

ALTMAN SIEGEL

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# SELECTIONS

ARTS / STYLE / CULTURE FROM THE ARAB WORLD AND BEYOND

“Inventing Perspective | Hiba Kalache,” *Selections Arts*, October 21, 2021



Hiba Kalache, "Inventing Perspective," 2017. Watercolor on paper, 100 x 310 cm.

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## TELL US ABOUT THE WORK YOU SUBMITTED.

The initial premise of my most recent project, *Lemonade Everything Was So Infinite*, which I started in December 2016, was to address the relationship between text and image, and the process of translation between written and visual languages. In its earliest stages, my concerns revolved around the transmission of knowledge across generation, (mis)communication and what was lost in the process of translation from text to image, as translation always entails interpretation.

I focused on the written word as my starting point in the creative process, and as a signifier that led to my interpretation of the symbolic images. I started playing around with the narrative I was confronting and altering its linearity by taking specific fragments out of context, confusing the descriptive language and layering it in my own work. This created new and unexpected associations among visual images, figures and consequently, interpretations, that led to indeterminacy in the narrative, and in the reading of the work. References to the initial narrative were retained as fragments, while new, and often fictitious, associations seeped in to feed on and disrupt one another.

I took the notion of 'hope' that we, as humans, embody, and that aids us in surviving or dealing with trauma and pain. In my interest in allegorical narratives, I turned to the description of the heavens in religious scriptures and studied specific passages for the production of my work.



Hiba Kalache, 56:10-40. Acrylic on paper, 150 x 310 cm.  
2017



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## WHEN CREATING A NEW PIECE, WHAT INSPIRES YOU MOST?

The process of constructing a drawing, a painting or an installation, and the layering of the work that goes through the different required steps, intellectually, technically/materially, as well as my emotional engagement. These spaces, experiences and interactions bring experiments, memories and visions to come together in the service of a projected future. A constancy of doubt and ambivalence drives the process and allows for the layers of the work to consolidate. It also resembles the way a tower or a city space is built, minute parts assemble to form a larger whole.

I usually start by envisioning a certain universe, and I work on the smaller elements. There are no new pieces: every beginning of a work is the continuity of past works. It is important for me that the process remains in perpetual "construction, deconstruction and reconstruction." In his book *Playing to the Gallery*, Grayson Perry points out that, "the sound a box of Lego makes is the noise of a child's mind working, looking for the right piece. Shake it and it's almost creativity in aural form." I love this reference.

If you could live anywhere in the world, where would it be and why?

I choose to live in a state of imagination and improvisation regardless of where I am geographically. I take from Clarice Lispector's novel, *Água Viva*, a fragment that concretizes this in my process, "always and always creating the present that is future."



Hiba Kalache, *I hear the mad song of a little bird and crush butterflies between my fingers acrylic on paper, 285 x 525cm, 2018*

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## WHAT'S ONE THING YOU COULD NEVER LIVE WITHOUT? WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT TO YOU?

Spaces of conversation – they create momentum to our presence. There's nothing else. I believe in process and in collaboration, which I believe is counter to the tediousness of our daily lives. These spaces carry the ability to continuously propel us into a future moment. Through exchanges with others, specifically in the art field with curators, art historians and gallerists, these dialogues become elemental in the unfolding and development of an idea and a project. Pertaining to that, preparations for my most recent solo exhibit over the past year and a half evolved and took shape only through an intense conversational exchange with the curator as well as the steady support of the gallerist. This only reflects the importance of the thought development behind the body of work and the present/local accessible contemporary art making approaches.

## WHO'S THE PERSON YOU MOST ADMIRE AND WHY?

Today: Clarice Lispector. Again, in her novel *Água Viva*, she claims "I refuse to be defeated: so I love," and continues "...to settle for that not as one defeated but in *allegro con brio*." I like the *allegro con brio* – it simply resumes life itself. It takes a lot of courage and self-defiance to choose "love" in life, and even better, with a high note.

## DESCRIBE YOURSELF IN JUST ONE WORD.

That's difficult... resilient.

A VERSION OF THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN PRINT IN SELECTIONS #45

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Talass, Rawaa, "10 Middle Eastern Artists to Discover," *Artsy*, March 8, 2021

Art

# 10 Middle Eastern Artists to Discover

Rawaa Talass

Mar 18, 2021 10:12AM



Yasmine Nasser Diaz  
*Thick as Thieves*, 2020  
Ochi Projects

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For over 15 years, the prominent New York-based nonprofit ArteEast has prioritized its mission to promote the artistic scenes of the Middle East and North Africa. In doing so, it has organized artist residencies in the United States, hosted on-site professional workshops, and maintained a growing archive of film hailing from the Arab world.

