



Nayla Tamraz portrait

Nayla Tamraz

Nayla Tamraz is a writer, art critic, researcher and professor of literature and art history at St. Joseph University in Beirut. She has also been the Head of the Department of French Literature and in 2010 she launched the MA in Art Criticism and Curatorial Studies that she heads. She has published numerous articles on artistic and literary theory and a collection of essays exploring history and memory in literature and art in post-war Lebanon. She is currently the curator of the exhibition *Poetics, Politics, Places* that will take place in Argentina in the framework of the International Biennale of Contemporary Art of South America.

ON MARGINALISATION, ACTIVISM AND FEMINISM

Nayla Tamraz interviews Etel Adnan, Lamia Joreige and Tagreed Darghouth

by Nayla Tamraz



Etel Adnan, photo by Simone Fattal. Photo Credits: artist



Photograph of the artist by Polly Thomas, © Artes Mundi



Tagreed Darghouth portrait, © Giles Duley

Etel Adnan

Born in 1925 and raised in Lebanon, Etel Adnan studied philosophy at the Sorbonne, U.C. Berkeley and Harvard and taught philosophy for 14 years. She is a writer, poet and visual artist, whose novel *Sitt Marie-Rose*, exploring the Lebanese Civil War, has been translated into more than ten languages. Now in her 90s, she continues to work as a visual artist, producing semi-abstract paintings and folding leporellos.

Lamia Joreige

Born in Lebanon in 1972, Lamia Joreige is a visual artist and filmmaker who lives and works in Beirut. She uses archival documents and fictitious elements to reflect on the relationship between individual stories and collective history. She explores the possibilities of representation of the Lebanese wars and their aftermath, and Beirut, a city at the center of her imagery. Her work is essentially on time, the recordings of its trace and its effects on us.

Tagreed Darghouth

Born in Saida, Lebanon, in 1979, Tagreed Darghouth is a painter whose work focuses on the dangers and desires reflected in contemporary society. She studied art at the Lebanese University in Beirut and at École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs in Paris. Her figurative paintings have focused on themes including war, the exploitation of domestic workers and the power of the atomic bomb. Tagreed also participated in Aylou's Summer Academy, intensive workshops directed by Marwan Kassab Bachi at Darat Al Funoun in Amman.

Louise Bourgeois was once asked, "Do you see the art world as a men's world?" and she answered, "Yes, it is a world where men and women try to satisfy men's power." Therefore, she noted the fact that women are not much represented and recognised in art history. We had to wait until the 1970s for this issue of under representation of women in art to be seriously raised by art historians. Linda Nochlin, for instance, raises a polemic question in a seminal article published in 1971 in *ARTnews*: "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" In this article, she reviewed the social structures and the institutional attitudes that influenced the art produced by women and their art-historical status as well.

Nochlin's article points out that in the 19th century and earlier, institutional barriers were strongly established to cut women off from essential training to become professional artists; they couldn't study the nude, nor attend the Academy courses. They were only allowed to work on portraits and still life, where models were easily available. Thus they were not able to practice

noble genres such as historical painting. It was implied that women could only be good enough for minor categories, which was obviously wrong. But this can explain the fact that, besides very rare exceptions (Marie Cassatt, Berthe Morisot or Judith Leyster), women artists were rarely bold or creative, because they were not trained to be so. Today's art schools, everywhere, are more than half full of girls. It is no longer difficult for a woman to train to be an artist. Nevertheless, once past art school, all sorts of obstacles stand in the way of her further pursuit of a serious career.

As a matter of fact, out of 169 artists who were invited to the exhibition *An International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture*, organised by the MoMA in 1984, one could count only 13 women. More than 30 years later, we can reasonably ask ourselves if women artists are still under-represented in art institutions all over the world, especially in the Arab world where particularism, religion, tradition and identity politics have inhibited the possibility of embarking on an in-depth and international scaling debate.

NAYLA TAMRAZ: We know that the fact that some of the best artists in every medium are women is unquestionable: good art has no sex. But in terms of art market, apart from some rare exceptions, do you think that today's women artists get the prices men do, or that museums are ready to support young women artists as much as they support young men? Don't you think that women artists generally have to be extraordinarily well-established before being bought for collections, or given major exhibitions?

ETEL ADNAN: Women artists have come a long way thanks to some artists from Germany and the United States, Agnes Martin and Georgia O'Keeffe coming to my mind. Louise Bourgeois too. Now there are as many women as men in all the major galleries in the world. I don't know the situation in Asia... I would think that they are still struggling. We don't hear much about women artists from Latin America either. In the U.S. and Europe,

If we still hear more about men than women artists, it's because they are still more numerous

