

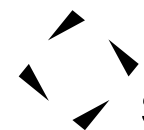


Azza Abo Rebieh

تَوَقُّ

Azza Abo Rebieh

تَوَقُّعٌ



SALEH BARAKAT
GALLERY



L'envol

En quête de transparence et d'espérance après des années dans l'obscurité d'une vie synonyme de répression des libertés et d'enfermement, Azza Abo Rebieh dresse sur ses toiles des aspirations premières, propres à l'humanité. Née en 1980 à Hama, cette artiste syrienne s'est formée à la gravure aux Beaux-Arts de Damas. C'est avec son matériel de gravure et quelques feuilles de papier qu'elle a pu emporter de son atelier que, après quelques années révoltées et mouvementées elle s'est finalement s'installée à Beyrouth. Après une période sombre mais nécessaire pour purger les atrocités subies par elle et les siens, l'artiste n'a jamais laissé de côté la presse et le burin, même pour s'emparer de la surface de la toile.

Tel un metteur en scène qui voudrait tirer différents fils d'une même histoire ou un marionnettiste essayant de diriger les fils de sa propre vie, Azza Abo Rebieh convoque différentes techniques pour entamer une réflexion sur les chemins que l'on trace, à la recherche d'une paix intérieure et commune. Par une ligne continue, dessinant d'un fil tendu pour ne pas se perdre, un équilibre fragile se joue dans ces œuvres de grand format aux tons clairs. Chacune représente une scène ou un personnage, de manière presque onirique. Sur la toile tendue, l'artiste applique le tulle comme s'il s'agissait de touches de couleurs, déjouant les techniques, elle superpose des couches d'une matière si légère et aérienne, par des moyens propres au collage et à l'assemblage. Contrastant ainsi avec l'acte de graver sur du métal, matériaux lourd et dense, l'artiste utilise des médiums variés et explore leurs potentialités symboliques.

Azza Abo Rebieh convoque la figure du papillon pour évoquer ces métamorphoses nécessaires et vitales. Après l'éclosion vient la chenille, qui a besoin de bâtir son cocon. C'est l'immobilité de la chrysalide nécessaire à la construction de soi qui, ensuite, laisse place à l'envol, à l'impulsion et à la légèreté. De respirations en aspirations, de battements d'ailes en mouvements de danse joyeux, notre papillon butine les fleurs d'une oasis en plein désert. Faut-il y voir la métaphore d'une transformation aujourd'hui plus qu'essentielle pour un monde en sursis ? En effet, rêvons un instant que cet oasis autrefois si peuplé de toutes les espèces soit survolé par des centaines et des milliers de papillons le transformant en un voile de couleurs joyeuses et éblouissantes. En fermant les yeux, on peut entendre le bruissement de chacune des quatre ailes de ces milliers de papillons. Réinventons notre monde où doit régner la lumière et la vie. Imaginons que ces êtres ailés puissent voler en toute sérénité.

Ôde à la liberté et à la vie, قَوَّ is la troisième exposition personnelle consacrée à l'artiste syrienne à Beyrouth. Mêlant des gravures, des céramiques et des œuvres sur toiles, قَوَّ est un cri chantant de Azza Abo Rebieh pour la beauté, la fragilité, l'étonnement et surtout pour la transparence d'un monde à construire ensemble. Sur une invitation de Azza Abo Rebieh, une pièce sonore a été composée par le musicien Khaled Omran à partir d'enregistrements des différents matériaux présents dans l'atelier de l'artiste. Cette collaboration inédite accompagne le visiteur à travers son parcours au sein du voyage imaginaire auquel nous invite Azza Abo Rebieh.



Does Liberty Have a Statue?
Tulles and thread on canvas | 170 x 110 cm | 2022



Apprehension
Tulles and thread on canvas | 100 x 130 cm | 2022



At Forty
Tulles and thread on canvas | 70 x 51 cm | 2022

Yearning

To do everything....and everything

I fly and fall and hit then run

I revolt and calm down fall in love and hate

I die and relive get pregnant and give birth

I fly and fall I fear and revolt

I shiver and cool down cry and laugh

that is the rhythm of the flutter of her wings

give and take make the path of her movements

like a heart beat and its eagerness, yearning , thirsty

to do everything and nothing...

Azza Abo Rebieh



تَوْق

أَنْ أَفْعَلَ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ وَكُلَّ شَيْءٍ ...

أَنْ أَطِيرَ وَأَسْقُطَ واضرب فأهرب..

أثور واهداً أعشق وأكره

أموت فأحيا أحمل وألد

أطير وأسقط أخاف وأثور

أرتجف وادفأ أبكي وأضحك

هكذا هو إيقاع رفرقة اجنحتها!

