

DIMA SROUJI

Through making glass objects and researching the history
of the land, the artist assembles new possibilities within
the past towards the future.

Words by Osman Can Yerebakan



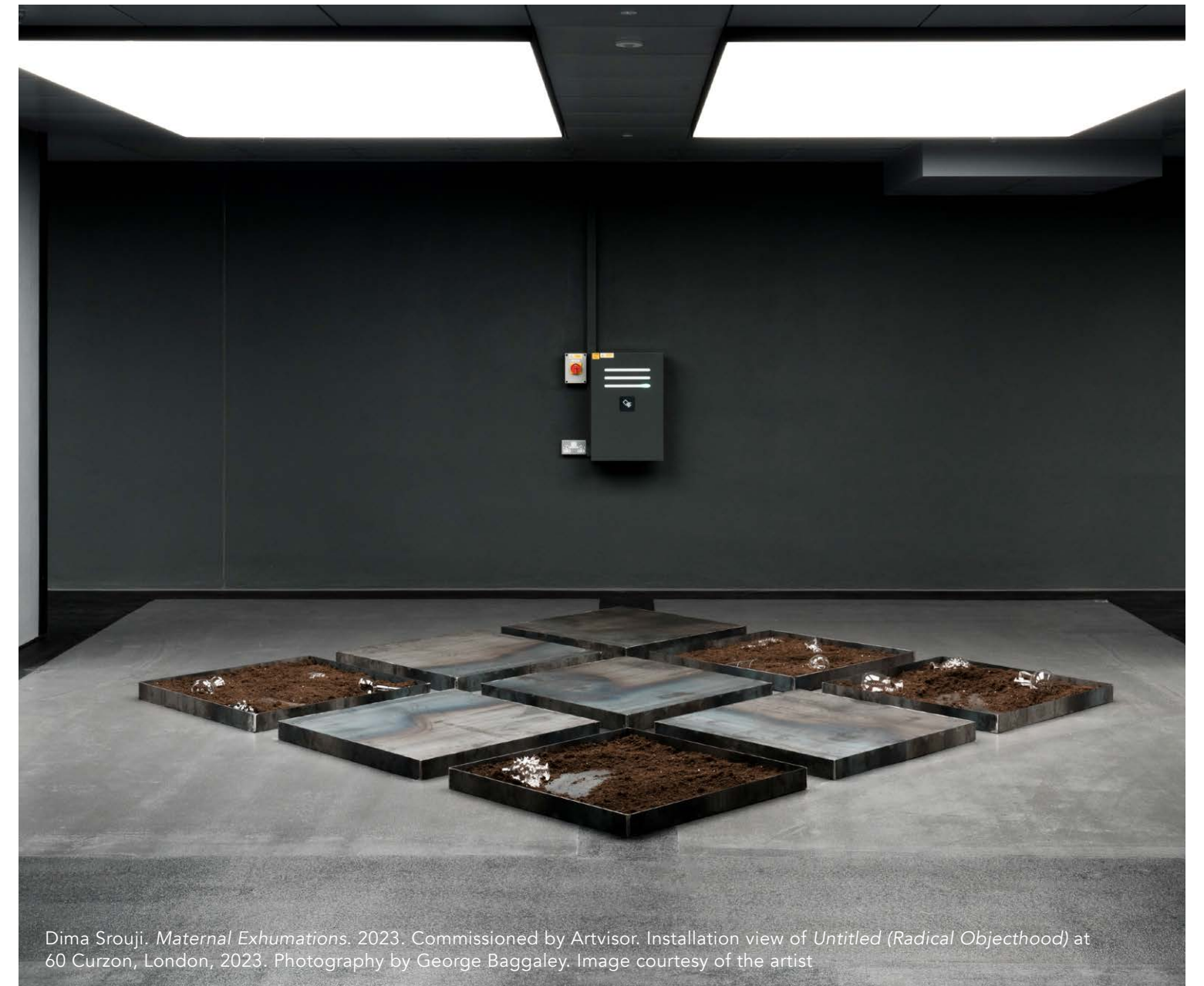


Dima Srouji. *Hollow Forms: Ghosts*. 2019. Hand-blown glass, variable dimensions. Image courtesy of the artist

For Dima Srouji, excavation – whether deep-diving into an institutional archive or exhuming an otherwise lost object – is not only about reaching a result. The intricate process of searching also echoes with a journey. “Digging is an attempt to achieve a moment of liberation,” the architect and artist tells *Canvas*. “The information I find also helps as a collective processing of trauma, an alternate state of liberation.”

