

Artists Talk

Sophia Al-Maria & Simone Fattal

The Law of the Father

Born on different continents generations apart, Sophia Al-Maria and Simone Fattal's worldviews collide in their shared invocation of the past, resurfacing through dreams, homesickness, and fragments of ancient verse. Vividly conjuring childhood memory and cultural mores, they explore their varied experiences of Arab womanhood, finding common ground in a lust to upend the linearity of time.



Photo: Kathleen Weaver



Photo: Bernice Mulenga

Simone Fattal

Sophia Al-Maria

Sophia Al-Maria: Being asked to talk about the subject of patriarchy, I sometimes feel a little confronted. As if it's pointed specifically to me as an Arab woman.

Simone Fattal: First of all, as an Arab woman, in my case, I was born in a family where I was the third girl, and I was told all my life that I was the third girl and if the boy hadn't come, it would have been a disaster for the family because of inheritance laws. If you don't have a boy, the whole fortune goes to the father's brother, or to the next male relative. To be told that over and over again as I was growing up was not a very pleasant thing, to say the least. On top of that, there was a French song that described this condition, and my father actually used to make me dance with him while listening to it.

SAM What was the song?

SF [Singing] *Je suis née dans une famille, où il y avait déjà deux filles. On attendait un garçon, jugez de la déception. Mon père a rouspété sur tous les tons, Ma mère pendant 8 jours m'appela Gaston, Marie ... Suzy aussi ...* (I was born in a family where there were already two daughters. We were expecting a boy, imagine the disappointment. My

father grouched all over the place. For eight days, my mother called me Gaston, Marie ... Suzy too ...). You see, I still know it by heart.

SAM The song was literally written about you!
SF I managed to escape, but you can never really escape it, because of the inheritance laws that inscribe these attitudes into familial behaviour. It's not as if you don't like the girls, but one has to have a boy, period. At least one. On the other hand, there is a saying in Damascus: "blessed is the mother of girls." But that's really about the actual good behaviour that a girl usually has towards her parents.

SAM Islamic jurisprudence is definitely a whole realm of patriarchal conversations we could talk about.

SF Laws are not about justice, but about the best way to organise a society. You have to put it into a much wider scope. In Europe, the laws were much worse because the eldest son used to take everything, and the other children got nothing. The good side of that was the protection and the perpetuity of the property that lasted until the French Revolution. Islamic law is not the



Simone Fattal, *Cloaked Figure*, 2009
Glazed stoneware, 34,5 x 10,4 x 11,4 cm

only one that discriminated between children based on gender.

SAM It's maybe worse, because in Western culture, the attitudes are more insidious, hiding behind a façade of liberalism. Last night I fell asleep listening to a recording of you, with a song by composer Annea Lockwood called "Thirst", where you're talking about your grandfather's house.

SF Oh yes. My grandfather's house, which for me is the symbol of happiness, and peace, consisted of a large courtyard in which all kind of citrus trees grew ... Beds of flowers, and a jasmine on the staircase leading to the upper floors. On the third floor terrace, a vine would be the final touch. A large cellar kept the food and jars with olive oils, olives, and all the other necessities. This year I had my corridor painted turquoise blue, the colour of his staircase. In the middle of the courtyard was a big marble fountain, there to refresh and entertain.

We would splash the waters to clean the floors and put out the watermelons on the water to cool them. There was a summer salon on the one side, open to the courtyard, with mirrors and impeccably white cushions, and the winter salon on the other side, always closed for formal occasions, which I personally never saw. The whole life of the house took place around the fountain.

SAM The description made me feel very homesick, actually.

SF Did you also have this kind of house in Qatar?

SAM No, but I have similar feelings about my childhood home, which was my grandmother's house. She was a widow. It was gender segregated, and I didn't know until I was twelve that I couldn't go to the men's side. Though there were very few men present, just two young uncles, who were almost never home. My experience growing up there was mostly with women, and also, it's a very drab desert. No orange trees for us. We did have some date palms and the feeling of absolute safety in a group. I loved this feeling of being safe in a group of people. I suppose that's the origin of forming tribes. I'm the eldest of ten from my father. So, the question of inheritance via the patriarch is very different and diffuse for me.

