

Open Studios - Artists in Residence

rama alashqar



**villa
arson**

March 6, 2025

Studio 4

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Palestinian artist Rama Alashqar graduated in contemporary visual arts from Birzeit University (West Bank) in 2023. She uses paper and silicone to create forms whose appearance and texture are similar to human skin. During her residency, from January 16 to May 15, 2025, she continues to experiment with materials in the Villa Arson workshops and creates a new series of drawings and paintings. Reflecting on the fragility of bodies and their apparent plasticity, she explores different textures and representations of skin to create organic formations that evoke the stone terraces of the Palestinian landscape. Rama Alashqar is a laureate of the SAWA SAWA ("Together") residency program initiated by the Institut français de Jérusalem.

Gil Lekh: Can you introduce yourself and tell us about your artistic journey?

Rama Alashqar: I obtained my degree in contemporary visual arts at Birzeit University in Palestine a year and a half ago. After my studies, I worked as a teaching assistant at the same university for a year and a half. During that time, I didn't have many opportunities to produce a lot of artistic work. But I have always had a deep connection with landscapes. I see a profound link between the human body and nature, both visually and in the way they are affected by their environment. I like to address social issues, and I feel that these concerns are always tied to nature. The way nature is damaged, scarred, and transformed by external forces resonates with what happens to human bodies. This understanding led me to work with materials, exploring their expressive power and political charge. During my studies, I wanted to understand nature through art and see how I could create from it. I was inspired by the experiences of Palestinian artists during the Intifada, who boycotted occupation materials and worked with the natural resources available to them. This greatly influenced my practice and continues to shape my approach to materiality today.

G.L.: You mentioned the Intifada and how some artists chose to use only local and natural materials. Is there a defined approach or a group of artists working in this direction?

R.A.: Yes, there is a group of Palestinian artists called New Visions who have adopted this approach, and I had the chance to meet and collaborate with them on a project last year. There are four of them: Sliman Mansour, Nabil Anani, Tayseer Barakat, and Vera Tamari. One works with natural leather, another with wood, which he burns to create forms, the third is well known for his work with clay, and the last works with ceramics. They all use natural materials closely tied to their environment. Their approach is based on experimentation and creativity with immediate resources, a form of material resistance that resonates deeply with me.

G.L.: What mediums do you use, and how is your practice evolving during this residency at Villa Arson?

R.A.: During my studies, I worked extensively with installation, using materials like natural clay to shape figures, as well as found objects, fabric, and recycled paper. I also experimented with silicone, a material I plan to reuse here.

At Villa Arson, I am exploring two-dimensional work more, especially painting and drawing, which I hadn't had the chance to develop before. This residency is an opportunity for me to experiment with new forms and expand my artistic practice.

I also want to explore the materiality of landscapes by covering the earth with a "skin," giving it a sensory dimension, making it visible as an entity that feels. I work with colors, veins, and marks that evoke flesh, and I am beginning to introduce stone pigments into this process.

G.L.: How do you analyze the relationship between the body and the landscape?

R.A.: In Palestine, this relationship is particularly strong. The land is scarred, wounded, and transformed by extreme and violent practices. Human bodies undergo similar violence. I see the landscape as a living entity that feels these transformations. For instance, I work with the idea of covering the land with a skin, giving it a fleshy materiality so that people can perceive, through touch and sight, the alterations it undergoes.

I am also interested in the symbolism of stones. In Palestine, they hold special significance. They are used to build dry stone walls that form typical terraces to support the land and prevent it from collapsing. They function as barriers, as collective structures. This image is very powerful for me: it represents collective identity, resistance, and mutual support. Stones hold together solely through their shape, without any external binding. At the same time, each stone must have an individual form, a personal identity, to fit together. It is a strong metaphor for community and collective resilience.

G.L.: There is a tension in your work between fragility and solidity, especially through your use of paper and stone. Can you elaborate on this?

R.A.: Yes, this tension interests me a lot. Paper is an extremely fragile, light, almost ephemeral material, but at the same time, it can hold an imprint, a texture that evokes skin.

I like the idea that something as vulnerable as paper can embody a form of resistance. Conversely, stone is a material of solidity and strength, and by placing it alongside paper, I seek to create a balance between these elements, exploring the dialogue between body, matter, and memory.

G.L.: You mentioned the importance of poetry in your work. How does writing interact with your visual art?

R.A.: Writing is essential to my practice. It is often the first step: before creating a piece, I write down sensations, images, and emotions that I later seek to convey visually. Writing acts as a sketch.

Sometimes, these texts remain hidden, serving as an intimate process, a personal research notebook. But

occasionally, I integrate them into the artwork, where they appear as an artist's statement. I love this dialogue between words and images, as it enhances meanings and adds layers of interpretation.

Poetry is a form of experimentation, just like working with materials. It is a powerful space for exploring complex emotions.

G.L.: Your work also explores the body, particularly in its transformations and metamorphoses. Does performance or theater influence your practice?

R.A.: I had some experience in theater at university, and it left a mark on me. Theater is a medium where writing and visual art meet, which inspired me. In theater, you spend a lot of time exploring the body, movement, and physical expression. This led me to reflect on how gestures and body forms can be translated into sculpture, painting, and materiality.

G.L.: How do you see the evolution of your artistic practice in the future?

R.A.: I don't think too much about the future. What matters to me is experimenting, exploring, and letting myself be guided by what I feel and the materials I discover. But what is certain is that I want to deepen this relationship between body, landscape, and memory, continuing to work with the materiality of natural elements.

G.L.: How has your initial project evolved since your arrival at the residency?

R.A.: When I arrived, I had a precise project in mind, but being here has changed my perspective. I didn't want to limit myself to a rigid idea. I wanted to give myself time to experiment and explore new materials. I also had access to workshops, particularly the painting studio, where I started making pigments from colored stones I had brought with me. This was an unexpected but very inspiring discovery. Being in residence is also an immersion in a new environment. This inevitably influences my practice. The landscape, the energy of the place, and the exchanges with students and artists here nourish me and allow me to explore new directions.

G.L.: A final word to conclude this interview?

R.A.: What I take away most from this experience is the importance of exploration without constraints, letting materials and the lines of landscape guide the process. I see art as an open space for questioning and reflection rather than a definitive answer. I feel that every experience, every place, and every encounter leaves an imprint on my work, and this residency is no exception. It is a station in a long path of searching for new forms of expression.

This interview was conducted and translated by Gil Lekh.

Thursday, March 6, 2025

• 6 - 8 pm
Open Studio Rama Alashqar
Studio 4 (Upper terrace)

Villa Arson is a public institution of the French Ministry of Culture. It is supported by the Région SUD Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, the Département des Alpes-Maritimes and the City of Nice. Villa Arson is a member of UniCa - Université Côte d'Azur, as well as L'École(s) du Sud, BOTOX[S], DCA, ANdÉA, BLA! and ELIA networks.



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