

PROFILE

Images - Courtesy of the artist. **Writer** - Paul Roth, director.

Muriel Hasbun: Saints and Shadows

A journey of a complex heritage

Since 1990, Muriel Hasbun has examined her complex cultural identity through an artistic exploration of family history. A child of disparate cultures, rooted in one country but with origins traceable to many others, she grew quite naturally into an itinerant spirit and a belief that she, like her parents, was fated to exile. Her paternal grandparents emigrated to Central America as part of a Palestinian exodus occasioned by war, and nearly 30 years later her mother's parents left Poland for France in the face of another war, and the impending persecution of their people that became the Holocaust. Hasbun herself grew up in El Salvador, a country beset for much of her childhood by pronounced political tension. She left for college to Washington, DC, in the United States, at the height of her homeland's civil war, studying French literature at Georgetown University, then photography, mentored by Ray K. Metzker.

Just as many people begin in adulthood to investigate their genealogy, Hasbun became increasingly drawn to the compelling stories of her ancestors. This interest rapidly became an obsession as she realized the scope and complexity of her heritage: the multiple languages, diverse religious rituals, and contrasting characteristics and traditions common to her various nationalities and ethnicities. From the beginning, her search was complicated by distance, the passage of time, and the disruptive nature of exodus, which resulted (in her grandparents' case) in the loss of many family connections. In 1990, Hasbun accompanied her mother to France on a journey to recover her

grandmother's ashes. Now a photographer, a Catholic Latina exploring Polish Jewish roots in Paris, she struggled to understand her multivalent background. How, she wondered, could she use her new art form to explore the tangled strands of her identity?

A picture she made during the trip gave her efforts some direction: photographing through a window at the chapel where her grandmother's body was cremated, Hasbun recorded a smudge on the glass. Superimposed over the church interior, this ghostly white mark recalled a burning body and seemed to overlay the present with an intense image of the past. Encouraged by this experience, Hasbun began her groundbreaking series *Santos y sombras* (Saints and Shadows) between 1990-1997. In the first part, *Todos los santos* (All the Saints), she explored her childhood experience of her paternal Palestinian family in El Salvador, particularly her experience of Catholicism. The second section, *¿Solo una sombra?* (Only a Shadow?), addresses the painful experiences of her maternal Jewish family members, most of whom were exterminated in Poland during the Holocaust. To tell these stories, Hasbun re-photographed and collaged old correspondence, pages from journals and identity papers, and faded snapshots. She also made her own photographs, depicting family members: candles, altars, and statuary from the church of her upbringing; and the landscapes of her parents' childhoods. She then chemically toned these multiple images, implying the passage of time with subtle shifts in color.

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Shapes and motifs make repeat appearances in *Santos y sombras*. Faces, elegant handwriting, forests and other indigenous plant life, and the horizon lines of mountains and volcanoes all recur. The artist is often surprised by connections between one place and another that emerge only in the work—for example, the palm tree vista of *Todos los santos VIII* (La llegada)/All the Saints VIII (The Arrival), 1995, made to capture her grandfather's first experience of the Salvadoran landscape. After printing the photograph, she realized, to her astonishment, that the scene also evokes the

From the series *Saints and Shadows* *Todos los santos* (Volcán de Izalco, amanecer) / All the Saints (Izalco Volcano, Amari) (1995-96) Painted gelatin silver print 35 x 46 cm



place his family left behind, the Holy Land of Bethlehem. To Hasbun, these unexpected correspondences are part of the texture of memory. It is as if she is exploring an imagined territory, a place of echoes.

