

MANDY EL-SAYEGH, detail of *White Grounds* (*de estas justa en amo.*), 2023, oil and acrylic on canvas with collage and silkscreened elements, 235 x 225 x 4.5cm. Courtesy Thaddaeus Ropac Gallery, London/Paris/Saltzberg/Seoul.

MANDY EL-SAYEGH

BY ANNA LENTCHNER

JUST UNDER  
THE SKIN



"There is a terror in excess," Mandy El-Sayegh told *The Guardian* in 2019. The London-based artist was referring to the abundance in her work, to the mass of material and symbolism that seemingly engulfs viewers of her large-scale collage-paintings. We see this in the texturally dense canvas *Burning Square: prayers for rest* (2023), with its streaked red background, illegible calligraphy, overlaid Palestinian keffiyeh scarf motif, silkscreened image of the United States one-hundred-dollar bill, and an *Evening Standard* newspaper cutout which reads "Israel pounds Gaza as the ground war looms." These elements are not personal in an obvious sense—she prefers to allude to the historical, the scientific, the cultural, the philosophical—yet buried within them is a kind of reverse self-portrait, one that, underneath its many layers, exposes the artist's innermost psyche.

El-Sayegh identifies as a "collagist," positioning this obsessive act of gathering, cutting, and layering as central to both her process and her final product. It is a dissection of imagery and language that has even extended beyond her own artmaking, to providing care for nonverbal autistic youths and working as an art therapist. She took up both roles in the years following her master's degree from the Royal College of Art in 2011, but eventually became disillusioned with government systems of social work and returned to artmaking full-time. *The Guardian* interview was published at a turning point in her career: conducted ahead of her debut institutional solo exhibition, "Cite Your Sources" at Chisenhale Gallery, and published the same day that New York gallery Lehmann Maupin announced its representation of El-Sayegh, the article described her as an "up-and-coming" artist who "talks fast." She had grown fast, too. In the following months she held solo exhibitions in Hong Kong, Paris, and Beirut, and contributed to group exhibitions in Berlin and New York. But then came a global pandemic and a nationwide lockdown, and the "terror in excess" that El-Sayegh had articulated once again began to take root—not in her work, but in her own body.

"I had to move constantly," she told me over email. The condition that the artist suffered from in 2020 was eventually diagnosed as akathisia, a syndrome of neurological restlessness that El-Sayegh describes as "a painful kind of internal engine that is revved up too high," to the point where "it hurts you to sit in your own skin." Unable to paint and make collages as she was accustomed to, El-Sayegh was forced to channel the irrepensible into her practice, using her body as a medium. This resulted in her first performance work, *your words will be used against you*, a 17-minute dance commissioned with a site-specific installation for the Frieze London art fair in October 2020. Drenched in purple light, she and five other performers walked around a square room, jerking mechanically to a hypnotic soundtrack composed by multidisciplinary artist Lily Oakes. El-Sayegh collaborated with Oakes again last year for *Akathisia* (2023), a video-audio collage incorporating footage of her studio practice alongside found imagery of bodies. Dressed all in white, El-Sayegh and another performer moved fluidly in front of a screen projecting this footage, and as the images superimposed onto their moving bodies, it mirrored the sense of claustrophobic abundance characteristic of akathisia.

