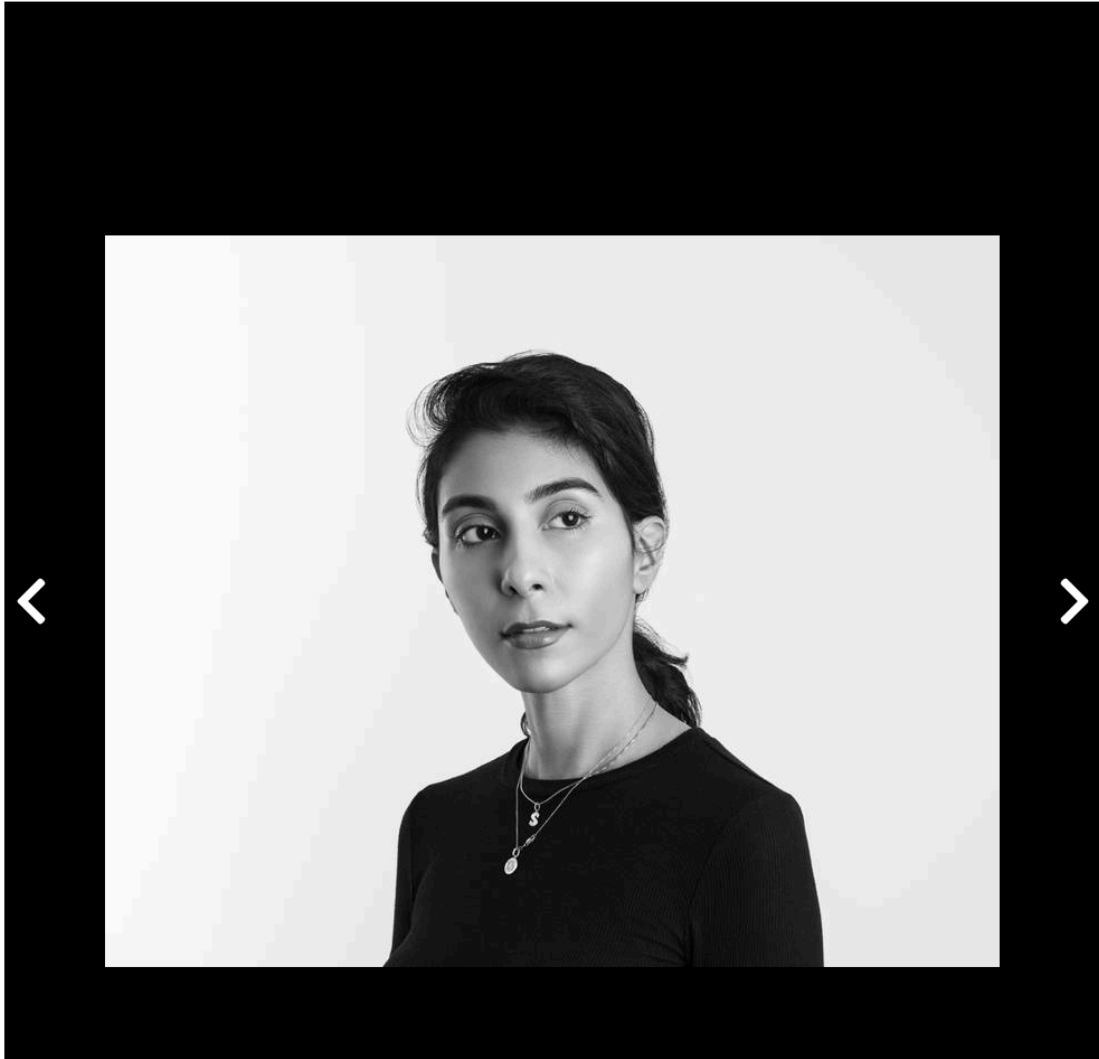


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Syrian artist Sawsan Al Bahar explores the theme of home in her first solo exhibition

► Talaliya delves into her family's history to create an arresting case for belonging and longing



Maan Jalal

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Syrian artist and researcher [Sawsan Al Bahar](#)'s first solo exhibition at [Firetti Contemporary gallery](#) in [Alserkal Avenue](#) is a compelling examination of memory and home.

Entitled Talaliya, the exhibition comprises eight intricate drawings and a powerful installation. Separately and together, the works tackle themes of immigration, things that should have been and how they inform what is.