In partnership with Artsy, ArteEast's newest initiative is an ongoing fundraising exhibition that features more than 50 artists associated with the region. Under the title "Legacy Trilogy," it uniquely pays tribute to a wide breadth of established and rising contemporary talent through three separate sections: Past, Present, and Future. The funds raised will be used to preserve the organization's film archive, including supporting the participating artists.

The question of "What is Middle Eastern art?" has surfaced from time to time in recent years, leading to discussion and debate in the art world. Given the contentious and geographically constrained nature of the term "Middle Eastern art," the answer varies and is rather subjective. But as evidenced by the diverse works of the 10 artists below from the ArteEast exhibition, it stretches far beyond the typical realms of pure calligraphy and ornamentation. By looking within and connecting with the events of the world at large, artists from the region and its diasporic communities have developed a compelling approach of producing art that proves to be thought-driven, socially engaged, personal, contradictory, and experimental.

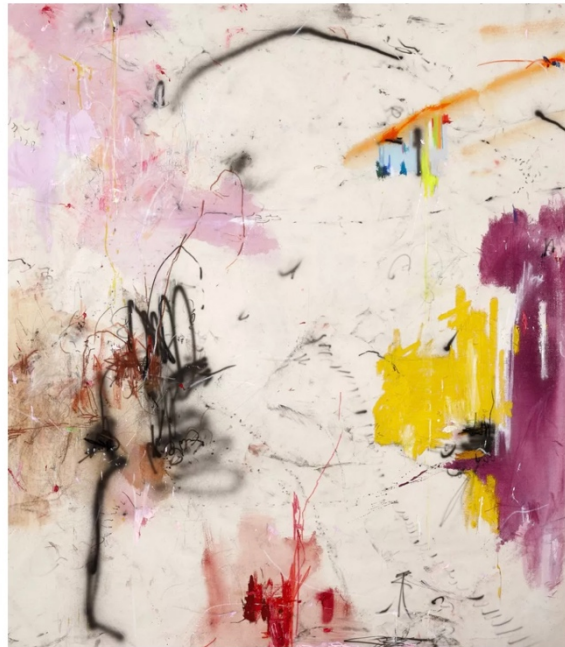


## Hiba Kalache

B. 1972, Beirut, Lebanon. Lives and works in Beirut.



Hiba Kalache  
*some dreams aren't dreams at all, just another angle of physical reality, ...*  
ArteEast  
Sold



Hiba Kalache  
*and there was the future that came and went, 2020*  
Saleh Barakat Gallery and Agial Art Gallery

One can liken the San Francisco–educated painter Hiba Kalache’s poetic compositions to the contradictory nature of life itself: Where there is beauty, there is pain. In her abstract paintings, Kalache applies a soft palette as a background, passionately covered with bursts of color and thickly contoured scribbles, almost acting as open, fresh wounds.

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Looking closely, there are visual hints of floral and erotic elements, evoking an atmosphere of violence, tension, and a glimmer of delicateness, where everything seems to coexist. The more one looks, the more one discovers intriguing details. Influenced by her geographical and sociopolitical surroundings, she claims her work to be autobiographical, reflecting occurrences of everyday life and how a human endures trauma.



Hiba Kalache

*i try to be more aware of the passing hours, that i might see it happen, that cosmic shift from one digit to another, 2020*

Saleh Barakat Gallery and Agjal Art Gallery



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Literature has served as a vital source of inspiration to Kalache's artistic process. The words of acclaimed writers Georges Bataille, Clarice Lispector, and Patti Smith have informed her work, notably the long, multilayered titles of her canvases, like *the trouble with dreaming is that we eventually wake up*, *the inexplicable love makes the heart beat faster*, or simply, *as it goes, so do we*.

# ARAB NEWS

Talass, Rawaa, “The Breakdown: Hiba Kalache – ‘the trouble with dreaming is that we eventually wake up,’” *Arab News*, January 9, 2021

## THE BREAKDOWN: Hiba Kalache — ‘the trouble with dreaming is that we eventually wake up’



Hiba Kalache is a Lebanese artist. (Supplied)

***DUBAI:** The Lebanese artist discusses her latest body of abstract work, available to view online at Beirut's Saleh Barakat Gallery's website.*

The title of my exhibition — “Our Dreams are a Second Life” — is loaded with layers. There’s this notion of exploring the concept of dreams and hopes throughout the trajectory of my work over the past 15 years. I think it’s quite impossible to separate the geopolitical, sociopolitical context we live in and belong to from the process that happens inside the studio.

