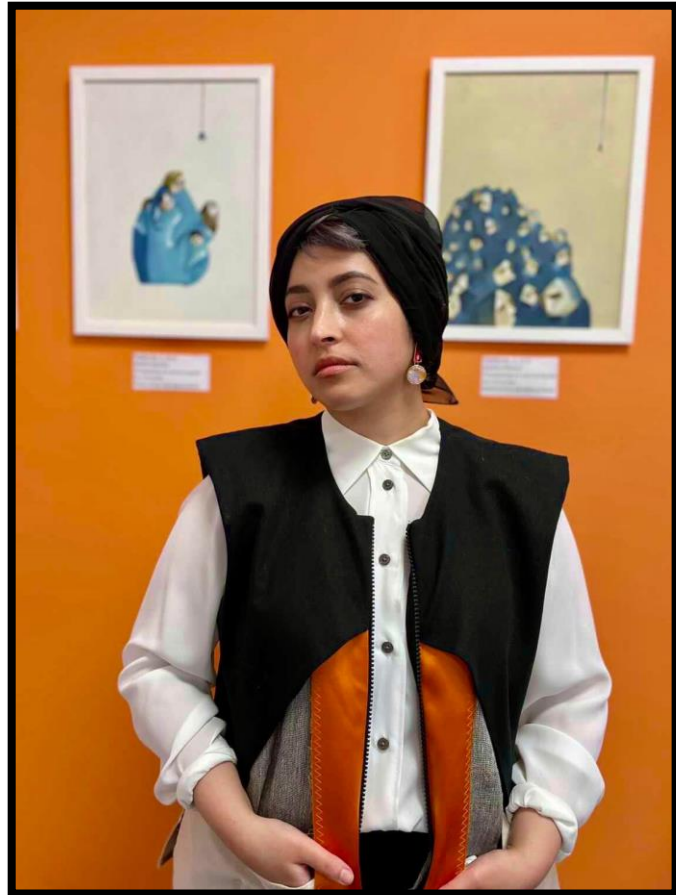


The White Canvas – Exhibition by Shatha Altowai

The White Canvas is award-winning Yemeni artist Shatha Altowai's first exhibition in Scotland.

In this series, Shatha addresses the issues that she has experienced and observed throughout her life in Yemen, specifically focussing on the last seven years since the eruption of the current war. She aims to highlight the lifestyles of Yemeni families living through the war, their solidarity, and how they seek to overcome the lack of basic necessities, such as food, water, electricity, fuel, and security. Her work conveys the contradictory emotions of strength and fear that Yemeni families grapple with as part of their everyday experience.

Shatha began to focus on the topic of family upon her arrival in Edinburgh, where she recognised how Yemeni families were forced to adapt to abnormal ways of living. The paintings presented here contain the emotions that this has elicited, and those she feels when she easily accesses and enjoys those basic needs in Edinburgh that Yemeni families struggle to attain.



Shatha numbers the families, rather than naming them, to reflect the attitudes of the Yemeni and international media, which reduce struggling families to bare numbers and statistics.

Shatha's work is mostly inspired by the music of her husband, Saber Bamatraf (see page 22 for more information on Saber's music). Together, they illustrate the concept of *The White Canvas* exhibition through the piece 'There Was a Family Here'. The painting is entirely white, with a simple texture that mimics the repetitive structure of Saber's composition titled 'The White Canvas'. Played on the piano using the white keys of the D minor scale, the music evokes a sense of melancholy and contemplation, encouraging viewers to look thoughtfully at, and engage with, the whiteness of the painting for a long time.



Shatha Altowai



Shatha Altowai is a Yemeni artist. She is an IIE-Artist Protection Fund (APF) Fellow in residence at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities (IASH) at the University of Edinburgh. Shatha has been creating art since 2014. She has presented at several art galleries in Yemen and beyond, and has won multiple awards for her art, including the John Byrne Award in April 2021.

Shatha graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Information Technology with Honours from the University of Utara Malaysia (2014) in Sana'a, the capital of Yemen. After earning her degree, Shatha held several administrative and technical positions in the Yemeni private sector. In 2018, she left those positions and decided to fully engage in her passion for art.