SF Yes, of course. I would also like to point to something in our culture that is not experienced in many others: polygamy. According to the particular topic of patriarchy, polygamy actually allows for a matriarchy to come into being. If a man has two women, for example, the children are differentiated by their own mother. Women gain a tremendous amount of importance and power for their own children under this system. So, patriarchy in our countries perhaps seems more flexible and subtler than in the West. What might at first glance seem like a disadvantage for a woman as the second wife can actually be extremely empowering. Of course, this really only applies to rich families, whereas when someone poorer has two wives, it's very difficult for the second wife because she has to serve the first wife, who achieves power with the arrival of another woman. That is



Sophia Al-Maria, *The Future Was Desert Part 2*, 2016
HD video, 04:35 min.

horrid. My father was so sweet and respectful. He never even gave me a kiss. He would never touch his children, good or bad. The power in my family was my mother's. What we should talk about is the power of women. I find patriarchy to be something positive if you compare it to the matriarchal systems that preceded it, because a woman has a lot of physical power as a mother, but of course, men exaggerated the power they gained.

SAM It's really interesting what you're saying about women's power, because patriarchy is not necessarily gendered. It can be performed by anybody.

SF Women are very, very strong. When they start using their patriarchal power, it can be intense, and often these women then overcompensate by being extremely strict. For instance, in my family, my father didn't really discipline us. He did not interfere, and I heard many times that it was also the case in other families. He let the women be the guardians of morality, of education, of everything pertaining to the household. The result was that a man was actually freer.

SAM In terms of our art, I feel like we share a

niche interest: ancient poetry but also creation myths, gods, and the like. When I look at some of your sculptures, archaeological artefacts jump out at me that have meant so much to me in my own explorations, trying to find different worlds. I was wondering in particular about creation myths and the idea of origins. If we're talking about patriarchy, we might as well start at the very beginning, with issues of fertility and how they connect to the broader conversations we're having.

SF Yes, but I think it comes to us because we live it. Whether you live in Syria or Qatar, it's the same. The past is there. You cannot avoid it. It's also in our genes. Everyone in the Arab World is brought up reading pre-Islamic poetry. The Great Odes of pre-Islamic poetry are all about crying over the past. They all start with that premise. It starts for me *there*. So lamenting or invoking the past instead of creating the now, the present, is ingrained. The positive side to it is that the past is always present. I cannot say anything other than what I always say: that this past is deeply present for me. Whether it is creation myths, or those that came after, or the epics, they all come from a shared origin, a



Simone Fattal, *Selene Holding Baby Dionysus*, 2019
Stoneware, 89 x 30 x 20 cm

Ancient poetry speaks of another world entirely,
and God is transcendent because we are in the
desert, there's nobody, nothing else.

shared land. The scars of it, the *athars* (traces), are there. My work is not about a different world than the one where it originates, nor is it a reflection or meditation on it. It just is that world.

SAM This is something that I feel is particularly inspiring about that space you've made and hold onto, because it goes against the usual assumptions, especially because we're both living in a Western context at this particular moment as artists, and make our art without directly referencing our geographic origins.

SF Yes, our heritage, all those epics that are unknown to many, because people go to foreign schools, they don't really know their own countries, languages, or epics. When I was preparing the bronze door I made for the National Museum of Qatar, I was sent a lot of epics to consult and read. Looking at them closely, they had the same heroes and names as in other Arab

countries, but the legend is slightly different. It's fantastic, to me, those tiny differences.

SAM I am feeling extremely frustrated by my own inability to read them properly. I went to an Arabic curriculum school for a while, but a Catholic one in Abu Dhabi – I know that you've also had experiences with sadistic nuns – and I think that the trauma of that experience is linked with the learning of Arabic for me and has made it very challenging to forge a more positive relationship with the language. I can read and write phonetically, I studied *Jabiliyya* poetry at university in Cairo, but I move very slowly through a text.

