



DESIGN

## FRAGMENTS IN THE GROUND

*Artist Dima Srouji's works  
embody the fragility and durability  
of ancient objects and current life  
amid violence in Palestine.*

Words by Charles Shafaleh  
Photographs by Pelle Crépin

*The Red River* (2023). An ode to the River Belus, near Akka, Palestine. Sand from the river was used to make raw glass. From this, glassblowers made perfume bottles, drinking vessels and voin bottles. The cycle that exists between the land, the glass objects and the Palestinian body is explored in this installation through a five-metre glass river. PHOTOGRAPH BY PELLE CRÉPIN

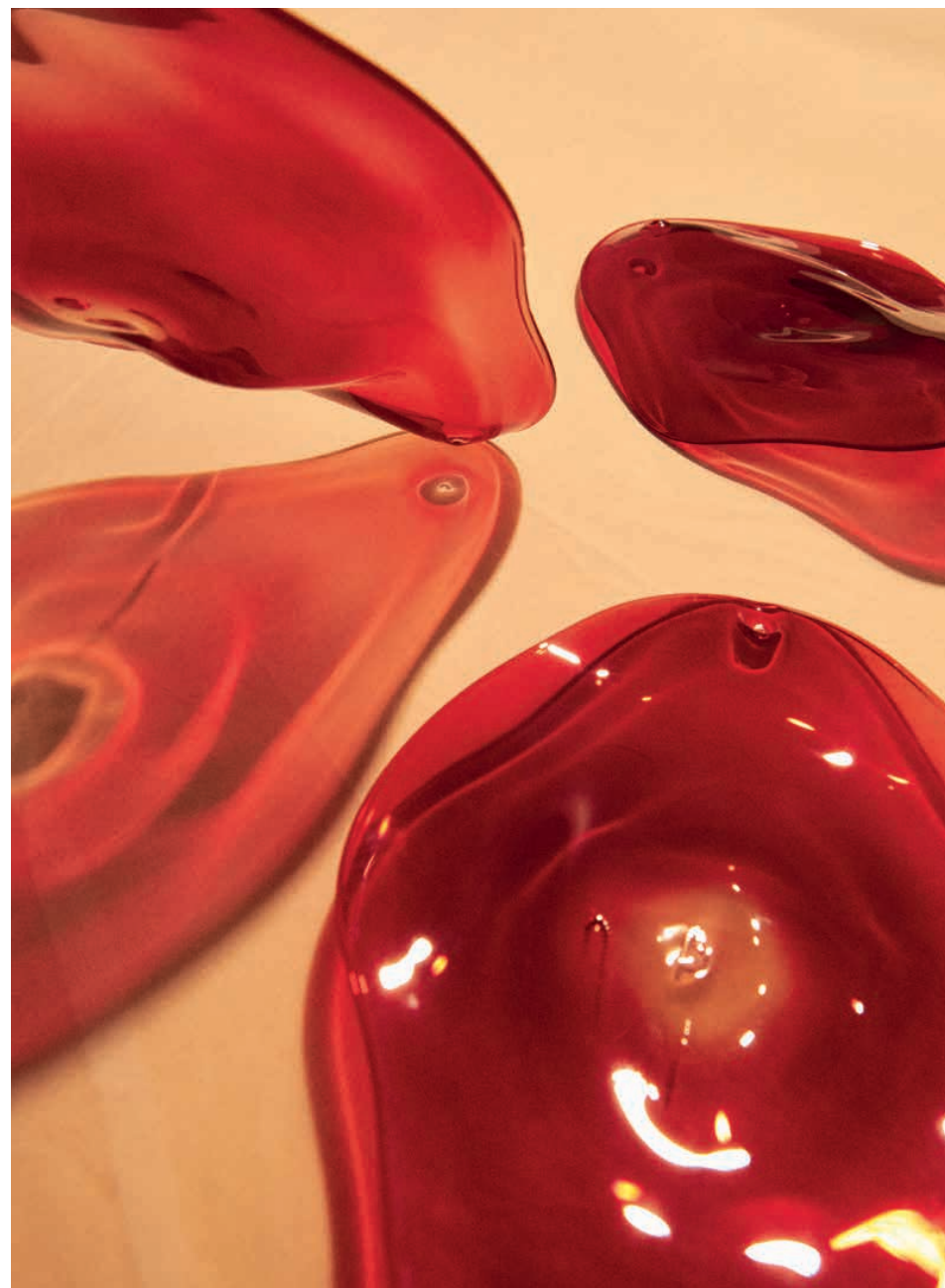
As a child, architect and artist Dima Srouji collected pottery shards, pieces of glass, fossils, and other artefacts she found while hiking on trails around Bethlehem and Nazareth with her parents. Her mother supplemented these discoveries with stories, explaining that many of these objects were thousands of years old. Eventually Srouji amassed over a hundred pieces, which she displayed with care in her bedroom.