Hasbun's spirit of seeking is common to many people whose roots reside in a land outside their present home. Using a term coined by feminist scholar Marianne Hirsch, the artist refers to her reclamation of family history as an act of "post-memory," overcoming a generational amnesia. Combining ancestral recollections with her own haunting sense of loss, Hasbun uses the medium as an expressive tool, one suited to convey this feeling of "memory at one or two removes," in the words of photo historian Andy Grundberg. In her hands, the camera can be an instrument of magic, a device to conjure up the past in a concatenation of different artifacts, places, and times. Thus, a volcano may speak to us, erupting a Greek Orthodox prayer in cryptic Arabic script: ghostly shapes may hover in a stand of trees; a postmark is imprinted

on family linens and takes on sepulchral significance; and faded portraits rise up from the script of tattered correspondence and identity documents. In a sense, shadows—the traces of experience—are Hasbun's subjects, and the activating presence for her process of remembering.

Of course, the past cannot be made to live again, conjured into existence from memory; it can only be reconstructed in history or in stories. Hasbun's photographs ultimately serve as melancholic signposts, directing her (and us) toward a destination that is always just out of reach. In a telling contradiction, the artist once referred to her combining of histories within photographs as an act of reconciliation, while on another occasion she commented that she is forever drawn to the incommensurable. Her art arises from an exploration of this paradox. Hasbun knows full well the strange facility of communing with an unrecoverable time; but she has discovered that while we cannot truly know what is gone, we will never stop longing for the keys to ourselves.