The work is autobiographical, because it reflects daily life and how we go on through trauma and what we hold on to as humans or as an individual female artist — being a mother and a daughter — coming from this specific descent.

Books, psychoanalytical texts and the daily news all end up feeding into my work. When the protests began in Beirut in October 2019 we were all thrown into uncertainty and somehow I fell on Patti Smith’s 2017 book “Year of the Monkey,” which deals with existential questions.



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The artist's abstract work is on view at Beirut's Saleh Barakat Gallery until January 16.  
(Supplied)

Going through lockdown in the last few months, I was in this space of high awareness of the present that took me back to this book. I had a very strong memory of it. I decided these fragments of sentences from the book would be most fitting, so this is where the title comes from.

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These canvases started by unfolding them on the streets of Beirut when the revolution began. I would follow spots in Downtown, where they were burning wheels. I would rub the canvases on the ground and it was as if the stains on them were a witness of this moment. Then I would go back to the studio and working on them with layers of watery acrylic inks.

I aim for the work to hold this kind of binary world where opposites can coexist fluidly on the surface of the canvas. If you get closer, there are visual, defacing elements that are a bit shocking to the eye: fragments of the body or bursts of color and tension. And then there's the empty, left-out spaces that the hand doesn't interfere with. I've put you more in a floating space where you can breathe.



“Can You Explore Your Dreams in Painting? Hiba Kalache Tells You How,” *Alsiasi*, December 28, 2020

# Can You Explore Your Dreams in Painting? Hiba Kalache Tells You How

**Hiba Kalache’s “Our Dreams are a Second Life” is an exploration of dreams.**

This collection of drawings and paintings is largely comprised of intricate abstractions and delicate color washes, most on expansive, unframed canvases.

On display at the Saleh Barakat Gallery, the show literally centers on a “sculptural intervention” that considers motherhood.

Kalache is interested in how text and image relate to each other. In “Lemonade Everything Was So Infinite,” her previous exhibition at this space, she explored the translation of religious texts into a visual language, drawing inspiration from the writings of the Ukrainian-born Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector.

While Lispector has continued to influence Kalache, the cerebral fuel for her new collection was primarily provided by American singer-writer Patti Smith. It was Smith’s



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“Year of the Monkey” that gave Kalache the title for her exhibition and the names for her artworks.

In her memoir, the singer poetically converses on politics, art and the people in her life while exploring what the year 2016 meant for her. Dreams are a running theme throughout the book, which opens with Smith at the “Dream Motel.”

“In the Dream Motel,” Smith writes, “I was certain I did not dream, yet the more I thought about it, I realized I did dream. More precisely, I skated along the fringe of dream. First it was morning, then night, then dawn, and the rays of the sun warmed everything. I left all thoughts of the world behind and followed my dream to the sea.”

“Year of the Monkey” regularly uses the Bay Area as a backdrop, which made the memoir feel very familiar to Kalache, who spent many years in San Francisco as an artist. Natasha Gasparian, who curated this exhibition, is, however, keen to emphasize that it is too easy and shallow to view Kalache as merely a “Bay Area artist.” Similarly, Kalache is keen to be seen within her own context, as an artist in Lebanon, rather than as a Middle Eastern counterpoint to an artist in the West.

“Hiba,” Gasparian says, “is not the John Mitchell of the Middle East.”

Given Kalache’s connection with the United States and her exploration of dreams, particularly disrupted dreams, it is, however, natural to consider the political and aspirational concept of the American Dream. Kalache worked on this collection throughout the Donald Trump presidency, which left many disillusioned with the idea of America – Smith being a vocal example.

During this period, the Trump regime waged war on migrants and dismantled the promise of America. With unfeeling symbolism, Trump attacked the Dreamers’

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program that protects immigrants who entered the United States illegally as children, leaving many lives and plans in disarray or limbo.

The disorientation that follows a disrupted dream is uncomfortable, as the mind shakes between a conscious and unconscious state. The idea of disrupted dreams, however, takes on a broader significance in the context of recent events and upheaval in Lebanon, the United States and elsewhere.

"I think globally, it all relates," Kalache says.

Kalache's abstract artworks are complex and layered. The intricate scribbles and vigorous brushstrokes create images that are "as gratifying as they are uncomfortable," Gasparian says.

In a previous exhibition, "Alternate Worlds," Kalache responded to the Arab Spring. These works included black washes, contrasting colors and styles, as well as figurative scenes of prisoners bound and blindfolded.