"For me this is what I've inherited from home," Al Bahar tells *The National*. "These are the leftovers that I still have. And so I was trying to collect them and put them all in one place."

Al Bahar, who was recently awarded the Massimiliano Galliani Prize for drawing at the 17th ArtVerona in Italy, often explores the subject of home through different facets.

Talaliya is a personal investigation into how home exists physically, conceptually, culturally and politically across three generations, starting with Al Bahar's maternal grandfather Zuhair Al Samhoury.

"I find myself reluctant to leave Jaffa, where my eyes have opened and seen the world for the first time," reads Al Bahar's grandfather's words about growing up in Palestine, which appear on 3D-printed sculptural sheets suspended in mid-air. They are both frozen and on the cusp of being swept away.

Leaving is Home is an installation made up of 90 pieces of 3D-printed thermoplastics, which dance, float and fly. The words on each sheet are from a chapter of Al Bahar's grandfather's memoir, which he wrote in retirement from his job as an English professor at the University of Damascus.

Al Bahar was given the memoir by her mother after her grandfather's death five years ago. With so much of Arab culture, heritage and history passed down orally, having a written manuscript of her grandfather's experiences wasn't only something Al Bahar was grateful for, but a responsibility she was mindful of.

"Very soon after I read it, I knew I needed to do something with it," Al Bahar says.

"I knew it was going to become content for my studio. I knew very early on this chapter was the most important, because it's the one that addresses the leaving."



'Leaving is Home' (2022), an installation by Sawsan Al Bahar. Photo: Firetti Contemporary gallery

The chapter Al Bahar used for the installation is one of the earliest in Al Samhoury's memoir. In it, he recalls a youth spent in Jaffa, from going to school, playing with friends, winning a poetry prize. In many respects they detail an idealistic childhood.

The same chapter then chronicles his sudden departure from Jaffa for Damascus in 1947 at the age of 12 with his mother and six younger sisters. Al Bahar's grandfather wasn't able to return to Palestine for another 70 years.

The chapter details the stark contrast of his new life in Syria where he had to work to support his family as his father, who remained in Palestine, was unable to join them.

"This chapter is really about that sudden and very strong juxtaposition of happy memories at home and then suddenly finding yourself somewhere without money, without support and trying to recreate everything," Al Bahar says.

This change of trajectory in her grandfather's life is frozen and evoked on the floating sheets for visitors to walk around and examine, reading pages and connecting fleeting, fractured memories into some kind of whole.

It's not lost on Al Bahar that this chapter in her grandfather's life created a tangible and intangible ripple effect, not only informing his life but also her mother's and her own identity and understanding of heritage and home.

"We inherited leaving, we inherited waiting from our parents," Al Bahar says.

"They had to leave and home is always their memory and their stories. For us it becomes like a myth. That was really always in the back of my mind and this is why that theme of home is so central to my work."

The eight surrounding drawings examine another facet of this idea. Al Bahar's incredibly detailed works are formed from descriptions in her grandfather's memoir, such as a forest in Palestine or the school he attended.



'Forest Fire I' (2022) by Sawsan Al Bahar. Photo: Firetti Contemporary gallery

In an attempt to reimagine these locations, Al Bahar researched digital archives and other documented works of Palestine, until she found pictures that struck her. Connecting threads from her grandfather's memoir to the images she found, Al Bahar combined them into detailed, delicate drawings that make the second and crucial part of her exhibition. The drawings also include a combination of Al Bahar's personal memories and those of her mother.

A half-cut lemon in a bowl, a traditional Syrian dress, an old door from the Khan Asad Pasha district in Damascus — these intimate drawings are artefacts of stories she'd heard from her mother, markers of a Syrian culture that Al Bahar has been part of but has also lived outside of.

"When you're drawing, you're making an image out of dust," she says. "I find that really poetic. Drawings fade and age, they're not as durable as paint. They're quite sensitive, actually."

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Al Bahar has drawn these inviting images using a detail-orientated, laborious technique, treating the paper with an intention to translate a sense of reminiscence, of fading memory.

Surrounding and facing the installation, the exhibition becomes an intergenerational conversation of recorded and shared personal stories of place, time and home.

Sawsan Al Bahar's exhibition Talaliya at at Firetti Contemporary gallery in Alserkal Avenue runs until November 25

