

THE WHITE CANVAS

The White Canvas is award-winning Yemeni artist Shatha Altowai's first exhibition in Scotland. Her work is seen here as part of **Art as a Tool of Peace**, an exhibition illustrating the transformative power of art in some of the world's most protracted conflicts.

In this series, Shatha addresses the issues that she has experienced and observed throughout her life in Yemen, specifically focussing on the last seven years since the eruption of the current war. She aims to highlight the lifestyles of Yemeni families living through the war, their solidarity, and how they seek to overcome the lack of basic necessities, such as food, water, electricity, fuel, and security.

Her work conveys the contradictory emotions of strength and fear that Yemeni families grapple with as part of their everyday experience. Shatha began to focus on the topic of family upon her arrival in Edinburgh, where she recognised how Yemeni families were forced to adapt to abnormal ways of living. The paintings presented in this exhibition contain the emotions that this has elicited, and those she feels when she easily accesses and enjoys those basic needs in Edinburgh that Yemeni families struggle to attain.

Shatha numbers the families, rather than naming them, to reflect the attitudes of the Yemeni and international media, which reduce struggling families to bare numbers and statistics. The Family series consists of a total 17 paintings. In this exhibition she participates only with nine.

About the Artist

Shatha Altowai is a Yemeni artist based in Edinburgh, UK. She has presented at several art galleries in Yemen and beyond. Much of Shatha's work reflects aspects of life in her society, and the suffering caused by the ongoing civil war in Yemen.

Through her figurative, cubist, and abstract paintings, Shatha seeks to shed light on issues such as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), women, coexistence, and families in Yemen. Shatha is an IIE-Artist Protection Fund (APF) Fellow in residence at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities (IASH) at the University of Edinburgh.





Family No. 1

Oil painting on canvas board
2021

A mother holds together with her children amidst the noises of bombardments. Here Shatha depicts the moment when she and her family members first heard an airstrike approaching her surrounding in March 2015 hitting a neighbouring house, few days after the US-UK backed Saudi-led coalition has started launch attacks in Yemen.

Winner of The John Byrne Award



Family No. 3

Oil painting on canvas board
2021

A group of Yemeni families in a neighbourhood takes an underground shelter in a house opposite to Shatha's and her husband Saber's house, this was the case when the air raids intensified.

Here Shatha depicts how the neighbourhood women and children used to gather in a single house that had a basement, the basement was full because there was few houses that had an underground room. The men had to wait outside until the airstrikes stopped.

	<p>Unfortunately, that house was destroyed by 2 airstrikes in July 2015, leaving a number of casualties, and a huge damage to Shatha's house that led them to be displaced for 2 years.</p> <p>Winner of The John Byrne Award</p>
	<p>Family No. 8 <i>Oil painting on canvas board</i> 2021</p> <p>A mother carrying her infant, desperately looking for food, between those shaky walls.</p> <p>Winner of The John Byrne Award</p>
	<p>Family No. 12 <i>Oil painting on canvas board</i> 2021</p> <p>Family members gathering around a single dish, wondering if this would be their Last Supper.</p> <p>According to the WFP, almost 16.2 Million people in Yemen are food insecure. This raises the question that Shatha has titled on her entry that won The John Byrne Award: "What is more Painful? Hunger or Fear?"</p>



Family No. 14

Oil painting on canvas board
2021

[No description available]



Family No. 11

Oil painting on canvas board
2021

The war in Yemen has worsened the water scarcity. In many areas, the access to safe drinking water is very challenging on a daily basis. Sometimes people are queuing for more than 24 hours to get a share of water.

“According to hydrologists, the capital Sana'a will run out of water by 2025. This would make it the first capital in the world to do so”
ICRC 2014

Image
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Family No. 16

Oil painting on canvas board
2021

Faces are falling apart. A symbolization of a collapse of families' cohesion



Family No. 6

Oil painting on canvas board

2021

A symbolisation of a dusty crowds looking for their loved ones under the rubbles



The White Canvas “There was a family here”

Acrylic painting on canvas board

2021

Shatha found the white colour to best describe her neighbour’s tragedy. She misses the children’s laugh and their innocent hand waves from the window whenever she opens her door in the morning. It is sad to say that room of the children was directly targeted by 2 airstrikes.

After the tragedy, Shatha opens the door expecting to hear the children laughs that she used to. Instead, she sees the remains of the house, remains of a vivid life. She always reminds herself that “There was a family here”. She expresses “Maybe they are in a better place, in a more peaceful environment that has no words, no colour to describe.”