



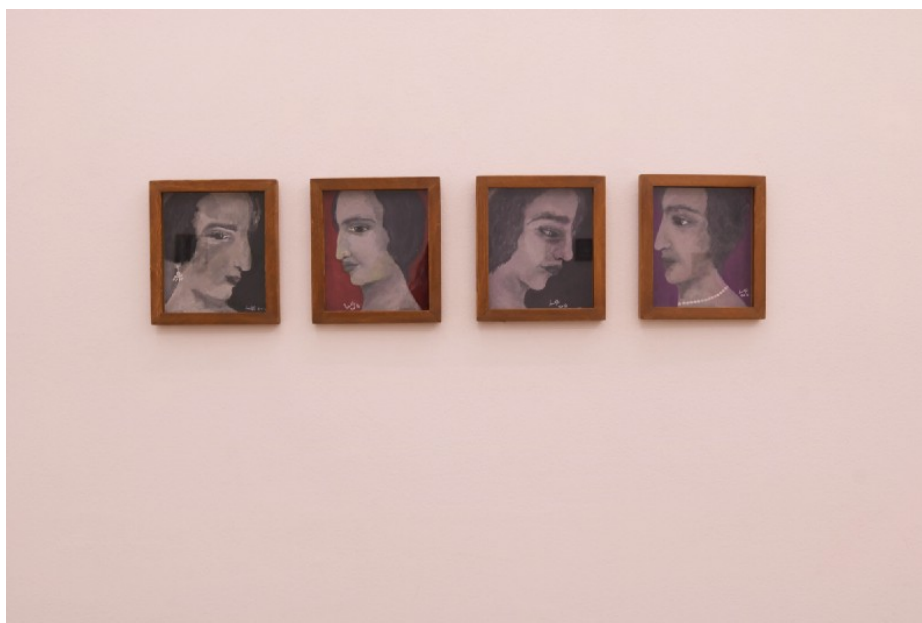
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Huda Lutfi's 'Dawn Portraits' at Gypsum Gallery

Review for Flash Art, March 2017

At Cairo's [Gypsum Gallery](#), sixty faces gaze into the middle distance, if their eyes aren't closed entirely. Huda Lutfi's "Dawn Portraits"—smudgy, chalky gouaches on Chinese gold-leaf paper—are unrefined yet very, very delicate. Their faces fit tightly and deeply within their frames, sometimes flattened by a sharply outlined background or a casual disregard for anatomy and painterly nicety. They look alternatively wry, wary, wistful and inscrutable. The powdery dryness of gouache is worked to produce gauzy planes or naive edges. In several works, features gently slope across the face like thoughts. You would expect them to look surreal, but somehow they make total sense.



Exhibition view at Gypsum Gallery

Lutfi is a mainstay of the Egyptian independent art scene and known for her scavenger's attention to mass-produced found materials: dolls' heads, mannequins, marionettes and shoe molds. These stand-ins for human subjectivity are often arranged repetitively in installations by turns popular, verbose, martial, sexy, nostalgic, overburdened with stuff and filled with competing metaphors and messages. Hers is an outright blast of political aesthetics that speaks to the chaos of her home city of Cairo.

So these comparably quiet, mottled portraits are a splendid departure from the norm. Unlike the heavily sourced work she's known for, these images are unspecific: simply memories of faces like her own, or, we are told, like her mother's. Rarely exhibited, these works answer the question: What would her work be like if there were no messages to convey to a government that doesn't listen. The politics of this exhibition lies not in what is said, but in what the artist is liberated from saying, if only briefly.

These faces, not really made to be seen, prompt the sensation of spying on a moment more than a person; they are produced in strange slivers of blue early morning time, before the traffic starts up and the "real" day begins—before Lutfi's "real" artistic practice can commence.