أخذُ وُردُ يصنعان مسار حركتها.

كنبضات قلب ولهفته، تَوَاقُ، عطش

لفعل كُلِّ شَيْءٍ وَاللَّاشِيءِ...

عزه أبو ربيعة





Warmth
Oil on canvas | 136 x 106 cm | 2022



Like a Gold
Tulles and thread on canvas | 136 x 106 cm | 2022



I am not a Number Anymore
 Tulles and thread on canvas | 120 x 100 cm | 2022





Curiosity
Tulles and thread on canvas | 120 x 100 cm | 2022



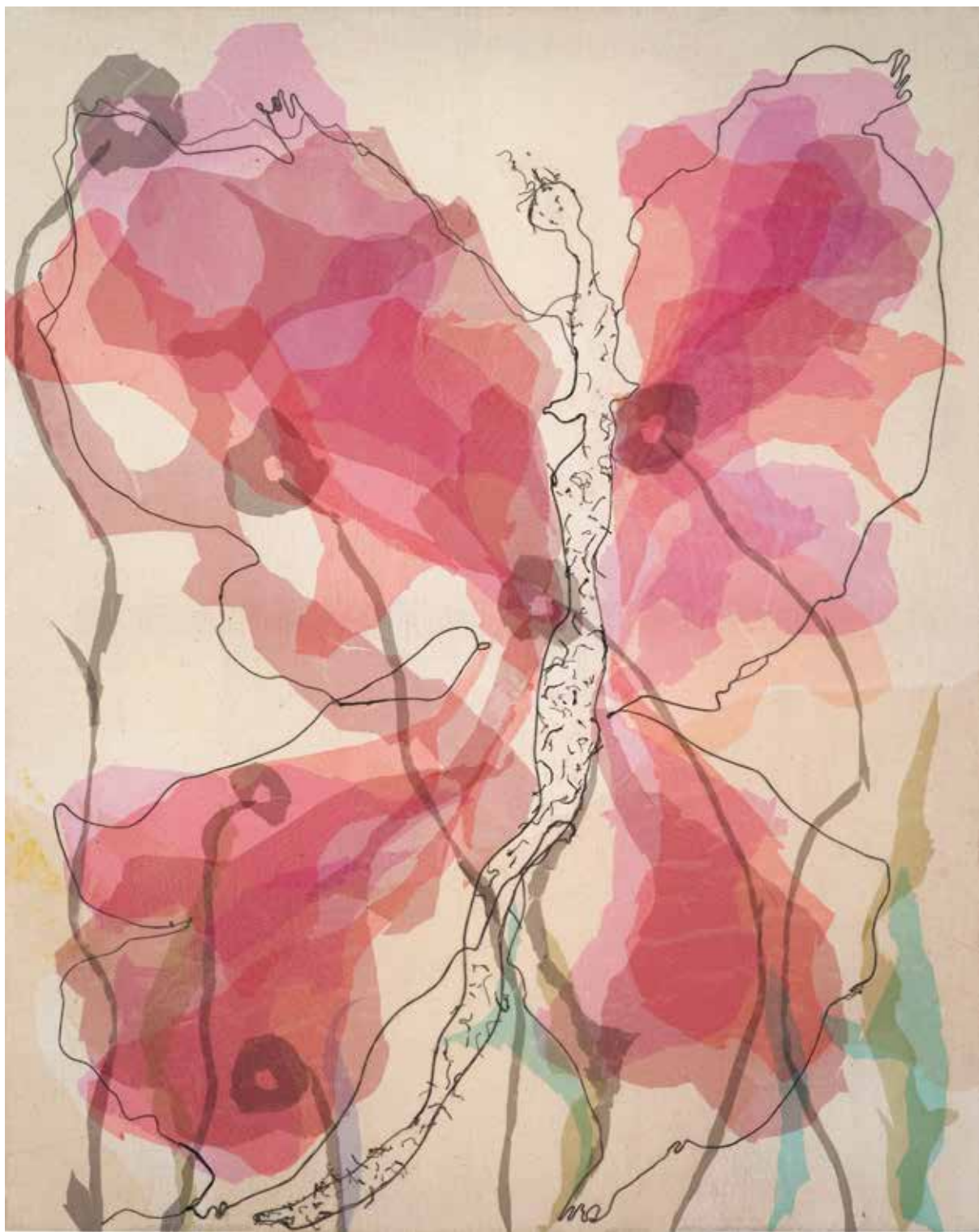
Awaken
Tulles and thread on canvas | 110 x 170 cm | 2022