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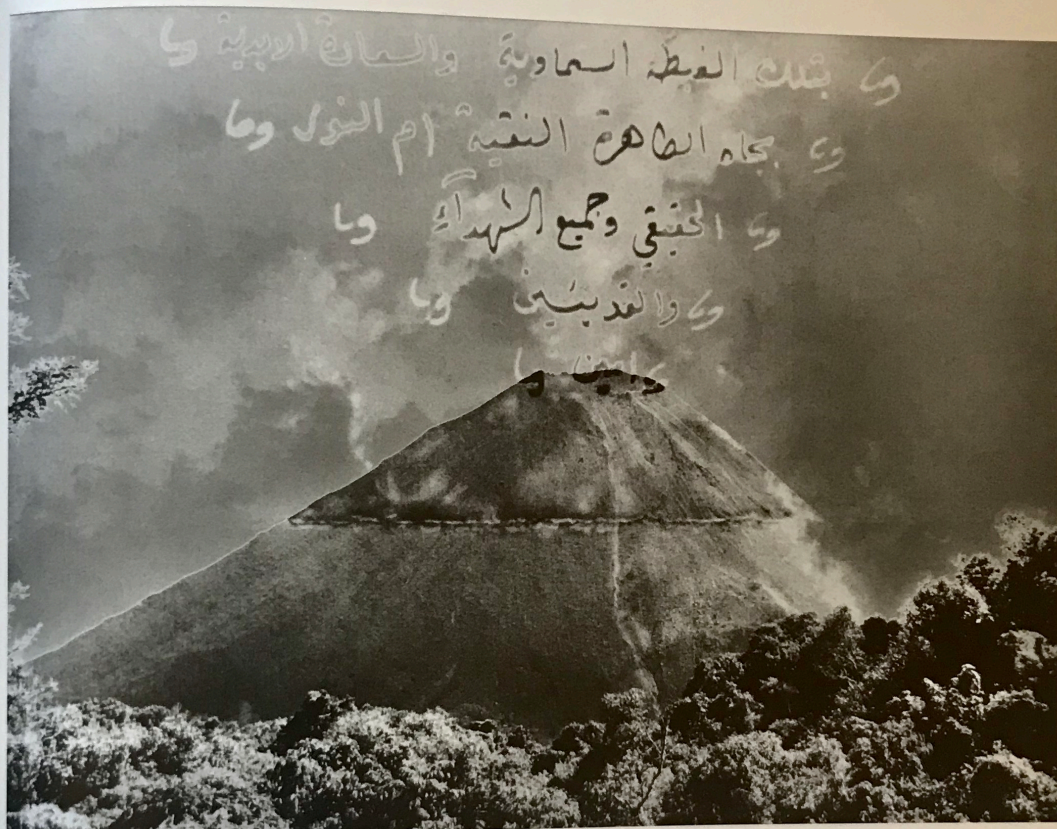
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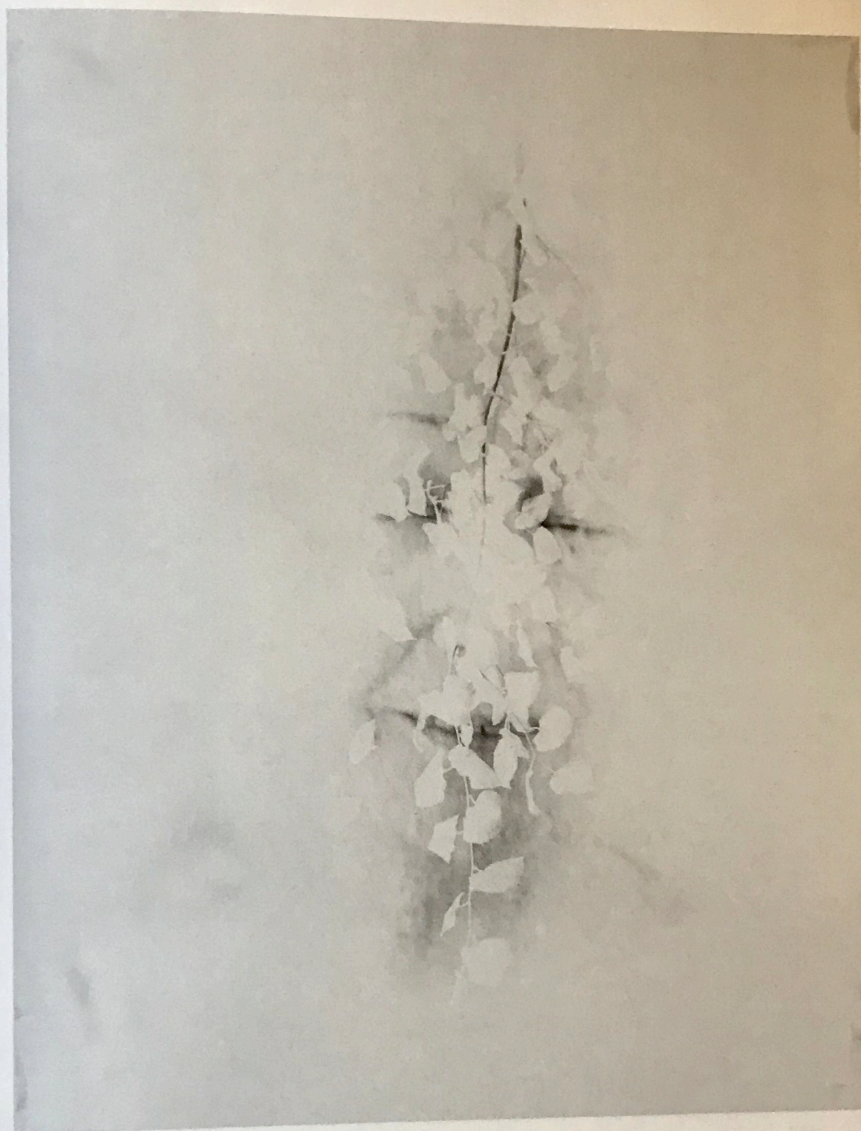
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From the series Saints and Shadows *Todos los santos (Para subir al cielo)* / *All the Saints (To Go Up to Heaven)*
(1995-96) Bluetoned/painted silver gelatin print, 31.5 x 46 cm



From the series Saints and Shadows ¿Sólo una sombra?/ Only a Shadow?
(Ester II) (1993-94) Silver gelatin print, 46 x 36 cm





Previous page: From the series Saints and Shadows ¿Sólo una sombra?/ Only a Shadow? (The Gate III) (1995)

Silver gelatin print, 46 x 33.5 cm

From the series Saints and Shadows ¿Sólo una sombra?/ Only a Shadow? (Lejzor)

(1994) Selenium silver gelatin print, 46 x 25.5 cm



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