MARYAM YOUSIF BUILDS ON THE COLLECTIVE PAST OF WARRIOR WOMEN

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R/SF Projects' latest show is titled, Shamiram's Delight, a solo show of new work by Iraqi-Canadian-American artist Maryam Yousif. Comprised of ceramics ranging from intimate miniatures to larger-than-life monuments, fibrous macramé hangings, and painted canvases, Yousif weaves an impassioned tale of matriarchal prowess that bridges upon historical revisionism.



Among the countless tales of Assyrian warriors, there's one female heroine whose expansive mythology spans myriad middle eastern cultures and centuries. Dating to the 9th century BCE, the legendary Shamiram is said to have seduced the King, passionately requested a single day as Queen, and whilst in power ordered the King's assassination—continuing her reign by famously sentencing rapists to their death. The

tale factors prominently in Yousif's childhood, most notably depicted in a painting done by the artist's mother where Shamiram rides atop horse-driven carriage.
Through Shamiram's Delight, Yousif breathes new life into the many-layered myth, seemingly embodying the persona of Shamiram herself and further carrying the feminist torch.

Easily the exhibition's main focal point, majestic arch-like Gate of Mishtar (2017) towers over seven feet high and stretches a magnanimous eight feet wide. Immediately greeting the viewer from an angled stance, the work features panoramic imagery that begs circumnavigation. Adorned with mirror-image sculptures to produce a perfectly parallel composition, the work boasts mischievously grinning horse heads, hookah spires, and female busts atop ziggurat-like pillars. Fashioning the top arch formation, two crisscrossed spears are seemingly wielded by blue genie hands (an allegedly lucky color), and draped between each column is a painted rendition of Shamiram—recreating the artist's mother's original interpretation. As a whole, the piece recalls ancient scrolls, regal fortresses, and the land of papyrus, yet its particular sense of antiquity possesses an unmistakable contemporaneity. Among its eccentricities, a propped ceramic wheel exhibits a smiley face flower as reminiscent of 1960s pop culture as it is the likes of Takashi Murakami; parallels drawn to the wands and cups of tarot decks are similarly apropos, whose divinatory use rhymes with Yousif's keen sensibility for the occult.

Where Yousif's color palette is playful and vibrant, it is also inclusive of raw beige tones, as in the use of undyed cotton twine, cement, and occasional unglazed ceramic—caught somewhere betwixt Eastern and Western cultures. Her forms are crudely sculpted with a certain naïveté or scrawled in a gestural yet painterly manner, exercising a prerogative to be goofy in a world learning to take women artists seriously. Upstairs, a trio of ceiling-mounted macramé hangings envelop not potted plants but individually nestled art objects. Once an entirely domestic (and women-performed) craft used to suspend greenery, here the artist has carved plant-like caricatures into clay. Like the scrolls and vases, these objects find themselves stripped of their original utility and rendered useless, now elevated to the realm of art and aesthetics. The artist's success is two-fold: while she reappropriates women's work, she also feminizes artmaking.

Shamiram's Delight possesses an anecdotal element that calls to myth, oral legends, and origin stories. The show both pays homage to the heroic female archetype at large,

the artist's own mother, the artist-as-warrior and warrior-as-artist, while also functioning as a performative embodiment of Shamiram herself—seemingly posing the question, what would this woman have produced as an artist, and what would the history books detail if more women had been granted the opportunity? Where Yousif's practice at times bridges upon a prop-like or set-like feel, a stage is set for the artist to enact her own powerful revisionist history—tipping the balance retroactively, and thrusting one new narrative into the limelight.

Words regarding the show via R/SF