identity. Fleeing from civil war, her parents migrated to Australia, where she was born. Her practice explores this in relation to contemporary Australian and global society, and current political issues; exploring links and meeting points between narrative theory, cultural practice, societal tensions, and the body as a political vessel. Currently completing a masters by research in fine art at Monash University, central to her research is the expansion on these notions in a more historical and anthropological sense. With discussing geopolitical issues, research and first-hand experience is important to the genuinity of her work. Middle Eastern historical and cultural comparatives provide a surprising amount of relativity and perspective into contemporary Australian culture as experienced by the artist.



teta (baba)



teta (mama)

entrance
الامي

she sits on the edge of my bed
soft weight shifts me slightly

a calloused hand on my forehead
no eyes open

practiced whispers,
quiet

and hushed terrors
tongue and saliva are louder than the words

loosen the threads that bind the manifest
unseen transference

those whispers fill the air
like gasps from pain
or a troubled sigh

•

born of two
and again of a vortex

the aftermath a conference with debris
a bleeding flea market

for reclaiming self post-departure

(a)mending (w)hole

(saws)

to make openings in the earth
for hiding
for severance

and stone houses
for those openings of severance

engraved with sigils
that lament the price of survival

and allow a transference
embodied by tears

I'm here because of you
and you me

but we return as strangers
so I may learn of things hidden

chipped gate
green tinged streetlights
tangled wires above our heads

خالتو

She speaks into the small cup
hands turning it with poise
a Qur'an bedazzled with plastic gems
an inscribed sword
open hands
blue glass eyes

'a lion'

and eyes in her palms

'three in white'

shrouded in black

my cup returns to the table
beside an ashtray
and an empty packet of chips
inside are two apricot pips

pain has a way of opening
intravenous passage

thwarted hope
like shrapnel in flesh

doubt
like feeling for walls in the dark

ontologies displaced by war

collecting bits from her
and piecing together with ensouled blood
animating remnants
covered in dust

mediumistic transference

unknown
ثيئة

but I know so much of her

in the essence transferred

I see the softness
the disarming gaze

a wisdom passed through silence and stone
your dust coats an heirloom
ornate with evidence of your matter
exuvial, precious

and remembrance is as far as our own heartbeat
I hear it when my forehead is pressed on clay or earth

how I wish to hold that echo

even without the ghosts
or the blood
something ties us here
perhaps it's the hope we have
for that memorialized place

to sing along
with clapping hands
let melodies confer the unspeakable

to know the beauty of that place
like cracked concrete

in the crevices
that's where it is

أمل

we may sing together
cry together
show each other scars
hide from each other wounds

and like iron skeletons
collapse and re-emerge

re-assemble again
endless shifting

omnidirectional (explosive) repurposing
making departure

gathering with lattice basket
rebuilding anew with precarious matter

that hope

stretches far down, and further
across the tunnels of natural gas

until it unravels
becoming dispersed root

surfacing with each perforation
each cut and hole made in her skin

then absorbed back into the hopeful
covered in dust

psychogeographic transference

a cycle that endures death
and with each rebirth the limbs learn

the wisdom polishes
colourful shadows cast

as children enter Earth
covered in dust
absorbing hope

She doesn't look up from the chopping board
her hands are the strongest I know

السرطان مثل

I hear about ways to channel
streams of ether

I learn of her oneiric windows
I learn of remedies, miracles
I learn of

the isthmus
of sacred materials
that emanate rays
or do they capture them?

