

YOSSI MILO

AZZA EL SIDDIQUE



Azza El Siddique's (Sudanese, b. 1984) practice encompasses various mediums such as site-specific sculpture, wall-mounted steel panels, clay vessels, and video installations. The artist draws inspiration from ancient Egyptian myths, Nubian dynasties, and the artist's personal recollections and community folklore. The exploration of these histories is more than a cultural reconnection or an inquiry into mortality. Rather, the resulting work serves as a mirror to the modern world, as it reveals parallels between ancient and contemporary systems of power and the inherent cruelty endured by the underprivileged and marginalized.

As time passes, her work undergoes unpredictable and evocative changes, driven by the elements at play. Water droplets engage in a mesmerizing dance, causing metal sculptures and unfired clay to oxidize, gradually unveiling alluring rusted surfaces. In parallel, the activation of heat lamps brings forth a profound metamorphosis in sculptures crafted

from bakhour, a fragrant resinous blend traditionally used in Middle Eastern cultures for its aromatic properties. Through the combination of steel and ceramic sculptures with ephemeral matter, El Siddique delves into her profound research on rituals, mortality, and memorialization.

Azza El Siddique has mounted solo exhibitions at Helena Anrather, New York, NY; Harbourfront Centre, Toronto, Canada; and MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, MA; among others. El Siddique has participated in group exhibitions, including at Museum of Contemporary Art Toronto, Canada; Gardiner Museum, Toronto, Canada; Green Hall Gallery, New Haven, CT; and Textile Museum of Canada, Toronto, Canada. The artist received the Creation to Realization Grant from the Canada Council for the Arts in 2021 and 2022, and the Visual Arts Project Grant from the Ontario Arts Council in 2020. El Siddique has participated in residencies such as the John Michael Kohler Arts/Industry Residency, Sheboygan, WI; and Amant and Silver Art Project, New York, NY, among others. El Siddique holds a BFA from Ontario College of Art and Design University in Toronto, Canada, and an MFA from Yale School of Art in New Haven, CT. The artist was born in Khartoum, Sudan, and lives and works in New Haven, CT.

ARTFORUM



View of "Azza El Siddique," 2022. Background, left and right: *Book of two ways*, 2022. Center, on floor: *Temple of a million years*, 2022. Photo: Sebastian Bach.

Azza El Siddique

HELENA ANRATHER

If, as science tells us, the universe tends toward chaos, then we may find relief in untethering ourselves from a linear, finite notion of time. The works in Azza El Siddique's solo exhibition "Dampen the flame; Extinguish the fire" leaned longingly into the possibilities of cyclical states. They flowed back into themselves and continuously metamorphosed, insisting that some things always remain in the wake of loss. Inspired by her research into ancient Egyptian and Nubian death traditions, El Siddique grapples with protean matters: the inevitable collapse of everything, what happens after life, and how we may find comfort in the face of mortality.

Inquiries into such grand themes can easily fall into stultifying opacity, but El Siddique's approach is surprisingly concrete and intimate. Making precise, discriminating use of materials such as steel and water, she grounded visitors in a hushed environment that roused multiple senses. Gridded armatures of varying scales demarcated the room, calling to mind the spartan outlines of a city and a cemetery. Their coldness was countered by the homely, cleansing scent of *bukhur*—incense made from fragranced wood chips—whose potent aroma filled the stairwell to the gallery. This offering transported me to a different place long before I opened Helena Anrather's front door. The show's themes of endless transformation and perpetual becoming were immediately recognizable as I entered the show, where standing like a sentinel on a steel block evoking a burial vault was a surrealistic cobra sculpted of dry stone and iron oxide, its long, zigzagging body topped by a head on each end.

But the focal points were three steel structures that functioned as carefully orchestrated stages for the slow yet conspicuous changing of matter. On opposing walls of the gallery stood *Book of two ways*, 2022, a pair of monolithic shelving units containing irrigation systems, developed by the artist over years of research. Inside them were vessels made of unfired slip clay that gradually turned to mush as water gently rained down upon and dissolved them. The resulting liquid muck, however, was reabsorbed and recirculated by the artist's industrial-looking altars, creating a cycle of disintegration and renewal that consistently returned the clay to a workable state. *Temple of a million years*, 2022, was another meditation on collapse, impermanence, and renewal: Suggesting a hazardous lab setup—or, as the title indicates, a scaled-down ancient sanctuary—this rectangular, stepped tank contained filmy, rusty-orange water that pooled around a central steel block. The artist set a trio of lotus flowers crafted from *bukhur* upon the block, from which plumes of smoke intermittently puffed. Warmed by heat lamps, the objects liquefied into sticky mounds of charred goo, their fragrance released to anoint observers. Intoxicating in its rawness, the spillage of stuff both visible and invisible was a visceral reminder of the interconnectedness of all things, and how presence endures regardless of form.