Creating art in a war-torn country, in which most of the population is dependent upon aid for basic survival, is not an easy thing. Even harder is the struggle to live safely and securely. Shatha has previously avoided touching on sensitive political and social topics through her art. Despite this, she has experienced hardships in her artistic journey, including serious damage to her house in 2015, and the threats she and her musician husband received in 2018 as a result of a cyberbullying campaign launched against them after the release of their short documentary film, *Voice of the Rainbow*. Nevertheless, Shatha has continued to pursue her passion in art and encouraging social change through her engagement in the artistic and youth community in Yemen.

Much of Shatha's work reflects aspects of life in her society, and the suffering caused by the ongoing civil war in Yemen. Through her figurative, cubist, and abstract paintings, Shatha seeks to shed light on issues such as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), women, coexistence, and families in Yemen.

Shatha has a shared art practice with her husband Saber Bamatraf, the pianist and music composer. Their marriage in 2014 was their artistic turning point. They have discussed their experiences as a married couple living in a very conservative society in a number of initiatives, including their TED Talk at TEDxLIUSana'a, 'Synaesthesia', and the documentary film *Voice of the Rainbow*.

Family No. 1

Oil painting on canvas board
2021

A mother holds together with her children amidst the noises of bombardments. Here Shatha depicts the moment when she and her family members first heard an airstrike approaching her surrounding in March 2015 hitting a neighbouring house, few days after the US-UK backed Saudi-led coalition has started launch attacks in Yemen.



Winner of The John Byrne Award

Family No. 2

Oil painting on canvas board
2021



Winner of The John Byrne Award

Family No. 3

Oil painting on canvas board
2021

A group of Yemeni families in a neighbourhood takes an underground shelter in a house opposite to Shatha's and her husband Saber's house, this was the case when the air raids intensified.

Here Shatha depicts how the neighbourhood women and children used to gather in a single house that had a basement, the basement was full because there was few houses that had an underground room. The men had to wait outside until the airstrikes stopped.

Unfortunately, that house was destroyed by 2 airstrikes in July 2015, leaving a number of casualties, and a huge damage to Shatha's house that led them to be displaced for 2 years.



Winner of The John Byrne Award

Family No. 4
Oil painting on canvas board
2021



Family No. 5
Oil painting on canvas board
2021



Family No. 6

Oil painting on canvas board
2021



Family No. 7
Oil painting on canvas board
2021



Family No. 8

Oil painting on canvas board
2021

A mother carrying her
infant, desperately looking
for food, between those
shaky walls.

