

Naim's Sara's

Microscopic Memories

Words by Georgia Graham

I meet Sara Naim on a sticky Sunday in Paris. She's a London-born, Dubai-raised, Syrian artist living in Paris, and I am an overheated English journalist that has just cycled forty minutes in the baking midday sun to interview her. I arrive at her studio next to Sacré Coeur, perched high above the city, adjacent to the crowds of tourists jostling for photos, crepes and souvenirs.

Entering through a large cast iron gate, I pass beneath a glade of trees with a pathway running through to a collection of white buildings. The air is immediately cooler, calmer. It is the Montmartre site of Paris' Cité internationale des arts, an artist residency program that welcomes artists of different nationalities and methodologies to live and work in these quarters. Cosseted away from the bustle outside, the studios feel like sanctuaries, ironically more divine than the heaving site of worship next door.

Sara greets me at her studio. She is calm and elegant, and speaks softly but precisely. We enter her workspace, a large white room with a high vaulted ceiling and windows that run the length of one wall. In the centre of the studio is a workbench, on top of which sit the beginnings of Sara's next work: amorphous plexiglass forms that will become more of her hypnotic sculptural studies of physical sensations, boundary and being.

Sara brews tea and coffee, and offers me honey from her family's farm in the Lebanese Beqaa Valley, 1 hour away from the Syrian border. It's a gesture that nods to her Syrian heritage, a sense of longing for a place that is at once home and yet never has been. "It's a weird one because I feel sensitive talking about it too much in my work. I don't want to ride the wave of public interest," says Sara of her roots. "I want to be really careful of how I discuss it, because I am Syrian. But I feel that to a Syrian I'm not very Syrian, because I've never lived there."

Nevertheless, Sara's most recent body of work, *Building Blocks* (2019), intimately explores these questions of identity. "I looked at jasmine and soil from my grandmother's garden in Damascus, along with soap from Aleppo and flakes of my dead skin cells under a Scanning Electron Microscope," she explains. "I spent hours navigating this tiny sample at 30,000 times magnified, and it became like this landscape of who I am in a physical way. It was my way of trying to get closer to this place that is no longer accessible to me. The idea I was playing with is that the closer you look, the further you actually become, because you lose perspective."

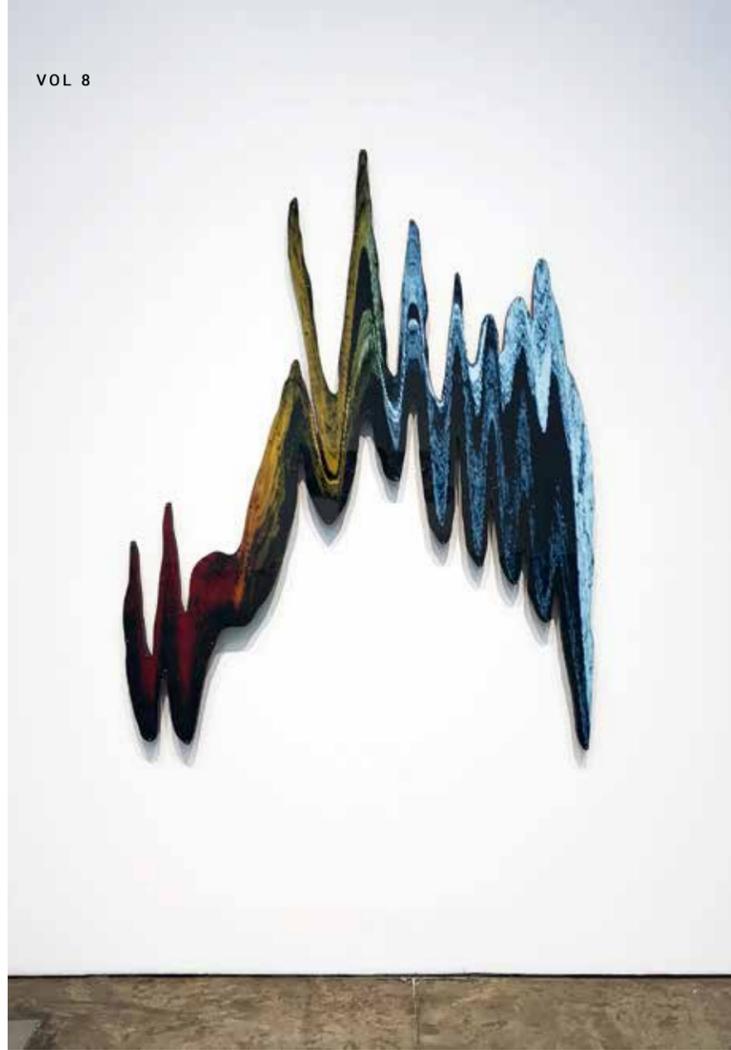
Much of Sara's work concerns itself with troubling the fixed notions of 'boundaries' — photographing microscopic details of her own skin cells to show how supposedly fixed borders are — in fact — simply different densities of matter. Whilst initially a process to discuss the fundamental interconnectedness in the world, the technique has since evolved to incorporate the subject of the conflict in Syria.



Waves, plexiglass, C-type digital print, 70x30cm, 2018



Installation, When Heartstrings Collapse, The Third Line Dubai, 2016



Form 6, C-type digital print, wood, plexiglass, 182x143cm, 2018



"Ten years ago when I was working with a microscope, it was purely as a way to talk about how the skin is not a barrier between your interior and exterior. Then when everything happened there, it wasn't only about the individual and their skin and those borders anymore... it's become more macro. Those arbitrary lines that divide countries and the politics those lines create."

"I think if you start to see separation and division in a way which is more true to the scientific truth — that borders don't really exist on that scale, they're just different densities of matter — then perhaps we'll be able to see the lack of separation between each other."

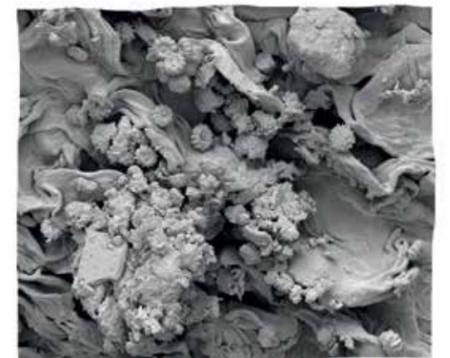
I ask Sara if she ever feels destabilised by these notions. By our nature, human beings enjoy the comfort and security of fixed categories, of order — it's arguably why we're all so obsessed with boundaries in the first place. Therefore does focusing her practice around deconstructing notions of reality ever feel confusing or overwhelming?

"I think it's the most stabilising thing," she responds. "When you start to go micro, where division becomes like an idea, as opposed to a physical thing, it makes you feel so interconnected. Embracing this idea of shared space, shared reality, shared existence — it sounds really hippie but I think it's the most grounding thing for me."

Again, the conversation returns to this idea of roots. "There are roots in this idea of interconnectivity," Sara explains. "You couldn't break a web in the same way you could with individual strings."

Stirring the honey into my tea, we look out across the garden. The surrounding plexiglass pieces seem to speak volumes. We finish talking, and I say goodbye and head back out into the Sacré Coeur crush. I feel like one of Sara's works, my edges blurred into the surrounding crowd, anonymous in the melee. It feels strangely comforting.

*I magnify your soil, soap + jasmine
with my dead skin cells, to smell
you again.*



I fucking miss you.



Blush, 66x99cm(x2), 34x99cm, 50x100cm, 14x99cm, 167x121cm, C-type digital print, 2016