Life always leaves its traces—this notion is at the beating heart of El Siddique's work. *A dog without a master (Rust)*, 2022, a wall-mounted steel panel inscribed with a welded image of a fanciful creature in mid-squat, was the most overtly personal work here, as it re-creates a painting by El Siddique's brother, artist Teto Elsidique, who passed away in 2017. The tribute was a subtle but powerful refusal of death's finality. Across the room, a similarly crafted panel featured a depiction of an Ouroboros, that icon of perpetual motion and of time that loops into itself. In El Siddique's tableaux of

controlled ruin, empty vessels, and aching absence, one got the sense that the snake symbolizes less a belief in eternal life and more an assurance of a natural order in which whatever vanishes will always somehow return.

— *Claire Voon*

MOMIUS

Azza El Siddique Summons Life Beyond Death

BY CHELSEA ROZANSKY · REVIEWS · APRIL 19, 2023



Azza El Siddique, *that which trembles wavers*, 2023. Photo: Paul Litherland. Courtesy Bradley Ertaskiran.

Sometimes called an [alchemist](#), Azza El Siddique treats the act of making as just the beginning of a process that the artwork carries on. Her sculptures themselves have a collaborative hand. As a result, El Siddique's artworks make erosion, decay, and decomposition more alive than processes concerned with their prevention. This is doubly impactful: nestled within an artistic statement that feels so poetically charged is an urgent critique of museological approaches to the preservation of art.

Installed downstairs in Bradley Ertaskiran's Bunker space—with its low ceilings, exposed and intermittently tarnished piping, and partially cemented brick walls—her exhibition [that which trembles wavers](#) feels right at home. The goopy, uneven contours between the Bunker's brick and cement surfaces create materially harmonious frameworks for El Siddique's sculptures and installations. For instance, *Still waters* (all works 2023), a rust painting on a steel canvas, is displayed beneath the straight line of a row of bricks, the wall here creating a border for the work.

Walking down into the space has the feel of entering a tomb, but instead of encountering symbols of death, the works in *that which trembles wavers* are subtly and evocatively alive. They are unconcerned with your presence, like machines chugging on, or like the systems of a biological body busily at work on its own reproduction and preservation.

El Siddique made these works specifically for the space, and it shows. The steel beams that make up the massive sculptural frame of the exhibition's eponymous work, create a labyrinth-like grid resembling scaffolds or a cage. A large double-headed porcelain serpent sits in a steel water basin inside one of the grid's segments. In other places, the steel beams create cubes, framing the metal heat-activated chambers of Sandalia, a perfumed oil made of sandalwood, that sit within them. The steel bars also almost perfectly mirror the gallery's own exposed beams overhead.

An irrigation system draws water up from the pool surrounding the porcelain double-headed serpent, then drizzles the water in slow drips over the serpent's body. The porcelain will degrade and tarnish over the course of its stay in the Bunker and beyond, if it lives on after the exhibition's closure. A coiling pipe in the corner of the pool mimics the movement of the snake, which, according to the show's exhibition text, is a symbol of power that adorns Nubian and Egyptian artifacts. But what does it mean that this symbol of power from ancient Egypt (a culture which was once a superpower) decays in the gallery, or—if we are to take literally the visual simile matching the support structures of El Siddique's sculpture with the gallery's own—*because of the gallery?*



Azza El Siddique, *that which trembles wavers*, 2023. Photo: Paul Litherland. Courtesy Bradley Ertaskiran.



Azza El Siddique, *that which trembles wavers*, 2023. Photo: Paul Litherland. Courtesy Bradley Ertaskiran.

The decay of El Siddique's sculptures seems directly at odds with museology's interest in custodianship. Museum practices of care for cultural objects and artifacts traditionally take for granted the goals of preserving these objects in a frozen state and restoring them as closely as possible to their so-called original condition. But why is conservation such an important aim of the museum's? Common sense dictates that these practices stem from a respect for these objects and their culture of origin. But the history of museum collections tells us *otherwise*. Their provenance is often bound up in colonial violence, theft, and black-market trades. [Looting Egyptian graves](#) supplied many of the items in the current collections at our history museums. The provenance (or biography) of an art object tells us so much. Are these travels and transformations not also part of the object's life, each change not equally as meaningful to the artwork and our understanding of it as its initial shape?