I would say that the art world is open to them as much as to men. I don't think that women have more difficulties than men finding galleries at home or abroad. I would say that sometimes it helps to be a woman artist, as there is great curiosity about women: galleries and collectors may think that there's a possibility to renew art through a feminine approach. Women also tend to be more aggressive, more tenacious in finding galleries... men get discouraged more easily, it seems to me. But the art world has become primarily a market, so galleries favour those artists they can sell, regardless of the fact that they are women or men. If we still hear more about men than women artists, it's because they are still more numerous. And it's also true for the old generation where women are less in

number in the arts. For the very young people, the situation has changed. They are promoted as much as the boys, and in the art schools of the main capitals of the world one can find that the number of girls has caught up with the one of boys. **LAMIA JOREIGE:** Let's be clear. I don't think there is equality today, in the market or even in the visibility between women and men in the art world. The reasons for this are not always clear. I don't want to go into speculation. I don't think women have to be extraordinary well-established today before being bought for collections. You have some young women artists who are part of collections. But I do think, at least for an older generation of women, who were as good as their male peers, that they only reached recognition at a late stage of their lives and careers.

I'm not talking just about the Arab world. We are witnessing today a sort of attempt by many institutions worldwide to render visible works by women artists that were done decades ago and that were not given the proper visibility at the time, for reasons that go beyond the art world. This inequality goes back thousands of years. For all the reasons that exist in all other fields, these women were not visible. And you see that many institutions are now trying to find, to uncover and unfold the works of women artists. So I wouldn't say that today's institutions do not include younger women, and you don't have to wait until you are highly established because it has changed. You have some kind of change, a progress, but we are not there yet.

TAGREED DARGHOUTH: I think that your question relates more to the Western art market than the Middle Eastern one. As a Lebanese artist, working and living in Beirut, I have never encountered a gender-based situation. At least from what I have noticed, prices are rather based on age, the taste of the local art collectors and who is considered a current "successful investment." It's a bit more complicated than being a woman artist or a man artist. I believe that here in Beirut an artwork is perceived regardless of the artist's sex. My prices probably match most of my other fellow colleagues who are of my same age.

It's a fact though that the older generation of women artists did face this inequality. Take Saloua Raouda Choucair as an example. Choucair got the recognition she deserved only recently, and after a long-term career that proved to be an extremely powerful one. I am convinced that in general, yes, men who are engaged in the art field take time before trusting a woman's artwork, and thus giving her recognition. But times have changed to our favour now, and probably in Lebanon more than the other Arab countries. Here we have less tension regarding the gender issue, although it still exists.

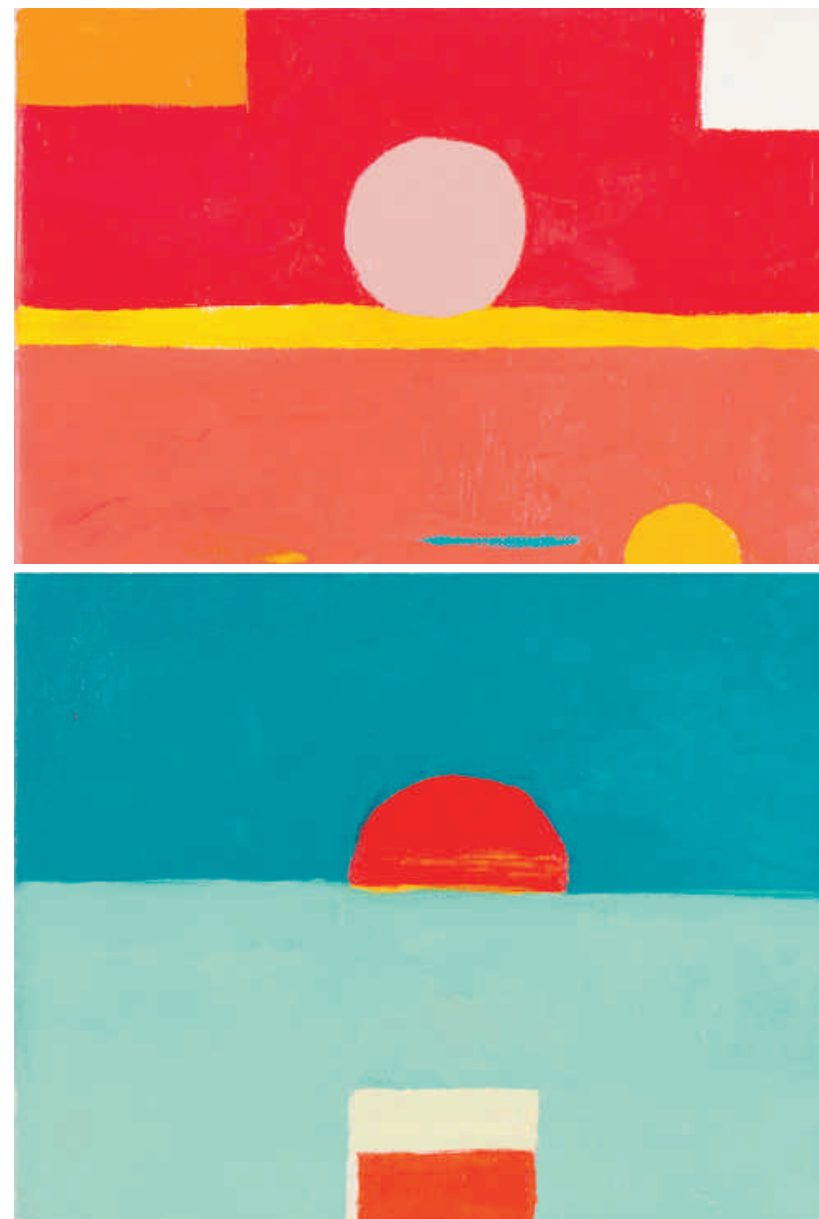
N.T.: Are collectors, museums, curators and galleries up on things? And is this still happening while women begin to occupy prominent places in the art world as creative artists? Or when curators and dealers are women?