“They became kind of like my companions,” she says at her studio in east London, the walls of which are lined with delicate glassworks that evoke those ancient pieces. “At the same time, I had an Arabic encyclopaedia with these beautiful sections of the earth’s surface that described different geologies and how deep you needed to go into the earth’s crust to excavate different types of stone. So I would speculate about the animals these fossils came from or how long a piece had been there. Because of that, I felt incredibly linked to the land.” There was an emotional relationship with the objects, too. “When I go to my parents’ home, I have to say hello to them. I’m not kidding! I want to make sure they’re still there and are OK.”

While these fragments conjure a personal narrative for Srouji, they resonate about Palestine more broadly. The diaspora has long cherished physical artefacts, whether jewellery or glass shards, that provide a link to their home and heritage—particularly when displacement becomes a lifelong condition.

For years, Srouji has produced work that addresses the fact that many similar pieces found in museums worldwide were exhumed from graves. *She Still Wears Kohl and Smells Like Roses*, a series of works first displayed at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and later at 421 in Abu Dhabi, drew from her year spent meditating on the V&A’s collection as a Jameel Fellow.

For the show, she designed eight perfume bottles, rosewater sprinklers, and other glass vessels linked to the female body which replicated pieces from Palestine and Greater Syria in the museum’s collection. Her works were blown by Ali and Marwan Twam, glassblowers from the small West Bank village of Jaba’, and were made to look aged by anonymous Palestinian craftsmen who specialise in antiquity forgeries. They were set on a surgical trolley in the gallery, while the originals in the vitrines were replaced with “tomb cards” narrating the often-violent histories of their excavation. The work spotlighted the perseverance of these artisanal traditions while also commenting on how these objects, when placed behind glass, no longer possess the power for Palestinians that they once did.



*Phoenician Pigeons* (2020). Srouji has researched the texture of glass artefacts found in the Eastern Mediterranean. Some of the glass work that continues today in Jaba and Hebron resembles fragments extracted from archaeological sites. The marbled effect found in "Phoenician" glass in Palestine today is the continuation of a process created centuries ago.

PHOTOGRAPHED IN RAMALLAH BY YASMINE OMARI  
FOR ATHENS DESIGN FORUM

*"So much is embedded in them—the history of the land and our relationship with it—that it's not possible to erase the Palestinian identity. It's impossible to commit genocide."*





This page, *Revolutionary Enclosures (Until the Apricots)* (2023) was inspired by the sense of security a simple gift of food produced. Right: *Homeware Collection* (2023). PHOTOS: PELLE CRÉPIN (2)



"These objects tell so many stories, but if they have to be protected on a pedestal in a museum, with temperature and light control, then they are dead," Srouji says. Instead, she argues, they could be in the homes of living Palestinians. Back in Palestine, their presence can keep culture alive. But she acknowledges that the restitution of objects is a conversation that cannot begin before millions of refugees have the right of return.