SF True, the ancient poetry speaks of another world entirely. It talks about nomadic life, tribes, living with animals, dying, coming and going back, and God is transcendent because we are in the desert, there's nobody, nothing else. Once you experience

Sophia Al-Maria, *Beast Type Song*, 2019
HD video, 38:03 min.



this and you understand this language, everything becomes clearer. If you read these texts in English, I don't find it as real. You must learn Arabic to be able to read it. You should also read the Epic of *Zbat El Himma*. This epic was written at the same time as *One Thousand and One Nights* and it tells the story of a woman warrior, Zhat El Himma, a name which in itself gives you the spirit of the epic: "the One who has the Spiritual Energy". She is born in Arabia as a princess and then becomes a knight. She is asked to defend the borders of the new caliphate in Northern Syria against the Byzantines and is an amazing fighter. There are many stories like *One Thousand and One Nights*, which are told with so much gusto, with sex everywhere, and a total freedom and irreverence towards religion. The big traitor in the tale is the great Cadi, i.e. the ultimate religious holder of the law! It's so modern.

Today you couldn't get away with its spirit. I've only read the first thousand pages so far. It is 8,000 pages long, and funnily enough, the great specialist on it is a German professor. Ideally, we all have to learn the ancient languages, because our heritage is in them – Arabic, Aramaic, and why not Assyrian and Sumerian? All these languages are linked. There is an archaeologist, a French man, Jean Bottéro. He was a priest and left the priesthood to become an Assyriologist. And he says his education as a priest, in which he learned Latin, Greek, Aramaic, Hebrew, Assyrian, German, and, of course, English, should be the same for everyone. He said that German is actually the first Assyrian language because of all of the early studies in German [laughter].

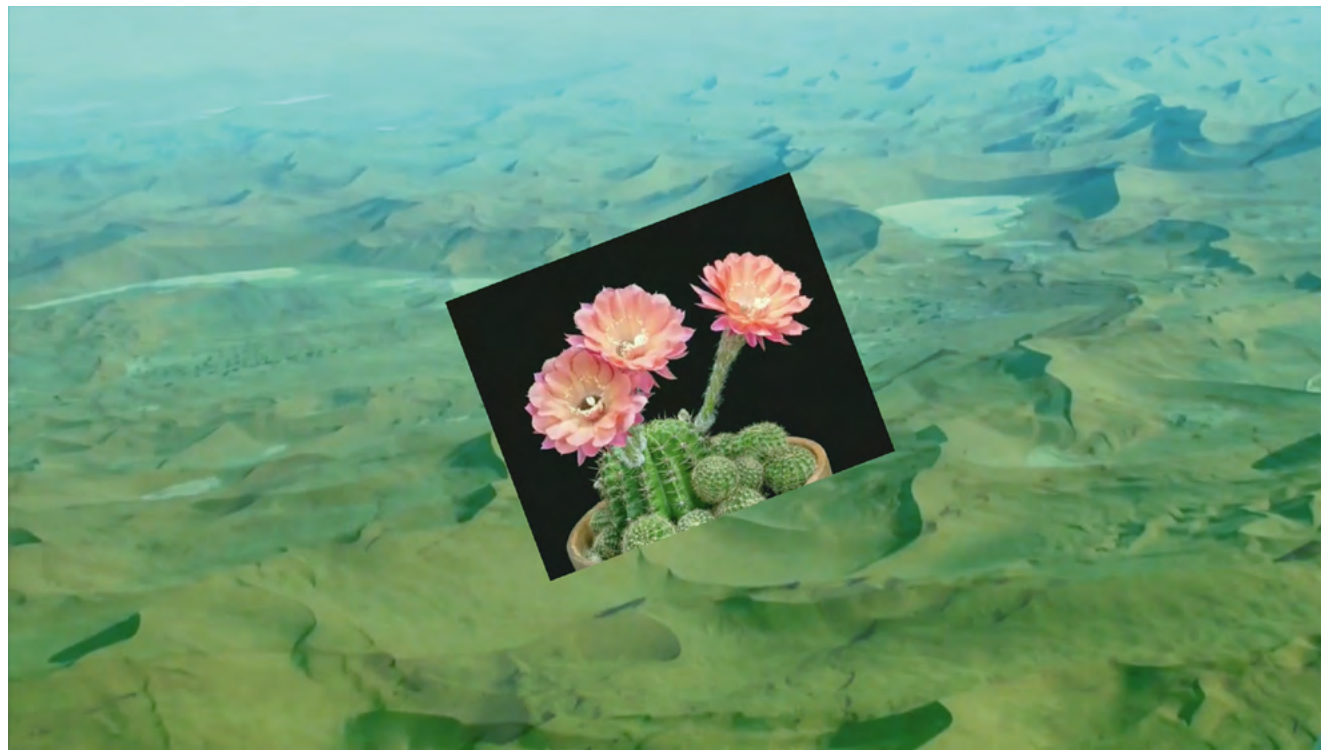
SAM You once gave me some advice that could have been from *One Thousand and One Nights*. It's a very beloved memory of mine. We met at a dinner and were talking about

Sophia Al-Maria, *Beast Type Song*, 2019
HD video, 38:03 min.



