



FRAGILE

Artist Dima Srouji works with glass, text, maps, plaster casts and film to uncover personal and political stories of Palestine. *Charlotte Jansen* discovers how her approach is taking her beneath the ground. Photography by *Benjamin McMahon*

HISTORIES

Sunlight cuts geometric shapes into Dima Srouji's new studio in east London. Out of the windows, the ripples of the Regent's Canal can be seen between the lattices of industrial buildings and Victorian gasholders. Inside her space, everything is tidy and serene. Shelves are neatly organised with various bodies of her elegant, organic-shaped vessels and homewares in clear and coloured glass. On a worktable, small-scale experiments are in progress, plaster chips and fragments still on their way to taking form. Usually, two assistants work here too, but today the architect and visual artist is alone. She proffers a box: inside is a constellation of jewel-like baklava, brought back from a recent visit to her native Palestine. I select a tiny slice and find it packed with all the richness of the region – layers of honey, pistachio and pastry.

The artist first left Palestine – physically – in 2002, after the Second Intifada (Palestinian uprising). At that time, her family were living in Bethlehem, where her mother, also an architect, was working on the renovation of the ancient Solomon's Pools near Bethlehem in 2000. 'We had two years of incredible bliss,' Srouji recalls. 'But right after that, the project was bombed multiple times, our neighbourhood was devastated.' Aged 13, Srouji and her family left for Doha, Qatar, where she attended an American school with children from military families. 'It was a completely different world. It felt like an empty canvas, after being in Bethlehem, where we had this intimate connection to the city.'

Srouji trained as an architect at Kingston University and then Yale. Although architecture was in her blood – her mother, four aunts and great-grandfather were all architects – she tells me: 'I don't think spatially – I was always more interested in making and collecting objects.' In 2016, she was working for a large architectural firm in New York. Then Trump was elected. 'The political environment made me question what it meant to be an architect.' She returned to Palestine for the first time in 15 years to find answers to some of the questions that remain fundamental in her practice. 'About how making can relate to politics, how we can work through a community of struggle, and what it means to do things together in a collective way,' she says.

PREVIOUS PAGE: Dima Srouji with some of her *Ghosts* pieces from 2019
RIGHT: the artist's open shelves display her *Alienation Knots*, 2020





ABOVE: testing tomb cards for the V&A exhibition *She Still Wears Kohl and Smells like Roses*, 2023
RIGHT: *Maternal Exhumations*, 2022