Finally, museum practices are shifting to investigate and acknowledge their stolen collections, as calls for repatriation coincide with and accelerate reckonings around care and display. Around the time that the editors at *Momus* asked me to review El Siddique's show, news reports announced that the British Museum would no longer use the word "mummy" to describe the mummified remains in its collection, as the word dehumanizes and abstracts their histories. If not performed out of respect, the act of preservation might be interpreted as a power move. By freezing these artifacts in time and putting them on display—irrespective of the many culturally specific practices around care and conservation particular to these objects—conservationists often participate in serious acts of othering, disempowerment, and sterilization of cultural objects. What is so threatening about the aliveness (the ability to transform) of an art object? Are we trying to belittle the power of the culture of origin? To kill it? Or do any signs of decomposition remind us of our own bodies' capacities to decompose? Are we simply afraid of death?



Azza El Siddique, *Black Earth*, 2023. Photo: Paul Litherland. Courtesy Bradley Ertaskiran.

Previous exhibitions of El Siddique's have made a case for the close association of life and death as they exist in works of art. Her 2021 duo show, *fire is love, water is sorrow – a distant fire*, was a collaboration between her and her brother, Teto Elsidique, who passed away in 2017. Making art in response to paintings Elsidique produced prior to his death not only allowed El Siddique her own kind of mourning ritual but also activated Elsidique's artworks differently, breathing new life into them. Every time an artwork is reinstalled, new meaning is evinced through contexts, dialectics, and discourses. In this case, El Siddique created a sculptural frame to literally reframe Elsidique's paintings and produced sculptural counterparts—siblings—for each painting. She also worked with a computer engineer to make an algorithm that produced “speculative paintings” pulled from aspects of Elsidique's style, palette, and source materials. In this way, the artist's signature carries on after his death, allowing his paintings to reproduce themselves, similarly to how El Siddique's works become her collaborators by evolving on their own after she has crafted them.

El Siddique has said before that she attempts to understand death as a way to understand life. The Sandalia she displays in heat-activated scent chambers was used in Muslim burial rituals. Beyond death practices, scent summons life. Its evocative power to conjure the past can bring memories of our deceased back to us—like when a whiff of the perfume worn by someone who has passed brings them to life. The use of scent in El Siddique's art, particularly in these scent chambers (which, though open, are suggestive of glass display cases and their distancing function), provides a stark contrast to the sterile, deadened lack of scent typical of our museum experience.

In the Bunker, a triptych of black porcelain urns on one wall are made from the same material as cracked African masks hanging opposite. El Siddique's ceramics are unfired, so the clay remains moldable and changeable. To fire clay would be to preserve it, to finish it. Unfinished from the start, these works emerge through decay over time. Time, then, is another collaborator. El Siddique applies water in places to erode the clay, creating cracks in the urns that look like gashes, but the result is also distinctly vaginal, and sort of erotic. This happenstance process conjures the life-making motif of fertility. These urns are birthing themselves. And the African masks, though in pieces, are displayed on steel mounts, in an ironic nod to museum displays. The cracks contradict the myth of custodianship: the institution's best efforts at conservation, and the false facade of care and respect symbolized by these types of displays.



Azza El Siddique, *that which trembles wavers*, 2023. Photo: Paul Litherland. Courtesy Bradley Ertaskiran.

By juxtaposing her African masks with museum-style display mounts, the artist draws a direct link between museums and the violent histories surrounding the objects her work references. Here, the display mounts may even suggest that the violence of colonialism causes the cracks in the masks, which in turn reveal cracks in museology's own facade. Although museum custodianship directs care towards objects from different cultures, this care is not necessarily extended to the cultures themselves.

By showing us that her artwork is alive, El Siddique reminds us that a work of art, in general, is always alive. Despite museological efforts at preserving objects as if suspended in time, the life force of an artwork is inevitable, enduring, as time itself is inevitable, enduring. Time always brings change, even if an artwork does not physically undergo the kind of material transformations that El Siddique's do. As Walter Benjamin [reminds us](#), all art has an afterlife, signifying "a transformation and a renewal of something living—the original undergoes a change." Contained in an artwork's afterlife are traces of the history preceding and molding it, its realization in its own time, and its potential to carry new meanings as it maps onto a future history. This, we must nurture.

In the pool of water beneath El Siddique's serpent, swirling rust created pretty patterns, reminding me of how, as a kid, I used to look for rainbows in parking-lot puddles of water colored by leaking gasoline. Pollution causes decay but may also generate something new. The exhibition makes such a strong case for the idea that decay does not necessarily signify death and ending so much as life's ability to change and evolve. As we let go of traditional museological models of preservation, we may be able to engage differently with the material world. Leaving the exhibition, I noticed a rust stain on the floor of the gallery upstairs, and was struck again by the same sense of admiration I felt as a kid in parking lots. Rather than trying to preserve what is past, beautiful accidents alert us to our present condition. Let's not end with conservation. If preservation remains our end goal, we may be dangerously limiting our own ability to evolve. In fact, our final reading of *that which trembles wavers* may be ecological. Maybe, from civilization's ruins, we can birth new life.

