

## ROMANCE

Tasneem Sarkez

*Just For You*

Nov 15–Jan 4, 2025

“BEAUTIFUL SEXY ANGELS AWAIT YOU IN HEAVEN” glows in red LED neon: the subtext of an exhibition rooted as much in images as in what’s left offscreen and unsaid. Performing as coy and damning double-entendre, the scrolling signage is characteristic of Tasneem Sarkez’s approach to the making of cultural meaning, and the morphing of that meaning when excerpted from its original context, like so many JPEGs infinitely circulated. The sculpture gives post-spectacle Victoria’s Secret fashion-show afterlife while alluding to a post-9/11 American mythology of Islamic martyrdom mistranslated, allegedly rewarded by “72 virgins in Paradise.” Transmitted somewhere between literal *red alert* and an after-hours bodega sign, the message is perfumed with soft xenophobic notes and shrewd critique, refusing to reconcile sincerity and parody.

In what she describes as “Arab Kitsch” or “Arab Americana,” Sarkez draws from the corners of the internet and corner delis, smoke shops, beauty salons, and street vendors in New York—or a city actually called Baghdad in Florida. Here, you might find sun-bleached perfume boxes with a retro glamshot of George Clooney and names like “Privilege.” Or “Just For You,” the title of the Brooklyn-based artist’s first US solo exhibition and the faux-fancy scent she found in Bay Ridge, branded with an authentic Arab expression of intimacy meaning “just for you, my friend.” Always attentive to these perverse collisions of visual culture and belief systems, Sarkez assumes control of the narrative, choosing what to inconspicuously reveal and bring into the silky, blurry focus of her buttery surfaces.

Where Sarkez’s images remain intentionally uncanny, her titles subliminally inform in their nods to hollow promises (*Special Price*, *Peace Plan*, *Moral “Odor”*) of America’s failed dreams. A glass hookah rendered in Absinthe-acid green with a gun-shaped base becomes equal parts genuine hospitality and vacant allure of “cultural souvenir” as seductively exotic elixir. In *Hi Jolly* (2025), she references the first “Arab cowboy,” hired by the US Army in 1856 to test camel-driven cargo transport across the “Great American Desert.” In the artist’s hands, the audacity of these minute colonialist footnotes meets the sly humor of absurdity and forlorn affect as her pristine renderings degrade with imperfection and moments of lower resolution, often hazy or pixelated, like the camo-wrapped military bible in *god-fearing soldier* (2025).

The exhibition’s centerpiece, *Paradise City* (2025), presides over the gallery, installed with subliminal cues of beauty salon and gleaming white purgatory: just shy of heaven, or a hallucinatory mirage. Positioned as disembodied witness and, crucially, omniscient narrator, the heavily made-up beauty-ad stock image of “exotic brown girl,” as the artist describes, recounts the cryptic moments in which Arab visual culture becomes absorbed (and often co-opted or attenuated) in the “western” imaginary. It might be the subtlest turn of a tagline, or a sacred red-rose insignia of deep affection slapped onto metallic car mirrors with shiny decals. Seducing with its liquid mask of thick mascara and femme pink-purple palette of eyebrow-threading salon signage, the image rendered in both precise yet hazy brushstrokes gestures to this malleability of cultural significance. A faint trompe-l’oeil of peeling adhesive on a sun-aged poster, unworthy of the cost to replace, adds another layer of depersonalization, meaning continuously eroding.

Throughout Sarkez’s practice, this bittersweet patina is equally deadpan, permitting the guilty pleasure of dissociation or even a kind of nihilism, while turning the tables on whose fantasy, exactly, and whose violence we’re living in, and who is watching. Importantly, the work ultimately gestures toward a real desire for belonging in the estranged position of perpetual “other” that defines the image America has of itself. Things perpetually in limbo, or, as she puts it, “an asymptote: always approaching, never arriving,” whether as citizen of the US or toward myths we’re told to strive for.

**Tasneem Sarkez** (b. 2002, Portland) lives and works in New York. Sarkez will have her US solo debut at Romance, Pittsburgh in November 2025. Sarkez’s first solo exhibition took place at Rose Easton, London in January 2025. Selected group exhibitions include: SL x RE, Silke Lindner, New York; WANAWAL Archives, curated by Evar Hussayni, FORMA Arts,

London; Dirt in the Eye, Gnossiene Gallery, London (2024); Saccharine Symbols, Rose Easton, London (2023); Me and you and me and, SADE Gallery, Los Angeles, US (2023); Beginner's Luck, Rosenberg Gallery, New York (2023); Transversal: Where We Come From and Where We Are Going, 80 WSE Gallery, New York (2023); Printing the Future, Diefirma Gallery, New York (2022) and Liminal Space, curated by Annabelle Park, 42 Rivington Street, New York (2021). In 2023 she received the Martin Wong Award from the Martin Wong Foundation. Her work is in the collection of the Thomas J. Watson Library in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. She received her BFA from New York University in 2024.