Though the world today is, arguably, more chaotic than it was in 2011, the work in "Our Dreams are a Second Life" responds in a less-direct way than that in "Alternate Worlds." There is a sense of freedom and psychological wandering in her newest pieces, as Kalache plays lightly with textures and shapes and color. This sense of looking inward (rather than to an alternative world) brings to mind Lispector's reflection that "it's inside myself that I must create someone who will understand."

For this collection, Kalache experimented with automatic drawing, where she let her hand draw as it wished – a sort of but not quite dream state, not unlike Smith's description of "skating along the fringe of dream."

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The subject of motherhood interests Kalache as an artist, and it makes sense that she would draw inspiration from Lispector. She is one of the few female writers of the 20th century who had the opportunity to combine motherhood with a life-long career, writing unashamedly about women's lives. Benjamin Moser, who translated Lispector's work, notes in an article for the New Yorker that "Before Clarice, a woman who wrote throughout her life about that life was so rare as to be previously unheard of."

The "sculptural intervention" of carefully folded and arranged fabrics on display at the heart of Kalache's exhibition is both unashamedly maternal and quietly personal. The piece took form in the aftermath of the Aug. 4 port explosion, when folding bed sheets and pillowcases from her mother's house and putting them aside in her studio made sense to Kalache "as a mother and a daughter."

Beyond the domestic toil and comfort of the folding process, Kalache views it as an act where much is hidden. With the port explosion, the artist says, "we will have to wait for the truth to unfold."

Kalache has used her latest collection to examine and analyze what is hidden between the folds of consciousness and unconsciousness. In a world where waking life has become full of horrors, the dream state becomes ever more appealing. Of course, as Smith notes in her book, "The trouble with dreaming is that we eventually wake up."





“On Negotiating Space and Memory” *Art Scoops*, September 2016

## On Negotiating Space and Memory

*Describing her work as “an abstracted attempt at reflecting on experiences and quests”, Hiba Kalache talks mapping the environment with Artscoops.*

*You have said that your art is a response to your environment and a way of trying to make sense of it. How did you come to make this your starting point?*

I continuously explore notions of time, space and memory, with their many folds and layers. My art being a response to the physical space I inhabit is a natural reaction to events I witness and question, as an individual part of a larger whole. I attempt to foster dialogue between site and artwork, as well as audience or participator. But what drives my process most is a search for an imaginary art narrative that can reflect on everyday experience and environment.

*Your fascination with the way people deal with tragedy and their capacity for hope is well documented. How do you take these emotions and channel them into your work?*

I am usually drawn to specific local (political) events as physical, social and mental constructs, and how they shape identity. I have always been intrigued by the way people process pain and trauma. In the past, I used to refer to images from daily newspapers and I examined Beirut city (security) maps. I am currently conducting conversations with people in Beirut city, around a specific subject matter (‘colour’), and, in parallel painting, drawing and playing with paper sculptural shapes, being driven by the formal aspects of artmaking. It is a new way of mapping my environment. The emotions are abstracted, and I prefer to keep an open-endedness regarding the reading of the work.

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*Kiss me before you go II, 2012, ink, watercolor, acrylics on archival paper  
120x240 cm each panel unframed  
(246x126 cm each framed)  
(246x630 cm 5 panels framed)*

***What have you learnt about the way people process and filtrate memory in your work?***

The way we negotiate space and memory is very subjective to each of us, and is usually based on selectiveness and omission in our everyday lives. What does it mean to engage with a physical space/place and ask it to shape a language (visual or not), define a self, or even a population? Do any two people feel the same way about a specific locality?

***Do you have a fear that memories won't be accurate or representative? Does it matter if they're not?***

My work is an abstracted attempt at reflecting on experiences and quests. My only fear is to fall out of the momentum, or of the work process, which is the main drive behind the progress of my investigations.

***Your art is known to be multi-layered and includes technical intricacies. Tell us something about the processes involved.***

The composition of a 2D work begins in an orderly manner with a division of spaces. Hand-drawn/painted intricate details are gradually added until structures and hybrids take form. Movements and rhythms then come into play to (inter)connect the whole and break down the original order. The interaction that takes place between the various visual elements is of great interest to me. This interplay seems to embody relationships between smaller parts and a larger whole, such as between an individual and a partner, or a larger community/society and it reminds me of the interdependence of systems. The resulting work becomes a visual plane for the viewer to decipher, as well as a dialogue between the viewer and me. There is almost always clearly an event taking place, or many smaller ones, but what is not necessarily clear is the cause or the outcome of the event.