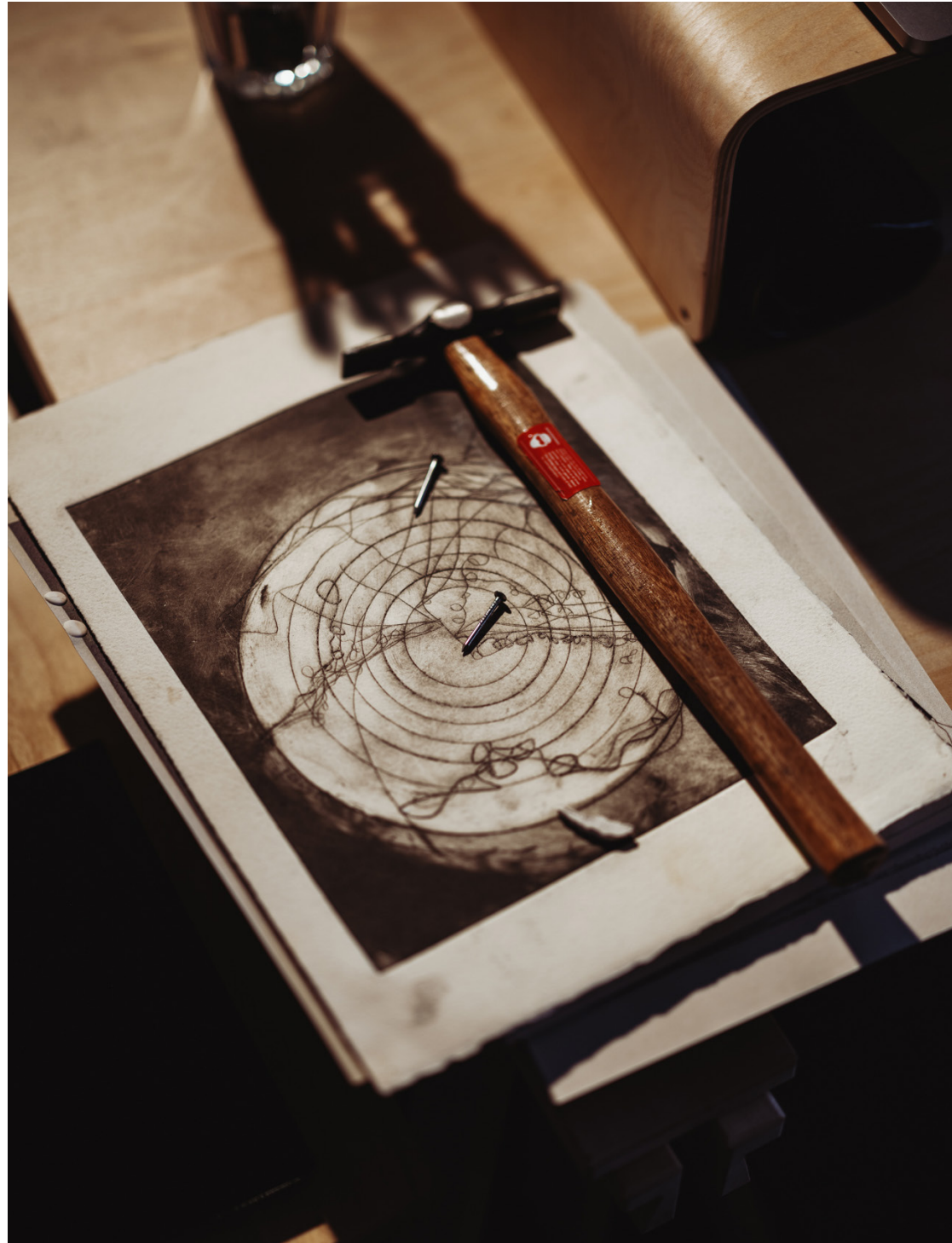
‘Creating a small bowl for olives or a glass for wine is just as important to me. I want everyone to have a plate from Palestine’



Srouji's practice has since expanded into collaborative design projects, often done in close partnership with archaeologists, artisans and members of her own family and community. When we meet, she has just released a collection of homeware, a new iteration of her project *Hollow Forms*, which reimagines a regional glassblowing tradition that goes back seven centuries in Palestine. It is an ongoing collaboration with the Twams, a family of glassblowers based in Jaba', a historic village north-east of Jerusalem in the central West Bank. Their first collection was showcased at Amman Design Week in 2017. The coloured glass vessels, in dazzling hues ranging from deep blues to turquoise and lavender, have an anthropomorphic feel. With thin, elongated legs and bulbous heads, the alien-like forms sometimes resemble deep-sea creatures.

Srouji first met the craftsmen in 2016 by happenstance soon after returning to Palestine, but three years into their collaboration, she discovered her family had worked with them before. In 1988, her parents had produced 600 vessels with the workshop as gifts for guests at their wedding. Inspired by this incredible connection, Srouji and the Twams made *Phoenician Pigeons*, a collection based on these wedding gifts. It comprises winding, whimsical, graceful shapes with a marbled texture found in traditional Phoenician glasswork, which was practised for centuries in the eastern Mediterranean.

