

With *Xíлома. MCCCLXXXVI*, Kunsthalle Basel presents Dala Nasser's (b. 1990) first institutional solo exhibition in Switzerland. At its center is an immersive installation, a fragmented reconstruction of a Byzantine church and its mosaic floor, spanning three rooms. The Church of St. Christopher, whose ruins are situated on a symbolic site on a contested borderland rooted in the terrain of southern Lebanon, prompts questions about identity, belonging, and the enduring consequences of war and destruction.

At the heart of the exhibition is a reproduction of the sixth-century floor mosaic that, before its removal to the Louvre, had been embedded on this land for 1,386 years, becoming both a lens and a method, framing memory as a constellation of resonant traces rather than a fixed monument. The title *Xíлома*, from the ancient Greek ξίλωμα, meaning to "rip" or "rupture," reflects this tension and evokes the fractures that turned once-solid architecture into fragile memory.

Nasser's practice understands material as both form and testimony, bearing witness to the historical conditions shaped by colonialism, ecological decline, and psychological rupture. The artist's work with earth, ash, clay, charcoal, plants, and insects is deeply connected with specific landscapes and histories. In processes including soaking, staining, dyeing, and frottage on spiritual sites or contested ground, fabric transforms into porous archives of lived experience and memory.

For this exhibition, Nasser turns from material presence to spectral absence. The lost church is evoked through a photographic cyanotype process, which registers presence through absence and touch through light. A sound piece running throughout the space traces the contours of displacement and loss, echoing the mosaic's displacement and the fractures left behind.

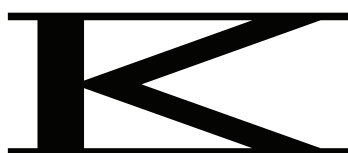
How does meaning persist when the whole is gone? *Xíлома. MCCCLXXXVI* suggests that memory endures in what remains in a quiet yet powerful narrative of cultural resilience traced in fragments.

Dala Nasser

Xíлома.

MCCCLXXXVI

16 May–
10 Aug. 2025



In her new commission for Kunsthalle Basel, Dala Nasser turns to a site where little remains, where presence has faded into absence, and history survives only in fragments. Located between Tyre and Qana in southern Lebanon, the ruins of the Church of St. Christopher now lie embedded within largely inaccessible terrain. Rather than treating the ruins as symbols of decay, Nasser approaches them as sites of reflection.

Fragmentation as Remembrance

Nasser presents the site through deliberate fragmentation, constructing a framework from simple wooden beams that evoke the contours of the lost church. Fabrics dyed with pigments sourced from the surrounding environment, such as earth, plants, and sediment, hang from this structure. Cyanotype-treated textile strips depict the original mosaic floor of the church to scale. The reconstruction resists monumentalization; instead, it renders absence perceptible, registering the ruptures of war, migration, and colonialism in both spatial and material terms.

