Palestinian artist Dima Srouji on creating ‘forgeries’ of V&A artefacts

The museum invited her to respond to the collection. The resulting work raises diffcult questions — obviously

Copyright The Financial Times Limited 2023. All rights reserved.

Zehra Munir
SEPTEMBER 9 2023

Wandering the Victoria and Albert Museum's cavernous halls last year, the Palestinian architect and artist Dima Srouji felt overwhelmed. The fellowship she had been awarded, which invites artists from the Middle East to spend time in residence at the London museum, meant she was free to investigate whichever aspect of the space interested her most.

Srouji spent whole days walking the museum's 145 galleries, trying to absorb the range of its oferings. As time went by, she found herself experiencing an "almost spiritual connection" with the artefacts, one she suggests everyone who has been there feels, but especially "if there are some pieces from where you're from". A bust of a woman from Aleppo, "decked out in incredible jewellery", reminded her of her grandmother. So too did the glass perfume bottles displayed in the Medieval Gallery.

Srouji's new show, poetically titled *But She Still Wears Kohl and Smells Like Roses*, on as part of the London Design Festival, is the result of that time spent getting lost among the relics of her homeland. It comprises an abstract flm on the history of glass in Palestine, eight glass replicas of objects she found at the museum and a gallery "intervention".

When she was installed as a Jameel Fellow at the museum in 2022, Srouji, 32, had intended to catalogue its glass artefacts from Palestine and Greater Syria, and work out the stories of how they ended up in vitrines and storage units in South Kensington. After making "a very boring Excel sheet" containing every object she had found interesting, a (perhaps predictable) pattern emerged: "every single [piece] had a very violent history". That fnding inspired her to take a diferent approach.

Srouji is no stranger to violence. The child of an architect mother and civil engineer father, her early years were spent in the West Bank. Her family left for Qatar in 2003,

when she was 13. Recalling the years before the move — particularly the upheaval of the Palestinian uprising of the early 2000s, better known as the Second Intifada — provokes a soft intake of breath. “It was three years of living under the stairs and hiding in bathtubs and our neighbour being bombed, and not being able to go to school in the morning. It wasn’t an easy childhood,” Srouji says. “It was three years of hell, for sure.”

After completing architecture degrees at Kingston University and Yale University, she started her own artistic practice and began tutoring in city design at the Royal College of Art in London. Her oeuvre to date is at its core a response to Israel’s occupation of Palestinian territories. Her politically charged artworks, which use mediums including flm, glass and plaster, have been exhibited the world over, from New York to Jeddah.

Handblown glass vessels from Srouji’s ‘Hollow Forms’ collection © Cian Oba-Smith

Today, when we meet in her white-walled studio in a warehouse in east London, the artist wants to talk about how encountering those “violent histories” became a prompt for imagining alternatives. Sitting across from me on a spindly wooden chair, sheathed in a grey tunic-like top and surrounded by her delicate, otherworldly glass pieces, she explains what happened in the museum. “I started relating to some of the [V&A] pieces through my imagination, in ways that were speculative,” she says.

Rather than trying to reconstruct the exact histories of each artefact, she decided to focus on eight glass pieces, most of which were vessels that once contained cosmetics, and were owned by women in Palestine and Greater Syria thousands of years ago at the time of the Roman empire. Visualising the use of rosewater sprinklers, receptacles for kohl and bottles to store perfumes and oils helped her connect the timeworn objects to the present. “I found so much joy in that,” she says.

Her response was to create eight replicas of those same vessels, which are arranged on the shelves behind us. Some of the pieces — particularly the perfume bottles — are not much bigger than the palm of my hand. All glisten with a patchily applied coat of coppery paint, as if ready for their second, unexpected lease of life. They will rest on eight pedestals in the V&A’s Glass Gallery when the show opens on September 16.

They have travelled here via Jaba’, a tiny village in the West Bank, which is home to a group of glassblowers that Srouji has been collaborating with for years. Though glassblowing was once a specialist craft in the region, practitioners are now few and far between — a fact that has driven Srouji’s interest in the medium. Over the years, the artist and artisans have created a collection of handblown pieces titled “Hollow Forms”, as well as striking homeware objects which are available to buy online. For this show, Srouji worked with the group to bring the ancient rosewater sprinklers and perfume bottles she found such connection with into the now.

To ensure they were perfect copies of the museum objects, Srouji also enlisted the help of a family in Nablus, an ancient city nestled between two mountains in the West Bank, who make forgeries of Roman artefacts to sell in Jerusalem as well as on the black market. They usually save their labour for pieces purchased by unsuspecting American tourists, but the artist recruited them to paint and transform the glassware made by the Jaba’ artisans.

Replicas of vessels in the V&A’s collection . . . © Cian Oba-Smith

. . . crafted by specialist glassblowers from the West Bank © Cian Oba-Smith

It’s this inversion of value — the transformation of forgeries into pseudo-artefacts sat proudly on museum plinths — that is so delightful to her. “The original pieces . . . are worth a ton because they were excavated by a specifc person and have been in storage for a particular amount of time,” says the artist, who speaks with an academic precision which occasionally gives way to a more unfltered zeal. But Srouji is showcasing pieces that are made “by incredible craftsmen that are alive today”, she says, smiling widely. The point, she explains, is to suggest that the value of a rosewater sprinkler produced by Palestinian craftsmen today can match that of an artefact excavated by a Harvard University archaeologist in 1908.

