



2035 South Third Street
Louisville, KY 40208

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**Speed Art Museum to present the first museum
survey exhibition dedicated to Iraqi artist Vian Sora**

Traveling exhibition devoted to Louisville-based artist jointly organized by Speed Art Museum, Santa Barbara Museum of Art, and Asia Society Texas

Louisville presentation to feature unique, site-specific artwork by Sora

Vian Sora: Outerworlds

Santa Barbara Museum of Art
June 22, 2025 – September 7, 2025

Speed Art Museum
October 10, 2025 – January 18, 2026

Asia Society Texas
April 2, 2026 – July 5, 2026

Louisville, KY, Jan. 15, 2025 — Speed Art Museum is proud to announce *Vian Sora: Outerworlds*, a multi-venue, mid-career survey of painter Vian Sora (b. 1976, Baghdad). Organized jointly with the Santa Barbara Museum of Art and the Asia Society Texas in Houston, this exhibition will assemble approximately 20 of Sora's major works, charting her growth as an artist over a period of seven years, 2016 to 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, Western art 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 in June 2025, traveling to the Speed Art Museum in October 2025 and Asia Society Texas in April 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 turned to 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 and our human efforts to control it," said Raphaella Platow, Speed executive director. "Her 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. It is our great pleasure to celebrate an international artist at the Speed who has found fertile ground for her artistic journey here in Louisville."

Describing her process, Sora said 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."

The title, *Outerworlds*, comes from two eponymous works included in the exhibition that Sora finished in 2021 while in Berlin on a residency. Vian 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 James Glisson shared, “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.” *Morphing* (2023) and *Floodgates* (2021) both convey a generalized sense of transformation and change, while others, such as *Antibodies* (2020), reference the flagellum of viruses or cells.

“This search for beauty amongst destruction is translated into my compositions through a conscious embrace of decay,” said Sora. “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,” said 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 not only reference their own process of making, or the chaos of war, but also 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*, which is Sumerian for fresh water from underground aquifers that helped fertilize the region; *Hanging Gardens*, as in the Hanging Gardens of Babylon; and *Dilmun*, 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, reflecting palimpsests that are part of Iraq’s millennia of recorded history as much as they are in the archeological sites across the country.

“I hope this exhibition will illuminate the struggle, courage and dissonance continuously faced by war survivors that exist between worlds,” said 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 remarked: “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.”

Speed Art Museum’s presentation will feature a unique, site-specific artwork created for the Louisville exhibition.

Vian Sora: Outerworlds is organized by Speed Art Museum, Asia Society Texas, and Santa Barbara Museum of Art. The exhibition is curated by Tyler Blackwell, curator of contemporary art, Speed Museum of Art; Owen Duffy, Nancy C. Allen curator and director of exhibitions at Asia Society Texas; and James Glisson, chief curator and curator of contemporary art, Santa Barbara Museum of Art.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a catalogue published by Inventory Press, featuring a lead essay by scholar Elizabeth Rauh from The American University in Cairo.

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 made possible at all three venues by the Great Meadows Foundation.

About the Speed Art Museum

The Speed Art Museum in Louisville, Kentucky, is the state's oldest and largest art museum and has served as a vital cultural resource for the Louisville community and the wider region for nearly 100 years. The Speed's ever-growing encyclopedic collection, timely exhibitions and community-driven programming explore contemporary issues and inspire meaningful personal experiences through the transformative power of art, sparking new conversations and creating opportunities for dialogue. Located on the campus of the University of Louisville but operating as an independent nonprofit institution, the Speed provides visitors from around the world with opportunities to engage with art through public and academic programs, screenings at the Speed Cinema, family offerings in the Art Sparks interactive learning gallery, and more. Fulfilling its mission of inviting everyone to celebrate art forever, the Speed is committed to creating a welcoming and accessible space for the community, including free admission on Sundays, Community Connections artmaking programs, and the Speed for All free membership. Significant upcoming projects include the highly anticipated Speed Art Park opening in 2025 and the Museum's centennial celebration in 2027. For more information, visit speedmuseum.org.

About Asia Society Texas

Asia Society Texas Center believes in the strength and beauty of diverse perspectives and people. As an educational institution, we advance cultural exchange by celebrating the vibrant diversity of Asia, inspiring empathy, and fostering a better understanding of our interconnected world. Spanning the fields of arts, business, culture, education, and policy, our programming is rooted in the educational and cultural development of our community—trusting in the power of art, dialogue, and ideas to combat bias and build a more inclusive society.

About Santa Barbara Museum of Art

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.

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Image caption:

Vian Sora, *Echo and Narcissus*, 2018. Acrylic and India ink finished with oil on canvas. 84 × 60 × 2 1/2 in. (213.4 × 152.4 × 6.4 cm.) Museum Purchase with funds generously donated by Stephen Reily and Emily Bingham, Reverend Alfred R. Shands III, Larry Shapin and Ladonna Nicolas, and Erik Eaker and John Brooks, 2018.19.

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