Living between Ramallah and London in the last handful of years has expanded Srouji’s understanding of place and belonging, not only her own but also for the histories and objects embedded in the ground. Holding the year-long Jameel Fellow role at the Victoria & Albert Museum last year exposed her to the entangled ways in which the past is categorised, narrated and presented

through its objects. The binary assumption of value became crystal clear in her research into the museum’s ancient glass objects from her homeland, Palestine. “Why is a Roman era vessel more valuable than one made by a glassblower in Nablus last week?” she asks. The former is exhibited and protected under the roof of a lauded Western institution, “but the ancient vessels on view are not necessarily so different from the rosewater sprinklers or olive oil dispensers we use at home today,” she says. This realisation led to her show last September, *She Still Wears Kohl and Smells Like Roses*, presented at the V&A as part of the London Design Festival. A set of eight glass sculptures which she created in 2017 under her glass line, *Hollow Forms*, were replicas of Roman era cosmetics vessels from Greater Syria in the museum’s archives. Putting her



Dima Srouji. *Maternal Exhumations*. 2023. Commissioned by Artvisor. Installation view of *Untitled (Radical Objecthood)* at 60 Curzon, London, 2023. Photography by George Baggaley. Image courtesy of the artist

creations onto pristine pedestals, alongside a film about the history of glassmaking in Palestine, was an attempt to complicate the tactics of value attribution and hierarchies determined by time and power.

“There is so much value in the practice today that it shouldn’t matter if a glass object was made 400 years old or yesterday,” Srouji affirms. The application of final touches onto the glass to convey an aged surface was among many intricacies of glassmaking she learned at the hot shop. “I re-entered architecture in Palestine through my time with my glassmaking family,” she admits. Srouji has been working at the same family-run studio for eight years since returning to Palestine in 2016 after receiving her Master’s degree in architecture at Yale University. The process necessitated unlearning and relearning, a transition from her Western-centric

formal education towards a form of overlooked local artistry – along the way, she transformed her architectural eye for an immediately manual craft. “Glassblowing is very architectural,” the 33-year-old artist has discovered over the years. Between generous lunch spreads prepared by the wife of the glass master and with their grandchildren either running around or helping their grandfather cut glass, “it doesn’t feel like work – there is no way I would be able to do this with other glassblowers outside of Palestine.”

Srouji initially launched *Hollow Forms* on a mission to reactivate the glassmaking tradition in her country, “but soon I didn’t need to do so because the industry was already active.” The challenge the factories are facing is how to export their products, and most of the work coming out of the hot shops is sold to tourists on street markets as forgeries of ancient pieces. Srouji questions the

Dima Srouji. *Hollow Forms: Alienation*. 2017.
Hand-blown glass. Variable dimensions.
Photography by Mothanna Hussain.
Image courtesy of the artist



Dima Srouji. *Hollow Forms: Alienation*. 2017.
Hand-blown glass. Variable dimensions.
Photography by Mothanna Hussain.
Image courtesy of the artist



Dima Srouji. *Maternal Exhumations*.
2023. Detail. Hand-blown glass.
Photography by George Baggaley.
Image courtesy of the artist



“necessity of a contemporary approach” in revitalising the local industry. “Artists and artisans have been using the same techniques since the days of the Roman Empire and consistency in sustaining the history of the craft makes it function across the timelines.”

Direct engagement with a material that defies time and geography helps Srouji weave elements of her past, as well as the collective histories she is a part of, into the rigid transparency of glass. “I love that glass is made from sand – no matter where it is used, it is earthy.” From a heated furnace to a finished object, glass spans various materials, including what is encapsulated inside a vessel. “Glass isn’t exclusive to the material as we understand it,” she muses. “These objects are fragments that tell a larger story.” From the first mirror produced in Lebanon with materials brought from Palestine to the shards that burst onto the Beirut streets from the blast four years ago, history has subjugated glass to its evolution. Fragility and strength have been intertwined in this witnessing. Bullets coming through her grandparents’ windows is a childhood memory, but also looking back today as an artist and a tutor in the City Design Master’s department at London’s Royal College of Art, Srouji is also reminded of the material’s symbolism in history’s myriad fractures.

Maintaining the Sacred is a sculptural installation Srouji created for the Islamic Art Biennale in Jeddah last year. The vertical freestanding concrete and wooden structure is embedded with pieces of coloured stained glass popping through the ornate carvings on the surface. The contrast between solid concrete and gentle glass alludes to occupation and resistance. Srouji created

the work after Israeli forces destroyed 30 coloured glass windows at the Dome of the Rock and Al Aqsa Mosque in 2022. “It would take 30 years to remake those windows,” she calculates, “so there is this constant absurdity between maintaining the craft and being ignored as a valuable part of architectural history.”

Srouji’s 25-minute film *Sebastia* (2020) collages together archival and contemporary footage that shows the titular Palestinian town under archaeological excavation back in 1908 by Harvard University and bird’s eye views of it today under the control of the Israel Nature and Parks Authority. The research about the ancient town has shown Srouji that “ruins in Palestine are never stuck in a particular time, they are adapted to whatever political surface they are active in.”

Srouji took the decision to return to her homeland after Donald Trump’s election. Besides brief visits in the last two decades, she had not lived in Palestine since moving to Qatar with her family at the age of 13. Returns have been a part of her lineage, as with her grandmother who had left Palestine in 1948 for Jordan and later returned for her marriage. Srouji’s maternal story is a trait in the recent video she made about Palestinian glass, and after its debut as part of her V&A show, the work went on view last December in a group exhibition at Tai Kwun Museum in Hong Kong. “Whatever belongs to a land should be returned to it,” she says. Its home, she thinks, is the place an object best thrives in: “If there is a rosewater sprinkler coming from Nablus, return it to a family still producing rosewater; if a *kohl* bottle is excavated from Nazareth, give it back to a family still making *kohl* at home.”