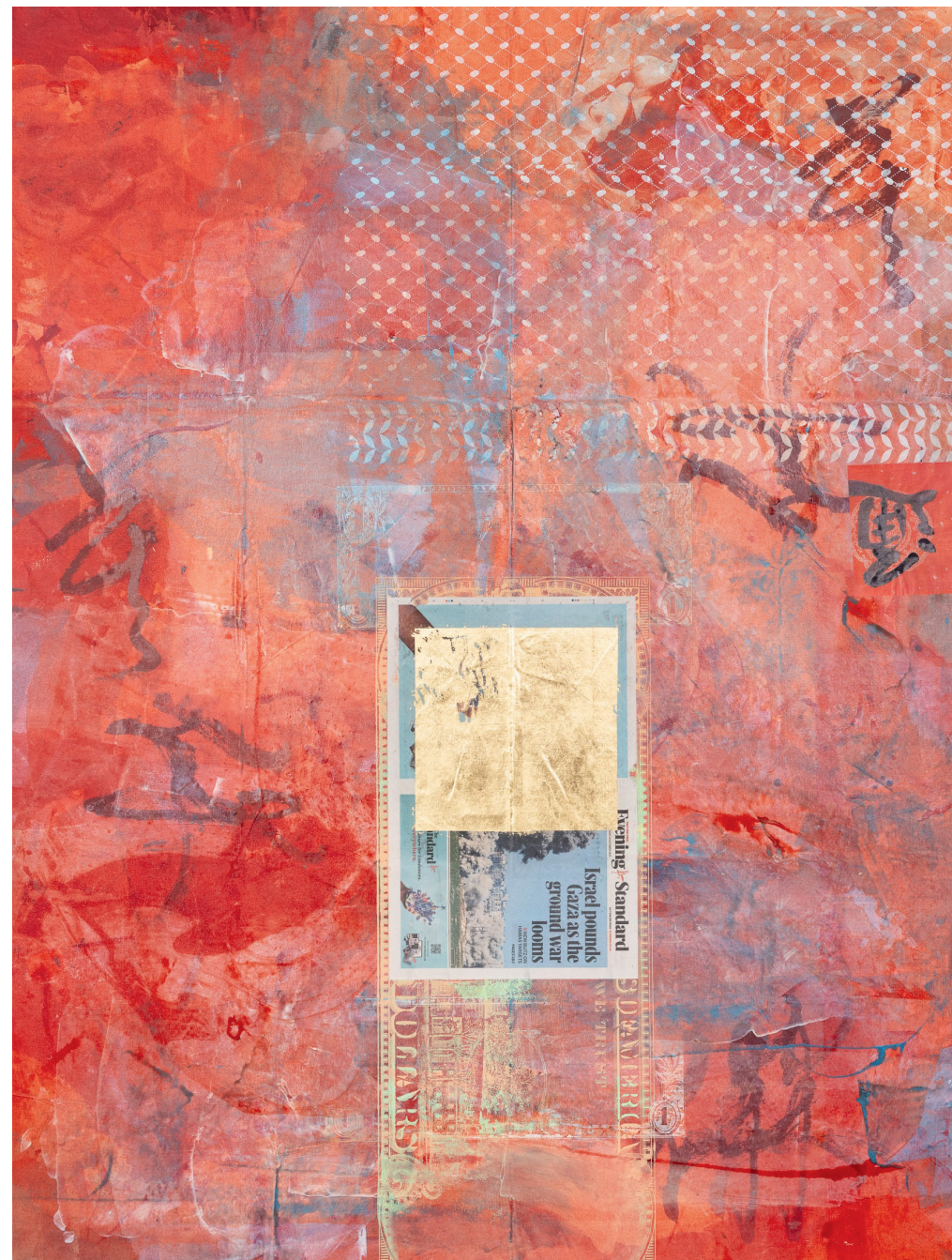
Today, El-Sayegh has fully sublimated the psychological experience into her artmaking: "As I got better I could see how

my practice always was that: the output or the artwork is always a product of that inner agitation, just at a different frequency." The sentiment is best evidenced by her *Net-Grid* (2010–) series, an ongoing body of mixed-media collage-paintings for which she is primarily known. Textural, colorful, geometric, and almost overwhelmingly referential, the works assemble everything from dissected anatomy books and pornographic magazines like *Hustler* and *Penthouse* to advertisements, historical texts, and silkscreened newspaper pages. Trying to grasp their meaning can feel akin to the gnawing pulsation of a migraine, but this chaos feels intentional, or at least emblematic of their creation. In a process that El-Sayegh describes as "an assemblage of fragmented parts," the artist applies layers upon layers of material from her studio to large-scale canvases, drawing from anything in her periphery—paint, latex, parts of other artworks, scraps from her arsenal of printed ephemera—until, she says, the surface becomes a "skin." When text and image have been amalgamated to the artist's liking (oftentimes, obfuscated past the point of recognition), she applies the series's titular component, a cage-like grid pattern that subsumes, disassociates, and equalizes the collaged elements' original context.

