

Painting What's Inside

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Photos Adel Samara

Sara Shamma paints how people feel, not how they look. In doing so she has made her unconventional mark on the often conventional world of portrait painting.

around her unique portraits that once again stole the show at her most recent exhibition *Sara 1978*, held in the Art House in October. "One should know oneself first in order to paint portraits," Shamma said. "If you give yourself spontaneously, you'll be distinguished and untraditional. It's like your fingerprint: it doesn't resemble anyone else's."

There's no place for lounging beauties in Shamma's portraits. In her works, faces are torn open as if a mask, smoke unfurls directly into the viewer's eyesight and spirals grow out of tongues and noses (a pattern which appears a lot in her works and is repeated all over her studio). Bodies are transparent, other features are opaque.

Shamma is not interested in painting a face as it is seen. She uses her portraits to transmit a mood, feeling or emotion. Some works even mix two faces together, others contain surreal elements like a finger strategically placed in the background. The repetition of a hand, face or body, often painted in a see-through fashion, adds movement to her work. Indeed, her paintings strike you as a series of comic

frames which tell a story, rather than a stand-alone picture.

All of which immediately breaks the traditional conventions of portrait painting, along with the restrained and over-romanticised image of women in Syrian society. It's a point which Shamma never

Shamma never paints animals, she says the messy shape and expressive eyes of the rhinoceros charmed her into action. "Rhinos have very sad eyes that reflect a lot of feeling and it's the feeling that I love to paint," she said of the work.

These awards are just two of many



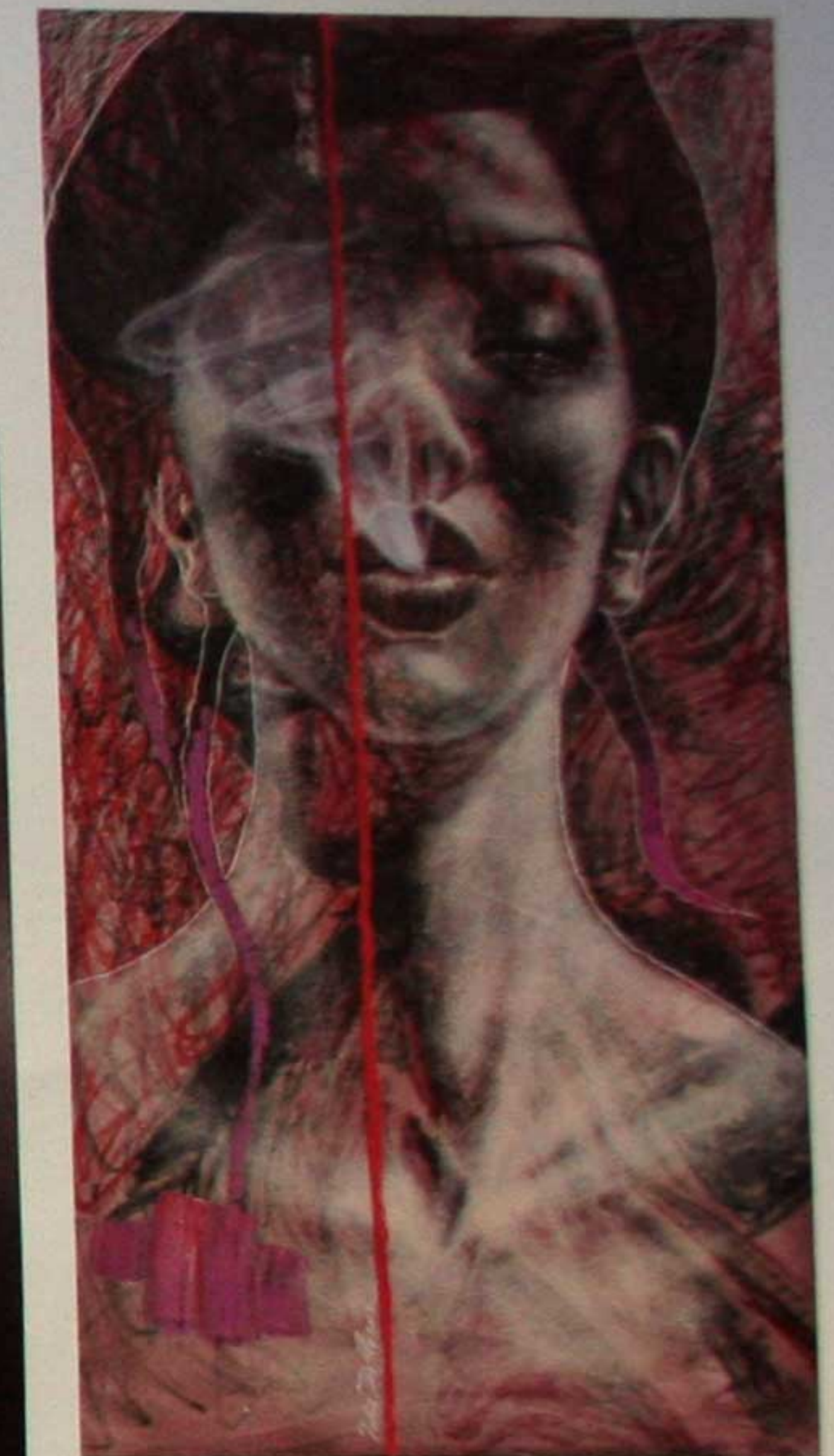
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seems to have considered until I ask her. "I'm simply doing what I like," she says. "I like freedom and frankness. When you work affectionately and spontaneously you don't paint a portrait, you paint a person."

Her own self-portrait was awarded the fourth prize at the BP Portrait Award at The National Portrait Gallery in London in 2004. In it Shamma, clad in black, sits with her legs crossed and elegantly holds a cigarette. Two transparent impressions of former hand positions add movement to the picture, tracing the path of her hand. Shamma was the only Arab artist accepted in the competition. Another painting of a rhinoceros won the First Waterhouse Natural History Art Prize at the South Australian Museum in 2008. Though

Shamma has accumulated in her short career. Not that she gives them much credit. "Receiving an award is a very relative thing. One jury might find my painting worth a prize while another might not. It's peoples' identification with my paintings that I consider as recognition."

Shamma doesn't remember when she had her first exhibition or how many she has had to date. She seems immersed in her paintings, careless of the world around her. "The greatest pleasure for me is to turn on the music and paint," she says. "I never know what I'm going to paint before I start. For me painting is like dreaming; you enjoy it while you are sleeping. It's only after it's done and you've woken up that you realise its meaning."



Wearing an ever-stylish little black dress, Syrian painter Sara Shamma leads me up a spiral staircase and into her studio in Rawda, an up-market district in the city centre of Damascus. Entering the studio, Shamma accidentally drops her mobile phone. As her maid hurries to pick it up, I realise this interview is going to be different. There will be no talk of second jobs to afford colours and canvas, no opposing parents who pressured her to take

on a real job, no complaining about a lack of exhibition space. In short, no struggling artist sob story here.

Shamma, 33, comes straight to the point and tells me she has never had any difficulties in her short yet successful career. She started selling her paintings at the age of 19 and has exhibited in more than 70 solo and collective exhibitions throughout Europe, North and South America and the Arab world since then.

The young artist has built a reputation