

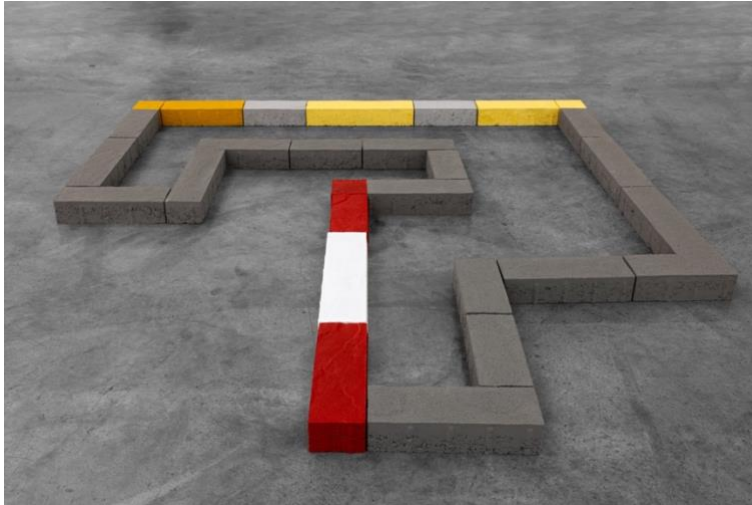
Dubai Collection

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An Interview with Sarah Al Mehairi

Dr. Martin Nixon

<https://dubaicollection.ae/en/story/an-interview-with-sarah-al-mehairi>



Sarah Al Mehairi graduated from NYU Abu Dhabi in 2019 and is currently represented by Carbon.12 in Dubai. Her work explores a space between the sculptural and the two-dimensional, and material properties and the tactile. She also writes poetry and is a co-founder of Jara, a collective which produces writing projects, especially artist's chap books.

During the interview we talked about some of her work. I mentioned that I saw connections to maps, diagrams, architecture, Cubism, Russian Constructivism, and the minimalist sculpture of Carl Andre:

SM: Yes, Cubism for sure. And I love Carl Andre. I just got back from Korea and I was so amazed that I got to see his work in person. The idea of form, and the way that with his work you walk around it. The position of your body to the work is something that in the back of my mind I always think about when I'm creating. And yes, maps, I always think I'm creating my own maps and my own language.

MN: You work in different media. Could you say something about why?

SM: I've always been quite interested in sculpture and my mentor (Jill Magi) tested me and challenged me to ask why a painting isn't sculptural, or why a piece of paper on a wall isn't sculptural, and that is still kind of the way I think. So my current body of work merges both traditional painting on canvas and sculptural elements that are attached to the paintings, so I'm in this limbo between painting and sculpture, and working out this new way of working within my body of work. I like to work with my hands, like fibre arts or pieces of wood or really natural foundation materials.

MN: There are two works from an interesting series that are part of the Dubai Collection. Can you say how you worked with these?

SM: These are paper collages. Again, liking to work with restrictions, I got all these shapes from discarded laser cut boards at a maker's space. These are shapes from projects that people work on that they no longer need the boards from, and I use them as stencils for these collages. Using these forms that I'm unfamiliar with to create a story or a new world within a piece of paper. Each one is quite different – different palette, different sizes of the shapes, as well

as different scales, and it's all about that layering, and again it's quite textural or tactile when you see it in person because of the different layers of the paper.

Gentle Giants I think is the first one that is quite large that I worked on. This one is quite playful, a lot of light, bright, pop colours and larger shapes that are working on a much larger scale.

MN: Does the title Gentle Giants relate to the fact that it was bigger and there was a playful quality?

SM: Yes. The most prominent element in the collage for me is how I make the title. So there's this little happy face on the left and there's this sea monster that I feel is right in the middle. I love alliteration as well and I felt like there were little giants on the board, or monsters.

MN: It's interesting what different people see. I was thinking of architecture and a pointed building and shapes that look like clocks and then I started thinking of giants as in skyscrapers. Everyone's going to see different things aren't they?

SM: Yes, the title is just a suggestion, and that's why I like to keep it quite broad. It's like a stepping stone for whoever wants to read into the work a bit more.

MN: So the process is that you start from pieces of discarded cut out board, and then you use those as stencils to cut out the paper. Could you say more about how you came to that idea?

SM: I knew I wanted to work again on a two-dimensional surface, and paper has always been a big material in my practice, I think paper has so many cool qualities to it, you can do so much with it. I was 'collaging' on canvas and I was painting shapes that were very similar to the shapes you see in these collages and it wasn't working out, it didn't have the depth that I was liking, so I decided to just start to use shapes on paper and go back to basics and that's how it started.

MN: For this second artwork Landing, what is the time difference between this work and Gentle Giants?

SM: The same time period. I work on a few at the same time. I remember I showed this in New York. There were about 14 collages that I was working on for a few months. It's about reworking as well, coming back the next day or the next week and adding or taking away pieces or adding a different colour. This one's called Landing because the flag that I saw in the middle reminded me of the moon.

MN: The shape in the middle comes forward a lot, perhaps because I think it's the only shape that has a black outline around it, but then the grey shape looks like it's going back. To me that makes it visually very interesting, there's a lot of rhythm and movement within it.

At the end of the interview, I asked Sarah what advice she would give for art students now.

I think you should absolutely go for what you want to go for, explore themes and concepts that are maybe challenging. When you're afraid of doing something new or working in a certain way I think that's your gut telling you there's growth there, so always go for something that will make you grow. In terms of art in general, go for every single opportunity, rejection is fine because there will always be someone that will tell you 'yes'. If you don't feel that an opportunity aligns with you or you don't see yourself fitting in somewhere then you should make that opportunity for yourself and then other people will come to you. There is always someone that's going to relate to you.

Above: Sarah Almehairi, 3. *Watch Your Step* (2022)