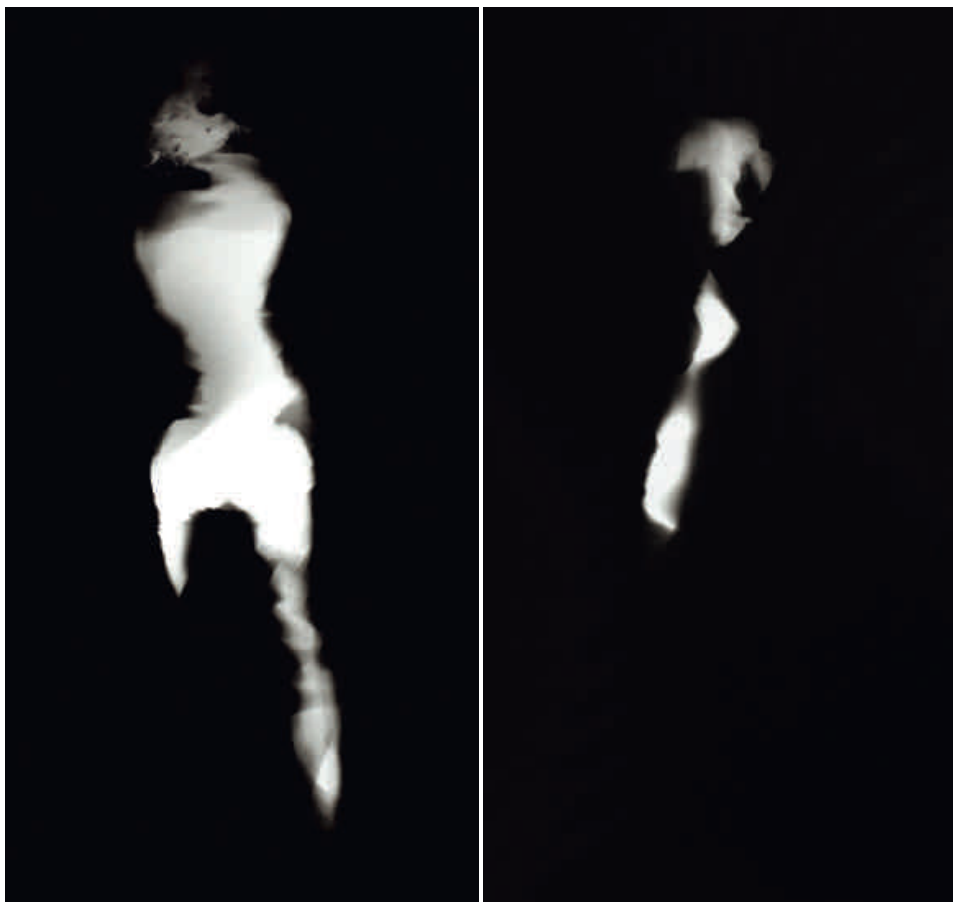
LAMIA JOREIGE: Collectors and curators are participating in this, for better and worse. Today, curators have reached such a prominent position. There is this sort of curator stardom that has risen since the '80s. Curators have a very important role in the career of an artist, like the one art critics in the '50s and '60s used to have. I don't like to use the word "career" or even the word "profession," this is not how I see my work. But if you want to make a generalisation or if you want to talk about it as a field, like any other field, I think that obviously the role of curators and the role of major biennales and museums are prominent, and you can almost retrace their paths in an artist's life. But it is very important to maintain the idea that you can also find your place in this world without following these paths.

So there is always this tension. In the end, you know it is very hard to make it without being part of these biennales and museums. This is not the reason why you do your art but there is always this tension. How am I going to make my work visible and share it with everyone if it is not in that public space? It is also a matter of visibility and publicity, and your work also exists when it is shared with the public.

above: Etel Adnan, Untitled (072), 2010, oil on canvas, 24 x 30 cm, courtesy of the artist and Séra-Semler Gallery Beirut/Hamburg

right: Etel Adnan, Untitled (075), 2010, oil on canvas, 24 x 30 cm, courtesy of the artist and Séra-Semler Gallery Beirut/Hamburg





Lamia Joreige,
One Night of Sleep,
 photographs,
 180 x 95 cm, 2013,
 © The artist

I took a diversion to explain the reasons for an artist to want to be in such places, apart from the desire for recognition. The fact is that you can barely 'make it' today without these considerations. And so it depends on who's there, but having a woman at the head of a biennale, or at the head of a museum, does not make her recognise other women, as we know. Unfortunately.