Rebirth
Tulles and thread on canvas | 110 x 170 cm | 2022



The Funeral of a Butterfly
Tulles and thread on canvas | 170 x 340 cm | 2022



Adventure
 Tulles and thread on canvas | 100 x 80 cm | 2022



The Kiss
 Tulles and thread on canvas | 120 x 80 cm | 2022



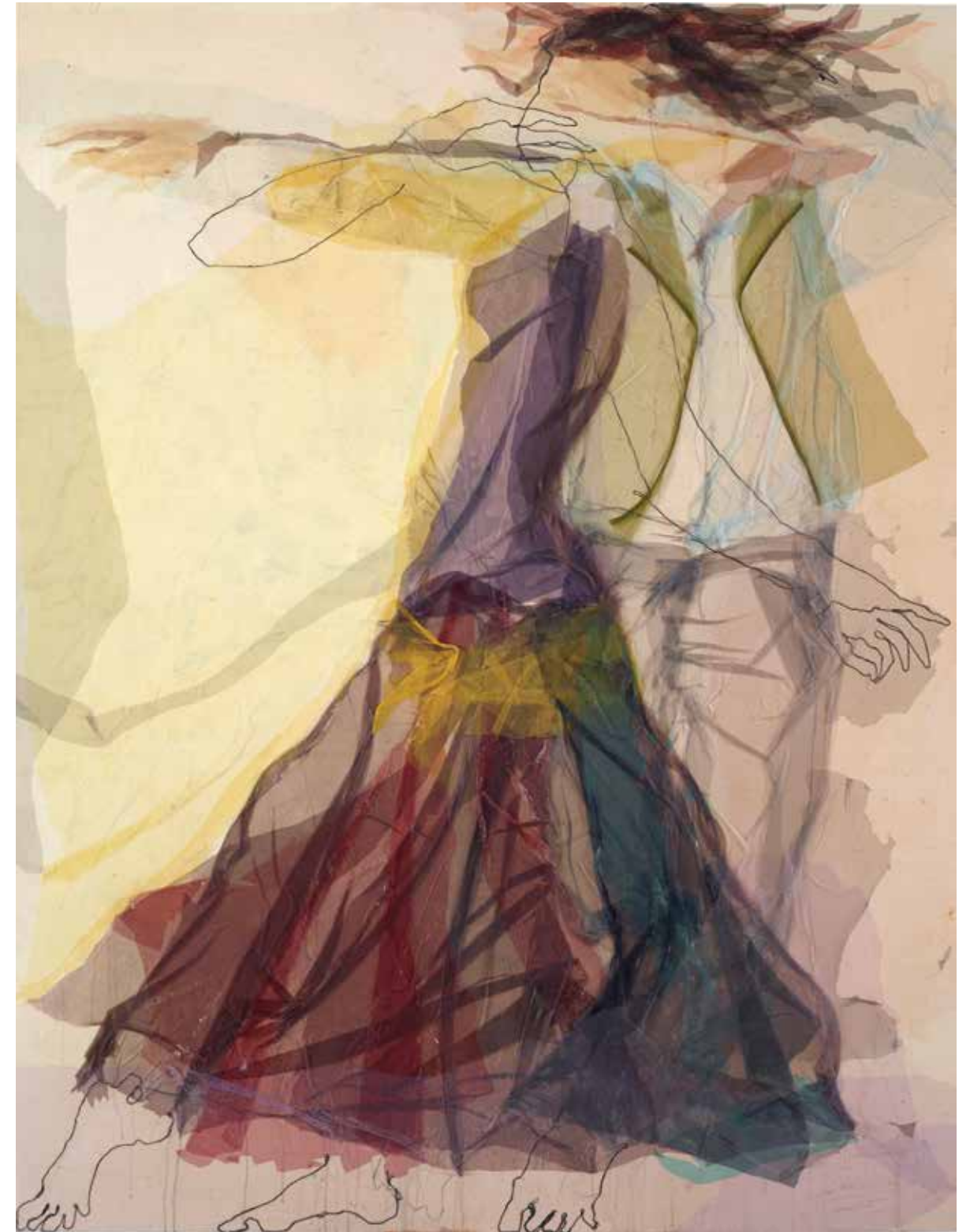
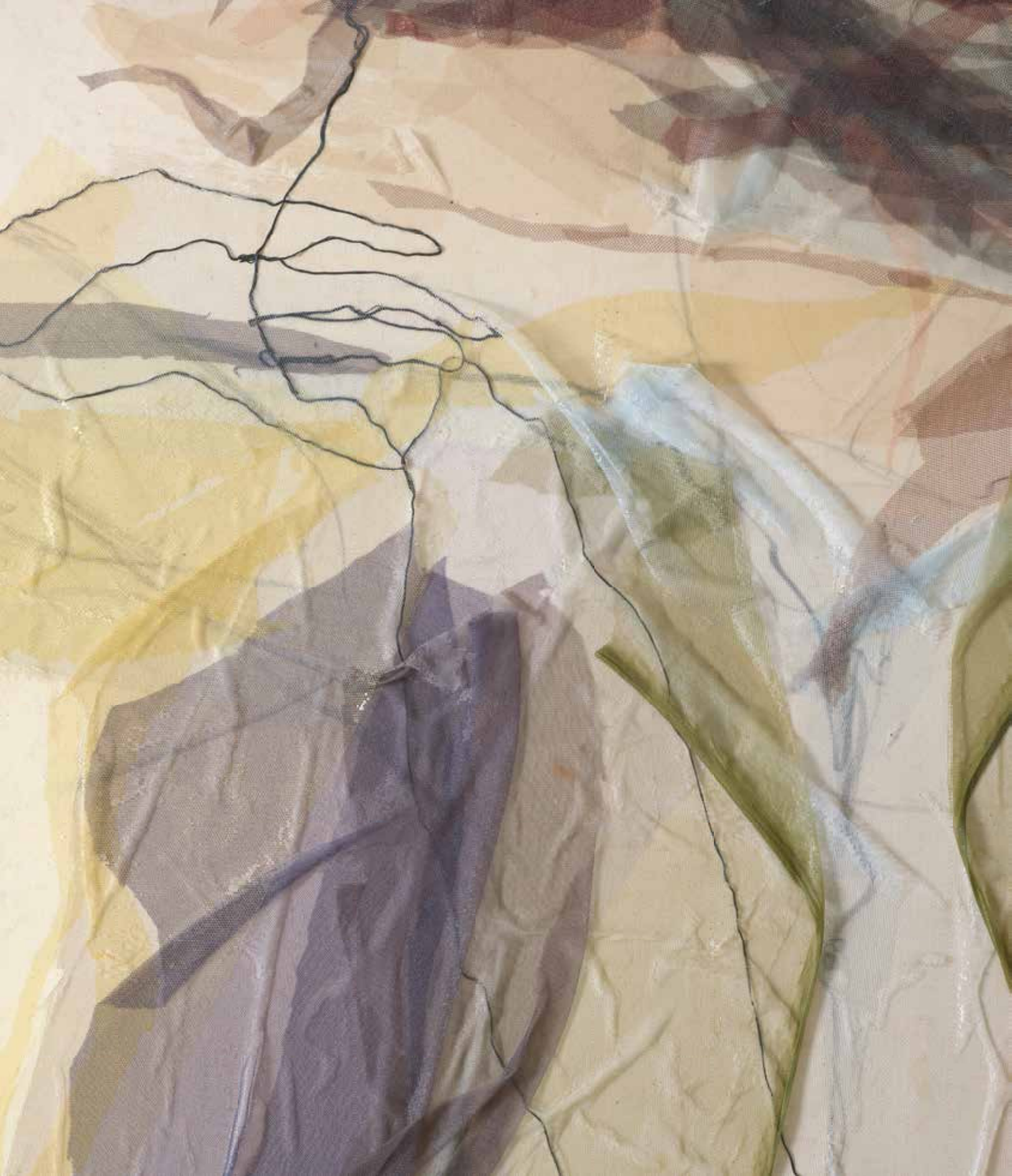
She
Oil on canvas | 70 x 100 cm | 2021



