

The National Pavilion of Syria announces artist, curator and concept for the 61st International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia

- Sara Shamma to represent Syria at the 61st International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia (9 May – 22 November 2026), with Yuko Hasegawa as the curator
- Shamma's presentation explores Syria's cultural heritage and Palmyra's diverse histories, while advocating for the restitution of antiquities looted during the Syrian War (2011–2024)
- This presentation marks a shift in format from earlier editions of the Syrian Pavilion, which have typically presented a group of Syrian artists alongside invited international artists



Left: Sara Shamma. Photo by Mohammad Azaat.
Right: Yuko Hasegawa. Photo by Keizo Kioku.

22 January 2026, Damascus, Syria: Sara Shamma will represent Syria at the 61st International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia, running from 9 May – 22 November 2026. Curated by **Yuko Hasegawa**, *The Tower Tomb of Palmyra* will be presented at the National Pavilion of Syria, commissioned by the Ministry of Culture. The pavilion marks a new chapter in the country's international cultural engagement following the Syrian War (2011–2024).

This year's presentation marks a shift in format from earlier editions of the Syrian Pavilion, which have typically presented a group of Syrian artists alongside invited international artists. It foregrounds a single Syrian artist, reaffirming the country's presence within the global contemporary art landscape.

Combining painting, architecture, light, sound, and scent, the exhibition will explore Syria's cultural heritage and Palmyra's diverse histories, while advocating for the restitution of antiquities looted during the Syrian War. It will feature a large-scale immersive installation inspired by the ancient funerary towers of Palmyra, which once stood as a crossroads of Greco-Roman, Aramaic, and Arab cultures, where communities of different religions and backgrounds coexisted in harmony, tolerance, and mutual respect.

Built between the 1st and 3rd centuries AD, the tower tombs were monumental family mausoleums rising high above the desert landscape. All were destroyed during the war, with hundreds of funerary portraits looted and sold abroad, transforming the towers into enduring symbols of cultural loss.

Sara Shamma said: *“Through The Tower Tomb of Palmyra, I aim to honour Syria’s cultural heritage and the resilience of its people. Palmyra’s towers, though destroyed, continue to speak to the strength and diversity of our history. This exhibition is not only a reflection on loss, but a message of hope, unity, and the importance of protecting and restoring our shared heritage.”*

Yuko Hasegawa said: *“Sara Shamma’s work transcends national narratives, using Palmyra’s history to explore universal ideas of memory, loss, and cultural resilience. The exhibition invites audiences to experience these themes through an immersive artistic experience, and positions Syria firmly within global contemporary art discourse.”*

The exhibition will be on view from 9 May – 22 November 2026 at the National Pavilion of Syria, located in the open-air courtyard of the Università Iuav di Venezia (University Institute of Architecture of Venice), Cotonificio campus.

Further details on the exhibition will be announced at a later date.

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About Sara Shamma

Sara Shamma (b. 1975, Damascus, Syria) is one of Syria’s most significant contemporary artists working internationally. Renowned for her emotionally charged figurative paintings, her practice centres on the human condition, exploring themes of loss, resilience, identity, memory, and displacement through psychologically expressive figures.

Shamma has exhibited extensively across Europe, the Middle East, and internationally, with more than 25 major solo exhibitions including *Echoes of 12 Years* at the National Museum of Damascus (2024–2025), *Bold Spirits* at Dulwich Picture Gallery, London (2023), and *Modern Slavery*, presented at King’s College London and touring UK cathedrals (2019–2021), alongside solo shows in Syria, London, Dubai, Kuwait, and Lebanon. Her work has been shown in leading institutions and venues such as the Royal Academy of Arts (London), Royal College of Art (London), Christie’s (Dubai, London), Bonhams (London), Sotheby’s (London), and international Biennales such as the Sharjah Biennial, Cairo Biennale, and Mediterranean Biennial. Her works are held in notable public collections including the National Museum of Damascus, British Council, and UAE Ministry of Culture, as well as private collections.

She graduated from the Faculty of Fine Arts at the University of Damascus in 1998 and has received numerous international awards, including Fourth Prize at the BP Portrait Award (London, 2004), and First Prize at the Waterhouse Natural History Art Prize (Australia, 2008), among others. In 2010, she was appointed a Celebrity Partner of the United Nations World Food Programme, supporting humanitarian causes through her artistic practice.

After eight years living and working in the UK under the Exceptional Talent Visa, Shamma returned permanently to Damascus in late 2024, reaffirming her commitment to artistic production, cultural engagement and renewal within Syria.

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Hashtag: #SaraShamma

About Yuko Hasegawa

Yuko Hasegawa is a curator and art critic. She is Research Professor at the Graduate School of Management, Kyoto University, and Professor Emerita at Tokyo University of the Arts. She also serves as Program Director of the Art & Design Division at the International House of Japan, Visiting Professor at the Research Institute for Humanity and Nature, and Artistic Director of the Inujima “Art House Project.” She is a former Director of the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa. She has received numerous honors, including the Commissioner for Cultural Affairs Award (Japan, 2020), the Order of Arts and Letters, Chevalier (France, 2015), the Brazilian Order of Cultural Merit (2017), and the Order of Arts and Letters, Officier (France, 2024). She has curated major international exhibitions and biennales in Istanbul (2001), Shanghai (2002), São Paulo (2010), Sharjah (2013), Moscow (2017), and Thailand (2021), among others. Her projects also include Japanorama: A New Vision on Art Since 1970 at the Centre Pompidou-Metz (2017), and Fukami: A Plunge into Japanese Aesthetics in Paris (2018). From 2006 to 2016, she was Professor at Tama Art University, and from 2016 to 2023, Professor at the Graduate School of Global Arts, Tokyo University of the Arts. She has served as Visiting Professor at Ca' Foscari University of Venice (2023) and Università Iuav di Venezia (2025).

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Hashtag: #YukoHasegawa