Simone Fattal, *Standing Man*, 2012
Glazed stoneware, 32 x 13 x 9 cm

This constant upbringing of our children made a woman's body a very heavy one, whereas the man was free, completely free.



Sophia Al-Maria, *The Future was Desert Part 1*, 2016
HD video, 05:17 min.

Yemen, and I told you that I had this can of honey from the area of Hadharamut in Yemen, where the beekeepers carry the hives on their backs and follow the flowers with the seasons. I told you that I was afraid to eat it because I worried I wouldn't be able to ever find this special honey again. And you told me, "No. You must eat one spoon every single day. And when you finish it, the war will end." So I have been eating one spoon every day and I still haven't finished it. It's a very large can and a very small spoon [laughter].

SF Learning Arabic is not really so difficult, it just demands an effort and people are not used to it. It also requires thinking and pondering. It's a language that's not a given. I don't know why, but the challenge of learning Arabic comes from the fact that they don't know how to teach it anymore. This is why many children just give up (they give up because they are given an alternative, i.e. a less difficult language, French or English). But in a country like Syria, where there is no alternative, people speak superb Arabic. On the other hand, I know of American professors who were so motivated that they learned it in three months. The

pleasure you get from deciphering it comes from this difficulty. It is always a discovery.

SAM It feels sometimes like it's a language that recedes.

SF Yes. I also wanted to talk about, not just patriarchy, but the emblem of virility – which is a man's penis, to put things clearly. It's something you see on all the walls in Luxor. In ancient Egypt, there was a god, Min, who is always represented with his sex erect, and he's represented on all the walls. It's absolutely beautiful. They worshipped this virility, strength, generosity, the life that this thing could give you: fertility. That image is a very positive one. It is also the obelisk, which of course you then see in Egypt and everywhere else.

SAM The Europeans trying to harvest the powers of everywhere else. The phallic power.

SF This is what they like about the boys, that they are the embodiment of power, and a long time ago, carried the possibility of earning a living for the whole family. The woman has a strong body that is virile in a different way. It's also heavy because she bears children. The process takes a whole year by the time you have the child, and in the old days, it used to be that you are

responsible for nursing them for two years. Every child would take three years of your life, essentially. This constant upbringing of our children made a woman's body a very heavy one, whereas the man was free, completely free. He can walk away. And come back if he wants. There is a dichotomy of the two worlds. It doesn't mean one should have power over the other. I like this difference. I like the way women are in their own right, in their own lives. Men are different. We have to accept it. I'm not one of those who wants to be like a man or take his role. That doesn't interest me. I am happy being a woman, in spite of my childhood where I was teased and reproached for being a girl. It was not a happy time, but you accept it. We accept a lot in our countries.

SAM I feel similarly to you in that I am a product of certain pressures and oppressions that come with being read as a woman, regardless of how I identify. I've been thinking and reading a lot recently about how gender non-conforming people have always been in our culture because it's so segregated. There's a text I came across recently called "Medieval Arab Lesbians and Lesbian-Like Women" by Sahar Amer. The title made me laugh but even more so I'm intrigued at all the history that's been so erased or literally covered up. I remember when I was living in Egypt, I heard about a case at Al Azhar, a very famous case, where they ruled that it was better for someone to have gender reassignment surgery then to live as a gay man. This person was religious, wore hijab, wanted to marry, and really wanted for all of this to be permissible under Islamic law. The attitude in the Islamic world towards such subjects is often less "binary" than it is in the West.