*I Love You Because..., 2012, ink, aquarelle & acrylic on paper,  
240 x 120 cm (5 drawings)*

***As a multi-media artist, how do you choose your medium for a particular work?***

I like to express conceptual layers with the physical gestures/manipulations the hand directly executes on a material, or through interventions, and direct interactions with the public audience.

***What are you currently working on?***

My connection and intimate relationship with Beirut city continues to be in translation through the work. I have started in March a new project that is taking its own course in developing. The same way I like to keep an open-ended interpretation to my work, I am aiming at having a more open-ended process through the construction of a project. The present work consists of two separate folds: one that involves conversations, as I explained earlier, with local artists, gallerists, curators, designers and pizza delivery guys... about life, magic and specifically 'colour'. And the second includes the artworks, which represent an abstracted expansion of these conversations.

# SELECTIONS

ARTS / STYLE / CULTURE FROM THE ARAB WORLD AND BEYOND

Stoughton, India, "The fine art of construction: Emerging artists in Lebanon were showcased by the Beirut Art Center in 'Exposure,'" *Selections*, February 2015

REVIEW

selections art paper #05

## BEIRUT

### The fine art of construction

Emerging artists based in Lebanon were showcased by the Beirut Art Center in 'Exposure'

by India Stoughton

Stuck to the wall of Nour Bishouty's studio is a collection of photographs of a woman the artist has never met. Dark haired and slender, she is captured at dinner with friends, alone at a table, visiting an archaeological site and seated on a surfboard in the middle of a calm sea. The mystery woman and her unknown story were the inspiration behind the work Bishouty created for part of the Exposure exhibition at the Beirut Art Center this winter. Dealing with memory, narratives and material traces, Bishouty's work fitted neatly with the theme of the exhibition, 'Under Construction.'

Using the physical traces left by a departed person, she constructed a series of works based around the idea of materiality and absence. Bishouty used the sticky paper from lint roller to pick up the hair and loose thread left on a coat each day for a month, cutting it into segments to create a calendar charting the overlooked traces of day-to-day activity. A second work consisted of a sheet of paper that from a distance appeared blank, but was in fact perforated by a series of tiny holes: the punctures created by a sewing machine without thread. A thought-provoking and strangely visceral project, her work tied together several of the sub-themes that emerged during the sixth edition of the annual show.

Designed to showcase work by emerging artists based in Lebanon, 'Exposure 6' was curated by the BAC's new director, Marie Muracciole. A four-person jury selected the nine proposals that resulted in the works on display.



Like Bishouty, Palestinian artist Mirna Bamieh chose to deal with construction as it relates to the intangible. Her installation piece, entitled 'A Manual: How to Preserve Memory', was a bleakly humorous, mock guide to remembering. Three video screens played rotating film clips, purporting to share step-by-step instructions for how to memorise everything from a dead person to the meaning of life. Shelves of objects, mislabelled with the text or titles of books, enabled viewers to "practice" their newfound skills, while highlighting the absurdity of political rhetoric based on a fabricated or misremembered past.

A film by Roy Dib explored the construction and perforation of borders as they appear in romantic relationships and between enemy states. Photographer Tanya Traboulsi likewise interpreted the theme as it relates to love and war, creating an installation piece centred on audio interviews with single women over 30, focusing on their perceptions of marriage.

above: Tanya Traboulsi, *Something Borrowed*, Ghida Y., 44, 2014

opposite page top: Mirna Bamieh, *A Manual: How to Preserve Memory*, 2014

above: Nour Bishouty, *Process: Inventing and distancing*, 2014







Jessika Khazrik chose to focus on reconstruction, uncovering the history of a mountain village that became a storage point for thousands of barrels of imported waste, using archival materials to create a large-scale installation. British artist Arjuna Neuman also focused

on the environment, constructing a large concrete platform dotted with neon lightbulbs in the shape of flowers, which encouraged reflection on physical and mental horizons.

Hiba Kalache, meanwhile, focused on physical constructs and the barriers they pose to movement. Enormous, intricately detailed paintings explored the fabric of Beirut, mapping roadblocks and charting their influence on urban circulation to create stunning abstract patterns. Georgette Power, the pseudonym of Lebanese-French artist Benjamin Moukartzel, created a video work relating to identity, movement and language, while Tala Worrell also explored two constructs we live by as though they were immutable: time and language.

Although a little rough about the edges, 'Exposure' served to highlight work by some of the region's more promising young artists. Several of the projects—Dib's film, Bamieh's video installation and Traboulsi's audio installation among them—held their own as finished works. Others hinted at good things to come from artists who are still cementing their practice. ♦