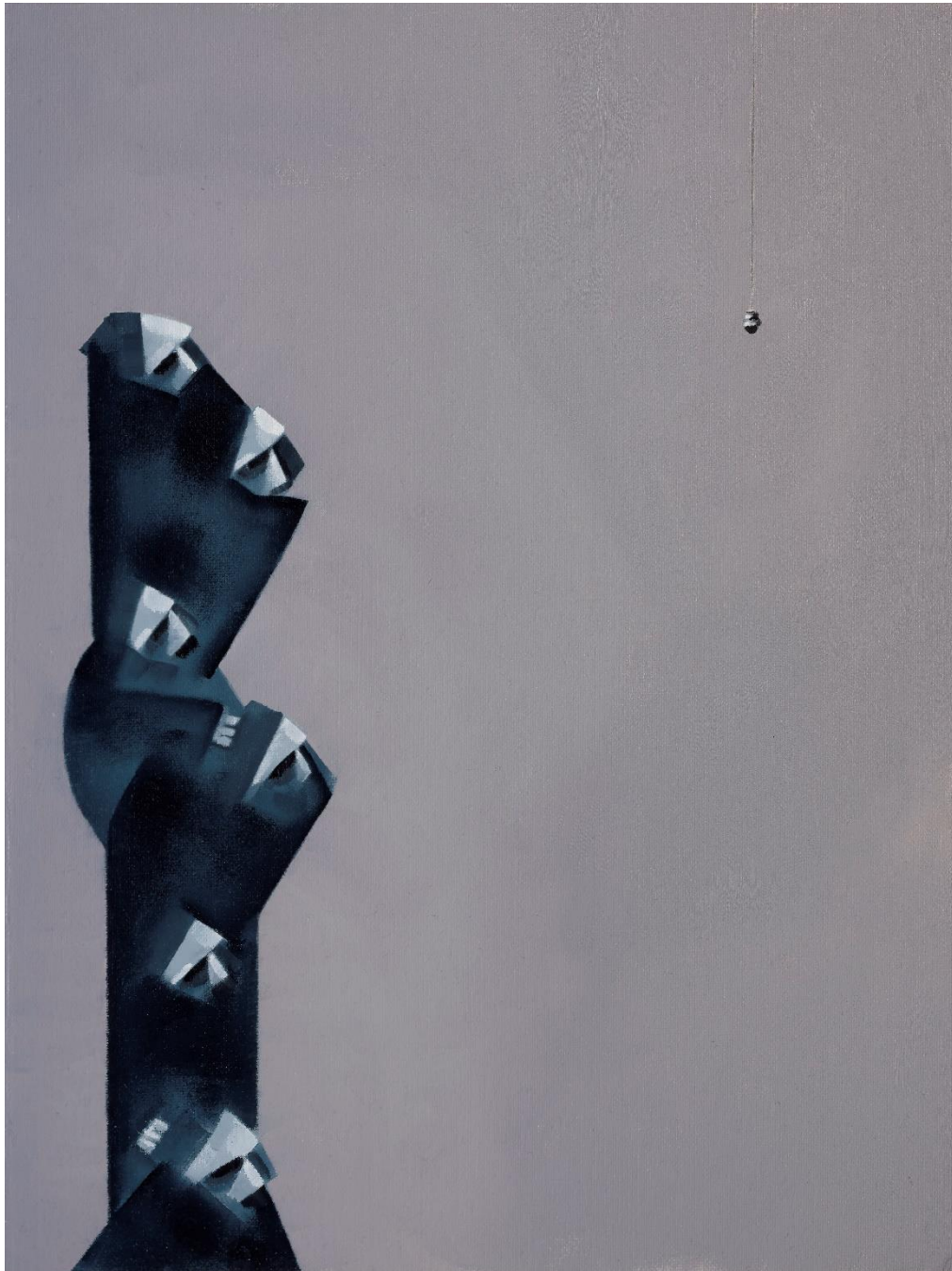


Winner of The John Byrne Award

Family No. 9
Oil painting on canvas board
2021



Family No. 10
Oil painting on canvas board
2021



Family No. 11

Oil painting on canvas board
2021

The war in Yemen has worsened the water scarcity. In many areas, the access to safe drinking water is very challenging on a daily basis. Sometimes people are queuing for more than 24 hours to get a share of water.

“According to hydrologists, the capital Sana'a will run out of water by 2025. This would make it the first capital in the world to do so” ICRC 2014



Family No. 12

Oil painting on canvas board
2021

Family members gathering around a single dish, wondering if this would be their Last Supper.

According to the WFP, almost 16.2 Million people in Yemen are food insecure. This raises the question that Shatha has titled on her entry that won The John Byrne Award: “What is more Painful? Hunger or Fear?”