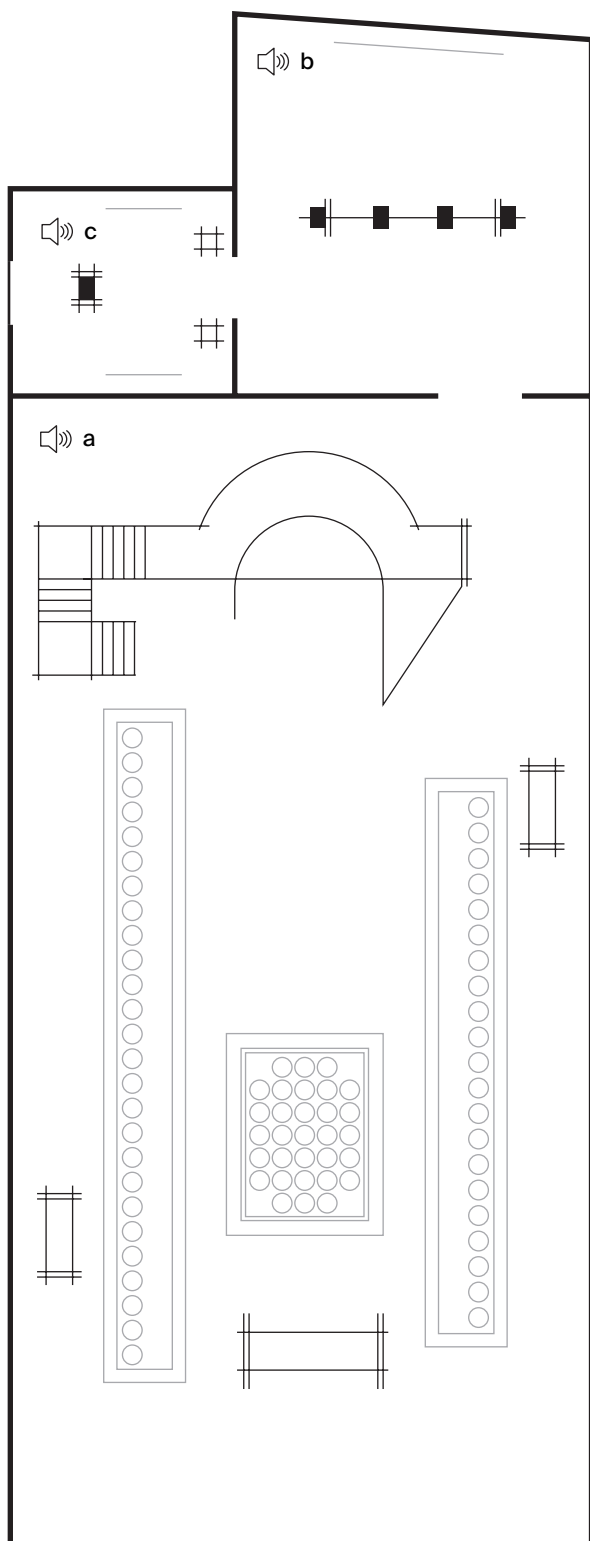
The sixth-century mosaic departs from conventional Byzantine iconography. Rather than depicting sacred figures or religious scenes, it portrays rural life, local flora and fauna, and the seasonal cycles of agricultural labor. Its imagery suggests a collective act of self-representation, commissioned by the surrounding community. In the nineteenth century, the mosaic was excavated and removed under the auspices of the colonial “Mission de Phénicie.” It was transferred to the Louvre in Paris, where it remains today, dislocated from its original context and reframed as a masterpiece of Byzantine heritage. By titling her work *MCCCLXXXVI*, Nasser references the 1,386 years that the mosaic was embedded in its homeland before being relocated to France. This span of time becomes a measure not only of historical distance but also of cultural erasure, reflecting how narratives are constructed through acts of removal and reframing.

Today, the ruins of the church are inaccessible and irreparably damaged due to ongoing aggression. Unable to use her usual method of frottage, Nasser turns to cyanotype for the first time in her practice. As an alternative form of image making, this early photographic process relies on sunlight, iron salts, water, and time to create deep blue images through direct contact rather than distant capture. What is exposed to light turns cyan blue; what is shaded remains pale white, preserving the outline of whatever is absent. For this work, Nasser arranged sand, soil, and dust from terracotta breeze-blocks on fabric to recreate the mosaic motifs, registering their presence as spectral impressions. In privileging contact, duration, and gesture over mechanical reproduction, these prints become reflections on loss, presence, and the impossibility of return.

The installation unfolds across three exhibition spaces, structured through a sound work composed in collaboration with the architect and composer Mhamad Safa. Each room stages a distinct sonic scene. In the first, recordings from the Mediterranean coast of Beirut and Gibraltar merge into a fluid maritime soundscape. The second becomes a space of layered vocal dialogue, rhythmically anchored in Byzantine chant. Two voices interweave, one that speaks from the mosaic’s enduring memory and the other from the experience of a migrant crossing the Mediterranean Sea. Together, both voices resonate with collective loss and the far-reaching effects of displacement. In the third room, the ambient reverberations of the Louvre linger, a distant echo of the institution that now holds the mosaic.

This sonic progression is mirrored in the visual language of the installation. From room to room, structural and material elements, including wooden scaffolds and cyanotype prints, gradually recede. What begins as a tangible reconstruction of the ruined church gradually disperses, leaving only spectral remains. This spatial development parallels the historical displacement of the mosaic itself, its removal emblematic of broader patterns of cultural extraction. It can further be understood as a reflection on the progression of movement from the Mediterranean Sea into Europe—whether by human beings or artifacts—and the stark differences in porousness. While objects are permitted to circulate freely, traversing the seas and migrating across borders, human movement is obstructed, regulated, and denied.