T.D.: I never approach my canvas thinking that I am a woman or a man. I'm a strong believer, though, that a well-constructed experience is going to prove itself, whether it's a he or a she who is behind it. I believe that our actual problem here in Lebanon is the current academic teaching level. The deficiency of good art schools, great instructors, the lack of public museums, the limited access to private art collections. It is the fact that art students are not being well exposed to art.

N.T.: What are the challenges women artists from the Arab World faced or are still facing in order to sell their work and gain recognition?

T.D.: I think artists of both genders face problems. Not until you find a good gallery, start to acquire a mature experience, be well-presented in exhibitions, museums and art fairs... These challenges face all artists, here and in the Arab world. As I have mentioned earlier, Lebanon has made considerable progress regarding gender issues. Some other Arab countries haven't yet, so basically Arab women and women artists still have lots of work ahead of them.

I do agree that more effort is demanded from women artists in order to be recognised. This is understandable, considering that women's experience in this field is still "young." I cannot, for example, ask an art collector to trust a woman's artwork for the sole reason that she has the right to be treated equally. An artist must work and her experience will inevitably be acknowledged. One undoubtedly needs to fight.

My artwork has always been confused with that of a man's or an older woman. I think this proves the stereotype some

still hold in their minds. My body of work debunks their image of how women do art. But, let me tell you something, my real worry has nothing to do with the gender issue. It's at that moment while I'm standing in front of my canvas, the anguish of becoming better. It is never between me and the outside world. A painting or an artwork is going to impress anybody if it is well executed. I'm always occupied with the desire to evolve as an artist. I make sure that all sorts of potential distractions remain outside my studio.

N.T.: Is it after all easier for the women artists whose work is being shown in London, Amsterdam, Berlin and New York than for those who develop their carrier in Beirut, Cairo, Amman, Ramallah and other centres of the Arab world?

T.D.: Definitely, Western "women artists" are exposed to places where art is always in action. So yes, as I have mentioned earlier, a three times effort is necessary in our case. But I am quite optimistic. I'm impressed with the work of lots of Arab women and I trust that their condition is going to get even better. The issue of men and women artists is going to be behind us in the upcoming few years.

L.J.: I never felt, living in Lebanon (I've been working and living here in Beirut for 20 years, except last year, when I was in Cambridge), that it was harder to be a woman artist than a male artist. I felt it was harder to be visible as a woman in the art world in terms of art market, such as being represented by a good gallery. And all these things are connected. So, for instance, depending on where you show and which is your gallery, you'll have more institutional shows — all these things are connected. But I never felt that the issue was to be an Arab artist versus a non-Arab artist.

If I think about the Arab artists of my generation (who are in their 40s and 50s today), there weren't many women Lebanese artists, and they didn't have the same market value or visibility as their male counterparts who had started at the same time. But it's not because I am in Beirut. Of course, I am a female artist and of course I am a

Lebanese artist. Of course, I am an Arab artist, but I don't necessarily identify as such or say that my work is about being female or the fact that I am a female. Of course, this is embedded in who I am. I've worked on the body, and many issues on the body, but I never felt I had barriers in my production here or in my freedom of speech being in Lebanon. I think this is important to say.

N.T.: But the question is less if it is more difficult to be in the Arab world than abroad than if it is more difficult to be a female artist in the Arab world.

L.J.: Yes, but not more than being a female artist abroad. I feel like in the younger generations of artists there are more female artists now, and they don't have such differences between them and male artists.

N.T.: So this is really a question of generation?

L.J.: It could be. I mean, there is something that is shifting and progressing for the better, between the generation of women working in the '60s, those who started working in the mid-'90s, and the current one. I don't know about the situation abroad. I have friends who are women artists from my generation and who are living in France, Berlin, London, and I don't think that by living abroad they have more visibility than us here.

N.T.: Did it become easier for women when contemporary art came along? While it was coming off academic references, contemporary art opened up to sociology, philosophy and psychoanalysis, all of them disciplines often associated with Marxist thinking. Has "anti-painting" — in the form of photography, video, installation, and performance — gained popularity among women because "they were associated with feminist refusal of the patriarchal reign of the painted masterpiece"? Do you think that these other media offered an independent territory for expression? Did these new ways of thinking of art beside the academic tradition give them the opportunity

to get off the established male artists' pattern? How has the art scene changed for women in the Arab world since 2000?

E.A.: It is true that women are better known in the other media than oil painting. I think it's mainly because they themselves are more attracted to the other forms of art, that they think it's more "avant-garde" to make installations, for example, than oil paintings. In part, there's more room for being experimental in the other forms of visual arts. For painting on canvas

Being a painter, I assure you is highly challenging, especially if you are aiming for "original results."

there's little room for formal invention. The field is exhausted. You can always paint, the individual is always new, unique, but formal invention is rather exhausted: they did black on black and white on white, they even tore the canvas, or burned it, so one feels that the other forms are still practically virgin. Women in the Arab world follow that pattern. The successful women artists in the Arab world like Mona Hatoum and Emily Jacir or Samia Halaby and a few others use mixed media, assemblage or performance or installations in very creative ways, and they are more political than the European or American artists because they come from countries in trouble.

