



Courtesy:  
Tamara Al-Samerai / Gypsum Gallery

Monday, March 31, 2014 - 14:04

## **Make room for me: Q&A with artist Tamara al-Samerai**

By:  
Jenifer Evans

When **Gypsum Gallery** was still in the planning stages last year, director Aleya Hamza was introduced to Beirut-based artist Tamara al-Samerai by Alexandrian artist Mahmoud Khaled.

After an initial meeting at ArtDubai, they continued their conversation about Al-Samerai's work and Hamza made visits to Beirut. Al-Samerai became one of Gypsum's represented artists, and her third solo show, her first in Cairo, took place from January 12 to February 18. Al-Samerai brought the artworks to Cairo in December herself, saw the gallery space and chose the frames, and then returned for the installation of the show a month later. Jenifer Evans, who is Mada Masr's culture editor, was part of the installation team. Here, she asks al-Samerai some questions about the show.

**Jenifer Evans:** There were two rooms in the exhibition. One of them had the charcoal drawings, and the three big paintings were in the other room. The drawings looked like they

were made on canvases that had been previously stretched.



**Tamara al-Samerai:** Yes. I usually use charcoal to start a painting, to do the drawing for the painting, and I had a stack of 50 x 70 cm stretched canvases. They were actually left over from Mahmoud's installation [[The Studio as a Work of Art](#), 2010]. When he showed in Beirut at AUB he had leftover canvases so he brought them over to my studio. I never usually work at that size, I usually work on paper or on loose canvases stuck on the wall. So I thought as they're there I'll just try a few exercises, see what it's like to paint on this size. I started doing this drawing that I was working on anyway with pencil. I liked it, I thought it could stop there and didn't need to turn it into a painting. And that set the tone for the rest of them.

One reason why I dismantled them from the wood was because I was going to carry them with me to Cairo, and the idea was to re-stretch them, but once I dismantled them I thought they looked more interesting. It wasn't necessary to stretch them anymore because they're just drawings.

**JE:** It's also interesting because it creates another frame within the frame. You've got this square of what look like staples around them. In the larger paintings you also have

these frames — in one of them what looks like a big sheet of paper is taped to the wall, and you've got the big window blind in the other one. So there is a formal link.

**TS:** And it questions the medium.

**JE:** In each of the drawings there were two little girls, looking like they were fighting or playing.

**TS:** They're fighting, they're playing, they're reconciling, they're dying, they're playing dead. They're pulling and pushing each other.

**JE:** You've used the girl figure a lot in your previous work. But these girls look slightly different.

**TS:** In the past I've used the girl in my paintings, so there were more features and a lot of shading with the paint. It was a completely different process. And here it's not about the face or the look, you know — I used to focus a lot on the expression, the look in the eye. That's not the case here — it's just about the actions. It's a bit more rough and it's about two people as opposed to one. In the older paintings, there were a lot of solitary

girls.

**JE:** It looked like in the older paintings the girl was a sort of self-portrait, or at least that the figure might represent you.

**TS:** I guess. I used to work from photographs, and there were photographs of me, of my cousin, of my mother, sometimes of my other cousins, sometimes photos of random girls on the internet. They're all from the same universe. I don't know if they look like me, but when people say 'Is that you?' I'm like, I don't know! But visually at least, they all come from the same family.

This video is produced by [Medrar.TV](#) and is featured in partnership with Mada Masr.

**JE:** The figures in the charcoal drawings at Gypsum, were they completely imagined, or were you also looking at photographs?

**TS:** They were based on a photo shoot that I did. These are fragment of that. I wanted to do an adaptation of [Mark Twain's] 'The Adventures of Tom Sawyer' and I was working on the idea of a book, which hasn't happened yet, I don't know if it will. I did an outline and

I decided to choose just two characters instead of illustrating all the characters in the story. To get two characters to re-enact everything. So I had it all planned out, all the actions, and I went and did this photo shoot.

**JE:** So it makes sense that they were displayed almost like a story board at Gypsum.

**TS:** They are four or five different sequences, but when I showed I decided to shuffle them up. We were going to sell them individually, and when I was shuffling them up before the exhibition on my computer I thought it kind of works, it's fun to connect them to each other, to see what works with what. And the other reason it worked for me is because they are all pretty much talking about the same thing.

**JE:** I also want to ask about the paintings. In the table one there seems to me to be a missing figure, like the figure has been removed or it's waiting for a figure.



**TS:** It's an erased figure actually. It's an old painting, it's something that I had worked on in 2009 I think. And I kept looking at it. The

figure was so badly drawn and there was nothing I could do about it. The idea started off with the girl, it was a very militant pose. The girl sitting on the chair with her arm on the table, her butt very firm on the chair, she is leaning toward the table and she's staring at you. The leg under the table wasn't working for me and I put an animal there and then erased it. It was something that was always laying there, and I wanted to keep it because the table and chair meant something to me. I started working on it again and I had this cactus that was growing in my room and it died, and I started drawing it and I erased the girl. And it started working.

**JE:** With the computer painting it feels like there's a figure in the picture but it's where the viewer is, do you know what I mean? And with the big painting, that says 'Make room for me,' there is actually a little figure near the bottom, asleep or something. I was interested in the shifting figure in those three pictures, especially in relation the words in the big picture.





**TS:** I don't want to exaggerate anything because I'm not sure why these things happen sometimes, but because of the title and the space it made sense to have the figure below the margin. It was also a formal choice.

**JE:** There's also a plant in each of those three paintings.

**TS:** I wanted this monstrous animate object that's gravitating towards the figure, towards the subject. It's like a threat — I don't want to use symbolic words, but it's gravity that you feel is coming towards you, I guess it's an anxiety thing.



**JE:** Aleya told me that people were very much drawn to the drawings, and they spoke about how the figures in them reminded them of

themselves or their family members.

**TS:** It's usually the case with the girls that I draw. Even men relate to them. It's like a universal language as a symbol, this girl, it's not only a girl. It's a girl, an animal, a boy, it plays on childhood instincts, on mischief, and people laugh, they find them funny. They say they're cute! [Laughs.]

**JE:** And you don't mind.

**TS:** Yeah I'm not a snob about these things, if someone says they're cute I'm not going to be upset, you know. I can't control that. I think people relate to them because they're easy, I don't mean it in a negative sense, but people have something to hold on to. They're figures, they're human beings, I think that people mostly are familiar with human beings and they're doing something that everyone's done. The narrative is sort of clear and I think people need narrative.