In *Xiloma. MCCCLXXXVI*, Nasser moves beyond a singular engagement with place to confront the broader conditions through which history is fragmented, inherited, or erased. The exhibition addresses not only the destruction of a specific architectural site but also the layered history of its appropriation, how cultural forms are removed, reinterpreted, and ultimately severed from their points of origin. The mosaic floor serves as a lens through which to view the region’s complex dynamics, one whose natural and cultural resources have long been subject to extractive violence and colonial intervention. Rather than seeking resolution, the artist’s work insists on exposure, registering the lingering presence of displacement across time and space.



Rooms 1–3

Dala Nasser

MCCCLXXXVI, 2025

Fabrics treated with terracotta clay and ash, dyed with indigo, walnut shells, and black tea, and cyanotype-treated fabrics with patterns drawn on with sand and dust from terracotta breeze-blocks, flowers, twigs, and wood

Dimensions variable

🔊 Sound installation

- a 55 min, looped
Recordings from the Mediterranean coast of Beirut and Gibraltar
- b 31 min, looped
Voices: Sally Moussawi and Vanessa Bowles
- c 30 min, looped
Recordings from the Louvre Museum

Courtesy the artist

Commissioned by Kunsthalle Basel, produced in collaboration with the Kamel Lazaar Foundation & Ibraaz London.

The exhibition is made possible through the generous support of Peter Handschin and Martin Hatebur as well as from the Südkulturfonds, with additional support from the Ernst und Olga Gubler-Hablützel Stiftung.

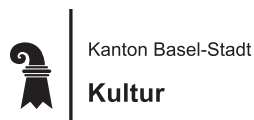


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Thanks to

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Structural and exhibition design: Adrian Müller, Arin Aprahamian
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Timber construction engineer: Ralf Müller
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The Kunsthalle Basel bookshop stocks publications on Dala Nasser alongside its broader selection of art books. You will find a selection of publications related to the artist in the Kunsthalle Basel library.

More information at kunsthallebasel.ch

Public Programs

Mal•Mal, in German and English

28.05.2025, Wednesday, 6–8 p.m.

Life drawing from a model in the current exhibition; materials will be provided.

Artist Talk with Dala Nasser, in English

18.06.2025, Wednesday, 10 a.m.

Mittwoch-Matinee, in German

30.07.2025, Wednesday, 10 a.m.–noon

The current exhibitions are explored at lunchtime as part of the series of events organized by museen basel. Afterwards, participants can engage in lively dialogue with refreshments on the terrace of Kunsthalle Basel.

Price: 10 CHF

Thursdays at Kunsthalle Basel

Espresso Tour, in German

17.07.2025, Thursday, 5:30 p.m.

The exhibition's key points are presented in twenty minutes, accompanied by an espresso ice cream.

Sundays at Kunsthalle Basel

Espresso Tour, in English

01.06.2025, Sunday, 3 p.m.

The exhibition's key points are presented in twenty minutes, accompanied by an espresso.

Public guided tours, in German

06.07.2025, Sunday, 4:30 p.m.

03.08.2025, Sunday, 4:30 p.m.

Curatorial Tour, with Yana Kadykova (Curatorial Assistant), in French

13.07.2025, Sunday, 4:30 p.m.

Registration at kunstvermittlung@kunsthallebasel.ch

Director's Tour, with Mohamed Almusibli, in English

10.08.2025, Thursday, 4:30 p.m.

Registration at kunstvermittlung@kunsthallebasel.ch

Program for Young People

Cyanotype: A sun-printing workshop, Basler Ferienpass

30.06.2025, Monday, 9 a.m.–noon

01.07.2025, Tuesday, 2–5 p.m.

Learn about the basic photographic printing process.

Be inspired by the works in Kunsthalle Basel and the SAM Schweizerisches Architekturmuseum and create unique cyanotypes.

Registration at: Basler-Ferienpass website

Price: free of charge

For children and young people aged six to sixteen

This program is also available for school classes.

Further information at: kunstvermittlung@kunsthallebasel.ch