Alienation
Oil on canvas | 80 x 119 cm | 2021



Awaiting
Tulles and thread on canvas | 110 x 150 cm | 2022



Backhome Dance
Tulles and thread on canvas | 190 x 145 cm | 2021
◀(Detail)

Voyage, voyage

The puppet freed itself, its meandering threads transforming into a butterfly.

Silence.

Who are you butterfly?

Why are you haunting me? Are you my yearning for soaring?

Free, fragile, light, determined, solitary, resilient, beautiful and scared,
I have followed your sounds.

Layer upon layer of tulle I revealed the transparency of my emotions.

Rejuvenated and enthralled, you have awakened love and desire to the brink of child bearing.

I never wanted to startle you, just be with you. You have rattled my existence.
I have lived through you, and without you.

I have held you high, transforming myself into a hundred beings.

The journey was harsh, exhilarating and desired.

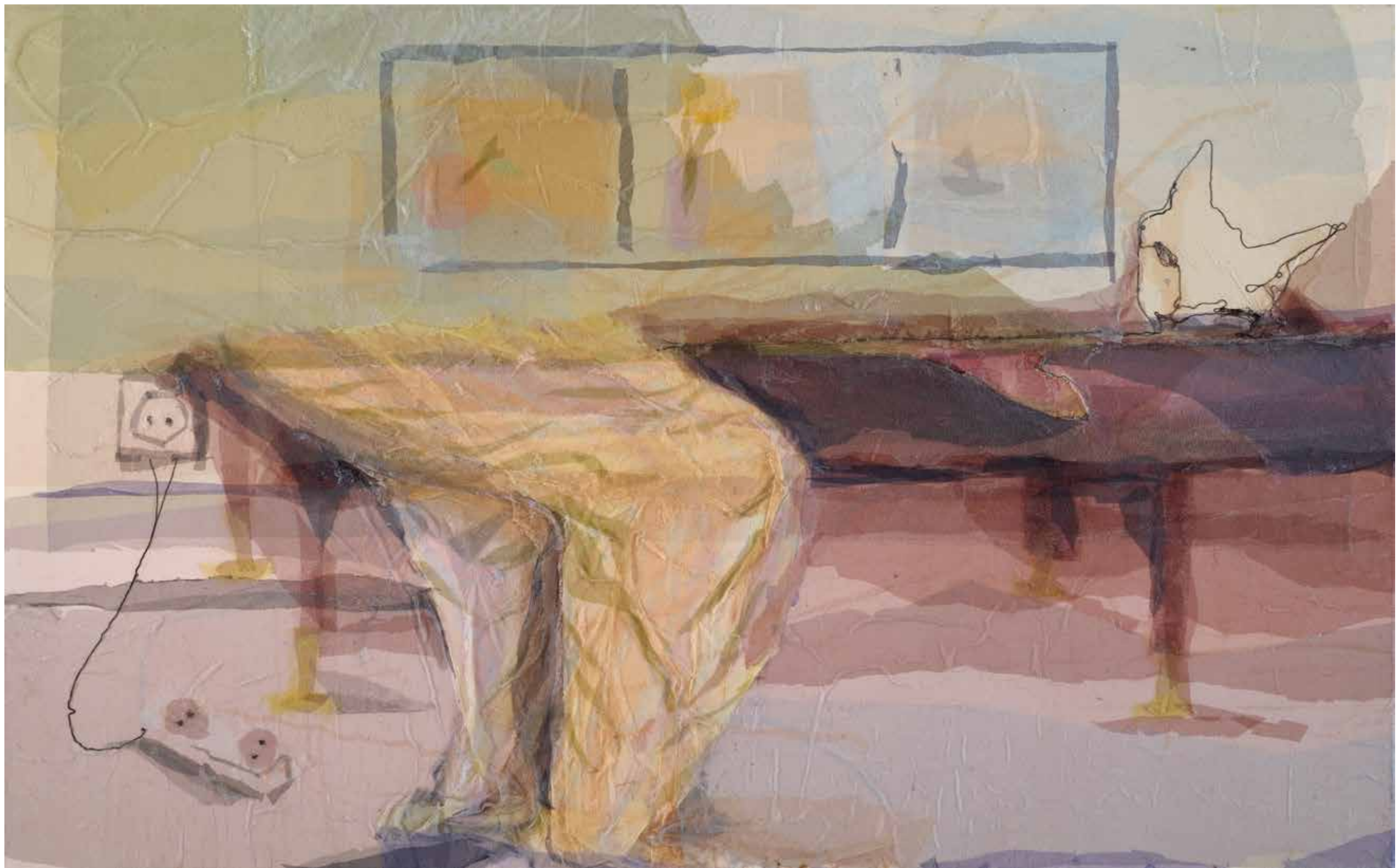
Such is my destiny, death a certainty.

