



THE MOON *OR* MARS

*Syrian Paris-based artist **Sara Naim**'s colourful oeuvre dissects the perception between boundaries and proportion. Skye Arundhati Thomas speaks with the artist about her visceral assemblages*

OR
MAYBE
YOUR
SKIN

Reaction 13, 2017. C-type digital print, plexiglass, wood. 222x114cm.
Facing page, clockwise from right: Sara Naim; *Shudder*, 2016. 167x121cm; Naim's Paris studio, 2018.

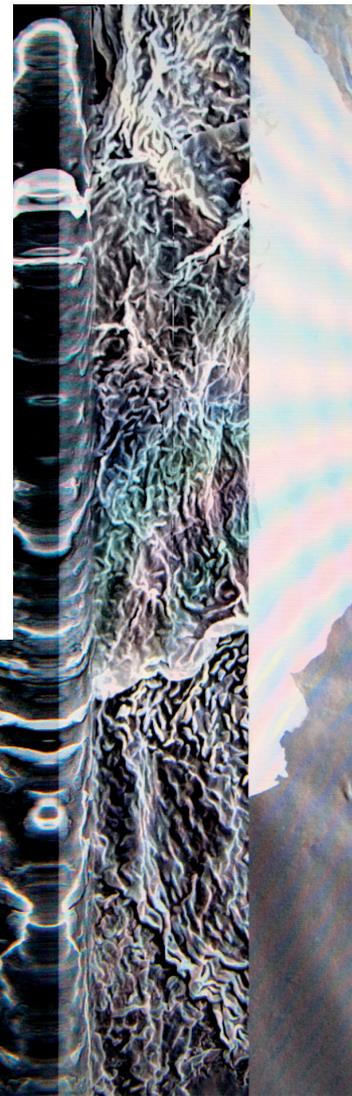
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n artist Sara Naim's installation *When the Heartstrings Collapse*, first shown at The Third Line, Dubai, in 2016, several curved stainless steel sheets sweep their way across the gallery floor. Held up by thick pieces of disused high-voltage power cables, the sheets mirror and fragment are all that reach their surface. On the neighbouring walls, large digital prints of bizarre, impassioned groupings cluster together. Each is named in dramatic pauses: *Tremble, Twitch, Blush, Chill, Choke, Pallor, Shudder, Sweat, Tense* (all 2016). There is something unnerving here, and this scene is prone to malfunction.

"Your face turns red when you blush, or

when you accidentally choke when you are surprised by something; or even when you shudder or twitch or tremble or sweat... All of these are translations of something internal being reflexively, and immediately, externalised," says the artist. This tendency for the human form to malfunction, or to glitch, is central to Naim's work. For the artist, it is the perfect analogy for our relationship to boundaries, and to our own bodies. Both boundaries and bodies, in her mind, are intimately attached. "The glitch became very representational of one's own experience with their own body," she says. "It is symbolic because it is saying something in a language we can't usually interpret. Each glitch is unintelligible, unreadable and totally different from the next." Form is elusive in Naim's work, and by entering one of her installations, we step into, and are held to attention by, highly abstracted and other-worldly terrains.

"Now when my hand touches material, it may seem that the two shapes that meet are separate, but in fact, on a cellular level, they are completely merged. It is more the meeting of different densities of matter," says Naim, flipping our perspective from the macro to the



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micro. Naim photographs her own cells using a Scanning Electron Microscope, and the photographs turn something that is minuscule into a grander, more deliberate shape; where Naim is, above all, "interested in visualising micro formations, and how proportion determines our definitions of boundary." For Naim it is not that boundaries dissolve when inspected on a cellular level, but that they never existed in the first place, "By going down to that scale, I am able to visualise a formal truth," she declares. Indeed, the work reflects this dissolution of boundaries—both formal and physical—where works placed on the wall spill onto those placed on the floor.

In the series *Reaction* (2016-18), soon to be shown at Parafin Gallery, London, Naim encases the digital prints in plexiglass and wood frames that she has made to fit the works' varying and quietly amoebic shapes. Here, her process is turned into something jewel-like, with visible layers of precious density. Rather than untidy, extraterrestrial geographies, we have round shapes that resemble the interior eyes of agate, amber, pink or bronze quartz. It is the deviant made delicious. Naim's practice is able to materialise such finished works only after a long process of abstracting single frames or images: when she is not using a microscope, she is photographing monitors that are in turn photographing samples, or even just exposing film to light and processing those chemical reactions by and printing. For her, abstraction is not just a treatment or medium, but it is her process, she says, "With abstraction you can provoke a discontinuity with the viewer, and it is





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both a visual discontinuation as it is a formal one.” Shifting not only perception, but also the formal nature of material is the ultimate goal in Naim’s practice, especially when it comes to the human body.

For the installation *Dialects of the Body* (2014), which was Naim’s final presentation as part of her MFA at the Slade School of Fine Art in London, she developed a narrativised multimedia display, which included digital print, HD video, screen prints and graphite drawings on paper. In one corner of the show, single-screen footage showed a close-up of Naim’s own face, silently screaming. “I filmed myself screaming a loud as I could for as long as I could without a breath in between, which was about 16 and a half minutes in total. I basically passed out at the end of it,” she says. As there is no sound to the video, as viewers we are only given the formal properties of her scream: the veins throb along her neck, her tongue quivers, beads of sweat appear and her eyeliner comes undone. “It is the ultimate breakage of boundary and I allow the viewer to project their own connotation to that sound,” she says. The panel next to the video is a red sheet, not just any red, but a direct RGB pigment match to the colour of Naim’s own blood. Naim uses such “averages” often in her work; the prints in *When the Heartstrings*

Collapse are all 167 centimetres tall, which is the average height of the human body. “Averages seek to make the human body uniform, which it is not,” she says, astutely referencing the ways in which the biological sciences seek to flatten and uniform the human body’s complexity.

Naim’s alien-like work often relies on its ability to surprise its viewer, “When the viewer doesn’t know what he or she is looking at, they are able to project their understanding of something onto the work.” She invests in that ambiguity, and hopes that once the viewer finds out just how close to home the images are, “It challenges their own initial viewpoint or preconception.” Naim’s treatment of the body is obsessive, almost forensic. Yet, in translating biological characteristics into glimmering landscapes and bejewelled cases, she is able to introduce them into the gallery space with an effortless, unsurprising ease. It is an exercise in dissolving boundaries, and showing how connected we are to everything around us. She says, “When I take the human form and abstract it to something so unrecognisable, I am able to communicate the fact that all spaces merge, and something which is internal, is always external. That the same thing that composes the moon or mars, composes your skin cells too.” ■



Silent Scream and S3060Y70R (Blood Code), 2014. HD video 14 minutes 31 seconds, acrylic.
Above: *Blush*, 2016. C-type digital print and funhouse mirror. Pentaptych two 66x99cm, 34x99cm, 50x100cm, 14x99cm. Facing page: *Reaction 8*, 2016. 119x78.5cm.