L.J.: I am not sure I would agree with where this is coming from, when speaking of today's situation. I don't think of the use of photography and video installation as anti-painting. I studied painting and cinema and I don't necessarily see mediums as contradictory. I don't see video or photography as anti-painting, I still see myself as a painter, although I don't necessarily paint anymore. I'm speaking based on my personal experience. Many women continue to paint and revisit the genre while still

criticising the omnipresence and the historical understanding that painting is really more of a man thing.

I was recently at the Rose Art Museum in Brandeis University, Massachusetts, watching Ana Mendieta's work, *Body Tracks*. They are a feminist response to Yves-Klein. Of course, as body prints, they are performative but they nevertheless are drawings. Also Etel — she's a painter and she's a feminist.

I am not at ease with this statement. I think the shift (to the other media you mention) has to do with technological progress and with a certain democratisation and freedom in the ability of using images and making images. I personally needed to deal with issues related to the narration of the Lebanese wars and the question of history. I had to use a medium that could unfold through time. I often used a time-based media because I was interested in the recording of speeches and testimonies. There was an urgency after the war, where I felt the need to confront myself to the notion of testimony, to the notion of the real and its relation to documentary and fiction and the narratives that could be created out of this. I felt it was impossible for me to do that through painting. This is very personal. I don't think it had to do with being a woman versus a male.

T.D.: I do agree. The experimentation of Western women artists in mediums like performances, art installation, was definitely an act of defying the patriarchal system. Marina Abramović is a perfect example. I was watching the other day her MoMA retrospective documentary titled *The Artist is Present*. Abramović speaks about her early performances, explaining the difficulties she encountered, both for being a woman and the fact that she was experimenting in a brand new art field, and finally the fact that doubts regarding her art remained until her retrospective. She is quite aware of the bitter reality that the institution, in this case MoMA, is still in control. I believe her experience, more or less, resumes the condition of Western women artists in the '60s, '70s and later. Abramović's is an admirable story of persistence and authenticity.

As for Arab women who choose new art fields over painting, probably the reason is that these mediums are accessible now. I know that the percentage of girls in the painting and sculpting section at the Lebanese University of Fine Arts surpasses their fellow boys. I do think, though, that painting requires high skill and craftsmanship. It is visual, physical and needs constant practicing to evolve. Being a painter, I assure you is highly challenging, especially if you are aiming for "original results."

N.T.: In the Arab countries, the topic shows more problematic aspects: we live in a world where, broadly speaking, women are still oppressed. Some of them still die from mistreatment, they sometimes can't initiate court cases and they can still be pushed into marriage. Do you think that the rising of the so-called "Arab Spring" has placed these issues on a more political scale? Consequently, has the art scene changed for women since 2011? And did activism through art — and more specifically women artists' activism — contribute to put these issues into the sphere of politics?

E.A.: Women are still oppressed all over the world: more mildly in some parts, very much so in the Arab world that interests us here. In many cities their situation has improved, and in some countries more than in others. Tunisia and Lebanon are better places for women than the other countries, the worst possible being Saudi Arabia, which, to make things worse, spreads its Wahhabism all over. But these are oppressive societies, and men are oppressed too: look at the way Egypt is repressing its opponents. It's a problem that includes men and women. Women artists' activism is a recent phenomenon, but political activism in some Arab countries did not start with women artists, but with women lawyers, doctors, housewives... In Egypt, it started in the late '20s... in Lebanon we had people like Laure Moughaizel or Janine Rubeiz who were pioneers... Very few Arab women artists are directly concerned with political and social issues... Artists



Tagreed Dargouth,
*Shall You See Me
Better Now?*, 2015,
acrylic on canvas,
120 × 166 cm, courtesy
of Ramzi & Saadia
Dalboul Art Foundation



left: Etel Adnan, *Untitled (247)*, 2016, oil on canvas, 32×41 cm, courtesy of the artist and Steir-Semler Gallery Beirut/Hamburg



right: Etel Adnan, *Untitled (257)*, 2016, oil on canvas, 38×46 cm, courtesy of the artist and Steir-Semler Gallery Beirut/Hamburg

The fact that women artists are in the open, in the streets, so to speak, gives them a political importance

like Mona Hatoum or Samia Halaby are an exception, probably because they're also Palestinians. Some women writers are more aware of the political importance of their writings... they are too many to be mentioned, but women like Hanan al-Shaykh and Joumana Haddad come to mind. The fact that women artists are in the open, in the streets, so to speak, gives them a political importance: they are visible in the streets, as just said, and in the papers, on television... so they attract attention and become models, an encouragement for other women to understand that a better world is possible for them, a dream that can one day become a reality.