Take *Net-Grid (missing eye)* (2023), a two-meter, square-shaped abstraction that, from afar, appears like a strip of gauze hastily applied to a wound, barely suppressing the blood and bodily fluids seeping out of it. Buried within these large strips of mesh and bruised flesh tones, partial images and fragmented text begin to emerge: a five-pound note bearing Queen Elizabeth II's portrait, bikini-clad women, the logo for Tiffany & Co. jewelry, and, in two places, the name "SUSANNAH," in all caps. The female forms recall El-Sayegh's frequent use of anatomical and pornographic images, although it is unclear where exactly the photographs in (*missing eye*) originate from. More elusive is "Susannah," which, unless a viewer is familiar with her work, might seem arbitrary. But as the artist frequently disguises military operation names in her collages, "Susannah" may allude to the Mossad's failed false-flag operation of 1954, when Israel attempted to undermine Egypt's populist regime by setting off bombs in civilian centers in a botched plot (the operation instead resulted in the deaths of four Jewish Egyptian recruits).

By embedding military references alongside other historical and cultural cues, El-Sayegh creates works that become a crime scene of social consciousness, where seemingly disparate and meaningless emblems become charged by the frames through which we view them. Other works in the series are equally referential: *Net-Grid (madras checks)* (2023) uses ornamentation evocative of the southern Indian checkered pattern, now representative of elitist, preppy styles, to partially conceal nude women gracing the covers of *Penthouse*, a world atlas, anti-counterfeiting symbols, and the phrase "blue skies"—the latter perhaps hinting at the CIA's Blue Sky memo from 2000, which outlined how American intelligence officers envisioned operating without legal restrictions. *Net-Grid (Blessing)* (2023) is more image-based, with a keffiyeh pattern superimposed over at least a dozen eyes, spirographic shapes, bank notes of various currencies, religious symbols from South Asia, more female forms, joss paper (typically burned during Chinese worship rituals), and, barely visible, the all-caps word "ARCHIVE."

MANDY EL-SAYEGH,  
*Burning Square: prayers for rest*, 2023, oil and acrylic on canvas with collaged and silkscreened elements, joss paper, and gold leaf, 194 × 148 × 4.5 cm. Courtesy the artist, Lehmann Maupin New York/Seoul/London and Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai.







MANDY EL-SAYEGH, *Net-Grid (Missing eye)*, 2023, oil and acrylic on linen with collaged and silkscreened elements, 235 x 225 x 4.5 cm. Courtesy Thaddaeus Ropac Gallery, London/Paris/Salzburg/Seoul.



MANDY EL-SAYEGH, *White Grounds (The Sun)*, 2022, oil and mixed media on canvas with silkscreened collaged elements, 235 x 225 x 4.5 cm. Courtesy Thaddaeus Ropac Gallery, London/Paris/Salzburg/Seoul.





Installation view of MANDY EL-SAYEGH's "A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose," 2024, at Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai. Photo by Ismail Noor of Seeing Things. Courtesy the artist and Lawrie Shabibi.

Whether these cultural and historical signs allude to capitalism, patriarchy, orientalism, nationalism, another framework entirely, or all of the above, El-Sayegh's documentation is complicated by the imagery's restraint under a totalizing grid pattern, allowing multiple, and even contradictory, readings to occur at once. "Materially, I do this with latex, to hold debris inside a flesh-like form," the artist expounds. "As latex is natural, it is degrading as it is preserving, and that is the edge that I am working on. It is an experiment in the production of meaning and its deterioration; it is about how plastic meaning can be—even with the endeavor to preserve, or to crystallize, or to materialize, that endeavor will always be undermined by the fragile nature of language itself." As for the military operation names that show up recursively in her collages, El-Sayegh says: "I used to check them [online] out of fear, just to see how they were changed, eroded, or straight-up erased . . . But I know I have preserved them at certain points [in the work]."

