



## ARTIST OF THE MONTH

### Rana Samara

A new artist is turning heads in the Palestinian contemporary art scene. Rana Samara paints Palestinian bedrooms – post-sex. It's a bold departure from the usual Palestinian artistic tropes: the olive trees of the West Bank, the trappings of traditional Palestinian heritage, the scenes of exile, war, and Israeli military occupation. "We have many Palestinian artists who work on the Palestinian struggle ... but Rana's works are different," said Ziad Anani, owner of Zawyeh Gallery in Ramallah, where Samara's paintings are on display for the first time in a professional exhibition. "She likes the intimate space."

Samara, a 30-year-old mother of three and a recent graduate of the International Academy of Art Palestine in Ramallah, paints in the style of Matisse or David Hockney – big, colorful still-life portraits. In one, an orange peel has fallen on the floor next to the bed, and underwear hangs from the bedpost.

Samara, who's based in Ramallah, became interested in scenes of intimacy as a second-year art student, after she visited a friend who lives in a West Bank refugee camp. She explains, "I stopped in the front of the camp and started questioning: How did people have sex? How did they sleep together?" There's very little privacy in West Bank refugee camps, crowded concrete shantytowns where Palestinians ended up after they were uprooted from their homes in the 1948 war that led to Israel's founding. "Then I began to meet women in the camp," she noted, "and I asked them

how they were able to sleep with their husbands. It's a horrible space, because the buildings (are) next to each other. One woman told me that her husband put his hand in her mouth to keep her voice down."

She interviewed women in refugee camps and elsewhere in the West Bank about marital intimacy. Some women would invite her to come to their homes after they had slept with their partners; Samara would take photographs of the room as inspiration for her paintings. One painting shows a pack of Viagra in the corner. In another, she painted the patterns from the lingerie of a woman she interviewed.

While Samara is breaking taboos as a Palestinian female artist dealing with such an intimate subject matter, it did not seem to faze people at the opening at Zawyeh Gallery. It's the first of three contemporary art galleries to be established in the West Bank during the past few years, part of a growing effort to market Palestinian artists to collectors in the West Bank and around the world. The works of other established and emerging local artists are also on exhibit at the gallery.

Samara has been accepted to a master of fine arts program at the California Institute of the Arts, and is trying to raise funds to pay for it. Her dream is to exhibit her work at the Venice Biennale, the Olympics of the art world, as the official Palestinian representative.