L.J.: The Arab Spring pulled us up; we were so proud to see that happening around us, compared to the disillusion of being in Lebanon where everything was stagnating. Then the bigger disillusion was the collapse of the Arab Spring in favour of regimes that were dictatorial or situations harsher or worse than the ones before.

I mean if we want to be positive, and not only on the issue of women's rights and the improvement of women's condition but on all issues related to civil rights, democracy and freedom of speech, if we believe that the Arab Spring completely collapsed into a failure but that still, people rose, people went in the streets, then maybe in decades we might see that something remained of that movement. That's if we really want to have some kind of hope. It's very hard for me to see things that way, because all I can see now is that this hope was crushed.

In Lebanon, you do have groups of women that are activists, and not necessarily artists, and I think they are doing amazing things to improve the condition of women. For instance,

there is a strong campaign in Lebanon against a law that prevents a rapist from being prosecuted if he marries the woman he raped. Art is a political territory but it's fine for me if these are civic movements or activist movements that have nothing to do with art. And I think that in Lebanon they are doing a great job, at least on the level of awareness, because the video they made on this issue was widely shared on social media, although I wasn't here to see the installation that was done by an artist.

I think that anything can contribute to awareness and to a shift. Although on a personal level I support this kind of movement, this doesn't necessarily mean that I am a militant through my art or that my art is militant.

I would say that almost every woman who, in her everyday life in Lebanon, is fighting the common understanding of what the woman's role should be is a militant. Of course, not in the same way as the courageous activists who are taking the time to do these campaigns. But what I am saying is that there are certain steps that you take as a person in your everyday life here that are very different from when you are living in other places, where these kinds of rights are already acknowledged and where, for instance, you don't have the same social pressure to get married and have kids as you would have in Lebanon.

If you are a woman of my age, and you live without being married and without kids, in a society where every two minutes someone is looking at you like you're weird, you start to realise certain things, so for me there are also these minor details of everyday life. A shift can happen in a society, the shift is not going to happen only in changing the laws. The problem, actually, is that

the laws often reflect the mentalities and ways of thinking that exist and are often carried by women themselves. So when you see women who are continuously perpetuating ideas that can be degrading on the role of women in society, I would say it requires all kinds of actions, minor actions and legal actions, for things to change.

How does this translate into art? This has more to do with being militant or not than with the issue of being a female or not. Even though my art is political, for instance when I deal with the wars, I don't do it as an activist or a militant. Same for when it comes to women's rights.

T.D.: Unfortunately, the so called "Arab Spring" gave rise to the emergence of radical movements, and along with it a set of values and attitudes that work against women, humanity itself and culture. I think that the local art scene is at a distance from what is happening. Yet the most efficient thing to do in these dark times is to continue what we are doing — by that I mean art.

N.T.: Art history, as we all know, is eminently male and white. Today, however, as a consequence of post-colonial studies and globalisation perspectives, parallel art histories have emerged and we talk more than ever about "plural modernities." The exhibition *Elles* that was organised by Centre Pompidou in 2009-2010 showed the decision to display only artworks made by the women artists of the collection. This exhibition was an attempt to show what a feminine and feminist rewriting of modernity in art can look like. Do you think that women from the Arab world are willing to talk about gender more openly now?

L.J.: Most women I know, are very conscious of issue of gender, and of their role as female artists. One of the greatest artists, Mona Hatoum, had a very important role too. I'm thinking of her early performances. If you look at younger artists today, like Marwa Arsanios, she's also dealing with issues of gender in her work. I would say that not all women include a militant

dimension in the visible aspect of their work, but I would think that they are all very aware of their role as female artists. **T.D.:** I think it will always be male and white. And in our society it's even worse because the patriarchal system is well grounded. This reality definitely bothers me, but it induces my determination to fight against it, not the other way around. I worked hard to be an independent woman and an independent artist, my hard work is my form of resistance.

The image is not gloomy at all you know, one should say the truth. I was always guided, advised, even looked after by male artists, that definitely brings some light in. An artwork should be approached with a strong mindset and complete presence. Feeling victimised will divert one's attention and it'll most probably show.

N.T.: Many also felt that a quota demand can be negative towards any objective standard of quality, with implications of special treatment. Women artists want recognition of their work on merit as artists and individuals before anything else. Do you think that a feminist-oriented discourse can reduce their art to a marginal category?

T.D.: Yes, of course. I don't appreciate being labeled as a woman artist. I am totally against the idea. Playing along means agreeing that levels and notes will be put accordingly. I don't even like to be labeled as "feminist," not that I'm against women's rights, of course not, but I came to realise that I'm against all kinds of injustice, not necessarily only those related to women.

