

Sama Alshaibi: All the Things We Carry

In *All the Things We Carry*, Sama Alshaibi is present as artist, subject, and Arab woman. Throughout each meticulously styled scene, an arsenal of objects is transformed into stunning, sculptural headdresses. Alshaibi, who centers the Arab female body throughout her oeuvre, is intentional in fashioning the headdresses as vessels that are overwhelming, if not overpowering. They implicate a pervasive image, née fantasy, of the Middle Eastern woman—pious, veiled, gracefully balancing a water vase on her head.

Alshaibi interrogates clichéd props like the mashrabiya box and terracotta vessel rampant throughout the genre of 19th and 20th century ‘Orientalist’ photographs to call attention to how they have aided a Western gaze to romanticize, eroticize, fetishize, and other the Middle Eastern woman. Her artistic choice to carefully study and replicate the laborious photogravure historic printing process serves as a powerful act of rebuke. She retools a framework that has, over a century, rendered the Middle Eastern woman invisible or hyper-visible, which is its own kind of invisibility.

In some portraits, the sculptural objects allude to the labor of women’s work—glass bottles, serving trays, aluminum vats, water vessels—and the gendered roles of domesticity they signify. In others, we see craftsmanship and artistry—embroidery, sewing, weaving—manifested in spectacular crowns of jute baskets or spools of thread. In portraits like “Eternal Love Song,” the subject balances a hollowed-out travel trunk—an indictment of both historical and 21st century migrant crises that have engulfed women.

All the Things We Carry references a grave historic malpractice—the role of photography, both colonial and contemporary, in reducing the body, desires, indeed the very existence, of the Middle Eastern woman to a dangerous single story—one rooted in the primitive, in fear, fantasy, and objectification. Simultaneously, a closer look at the weight these women collectively carry reveal a restorative narrative where strength, might, grace, grit, resistance, justice, and vulnerability all take shape.

Sama Alshaibi: *All the Things We Carry* is curated by Grace Aneiza Ali, Assistant Professor and Provost Fellow, Art & Public Policy, Tisch School of the Arts, NYU.

Sama Alshaibi

Born in Basra to an Iraqi father and a Palestinian mother, Sama Alshaibi is Chair and Professor of Photography and Video Art at the University of Arizona, Tucson. Alshaibi is artist, activist, scholar and teacher as throughout her body of work she aims to upend the traditional lack of agency of Arab women in their depictions and create a complexity for Middle Eastern women's bodies and experiences by revisiting and re-visualizing historical and contemporary images of them. Alshaibi's oeuvre over the past twenty years has deepened our understanding of the women of the Middle East and North Africa, as well as critiqued entrenched misunderstandings that continue to haunt those very women today. Alshaibi has been the recipient of an Artpace San Antonio Residency, Arizona Commission on the Arts Grant, Arab Fund for Arts & Culture Visual Arts Grant, and a Fulbright Scholar Fellowship to Palestine. She is an 1885 Society Distinguished Scholar (2013) and in 2015, Aperture Foundation published her monograph, *Sand Rushes In*. Alshaibi holds a BA in Photography from Columbia College and an MFA in Photography, Video, and Media Arts from the University of Colorado.

A Note on the Photogravure Printing Process

Sama Alshaibi produced the portraits in *All the Things We Carry* using the photogravure historic printing process. Popularized in the late 19th and early 20th century, it was invented by William Henry Fox Talbot in 1852 and later developed by Karel Klíč around 1879. Alshaibi's photogravures use traditional intaglio printmaking methods whereby copper plates are etched by imaged-exposed carbon gelatin. These resulting image-etched copper plates are then inked and run through an etching press over cotton paper.

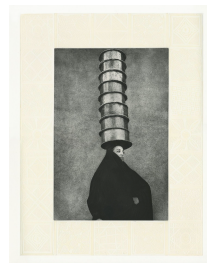
Works in the Exhibition



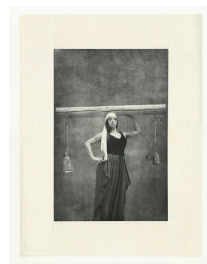
The Harvest, from the project *Carry Over*, 2019, photogravure blind embossing with transparent ink relief rolled on Stonehenge White 100% rag paper, Edition of 8, 25 x 20 inches.



Eternal Love Song, from the project *Carry Over*, 2019, photogravure blind embossing with transparent ink relief rolled on Stonehenge White 100% rag paper, Edition of 8, 25 x 20 inches.



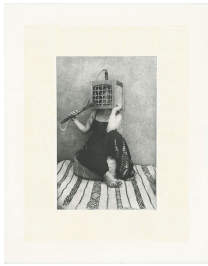
Gamer, from the project *Carry Over*, 2019, photogravure blind embossing with transparent ink relief rolled on Stonehenge White 100% rag paper, Edition of 8, 25 x 20 inches.



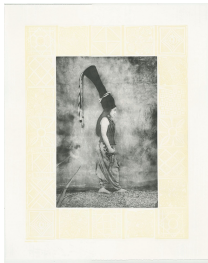
Justice, from the project *Carry Over*, 2019, photogravure blind embossing with transparent ink relief rolled on Stonehenge White 100% rag paper, Edition of 8, 25 x 20 inches.



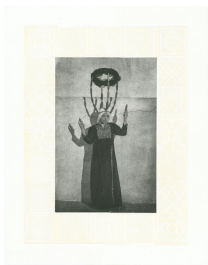
Marjanah, from the project *Carry Over*, 2019, photogravure blind embossing with transparent ink relief rolled on Stonehenge White 100% rag paper, Edition of 8, 25 x 20 inches.



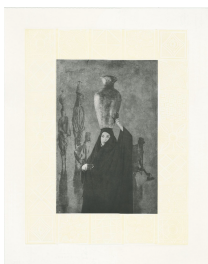
Mashrabiya, from the project *Carry Over*, 2019, photogravure blind embossing with transparent ink relief rolled on Stonehenge White 100% rag paper, Edition of 8, 25 x 20 inches.



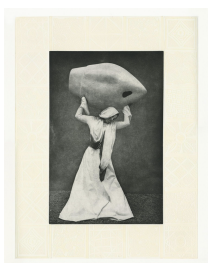
Sheesha, from the project *Carry Over*, 2019, photogravure blind embossing with transparent ink relief rolled on Stonehenge White 100% rag paper, Edition of 8, 25 x 20 inches.



Spools, from the project *Carry Over*, 2019, photogravure blind embossing with transparent ink relief rolled on Stonehenge White 100% rag paper, Edition of 8, 25 x 20 inches.



Standing River, from the project *Carry Over*, 2019, photogravure blind embossing with transparent ink relief rolled on Stonehenge White 100% rag paper, Edition of 8, 25 x 20 inches.



Water Bearer II, from the project *Carry Over*, 2019, photogravure blind embossing with transparent ink relief rolled on Stonehenge White 100% rag paper, Edition of 8, 25 x 20 inches.