SF Yes, on so many issues like that, they are completely off. It's unacceptable the way they speak about homosexuality, transgender people, even race. But the discourse on sexuality is especially terrible. I don't know why they want to remain so ignorant. There was a great woman here, in France, Eva de Vitray-Meyerovitch, whom I met in Paris. She became a Muslim. She said, I don't understand you Arabs, you have everything: the Quran, the Arab world, the Arabic



Simone Fattal, *Young Man*, 2019
Glazed stoneware, 60 x 38 x 18 cm

language, and the Sunna, and you don't do anything good with it. You have everything to be intelligent and you are not. I think she meant that all these givens are great strengths, but do not result today in empowering our societies. What would she say today when we are witnessing the deviations of this heritage?

SAM It's true. It's so counterintuitive.

SF It's up to women now to start writing and having their own ideas of what they want for the modern world – what they think should be gender issues, gender relations, gender everything – within Islam, of course. If you speak from a position outside of the religion, it has no effect, but if you talk with them, understanding the way they think, and you prove that they are wrong, it could be fantastic. See what I mean?

SAM How?

SF We have to have more women writing about



Photo: Andrea Rossetti

Simone Fattal, *Angel I, Angel II, Angel III, Angel IV, Angel V, The Meeting*, 2019
Installation view, Punta della Dogana, Venice, 2019

the religion from their point of view, explaining the texts from a feminist perspective.

SAM Actually, there is a question that I have for you. The first works of yours that I ever had the opportunity to see in person was in Venice, maybe two years ago: *Angel I, Angel II, Angel III, Angel IV, Angel V, The Meeting* (2019). Robert Wilson's voice swirled in the space and along the walls were these beautiful ceramic angels in transit that made it feel like I was on the inside of some heavenly whirlwind. I wept a lot in that room. I've been wanting to ask, where do the angels come from?

SF Just by coincidence, I was reading a chapter in *The Meccan Revelations* (1203–40) by philosopher and Sufi Ibn 'Arabī about angels. That particular chapter, a short one, was saying that the angels listen to you all the time, and when we die, they will stand witness for what we have said. Not for what we did, mind you, because what is said is really what matters. This

puts the responsibility on what we say. Sometimes you do something because you are forced into it, or just by mistake, but when you say something, as you know, the word is so important. Then your real responsibility is engaged.

It hit me because at that time, in 2018, I was asked to do an exhibit at the Musée Yves Saint Laurent in Marrakech, "Garden of Memory". I was going to work with the poem "Conversation with my soul" by Etel Adnan, and Robert Wilson was going to read it, and I had to accompany it with sculptures. I thought the best way to accompany the poem was to have angels listening to the text. I created these angels passing by along the walls, like clouds, and we can assume listening to the words, as we were doing. I made them like Sumerian sculptures with ruffling skirts, as if the wind was going to blow them and make spin around. That's how they came about.

SAM I felt this really intense experience of



Sophia Al-Maria, *Beast Type Song*, 2019
Installation view, Tate Britain, London, 2019

temporal vertigo in that room at Punta della Dogana, similar to what I've experienced when encountering ancient rock art. The last time I had experienced something like that was in Namibia overlooking a canyon where the so-called Apollo 11 cave archaeological site is. And standing in the place where 30,000 years ago someone had been painting animals and mapping the stars, and probably pissing in the corner, I don't know . . . time completely collapsed on me, on itself. I think the angel warp in Venice collapsed into me, too. It didn't just collapse temporally, I really collapsed physically in that room, I couldn't leave. Maybe I was exhausted because of the Biennale, but it was a kind of endpoint for me, and I remained until they closed the space. It wasn't like a church experience, or any kind of religious experience. It just felt like completion – whole, generous, true. Very few experiences of art have done this for me.

SF Thank you, that's very moving.

SIMONE FATTAL is an artist born in Damascus, who grew up in Lebanon. Educated in Beirut and at the Sorbonne in the late 1960s, Fattal began exhibiting her artistic work in 1979, and fled the civil war in 1980 for the US, where she started Post-Apollo Press, an imprint for experimental writing. Her work has been featured at exhibitions around the world since 1988. She lives in Paris.

SOPHIA AL-MARIA is a writer, filmmaker, and artist. In 2009 she coined the term, "Gulf Futurism" to describe the rapid design aesthetic of the rapidly expanding architecture and art in the Persian Gulf Region in the 2000s. Her first book, a memoir, The Girl Who Fell to Earth (2012), details her childhood growing up in Qatar. She is currently tackling the 800-pound Gorilla of the movie industry by writing screenplays. She lives in London.