Nelsy Massoud

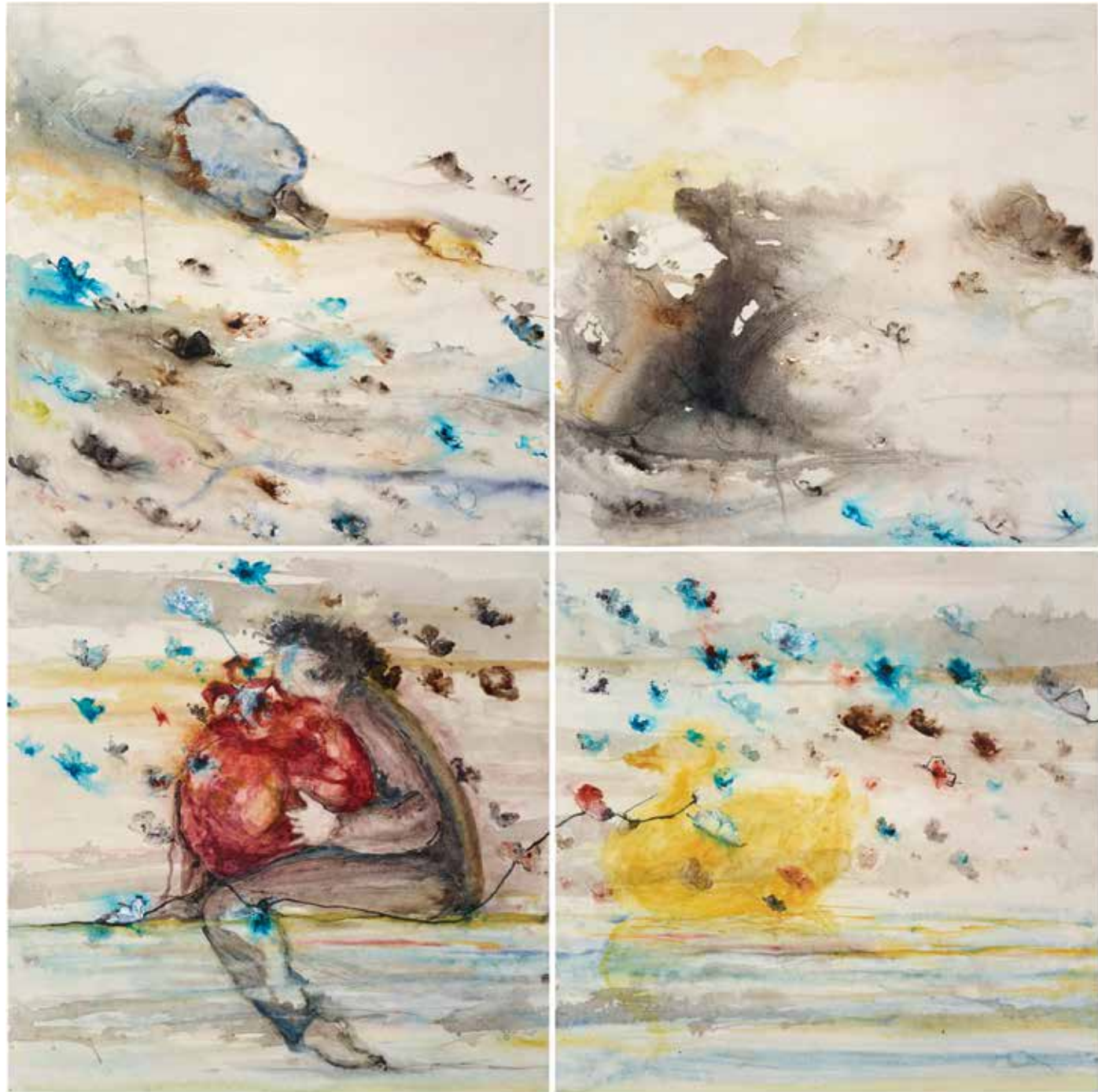


Re-Up

Inks and watercolor on washi paper | 136 x 105 cm | 2022



Night Visitor
Tulles and thread on canvas | 110 x 170 cm | 2022



Rendez-Vous
Inks and watercolor on washi paper | 85 x 85 cm each | 2022