E.A.: Yes, like everything else, art history is not a tributary of a single source, a single voice. As the West dominated most of the world, its pontiff view was considered consciously and

unconsciously as the only possible point of view. This was true in all domains. I remembered that at school in Lebanon we studied ONLY French history and the book was called: France in the world, meaning France AND the world. So every field of the integer, as well as every field of life, was considered from the point of view of Western European countries and the United States! Decolonisation in one field brought about decolonisation in other fields, artistry being one example among many. It's not yet a battle totally won because colonisation has been internalised and the colonised people are comfortable in their situation. It will take many years for our countries to regain genuine pride in themselves, the more so — and as a result of their comfort — they are ignorant to an alarming degree of their own past. Everything goes together. When some governments dare resist the big powers, there's a general enthusiasm in the populations that makes people desirous to take their destinies into their hands, and that affects everything: the way they claim their literature, their different histories, even the way they dress and walk!

During the Saddam era in Iraq, for example, Iraqi artists were very close to their heritage — in all ways — while at the same time in Lebanon artists were still thinking that "Cola de Paris" was all there was to art. Thankfully, Lebanese artists (and all those of former French colonies) have since opened up to themselves and to the rest of the world, but that took a few generations.

Would a feminist-oriented discourse reduce women art to a marginal category? I would say no! Women artists are winning their battle, they are accepted by all the major galleries and art fairs of the world. Again, it

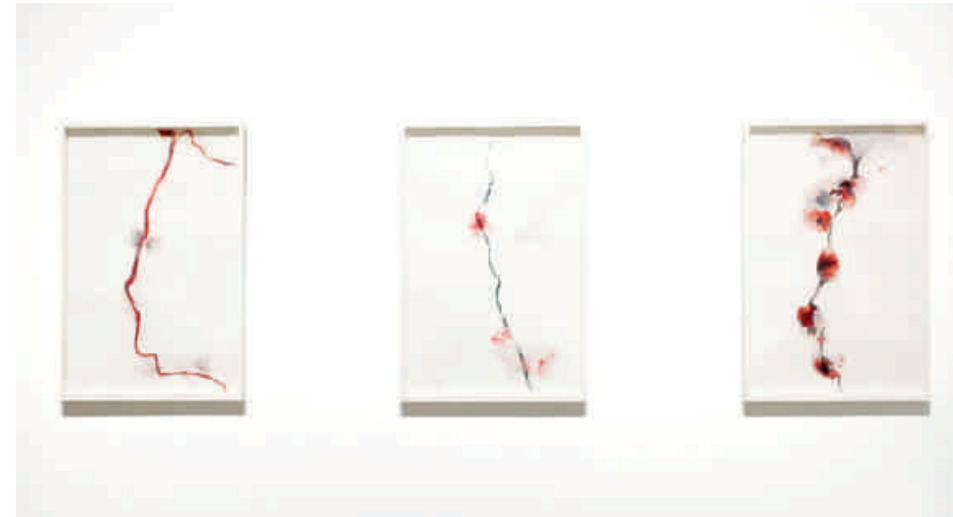
goes with everything else. There are women scientists, women engineers, architects, doctors, more and more... There are business-women even in the most unlikely places like Saudi Arabia or Egypt... So it's a tide that includes women artists too. A feminist-oriented discourse can only help, as it will be one more way to look at things, and not the only one. Many angles to reach a question will always be better than to look at things only from a single point of view.

N.T.: Don't you think that being labeled "artist from the Arab world" is as reductive as being labeled "woman artist?" Do you think that it is more relevant to put the debate on the representation of women artists in the art world in the frame of an intersectional feminism, including race and class conflicts as well?

T.D.: Sure, "artist from the Arab world" is labeling as well. Whenever I'm asked about a favourite artist, my mind goes directly towards naming Western ones. See, I was educated in the Lebanese University of Fine Arts, following Western techniques and methods. So being introduced as an "Arab artist" wouldn't be convincing, especially if you've seen my paintings.

Yes, I think it's fairer to put the debate in the frame including race and gender. The whole system is like a puzzle, once one issue starts to be solved, another will consequently follow. We all fall under a certain kind of inequality and oppression, women, men and kids. Being born a woman means I have to make more endeavour. But yes, as you have mentioned, it intersects with all conflicts. When I am requested to "identify myself" I say humorously that I'm a black artist. I have to fight for my right because I am treated as a second-class citizen, not because I'm a woman.

What I would like to add has nothing to do with gender, rather than art itself. I think from my modest observation, the art world, in general, is losing its poetic aspect, in favour of what I might define as "spectacular" yet hollow and fake. The sad truth is that it's losing its very essence, that is standing in front of a



above: Lamia Joreige, *The River*, drawings, wax, pigments, pastels & crayons on Velin d'Arche paper, 100 x 65 cm, 2016, exhibition view of *Under-Writing Beirut, Nahr* (2013-2016) at Cardiff National Museum, U.K. in Artes Mundi 7, 2016-2017, photographer Jamie Woodley, © Artes Mundi

below: Lamia Joreige, *After the River*, three-channel video: 20 minutes, 2016, from *Under-Writing Beirut, Nahr* (2013-2016), exhibition view at Chapter, Cardiff, in Artes Mundi 7, photographer Jamie Woodley, © Artes Mundi



I would say that not all women include a militant dimension in the visible aspect of their work, but I would think that they are all very aware of their role as female artists



Tagreed Dargouth,
Vision Machines,
 acrylic on canvas,
 120 x 120 cm, 2015

genuine and real human production. Receiving visual pleasure from an art work, and being extraordinarily happy about it, is becoming more and more difficult.