Srouji's exhibition which opens at the Lawrie Shabibi gallery in Dubai in April, her first solo show, extends this meditation on archaeology and exhumation to the current war in Gaza. She has long been preoccupied by photographs from Sebastia, near Nablus, taken in 1908, of local women digging their own land during archaeological expeditions led by Harvard University. But these images have new resonance for her today. "The excavations now are not so much about digging objects from the ground but trying to save lives," she says. "It's very eerie for me to think about women digging fragments of Roman statues—the arms or head of a goddess—with literal parts of bodies coming out of the ground in Gaza. The aesthetics are very similar. The sense that I had that archaeology was never about the past is now in my face with this direct, visually clear link between 1908 and 2023."

Yet her focus on tombs is not fatalistic or exclusively sorrowful, she insists. "We exist in all these fragments in the ground," she explains. "So much is embedded in them—the history of the land and our relationship with it—that it's not possible to erase the Palestinian identity. It's impossible to commit genocide."

The ground, counterintuitively, provides these objects with a metaphorical expression of something Srouji sees as profoundly lacking in Palestine today: shelter. In many instances, following the repeated bombings in Gaza, the only remnants of buildings that provide a modicum of safety are staircases and bathtubs. Sometimes entire homes collapse and yet these elements remain intact. These, along with tunnels, are the subject of her installation at Dubai's Alserkal Avenue, which opened in February for six months. Activating all five senses by incorporating Palestinian food, perfume, and audio, such as the sound of digging, the work includes a bathtub turned into a dining table, a tunnel transformed into a site for meditation and mourning, and a staircase library where poetry readings will occur. Each piece creates an intimate experience for about five people at a time, who Srouji hopes will take ownership of the space—whether in silence or in conversation.



While these facets of a home connect to traumatic memories—Srouji hid in stairwells and bathtubs as a child during the bombings of the second Intifada—her concerns about shelter are professional. A tutor who leads a city design course at the Royal College of Art in London, she is vocal about the need for architecture to fulfil its basic duties. "The entire purpose of architecture, going back to the primitive hut, is to create shelter and protection from external elements. But the practice has failed us completely," she says. "Hiring an architect today is a form of luxury: you'd only hire one if you're renovating your townhouse or building with a developer. It's no longer about shelter or creating a community. It's about serving the one percent. We've lost our compass." The Alserkal Avenue installation is in part a bid to realign the discipline's priorities back to its foundational elements.

Shelter does not only come in physical form, however. "A lot of the time you find shelter in community," she says. "One of the moments my family felt most safe during the Intifada was when our neighbours knocked on our door on a Saturday afternoon and left a huge bowl of apricots on the floor. It was a silent sign of solidarity and intimacy between families on the same street. The apricots became a glue for the community, a sign of care."

*Revolutionary Enclosures (Until the Apricots)*, created with academic Jasbir Puar for the Sharjah Biennial last year, was inspired by the sense of security this simple gift of food produced. It featured a light box on which were arranged 300 individually blown glass apricots coated in resin. Appearing as if it were a living organic form, the glowing mass of fake fruit seemed so real that it attracted flies. The work's subtitle derives from the common Arabic expression "fil mishmish," or "when the apricots bloom"—a phrase that suggests something that will never happen. For Srouji, it connotes "until liberation" or "utopia."

Addressing these traumas, which are both political and personal, through art and the imagination is itself an expression of optimism about the future. Just as the apricots draw from a memory of security, Srouji's perfume and kohl vessels conjure millennia of traditions that can be continuously reinvigorated through these objects' use. "I don't think liberation is ever going to be possible unless we're all dreaming," she says. "Even if you don't think it's possible to get there, getting a sense of what liberation might taste like is the feeling on which you need to dwell. That's the feeling you need to chase. As long as you're chasing that—that taste of liberation—we might actually get there." ■