

# HECHO A MANO

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## Rose is a Rose is a Rose

**WHAT/WHO:** A solo show featuring watercolor paintings centering roses and Arab poetry by Albuquerque-based artist Zahra Marwan

**WHEN:** July 5 - 29, 2024

**WHERE:** Hecho a Mano, 129 W Palace Ave, Santa Fe, NM

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Zahra Marwan's dreamlike watercolors have always had a close relationship with the written word: the origin of her paintings is often a sparse yet evocative line of text. Born in Kuwait, Marwan is the author of *Where Butterflies Fill the Sky* (Bloomsbury Publishing NYC, 2022), which chronicles her family's journey from Kuwait to Albuquerque, NM when she was a child, escaping discrimination in Kuwait where she and much of her family were considered stateless and

were subject to open discrimination and discriminatory laws.

In her upcoming show at Hecho a Mano, Marwan's skill for marrying language and art is evident in watercolor paintings centering roses and Arab poetry. Drawn from the seven *Mu'allaqat*—the ancient Suspended Odes that were hung in the Kaaba in Mecca and were so dear to the Arabs that they were written in gold—Marwan's paintings evoke a feeling of awe and longing.

Marwan describes the paintings' mood as akin to Saadi Shirazi's *Gulistān*, or *Rose Garden*, a work composed of short prose in chapters. She was inspired, too, by an image from the medieval romantic epic *The Romance of the Rose*, in which the character Amant falls asleep

and wakes up in the garden from his dream. Her paintings suggest the greater historical Andalusian influences and connection to Arabic poetry written on the Iberian Peninsula. While they don't reference these writings directly, they share a quality of mysticism and whimsy.



"Mostly, I want them to feel like sitting near an enormous traditional ship that no longer sails on the shore at dusk," Marwan says.

The show's title comes from Gertrude Stein's 1913 poem, "Sacred Emily," which was inspired by Stein's search for a new language in collaboration with Picasso. Marwan says she read the poem in Paris in October: "Fragmented and repetitive, it kept reappearing starkly in my life," she says.

Over the past few years, Marwan has received several book awards and recognitions, including the New York Times/New York Public Library's Best Illustrated Children's Books of 2022.

"Receiving news that my work was in the New York Times Ten Best Illustrated Books was really an absolute dream," Marwan says, explaining that during the first few years she was sharing her work, she was told by publishers that it wasn't a good fit for picture books, and by the fine art world that it wasn't a good fit for galleries. "To see it be uplifted felt almost miraculous after so many eloquent rejections," Marwan says.

She also received the United Nations Human Rights Commission Art Award for creating art that uplifts statelessness in 2022. "It broke my heart, in a way," Marwan says. "It's this constant feeling of being proud of gaining traction and visibility on the issue on one hand, and wishing I could bring real change on another—deeply wishing that this suffering could end and this award was for retroactive contributions and that no one had to live under these discriminatory policies any more."

Marwan recalls a song she listened to with her cousin in Kuwait, which she returned to in Albuquerque. It told a story of forlorn love and rejection accompanied by a frenzied oud that sometimes slows. She memorized its lyrics almost by accident, and later learned that it was a 6<sup>th</sup> century poem written by Imru Al-Qais, one of the poets of the seven *Mu'allaqat*.

"We are handed down ancient poems, suspended odes in gold, our lives like a rose garden in chapters," Marwan says. "The exchange of art and literature as fragmented dreams; of what remnants live in my inner-soul, effervescently."

*Rose is a Rose is a Rose* will open at Hecho a Mano on Friday, July 5 and will be on view until July 29.