



**Press Contact:**  
Cynthia Wornham  
Santa Barbara Museum of Art  
(805) 884-6430  
[cwornham@sbma.net](mailto:cwornham@sbma.net)



Left: Vian Sora, *Dilmun*, 2022. Oil and mixed media on canvas. SBMA, Museum purchase with funds provided by the General Art Acquisition Fund. Right: Vian Sora

## **Santa Barbara Museum of Art Presents** ***Vian Sora: Outerworlds***

The artist's first solo museum exhibition in the United States debuts at SBMA  
On View June 22 – September 7, 2025

*March 13, 2025* — The Santa Barbara Museum of Art (SBMA) is pleased to announce *Vian Sora: Outerworlds*, a multi-venue mid-career survey of internationally renowned abstract painter Vian Sora (b. 1976, Baghdad). Organized jointly by the Santa Barbara Museum of Art; Asia Society Texas, Houston; and Speed Art Museum, Louisville, this exhibition will assemble approximately 20 of Sora's major works, charting her growth as an artist over a period of seven years (2016–2023).

*Outerworlds* is Sora's first solo museum exhibition in the United States and will tell the story of how her multivalent paintings abstractly channel the tumultuous events of her life, ancient

Mesopotamian history, and Iraq's diverse natural landscapes, including its deserts, rivers, and archeological sites. *Vian Sora: Outerworlds* will debut at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art on June 22, 2025 before traveling to the Speed Art Museum and Asia Society Texas.

**Exhibition venues and dates:**

Santa Barbara Museum of Art	June 22 – September 7, 2025
Speed Art Museum	October 10, 2025 – January 18,
Asia Society Texas	2026 April 2 – July 5, 2026

Born in Baghdad, Sora had her first solo exhibition in Iraq in 2001. She lived through the Iran-Iraq War, the Gulf War, the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the subsequent Insurgency. She later left Iraq, sought refugee status for her family in the United Arab Emirates, and then eventually resettled in Louisville, Kentucky. In 2016, Sora realized she needed to use abstraction to process all that she had lived through from Iraq to the settlement in the United States. Her painting has transformed into a high-powered, bodily, and dynamic practice of controlled chaos. Her canvases reflect an array of radiant paints that are splashed, poured, and sprayed onto the canvas. Pigments run, accumulate, and clash, resulting in upwards of fifty layers of oil and acrylic paint in a single work. For Sora, the multilayered effects of her paintings give a concrete form to the chaos of life. The paintings reference both the realm of biology with its cycles of growth, decay, and evolution, as well as the tumultuous history of her homeland, and inevitable recurrence of wars, violence, and eventual regeneration.

Describing her powerful process, Sora says in a recent *Observer* interview, "I initiate each of my works with the canvas flat, then I utilize fast-drying spray paint, acrylics, pigments and inks, applying each...with brushes, sponges, spray bottles or my breath to move the medium, creating passages...like ventricles, sometimes tissue. I then use oil to control the disarray, layering various hues in an intuitive process...that attempts to constrain chaos, when life regenerates from detritus." According to Owen Duffy, the Nancy C. Allen Curator and Director of Exhibitions at Asia Society Texas, "Sora's paintings brim with dense visuals that can be understood as spaces of visual conflict where hues and colors collide, absorb into one another, and bleed."



Left: Vian Sora, *Outerworld I*, 2021. Mixed media finished with oil on canvas. Brook Smith Collection.  
Right: Vian Sora, *Echo and Narcissus*, 2018. Mixed media finished with oil on canvas. Speed Art Museum.

The title, *Outerworlds*, comes from two eponymous works included in the exhibition that Sora finished in 2021 while in Berlin on a residency. Sora completed this residency during a period of intermittent pandemic lockdowns, when she started to return to social spaces. As Santa Barbara Museum of Art Chief Curator and Curator of Contemporary Art James Glisson shares, “The title is also a reminder that for all of her paintings’ interiority and feeling of completeness—as if there was an entire world laid down on the canvas—these paintings reference cycles of nature and human history. There is growth, decay, violence, healing, frenzy, and quiescence.” Indeed, *Morphing*(2023) and *Floodgates* (2021) both convey a generalized sense of transformation and change, while others, such as *An bodies*(2020), reference the flagellum of viruses or cells. Sora has said, “This search for beauty amongst destruction is translated into my compositions through a conscious embrace of decay. For me these emotionally intense and bright ‘landscapes’ act as metaphors that simultaneously signify both the turmoil of war and the dynamics of change.” Indeed, the paintings’ upwellings, flows, pools, and eddies are microcosms of the world's endless transformations. “The forms we see in her paintings are elusive and contradictory—they are somehow familiar and alien, surreally swirling with vigor and unexpected gestures,” says Tyler Blackwell, Curator of Contemporary Art at Speed Art Museum. Sora’s paintings, long after they dry, remain in constant visual flux.