When Srouji first started collaborating with the Twams, they were mostly producing beakers for chemistry labs and bongos for the Israeli market – but she recalls being captivated by their skill. She began to make more experimental, contemporary designs using 3D software, which she would share with the Twam family. The combination has proved very successful, with pieces exhibited all over the world. Srouji has fostered a relationship based on mutual trust that has allowed them to find a shared language. The latest collection of homeware, released in July 2023, is made in clear glass. There's a tactile dotted plate, and a tilted cake stand – a favourite of Srouji's – both playful yet



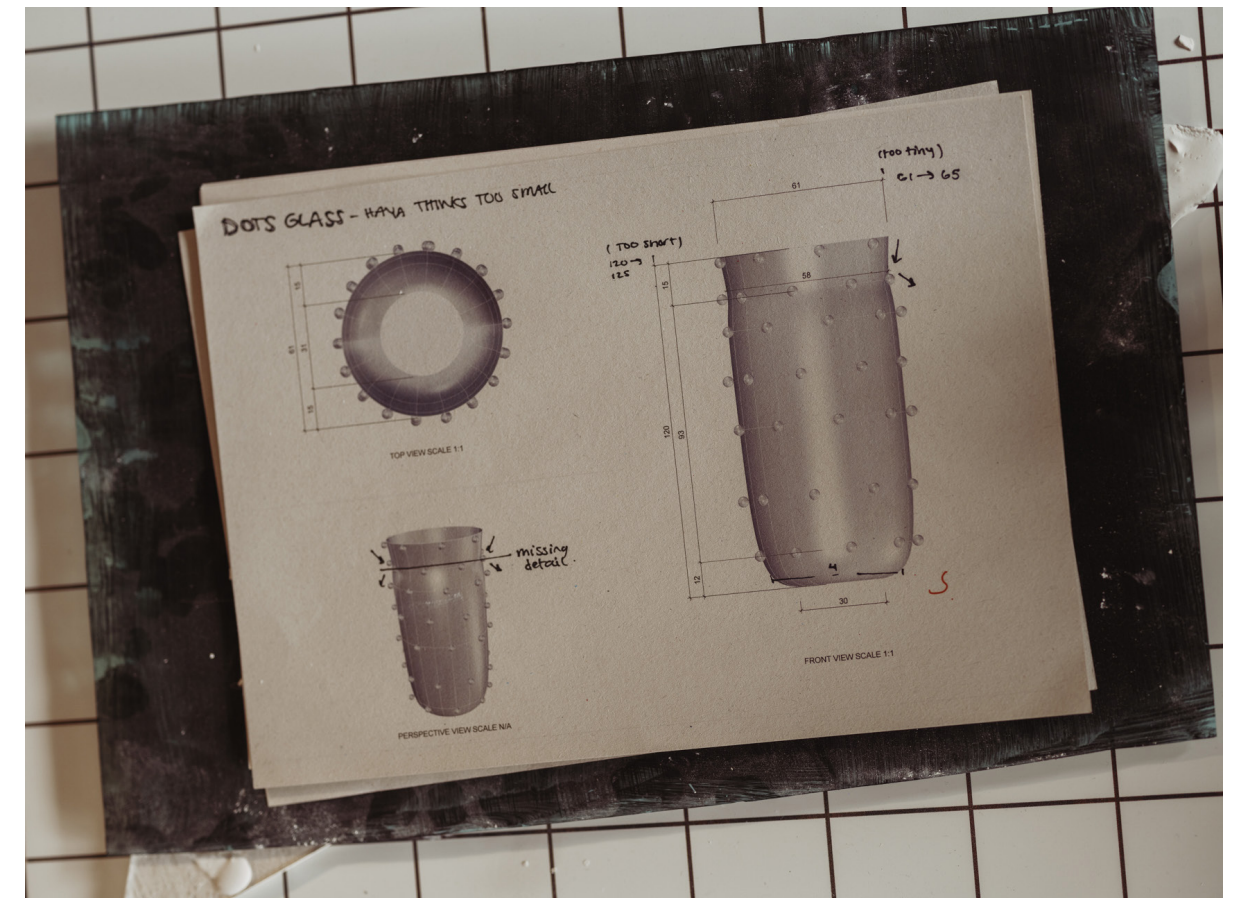
ABOVE: *Cartographic Imaginary*, 2016, etching of a crop circle in Gaza
RIGHT: *Maternal Exhumations*, 2022