After more than a decade, the *Ner-Grid* paintings come across as repetitive to the point of obsession, like intrusive thoughts wrestling their way into consciousness. And perhaps that is the point: by returning to the same themes time and again through an incomprehensible variety of material, El-Sayegh conversely demonstrates the limitations of these signals; how their meanings and connotations are malleable and finite. This is echoed by her practice being almost entirely comprised of collage series, essentially all of which are ongoing: *Piece Paintings* (2010–) and *White Grounds* (2017–), where paint, gesso, or lotion, often bone-white, obscure densely collaged canvases; *Windows* (2018–), depicting swirling, connective tissue-like patterns in blue ink more recently, *Editorial Alias* (2022–), incorporating brand logos and fonts; and *Blessings* (2022–), which originally featured Chinese blessing scrolls from her maternal uncle, a calligrapher, and has since evolved into her *Burning Square* subseries (2023–).

In February 2024, El-Sayegh exhibited works from the lattermost series at Lawrie Shabibi gallery for "A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose," her inaugural solo show in Dubai, curated by Sara Raza. The exhibition title was taken from a frequently cited line in "Sacred Emily," a 1913 poem by the sapphic writer Gertrude Stein, which highlights the equivalence between the word as a signifier for the thing and the thing itself. El-Sayegh's parallel exploration of meaning-making could be seen in her treatment of the gallery space, which she enveloped in materials from her practice: the walls were covered in pages from the seemingly dichotomous pairing of two newspapers—the salmon-toned, English-language *Financial Times* and the Arabic-language, mint-green-tinged *Asharq Al-Awsat*—while the floor was sheathed by layers of blood-red latex. Asked why she so often immerses exhibition spaces in this way, El-Sayegh says that she "cannot bear a space being exposed," and "refuse[s] to accept the first ground" of a neutral white gallery. Instead, her interiors mirror her artworks, creating an endless reflection of disembodied material.

One of the works featured in "A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose" was *Burning Square: The Times* (2023). In these collaged works she replaces the scrolls characteristic of the *Blessings* series with embossed gold-leaf squares representative of joss paper, and incorporates Mandarin and Arabic calligraphy penned by her Chinese uncle and Palestinian father, respectively. In *The Times*, a large, square-shaped canvas has been overlaid with red paint, providing a gory, crimson background to the collaged elements: at the very top, a Chinese character that appears like a backwards "矢" (arrow); in the center, an advertisement from the British newspaper *The Times*, brandishing a luxury watch by Cartier and overlaid with a gold-leaf sheet and a cutout eye; at the bottom is a white *keffiyeh* pattern; and on the far right is a cover from the British newspaper *The Daily Telegraph* reporting what a Conservative member of Parliament stated about pro-Palestinian demonstrations in the UK: "The hate marches must end."



**Her works are able to capture an evermore universal strife; a perpetually evolving, psychosocial pain underpinning the human experience.**

Visually, the work connotes violence, through the same viscerality imbuing her *Net-Grid* series. Yet, there also appears something honorific within the additional elements, as if paying homage to a disaster perceptible only by the work's ominous, sanguinary background. "Thinking of artworks as bodies that hold precious archival material and are taking record of histories, there needs to be some kind of ritualistic or motif-like protective element," El-Sayegh explained the repetition of particular symbols. "The embossing of gold leaf at the center of the [joss] papers signifies an offering, and an acknowledgment of the invisible." As for the calligraphy: "My impulse is to preserve and protect, where histories are being systematically erased . . . [The writings] are literally parts of me, and impulses from my familial line that bear witness." She notes that because she does not speak either Arabic or Mandarin, the inscription of these characters also becomes a "reparative gesture," serving as "a symbol of a broken syntax . . . where there is dislocation or displacement."