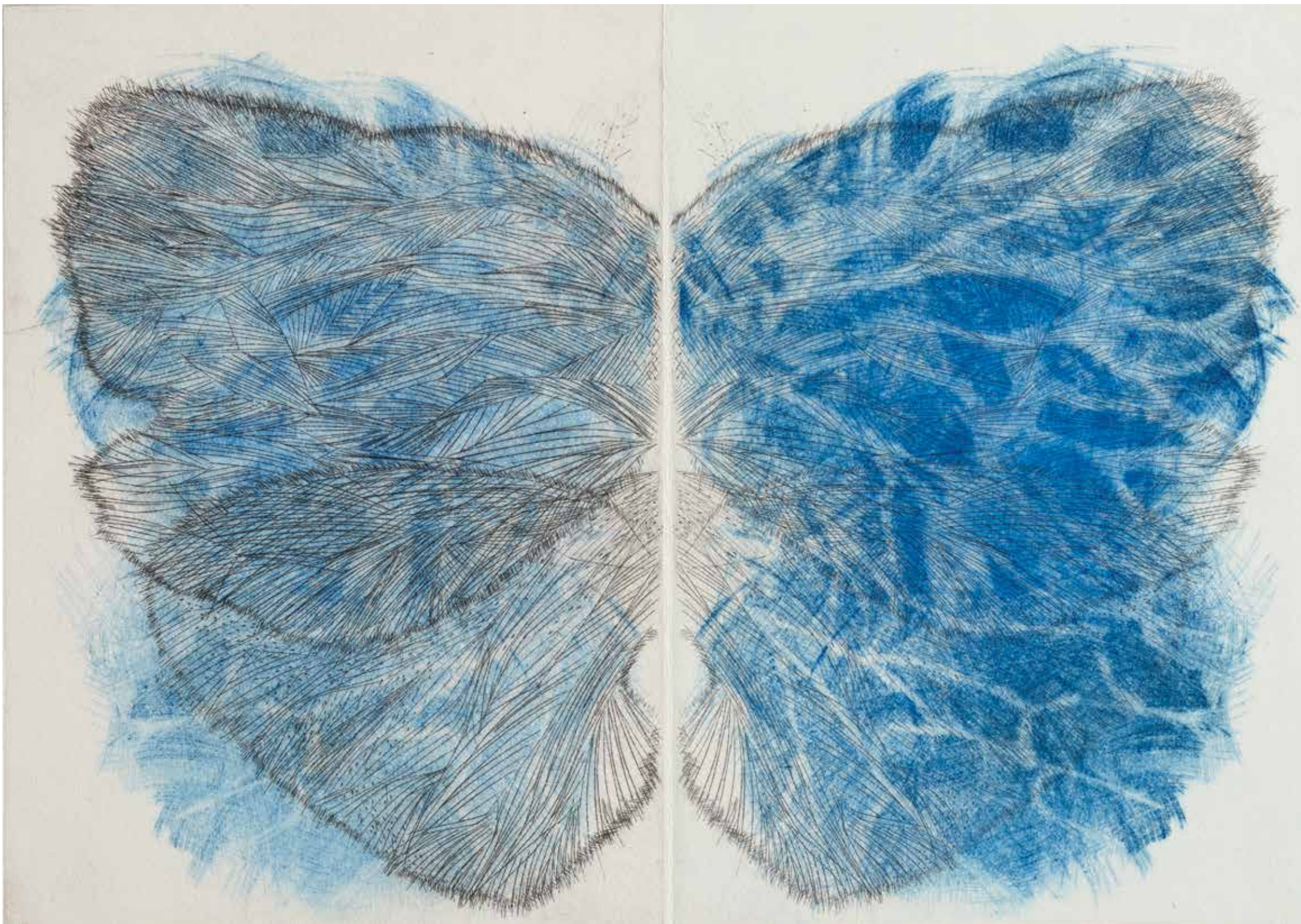


Who I am?
Oil on canvas | 100 x 119 cm | 2022

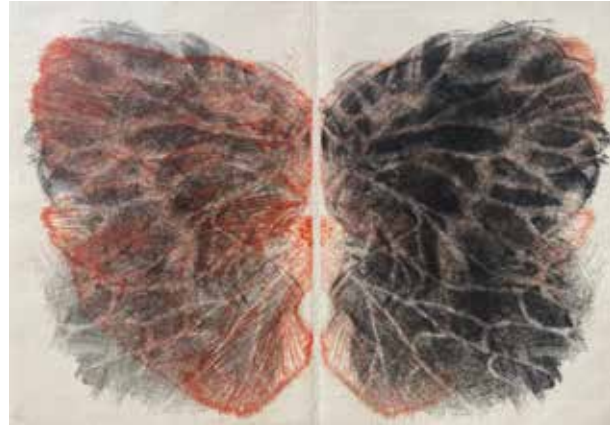


Two Souls in One Body
Inks and watercolor on washi paper | 70 x 31 cm each | 2022