ABOVE: *Alienation*, 2017

sophisticated. Priced from 30 to 300 USD, the homeware collection also represents something affordable that can be used on a daily basis. To reduce production costs, she simplified the designs and opted for clear glass, which is substantially less costly than coloured. 'They're still artworks, just more accessible,' she says. 'Creating a small bowl for olives or a glass for wine is just as important to me. It's also a way of addressing my anxiety about the industry being too expensive and inaccessible. I want everyone to have a plate from Palestine.'

From building up from the ground as an architect, Srouji's practice now looks into the ground, looking for stories in buried artefacts that might be retold as new objects, a film or an installation, evolving according to a feeling. 'I don't necessarily identify craft as making in a traditional sense,' she explains. 'I think there's a skill in making an object and in planning a building – but I like to blur those boundaries.' Her projects to date usually begin with a long period of research and exploration. 'The process of making is very emotional. There's a big conversation about tangible and intangible heritage, and how they're not so different – as you're weaving, you're meditating, you're thinking



ABOVE: process of making the homeware collection *Hollow Forms*, 2023, her collaboration with the Twams, a family of glassblowers in Palestine



LEFT: Dima Srouji in her studio in east London
ABOVE: *She Still Wears Kohl and Smells Like Roses*, 2023



ABOVE: picture of Palestinian women excavating Sebastia for Harvard University in 1908, from the Matson Collection Library of Congress

with your internal voice. It's the same with making glass,' she says. 'The process is so much about storytelling, it's a reflection of what the craftsperson is thinking about. The hands are an extension of the subconscious.'

I notice a photograph printed out and pinned to the wall. Srouji tells me it is central to all her works. It's an archival image from 1908, showing a group of Palestinian women carrying baskets of rocks on their head. The rocks are artefacts collected from an archaeological site in Sebastia, near Nablus, excavated by Harvard University with the finds to be sent to museums abroad. Forty years later, the people of the area were displaced too, by the Nakba (the destruction of the Palestinian homeland and mass displacement of Palestinian Arabs in 1948). For Srouji, it is a reminder of how intertwined our stories are with objects, and with the earth. 'In the conversation about restitution and the right to return, objects are often an afterthought.' It is perhaps why her process often involves looking into the earth. 'I'm definitely looking for the maternal connection in the ground somehow, and I try to articulate that connection to the earth in the materials I use,' she says. 'That's where I thrive – working with the land.'

For *She Still Wears Kohl and Smells Like Roses*, her exhibition at the V&A, part of London Design Festival in September this year, Srouji created replicas of displaced glass artefacts from Greater Syria from the museum's collection. Displayed in wooden cabinets, the vessels were made with the Twam craftsmen and were then aged by anonymous forgers in Palestine who produce fake antiquities for the black market. Srouji replaced the original objects on display in the glass collection at the V&A with tomb cards, accounts of their violent removal and often uncomfortable journeys. Srouji selected vessels historically used by women in cleansing, cosmetic and healing rituals, such as a rosewater sprinkler used to douse a bride as she exits the church and begins a new chapter of life. These bottles, decanters, pendants and vials, intimate in size, flecked with orange and turquoise tones, would have been carried by women and used on their bodies.

Srouji's research also explored her own matrilineage: interviewing her grandmother, and inscribing her personal memories of using a rosewater sprinkler into these delicate and fragile yet performative and perfunctory objects. The project is a homage to the past, the vessels imbued with human stories that are often lost, buried and displaced when objects are forcibly removed from their context. She sees the vessels as 'ways to communicate, as agents in creating conversation and storytelling'. In her own vision of craft, Srouji finds the possibility of continuing conversations, moving between past and present, and keeping long-lost and forgotten stories vividly alive.

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