cold stone slab
plastic chairs, coffee table, ashtray, tea
bedsheets over the window

hundreds of coloured lights decorating Sayyida Khawla

تبتة

She is laughing
her own coloured light

visible when the other lights fail

each of them knows (or *knew*)
none of what we do is for *The One*

socially prescribed ritual
does not equate faith
'*we need it more than He does*'
and how brilliant hers is

of generosity
and retrieval from ruin

of protection by words that encircle us

of creating-home-together

and silent trails of dust
perhaps still entangled in skin
in the cuts from the rose bush

in tabouli and molokhia
in whispered recitation
in strongest intentions

those hands know
that we don't come to know *The One*
by fear of consequences

Mohamed Chamas is an artist, game developer and poet based in Naarm (melbourne) who channels the 'dijital djinni'; a rewired/rewiring agent for practice-based research. Chamas' work calls upon magick and mysticisms of the ancient past to create fusion and synergy with emerging technologies. This diffractively interfaces with religious studies, ludology, performance, language, and critical and contemporary theory. Chamas' Virtual Reality (VR) works exist as unsurveilled sites of healing for orientalized bodies; namely **سايير تصوف (cyber tasawwuf) 2018** and **باب القرين (Baab Al Qareen) 2020**. The former received two Freeplay Independent Games Festival Nominations in 2019 and has exhibited at Testing Grounds, Seventh Gallery, Siteworks and Incinerator Gallery. Chamas has been published in Co-, The Lifted Brow, and the Writing & Concepts Lecture series. In 2020 they were part of Experimenta x Hedio's Mixed Realities Symposium, a public program for Heide's major exhibition TERMINUS (Jess Johnson and Simon Ward).



mama and me

Clusters of fruit and cluster bombs

By Amani Haydar

Lara Chamas' exhibition *The Entrance to Paradise lies at your Mother's Hands* is a mixed media project that considers the role women play in nourishing, educating and protecting societies against a backdrop of violence and political instability. The exhibition takes its name from a well-known hadithⁱ. Chamas experiments with the original words, substituting hands for feet, honouring the manual labour performed by women in the domestic sphere.

Over a Zoom call, Chamas tells me her work is grounded in decolonial and feminist theory, featuring storytelling as a 'primary tool of knowledge'. We engaged in our own storytelling and Chamas tells me the exhibition includes a real bullet shell from the 2006 Lebanon Israel War. I feel a ripple through the skin of my forearms as Chamas shares this fact. I tell her that my grandmother was one of the 1,109ⁱⁱ Lebanese people – overwhelmingly civilians – who lost their lives during that war. Chamas and I discuss the consequences of war for women; a theme that runs through my creative practice as well as hers. There is an ease with which I can relate to the visual language and themes in her exhibition.

We talk about the ways in which a mother figure is often a person's first source of knowledge and authority. Yet, that knowledge, transmitted orally and through touch, is

not regarded as authoritative in patriarchal societies and institutions. 'Why can't I reference that?' Chamas asks rhetorically, referring to the stories matriarchs share while they roll wara 'anab and carve out the mushy centres from coosa using rudimentary but foolproof tools.

Chamas documents this exchange of stories through a series of audio-visual recordings featuring conversational interviews with matriarchs in her own family. She captures hands kneading, rolling, and gesturing mid-conversation. Given Lebanon's history these actions represent a lot more than the drudgery of domestic life; they become acts of joy, care and resilience against uncaring and oppressive structures. Four kitchen tools are included in the exhibition; a parsley knife, a zucchini-corer, a ma'amoul mould and a pestle. Cast in bronze, they were handmade by the artist's grandfather and given to her mother when she got married and migrated with her years later to Australia.

Chamas' work includes various cast objects and sculptures that play with words. There is a grenade spliced with a pomegranate. The former, an explosive, is named after the latter, a fruit deemed significant in each of the Abrahamic religions. One consists of flesh while the other is designed to destroy flesh. The juxtaposition here is powerful, forcing us

to question the passivity and indifference with which society tends to accept violence against some bodies even while professing to be against it.

Chamas has also cast her mother's hands inside the recess of a mortar. The hands are upturned as though performing *du'a* – prayer. Chamas points to the irony here as the pestle becomes a weapon which grinds against the hands of an Arab woman who is, in turn, racialized and labelled a 'terrorist'.