Other *Burning Square* works showcased at "A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose" included *freedom of goods*, *Deeds for the dead*, and *prayers for rest* (all 2023), which deal with the same themes as *The Times*, but demonstrate the breadth of El-Sayegh's visual language. *Deeds*, however, is busier and more choppy, its less abstract elements recalling a collaging style more akin to El-Sayegh's *Piece Paintings*. In the same vein, the pastel, white-washed tones in *freedom of goods* appear in conversation with her *White Grounds* series, and a red mesh pattern at the bottom of the canvas naturally conjures her *Net-Grid* works. But regardless of their aesthetic, each *Burning Square* canvas includes the signature components of golden joss paper and calligraphy. It is here that we can see the autobiographical nature of El-Sayegh's series, as both elements are in direct conversation with her real life and heritage. The works are not simple condemnations of worldly events or systems in a blanket, moralistic sense, but reveal disguised odes to her and her family's history, which become all the more urgent in the face of global crises.

The series title, *Burning Square*, is likewise evocative in its own right. While El-Sayegh is rarely explicit in terms of an intended message behind an artwork, these canvases inevitably recall images of tumult, particularly in terms of how public squares have been employed during periods of conflict. The Egyptian Revolution of 2011, for instance, famously erupted in Cairo's Tahrir Square; protestors of the Women, Life, Freedom movement in 2022 united in Tehran's Vali-Asr Square; and, at the time of writing this article, hundreds are seeking shelter in Beirut's Martyrs' Square following Israel's bombardment of the city. One could easily attribute legible references to the artist's politics, but El-Sayegh says her identity simply accounts for "parts of the layers in the meat of the practice." She does not want one element, say, race, culture, or sexuality, to

"be held over the others in a hierarchy," or for viewers to encounter her works with a predetermined, reductive framework that fails to account for intersectionality. "If you can't take in Palestine then you can't take in the rest of my self," she summarizes.

The latest iterations of the series, such as *Burning Square (Tiffany #2)* and *Burning Square (In the Hundreds)* (both 2024), appear Pop adjacent in that they are more severe in tone, and less complex in composition. The former centers a Tiffany & Co. advertisement in which blonde bombshell Anya Taylor-Joy poses elegantly, recalling Warhol's Marilyn Monroe prints from the late 1960s. Despite their comparative simplicity, however, El-Sayegh's recent collages remain equally provocative: red, orange, yellow, and Tiffany blue paint obscure the original advertisement, as does a silkscreened US one-hundred-dollar bill that reads "In God We Trust" and a newspaper with the headline: "Can democracy survive 2024?" *Burning Square (In the Hundreds)* features the banknote and several pieces of ornate joss paper against a bright red background, but streaks within the painted layer suggest bloodshed, stimulating the bodily evocations so often seen in El-Sayegh's oeuvre.

El-Sayegh's recent performance work *Talisman* (2024), which also debuted at "A rose is a rose . . ." continues this self-referentiality. The multidisciplinary project was conducted in collaboration with movement artist Chelsea Gordon and heavily recalled last year's *Akathisia*, down to the white-suited, trance-like performers, whose repetitive, ritualistic movements were complemented by a score from British Egyptian composer Sami El-Enany. Here, too, a plethora of imagery was somewhat projected onto the performers, recalling the way that El-Sayegh rejected, and made use of, the all-white gallery space in which the performance took place. The work's confluence of free-flowing movements and collaged footage are further illuminated by the fact that El-Sayegh points to mumblecore and new-punk cinema as early influences, as the work was likewise fortified by the kind of improvisational, "DIY-type, guerilla-style aesthetic" that the filmic movements are known for.

Her most recent exhibition, including her new performance and the various *Burning Square* works that were displayed, in some ways return the artist to an earlier stage in her career, when institutional rejection was a primary inspiration—in fact, the title of her first show, "Cite Your Sources," was a sarcastic nod to her experience of art school, which she felt pushed the confines of the Western canon onto her practice. At the same time, El-Sayegh's art has also matured past these preliminary experiences. In each new, transcendent iteration of her series, her works are able to capture an evermore universal strife; a perpetually evolving, psychosocial pain underpinning the human experience—or, as Frantz Fanon described in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), "that violence which is just under the skin."



MANDY EL-SAYEGH, *Talisman*, 2024, performance, at Art Basel Parcours, 2024. Photo by Art Basel. Courtesy Lehmann Maupin, New York/Seoul/London and Thaddaeus Ropac Gallery, London/Paris/Salzburg/Seoul.