YOSSI MILO

AZZA EL SIDDIQUE

b. Khartoum, Sudan, 1984

EDUCATION

- 2014 BFA, Ontario College of Art and Design, Ontario, Canada
- 2019 Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Skowhegan, ME
- 2019 MFA in Sculpture, Yale University School of Art, New Haven, CT

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2023 that which trembles wavers, Bradley Ertaskiran, Montreal, Canada
- 2022 Dampen the flame; Extinguish the fire, Helena Anrather, New York, NY
In the place of annihilation, where all the past was present and returned transformed,
MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, MA
solar evocation, Centre CLARK, Montreal, Canada
- 2021 fire is love, water is sorrow - a distant fire, with Teto Elsidique, Towards
Gallery, Toronto, Canada
- 2019 Begin in smoke, end in ashes, Helena Anrather, New York, NY
- 2018 let me hear you sweat, Cooper Cole, Toronto, Canada
- 2017 Concave Conflux Convex, Harbourfront Centre, Toronto, Canada
Lattice be Transparent, 8eleven, Toronto, Canada

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2023 Crusading The Specter, Yossi Milo, New York, NY
- 2022 Last Call, Bradley Ertaskiran, Montreal, Canada
- 2021 Greater Toronto Art 2021, Museum of Contemporary Art Toronto, Toronto, Canada
Praying on the name, King Fish Gallery, Buffalo, NY
- 2020 RAW, Gardiner Museum, Toronto, Canada
- 2019 Material Tells, Oakville Galleries, Toronto, Canada
Too full to cry, Shin Gallery, New York, NY
Ripe at Dawn, Green Hall Gallery, New Haven, CT
NADA Miami, Towards, Miami, FL
NADA Miami, Parisian Laundry, Miami, FL
- 2018 Art Toronto, Projet Pangée, Toronto, Canada
- 2017 An Orbit, The Drake, Toronto, Canada
- 2016 Non-Objective, Harbourfront Centre, Toronto, Canada
- 2015 Every So Often, Harbourfront Centre, Toronto, Canada
- 2014 Surface/Surfacing, Artscape Youngplace, Toronto, Canada
19th Annual Juried Graduating Sculpture Student Exhibition, Canadian Sculpture Centre,
Toronto, Canada
Chautauqua School of Art Annual Student Exhibition, Fowler – Kellogg Art Center,
Chautauqua, NY
Carrier: Out of Pocket, 1 Gerrard West, Toronto, Canada
99th OCADU Graduate Exhibition, Ontario College of Art and Design University, Toronto,
Canada
Process and Product, Make Works, Toronto, Canada
- 2012 Graft, Textile Museum of Canada, Toronto, Canada
- 2011 50th Anniversary Stem Cell Collaboration, Ontario Science Centre, Toronto, Canada

GRANTS AND AWARDS

- 2022 Creation to Realization Grant, Canada Council for the Arts, Ottawa, Canada
John Michael Kohler Arts/Industry Residency, Sheboygan, WI
- 2021 Creation to Realization Grant, Canada Council for the Arts, Ottawa, Canada
Amant Residency, New York City NY
- 2020 MSA Vision Grant - Mid-South Sculpture Alliance, Chattanooga, TN

YOSSI MILO

- Silver Art Project Residency, New York NY
- Visual Arts Project Grant - Emerging, Ontario Arts Council, Toronto, Canada
- Visual Arts Grant – Emerging, Toronto Arts Council, Toronto, Canada
- 2019 The Lighthouse Works Fellowship, Fishers Island, NY
- Susan H. Whedon Prize, Yale School of Art, New Haven, CT
- Rapid Prototyping Grant, Yale Digital Humanities Lab, New Haven, CT
- Skowhegan Fellowship/Residency Award, Yale School of Art, New Haven, CT
- Blair Dickinson Scholarship, Yale School of Art, New Haven, CT
- 2018 Schickle – Collingwood Prize, Yale School of Art, New Haven, CT
- 2016 Visual Arts Grant - Emerging, Toronto Arts Council, Toronto, Canada
- 2014 Ellen Adams Award, Ontario College of Art and Design University, Toronto, Canada
- 2014 Chautauqua School of Arts Residency Scholarship, Chautauqua, NY