These poetic paintings do not only reference their own process of making, or the chaos of war, but they are imbued with references to mythology, history, and the rich geography of

Mesopotamia's ancient Sumer, among the earliest of urban civilizations. These important resonances can be witnessed through Sora's use of such poignant titles as *Abzu* (2023), which is Sumerian for fresh water from underground aquifers that helped fertilize the region; *Hanging Gardens* (2022), as in the Hanging Gardens of Babylon; and *Dilmun*(2022), an ancient civilization located along the shores of the Persian Gulf, but also a netherworld where the dead lived and Enki, a Sumerian god of water, dwelled. Consequently, Sora's paintings contain traces of the civilizations and cultures that are part of Iraq's millennia of recorded written history as well as the objects and structures in the archeological sites that blanket the country.

"I hope this exhibition will illuminate the struggle, courage and dissonance continuously faced by war survivors that exist between worlds," says Sora. "As displaced people and immigrants constantly strive to make sense of our new orbits, these paintings depict a journey through distant time and space in order to reach safety." Reflecting on this exhibition, Sora remarks: "It is the milestone of my career for the prestigious institutions of the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Speed Art Museum, and the Asia Society Texas to present my first survey museum show, *Outerworlds*. As a Kurdish Iraqi immigrant, I cherish the opportunity that these museums open their doors for our culture and stories to be shared."

### **About the Artist**

Vian Sora (b. 1976, Baghdad, Iraq) has lived and worked in Louisville, Kentucky since 2009. She received a BS from Al Mansour University in Baghdad, Iraq in 2000 and studied printmaking at the Istanbul Museum of Graphic Art (IMOGA) in Istanbul, Turkey in 2007. Sora's work has been presented in solo and group exhibitions nationally and internationally including the Baltimore Art Museum, Baltimore, MD; Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Santa Barbara, CA; Speed Art Museum, Louisville, KY; Contemporary Arts Center (CAC), Cincinnati, OH; Sharjah Biennale, Sharjah, UAE; IMOGA, Istanbul, Turkey; as well as the KMAC Triennial, Louisville, KY; Grinnell College Museum of Art; among others.

Sora's work is included in the collections of the Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD; Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, CA; KMAC Museum, Louisville, KY; Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Santa Barbara, CA; Speed Art Museum, Louisville, KY; Grinnell College Museum of Art, IA; Ministry of Culture Contemporary Collection, Baghdad, Iraq; the Pizzuti Collection, Columbus, OH; Fidelity Art Collection, Boston, MA; and the Shah Garg Foundation Collection, New York, NY; as well as numerous private collections.

*Vian Sora: Outerworlds* is organized by Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Asia Society Texas, Houston, Texas; and Speed Art Museum, Louisville, Kentucky. and. This exhibition's realization at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art is made possible by Joan Davidson, Jeanne Dentzel, Rachel Kaganoff, Isabel and Paul Wendt, and an anonymous donor.

The exhibition is curated by James Glisson, Chief Curator and Curator of Contemporary Art, Santa Barbara Museum of Art; Owen Duffy, Nancy C. Allen Curator and Director of Exhibitions at Asia Society Texas; Tyler Blackwell, Curator of Contemporary Art, Speed Art Museum.

The Santa Barbara Museum of Art is one of the finest museums on the West coast and is celebrated for the superb quality of its permanent collection. Its mission is to integrate art into the lives of people through internationally recognized exhibitions and special programs, as well as the thoughtful presentation of its permanent collection.

**Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1130 State Street, Santa Barbara, CA**

**Open Tuesday – Sunday 11 am to 5 pm, 1<sup>st</sup>Thursdays 5 – 8 pm**

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