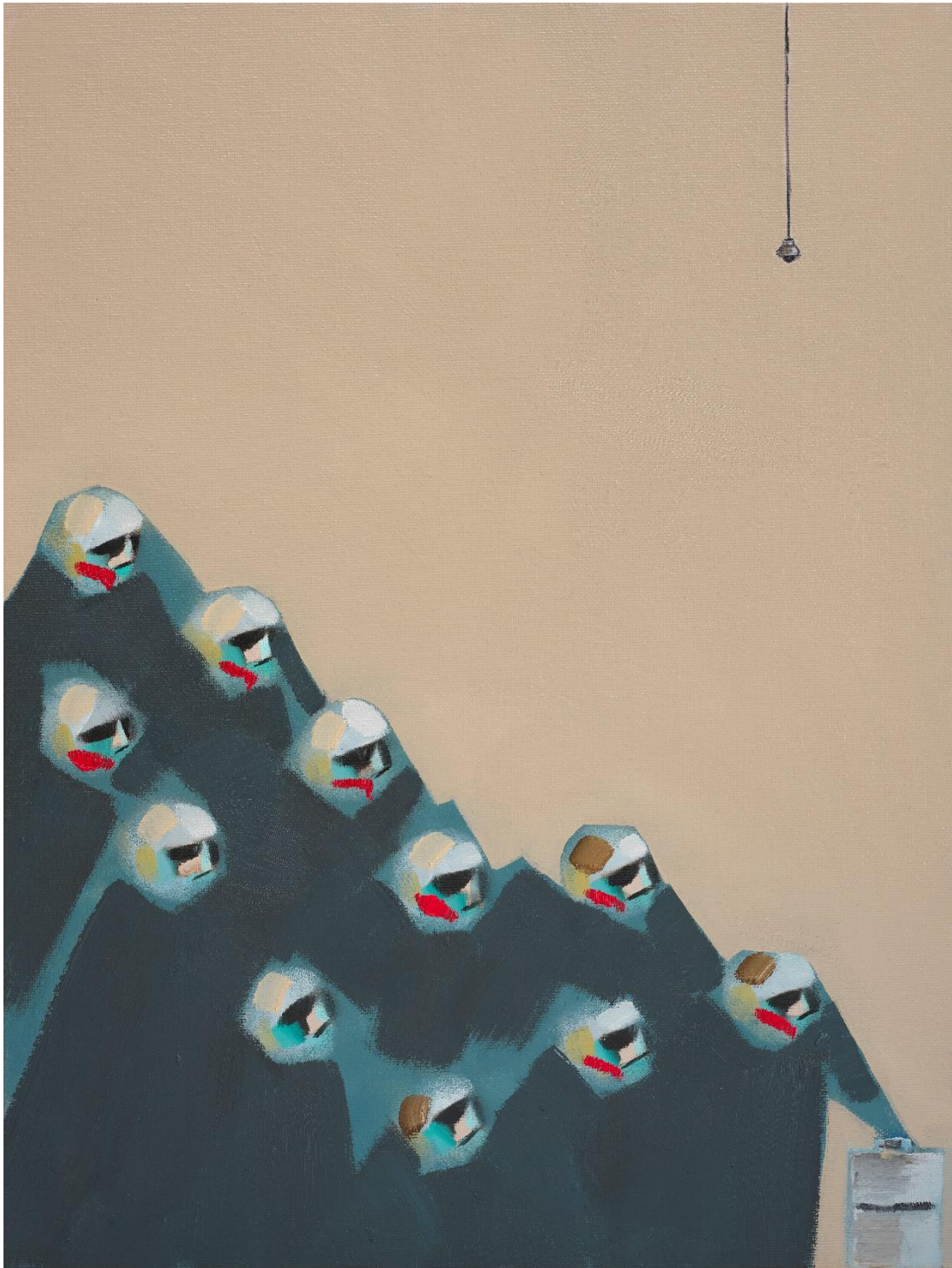
Family No. 13
Oil painting on canvas board
2021



Family No. 14
Oil painting on canvas board
2021



Family No. 15
Oil painting on canvas board
2021



The White Canvas
Oil painting on canvas board
2021

*There was a
family here...*



To know more about the painting, please listen to the music composed by the pianist Saber Bamatraf through the link below:

<https://distrokid.com/hyperfollow/saberbamatraf/the-white-canvas>



<https://distrokid.com/hyperfollow/saberbamatraf/the-white-canvas>

Saber Bamatraf

Saber Bamatraf is a Yemeni pianist and music composer who has participated in both solo and group musical performances and projects. He is a self-taught pianist who does not read music, but has played music by ear since childhood.

Saber graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Information Technology with Honours from the University of Utara Malaysia (2013) in Sana'a, Yemen's capital. He then worked for the humanitarian sector in security and operations management for seven years, while maintaining his voluntary community engagement in artistic, cultural and musical events.

Saber began focusing more on composition in 2014, with the release of his debut album *Turning Point*. He also began working to renew Yemeni folk poetic music through 'Yamaniat', a playlist he recently launched. Saber works to reconceptualise the Yemeni work spread throughout Arabia by focusing solely on instrumentals. This way, he attempts to represent the Yemeni musical legacy and heritage in a style that can be enjoyed worldwide.

Saber has been awarded an IIE- Artist Protection Fund (APF) Fellowship 2020-21. He is in residence at IASH.



Saber's latest album release, *Embrace from Edinburgh*, is available on all digital platforms through the QR code below. It contains seven New Age tracks that Saber has composed since arriving in Edinburgh. In this album, he expresses the inspiration he has drawn from living in a peaceful environment, and the sense of courage and hope he has felt while immersed in the natural and historic Edinburgh landscape, after six traumatic years of uncertainty in a war-torn country.



<https://distrokid.com/hyperfollow/saberbamatraf/embrace-from-edinburgh-2>