

# Henry

## SOPHIA AL-MARIA: NOT MY BAG Jul 22, 2023 – Jan 14, 2024



Sophia Al-Maria, *Beast Type Song*, 2019. Single-channel video (HD video, color, sound); 38:03 mins., Courtesy of the artist, Anna Lena Films, Paris and Project Native Informant, London.

Seattle, WA (May 2, 2023)— Sophia Al-Maria (b. 1983, Tacoma, WA; lives and works in London) is a Qatari-American artist, writer, and filmmaker whose work addresses the enduring orientalist gaze and legacies of colonialism in contemporary culture and society. *Not My Bag* brings together for the first time Al-Maria's recent trilogy of films: *Beast Type Song* (2019), *Tender Point Ruin* (2021), and *Tiger Strike Red* (2022), alongside collage-based works. This will be Al-Maria's first exhibition in the Pacific Northwest, a region central to shaping the artist's youth and the trajectory of her art practice.

Drawing from a range of sources including Arab literature, American pop culture, and experimental punk cinema, Al-Maria creates multilayered narratives that weave connections across time and place. She braids together the personal with the geopolitical, engaging a process that interrogates the writing of history and generates alternative visions for the future.

Her recent trilogy of films investigates the violence of empire across individual and generational time scales, as well as the persistence of the creative and rebellious spirit amid the ruins of crisis. Filmed in the derelict former campus of a legendary art school in London, *Beast Type Song* entangles individual stories of violation and resistance within a meta-narrative, science-fiction solar battle inspired by Etel Adnan's book-length poem *Arab Apocalypse* (1989). The structure of this film follows a process of script writing and editing that resonates with Al-Maria's

pervasive interest in the writing and rewriting of history. The second film in the trilogy, *Tender Point Ruin*, combines found and made footage, and intertwines multiple forms of longing and loss. The title references the language of love and heartbreak in Adnan's poetry, as well as in Egyptian author Ibrahim Nagi's poem *Al-Atlal* (1944), or "The Ruins," which legendary Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum adapted into a celebrated song of Arab culture in the 1960s. The culminating film, *Tiger Strike Red*, premiered at the 2022 Venice Biennale. Filmed inside the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London, it confronts legacies of British Empire, desire, and fantasy through practices of collecting and categorizing. The film inverts hierarchies of order and power and takes its name from *Tippoo's Tiger*, a mechanical sculpture in the V&A's collection made for Tipu Sultan, an eighteenth-century ruler of Mysore in South India, which depicts a tiger mauling a European soldier.

Alongside the films, Al-Maria will present a group of new collages. These collages express the ways cultural fragmentation and memory, both personal and collective, form interconnections across Al-Maria's work. In one gallery, a collection of over fifty images, script notes, and film production ephemera will extend across the walls, creating an index of references that show the process of generating both story and subjectivity. Included among the collage materials are personal childhood drawings and photographs related to Al-Maria's experience of growing up between Washington State and the Middle East.

The title, *Not My Bag*, is indicative of Al-Maria's layered use of language, evoking a colloquial phrase of disavowal, while also alluding to Ursula K. Le Guin's book *Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, in which Le Guin advocates for writing narratives that hold the multiplicity of human experience. This metaphor of the bag recurs throughout Al-Maria's work and points to her refusal of monolithic hero stories in favor of narratives that enfold the complex entanglements of pain and beauty that comprise the continual process of being and existing together on Earth.



Sophia Al-Maria, Installation view of *Tiger Strike Red*, 2022, La Biennale de Venezia, V&A Pavilion of Applied Arts. Photo: Sebastiano Pellion di Persano, courtesy of the artist and Project Native Informant, London.

## ARTIST BIO

Born 1983 in Tacoma, WA; lives and works in London

Sophia Al-Maria is a Qatari-American artist, writer, and filmmaker. Al-Maria has had solo exhibitions at Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Qatar; the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow; the Tate Britain, London; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; among other institutions. Her work has been included in group exhibitions at the Institute of Contemporary Art, London; LUMA Arles, France; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Toronto; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; the New Museum, New York; the Palais de Tokyo, Paris; and the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing; La Biennale di Venezia, Venice, Italy; and numerous other venues. She has been writer in residence at the Whitechapel Gallery, London. She is the author of three books: *Sad Sack* (Book Works, London, 2019), *Virgin with a Memory* (Cornerhouse Publications, Manchester, 2014), and *The Girl Who Fell to Earth* (Harper Perennial, New York, 2012).

*Sophia Al-Maria: Not My Bag* is organized by Nina Bozicnik, Curator.

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