To mark the absence of the eight objects she’s removed from the museum’s cases for the duration of the show, Srouji has designed “tomb cards”. These were used by a British archaeologist named Flinders Petrie following his excavation of hundreds of tombs in Gaza in the early 20th century. Each card detailed the objects he found with the exhumed bodies. “They were treasures that the families would lay in the tombs next to their grandmothers and so on,” says Srouji. The so-called “grave goods” were meant to follow their owners into the afterlife. In reality, “a lot of them ended up at the V&A”. Srouji’s own cards, which she terms a “gallery intervention”, refect her imaginings of where the original artefacts came from and where they could return to: the rosewater sprinklers and perfume bottles could “be used again”, for example, in her grandmother’s kitchen or her aunt’s perfume stand.

Meanwhile, the timber plinths that the reproductions will sit on were inspired by what goes on behind the scenes at the V&A. The design of the pedestals nods to the boxes and trolleys that are used by the museum to transport objects from one place to another. It will be, the artist says, as if the eight artefacts are “on their way home”.

Srouji photographed in her east London studio last month with a collection of her work © Cian Oba-Smith

Palestinians, she points out, don’t have access to these artefacts, unless they’re able to travel to London. So one day, she would like to bring her own reproductions home. “There’s something nice about making ghosts of the originals . . . imagining restitution in this way.”

But, I wonder, if she could, would Srouji send these pieces back to where they were

found? Her eyes widen. “Absolutely, there’s no doubt about that.”

Yet enacting such a return would not top “the hierarchy of immediate needs” for Palestinians, The Benin Bronzes and the road tothe artist notes. The priority for them is restitution “ending the occupation”, which has gone on for decades, with ever increasing land grabs by Israeli settlers and the demolition of thousands of Palestinian homes. “There are other places in the world where they’re not worrying about millions of refugees and they’re talking about returning objects. Here we are, still worrying about our own refugees [who] have left since 1948 and haven’t been able to return.”

It’s clear that she’s had this conversation before. Later, I email the V&A. What do they think of Srouji’s pronouncements? If she had it her way, wouldn’t the museum’s vitrines be empty? A slightly strained reply lands in my inbox. They are dedicated, they say, to telling the full story of the objects on display or in storage, “engaging with these important debates, and to acting as a conscientious steward of the objects in its care. As part of this work, we are committed to working with contemporary artists to support new responses to the collection.”

She hasn’t quite convinced them yet, then.

When we talk next, Srouji is at her grandparents’ house in Bethlehem, shooting her flm on the history of glass in the region, which will combine archival footage with scenes she’ll flm in the West Bank. This time, though, she is 10, 20, 30 minutes late to our online interview. I start to wonder whether I’ve been stood up. Then an apologetic email arrives, followed by a WhatsApp message. “I’m so sorry about the delay,” she writes. “I was stuck at the checkpoint for a couple of hours with no phone service . . . ” Why? Because the soldiers in charge of the crossing decided to give themselves a lengthy break from managing trafc, after the air conditioning in their shed stopped working.

The absurdity of life under occupation has fred her practice for years. But as time passes, she’s coming to a place where she sees that joy is important too. “I realised that I wasn’t able to produce work when I was in a good place,” she says of looking back over the past few years. “I felt like trauma was incredibly productive, and that I had to revisit really painful moments of my life, or dig into my family history” to make work. Drawing the world’s attention to the occupation through art is vital, but exclusively doing so defnes Palestinians as “occupied people”. “We’re so much more than that.” Ergo, the V&A show. “Kohl and roses — it just sounds like a party,” Srouji laughs.

Moulds and glass pieces on display in Srouji's studio space © Cian Oba-Smith

The artist's upcoming work — she has six shows planned for the next six months — further interrogates joy. One exhibition will be based in Cincinnati's Contemporary Arts Center — Srouji plans to explore the life of that building's late architect, the trailblazing Dame Zaha Hadid. She was taught by Hadid at Yale, for one brief semester. But Srouji's focus for this project is on the Baghdad-born architect's claim that the time she spent as a student in Beirut, in the lead up to Lebanon's civil war, was the happiest of her life. Srouji says she's "trying to fgure out" how that was the case, given that the period was so traumatic for the country as a whole.

It's a return to that same question, of how to live and work when disruption is embedded in daily life, when zigzagging trafc jams sprout up in moments due to the whims of soldiers. "The way to survive," she has found, "is through humour and fnding the absurdity hilarious, instead of constantly being destroyed by it."

Both times when I bid her farewell — once from the balcony outside her studio, and again over a sometimes-crackly conference line — my sense is of an artist in transition. Moving from pain to joy is a fraught process. So is telling stories of restitution, thousands of miles from home. Srouji has found one solution: to keep creating through it all.

Zehra Munir is the FT's opinion commissioning editor
Follow @FTMag to find out about our latest stories first

Copyright The Financial Times Limited 2023. All rights reserved.