I read once about an artist (I can't seem to remember his name). He was explaining what happens inside his head when he enters into his studio: first, all the art-loving crowd leaves the room, then slowly the art collectors follow them, then his gallerist. Now if he got lucky enough, he himself will disappear in front of his painting. I keep aiming on being in his place to generously give my painting the attention it requires.

E.A: Questions relating to the works of Arab women artists can very well apply to men artists too: is there an Arab art? We need answers from many people, curators, and so on, from both the Arab world and from outside of it. I would say that most often not: if we see Walid Raad's work without having his name and knowing him, we may hesitate. Of course, when the subject matter is obviously Arab... the international world is too strong... With Chinese art, Japanese art, I personally see rapidly where they come from... with Latin American artists it's harder, but most of the time one can guess... mostly with those still influenced by surrealism. But the Arabs? There's of course a school coming out from Arab calligraphy, and there the origin is clear. On a formal basis, there's something "international" which blurry boundaries... It's an open question, and worth discussions. Of course, many Arab artists say they are Arabs, but know little of their traditions and history, if they do. So they cannot be influenced by them. They are resolutely part of today's world. That's neither good nor bad, it's just their own situation.

L.J: It's always the same questions with identity and politics. To go back to the post-colonial discourse now predominance is given to artists from other parts of the world, from our region, for instance, or let's say from South America. But are you actually labelling these artists only through their identity of origin? This is often problematic. Sometimes we choose to

be part of these shows and we regret it, sometimes we are happy because the show has an amazing articulation. It is very hard. You can be critical, of course you are going to be labeled as a woman artist. Being labelled as a woman artist from the Arab world is also a problem. I am now part of a show that encompasses both these dangers.

But then again, you also have to advocate for more visibility. I would say it demands a lot of subtlety in the curatorial statement, in the articulation of the exhibition, in the understanding of the fact that you shouldn't just label these works. But I'm torn, because it is something that can be reductive. Of course, I am a woman and I am Lebanese, but I am very happy when my work is shown beside the work of someone who is not from my region, and who I don't necessarily identify as a woman or a man, but whose work echoes mine, as if we were really speaking to each other. You also have amazing male artists that have done incredible works where a woman's character is put forward. It is ambiguous. The fight is not over, but one has to be conscious. So it's an answer that is not an answer, sorry.

Ten or 15 years ago I was interviewed and I said that I never introduce myself as a woman artist. But then, of course, I am a woman artist and, like I said, in your everyday life in Lebanon, you deal with the issue of being a woman every minute of your day. Not necessarily in an oppressive way, but you are constantly aware of certain things. A few days ago, I was in a restaurant with a male friend, and the waiter asked him how he liked the food but did not ask me. So I said, 'It is great, thank you. If you care about my opinion.' I am talking about the daily things.

I would not like my work to be reduced to these 'labels.' I want my work to speak to everybody. I was influenced by artists and filmmakers who were from China and Thailand, for instance. And many artists who work within different political contexts have a reflection that has great resonance with mine. Like artists in China, Cambodia, Argentina or Brazil, who deal with the

notion of representation, history and the use of documents. As much as I am happy to be in conversation with my peer artists here in Lebanon, I feel like it is also important to be in conversation with artists from other parts of the world. And frankly, speaking of the locality and the context, at some point with these shows about Lebanon, the region, the Middle East, Islamic art, all these labels that are harmful sometimes, you feel that their agenda is not always well intentioned or genuine.

Things that were happening ten to 15 years ago, when people were deeply interested and did serious research, are not to be put at the same level as other ways of doing things, where people are doing 'art tourism' or art shopping. And, I must admit, I have sometimes accepted taking part in these exhibitions with regret or for various reasons, but we should not put everything in the same basket. So you could have an extraordinary 'women's show' that comes out of Lebanon and that could be subtle in its articulation. Or a basket where they'd put everything that fits the fashion of the time...

So in a strange and contradictory way, I would say that being a woman today in the Arab world is certainly more difficult, and the fight over legal matters for equality is certainly harder than being in Norway, Sweden or France, but being a woman artist is not necessarily more difficult, because on the international platform it hasn't reached equality.

Also, on the local aspect, I would say it is not more difficult to be a woman artist, simply because art is not regarded as a profession that is serious. So, basically, if you are a man and you want to become an artist it is hard, you are under pressure. But because it is not considered as a serious profession, or one that has an obvious economic outcome, it is fine if women do it. They can have fun in what is often understood as a 'decorative' activity. This is the worst way to think about art. So you will not be looked at as someone on the margin if you are a woman artist. It is fine to be a woman artist, but it is not necessarily for good reasons. You know what I mean? ■