

Danna Writes

ART AND POP CULTURE FROM THE MIDDLE EAST

THE DUBAI INVESTIGATIONS: IN CONVERSATION WITH ALIA DAWOOD

‘A loof’ is the first adjective that came to mind when I met Alia Dawood for an interview at Showcase Gallery. Perhaps it was her height, the delicate British accent, the elite education in architecture and drawing, or even the shock of rushing into the air-conditioned gallery on an outrageously humid September’s day. First impressions are oftentimes dead wrong, and as we spoke I quickly understood that Alia is so passionate about drawing and it is so important to her to explain her process, that she weighs her words carefully before speaking, as if intentionally choosing which to offer up and which to hold back for a later time. This habit holds true to her work in ‘*Moving Forms*,’ an exhibition integrating her urban drawings with the arborescent work of Mohammed Fassounaki.



'Evening Cranes', Alia Dawood. Mixed media on paper.

It wasn't a single moment that can be regurgitated in a 30-second anecdote for

journalists and gallery catalogues. It was gradually over the course of her life that she came to believe that she had no other choice but to become an artist. She moves backwards in her mind, pulling out drawers of dusty memories to clarify, “There were certain things that made me realize I should always draw and that I will never stop drawing. I have to make the time for it every single day. That is a sign. When I was young in London my mother sent me to this American hippy woman, Paula’s house for art lessons. She had a hut in her garden and I still remember the walk up the tiny hill with the big oak trees, through her living room with the grand piano, and then out into her shed where I’d spend two hours having fun with art.”



‘Look Up and Ahead, Look Up and Head’, Alia Dawood. Mixed Media on paper.

Most of the drawings included in *‘Moving Forms’* are inspired by Dubai’s construction culture and include cranes, high rises, and the looming ghosts of those buildings started but never completed after the 2008 financial crash. Iraqi in origin, but raised in London, Alia Dawood has only recently claimed Dubai as her home, and is very clear that the pieces featured here came about from her need to ground herself in a new space. It struck me as purposeful that an artist who has never visited her country of origin and has relocated more than ten times in her life would wish to explore the transience of architectural Dubai and would be more attracted to spaces than to people. Although an exception is her Richard Maple series in which John Updike’s famous character emerges in torso from the underbrush of a secret garden surrounded

by skyline.



'Richard Maple, Green Path' by Alia Dawood. Mixed media on paper.

“To Investigate” is the verb she used most often to name the purpose of her drawings. Here is how she explains the process: “I tend to pick up my charcoal or pencil and I wait and look and try to identify what I’m looking at. So if it’s a shadow on a building, obviously the light will change the way it looks over time, and I don’t get frustrated that it doesn’t look like a photograph because the point is to investigate the shadow. Although it’s not a recording of what I am actually seeing it’s my moment in time and it makes me understand that space.” I picture her sitting on her aunt’s balcony near Business Bay as she does every morning and late afternoon, a mug of coffee steaming on the table beside her, bird-like in her observant stillness.

Trained as an architect but disparaging of her first firm’s demands that she sit and draft perfect squares all day, Alia Dawood handed in her notice and is currently a full time artist who freelances on architectural projects. She does have some angst about

whether or not she will one day return to a firm or give it up entirely for the sake of her drawing. Once on a gray London day, while sketching under the dark eaves of a studio at *Princes' Drawing School*, her tutor advised her to keep her ideas for future projects locked away in the secret compartment of her heart. It was good advice and although she isn't ready to reveal what she is working on next, she leaves me with the following clue, "I've investigated Dubai through my drawings but I think next it is time to say something through abstract portraiture, an experience piece, or something on a more conceptual level."



In conversation with Alia Dawood at Showcase Gallery with 'Moving Forms' in the background

Good Ideas: 'Moving Forms' will be at [Showcase Gallery](#) on Alserkal Avenue in Al Quoz, Dubai through 9 October, 2013.