There are bullet-like dates, open pomegranate sculptures, and clusters of wax grapes resembling bomblets in a cluster bomb; a reference to the hundreds of thousands of cluster bombs dropped by Israel during the final days of the 2006 warⁱⁱⁱ.

Fossilised as wax sculptures, these things do not carry any threat and yet, they make me uneasy. I am reminded of a story. From relatives who survived the 2006 war, I heard the story of a neighbour who was sheltering in his house when a bomb crashed through a wall and landed on the floor before him without detonating. *SubhanAllah!* There was a tendency in people narrating these events to describe this incident as a miracle rather than the failed attempted killing of an unarmed civilian in his own home. Had the expectation of violence become so routine that the deliberateness of it was forgotten? Or is it, perhaps, easier to spiritualise a painful experience than confront seemingly insurmountable political realities?

The centrepiece of the exhibition is a concrete abstraction of the rug Chamas' grandmother used to pray upon. The original prayer rug is a family heirloom, and the only tangible

reminder the artist has of her grandmother, whom she never met. There are holes in it where her grandmother's knees and feet would have been.

I find myself pondering the number of times the artist's grandmother expressed her hopes and fears, standing, kneeling and prostrating on this rug, the weight of her prayers wearing the fabric into threads and then nothing. From here I find myself pondering the gravity of the prayers that, collectively, the women who lived and survived Lebanon's wars have infused into their rugs and rosaries.

Whilst cold hard materials like bronze, glass and concrete are not typically associated with the softness of a woman's hands, or the velveteen of a prayer rug, Chamas successfully renders these materials into ethereal forms. The concrete sculpture representing her grandmother's rug is monument-like; transformed into an enduring memorial to all the matriarchs whose power, agency and labour is often forgotten.

Chamas has also produced a glass mosaic version of the rug, glass holding a mirror-like quality that instantly reminds me of the reflective aspects of prayer. Reflection is a central theme in literature on Islamic spirituality. Ghazzali, for example, says 'some hearts are like mirrors' and in one hadith the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ likens the human heart to silverware requiring gentle but regular polishing. This metaphor refers to the continuous process of self-reflection, compassion and accountability we are required to engage in, polishing our internal mirrors until they reflect divine attributes.

These thoughts are disrupted, however, as

I recall the explosion of the Beirut Port in August 2020 in which we witnessed the same materials – concrete, metal and glass – transform into deadly shards before collapsing into the city's streets as dust and rubble; a consequence of decades of neglect, exploitation and corruption. Physically removed from these events, members of the diaspora like the artist and me witness them from a safe distance and struggle to articulate their psychological impact. 'The ambivalence I feel towards family, love, politics and war are a thing of the past, present, and sadly a thing of the future, in Lebanon and globally', Chamas says.

Despite this ambivalence, there remains a sense of resilience in Chamas' work. The women emerge as heroines against colonial and patriarchal machinery; engaging in daily acts of remembering, caring and knowledge-sharing. This is what rises from the rubble after destruction and it is what keeps hope alive for future generations.

- i. Traditions and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ
- ii. Human Rights Watch (2007) Why They Died, Civilian Casualties in Lebanon during the 2006 War, Volume 19, No. 5(E), p. 4.
- iii. Sultan, C. Tragedy in South Lebanon (2008), Scarletta Press, p. 59.

Amani Haydar is a writer, award-winning artist and former Archibald Prize finalist based in Western Sydney. Her writing and illustrations have been published in Arab Australian Other, Sweatshop Women Volume Two, SBS Voices and ABC News Online. In 2020 Amani was a Finalist for the NSW Premier's Woman of the Year Award and was named Local Woman of the Year for Bankstown in recognition of her advocacy against domestic violence. Her forthcoming debut memoir The Mother Wound will be released in 2021.



a woman overcome with emotion inside Sayyida Khawla



mama



me

aala' Baalbek, hometown



This project is supported by the
Victorian Government through
Creative Victoria.

designed by Celine Saoud