Inks and watercolor on Washi paper | Variable dimensions | 2022



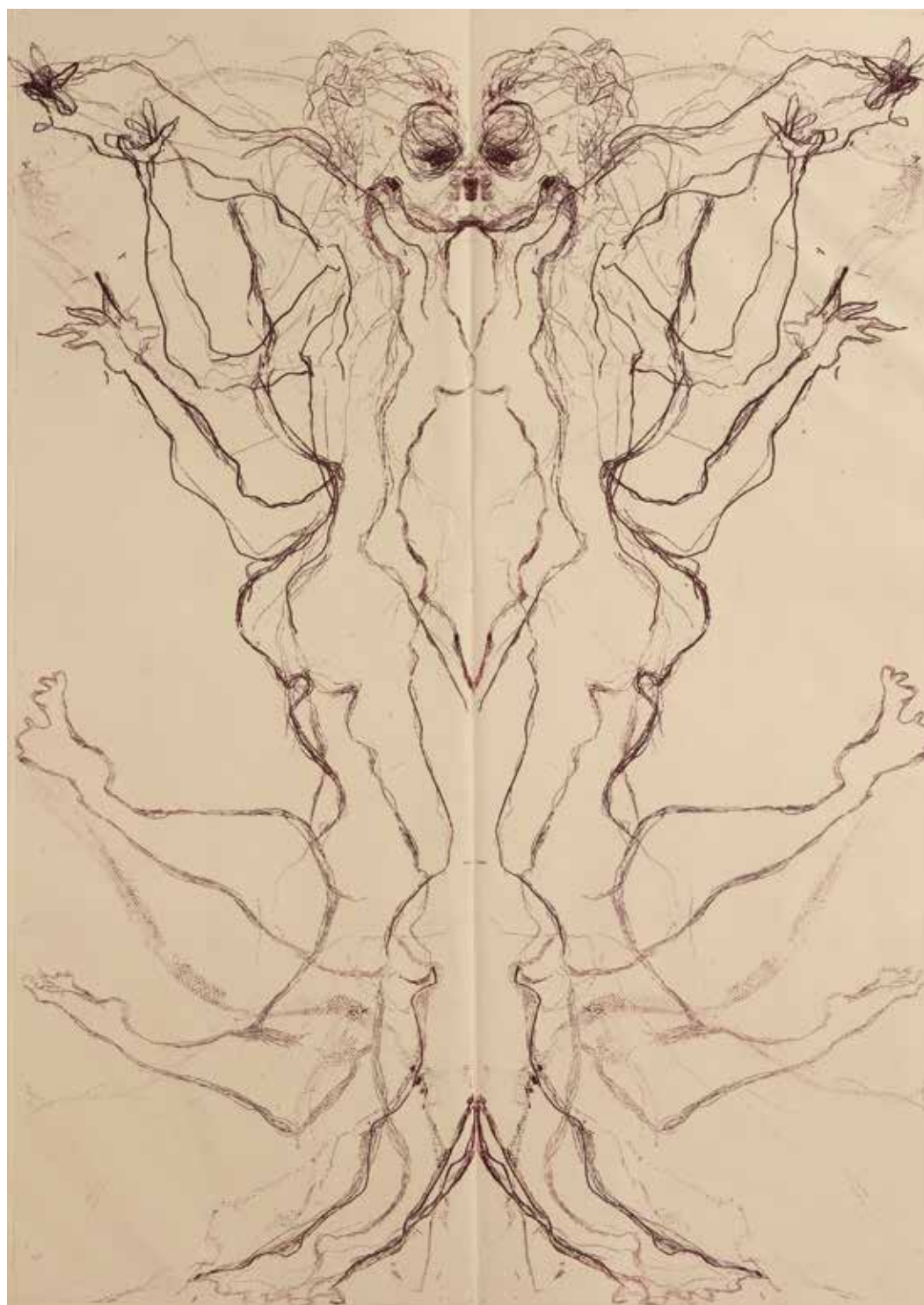
Yearning
Mezzotint and Burin drypoint printed on Hahnemuhle paper | 35 x 25 cm | 2022



فتاة فتحت ذراعيها وصرخت، فراشة عابرة اجتاحتها، لم تكن الفتاة تعرف أنّ لرفرفة الجناحين زلزلاً، وأنّ الفراشة على الرغم من هشاشتها مخيفة، فكلّ من تزوره لابدّ أن يتشربق، أن يتمزّق، أن يتحوّل، جناحها جسمان يتعانقان هنيئاً ثم ينفصلان، تحولاتٌ عدة، ذكرٌ في أنثى وأنثى في ذكر... ولطخاتٌ حمراء صفراء زرقاء تحمل غبار الحكايات البعيدة، تنقلها فراشة مهاجرة هنا، وتنقلب في لوحةٍ أخرى جسداً يراقصه شابٌ شَبِيقٌ ويعزف فيه لحن الغموض، وتحبل بها امرأةٌ في عمليّ ثانٍ ويصير جناحها شفاهاً لقبله في آخر، وتفتح وحده امرأةٌ في سريرها لتبعثر جدائلها في ليلةٍ حالميةٍ بحريّةٍ ما، ترحل الفراشة من عمليّ إلى آخر رسماً وحفرًا ونحتًا، ثمّ تموت في لوحةٍ أخيرة، نرى فيها المشاركين يرقصون على الرغم من حزنهم وكأنّهم يرفرفون، أكانت هذه وصيّتها، أن يتحوّل مشيعوها إلى فراشات؟ ربما...

نبراس شحيّد







Heresy
Etching and aquatint printed on Hahnemühle paper | 50 x 25 cm (printed size) | 2022

Syria's Women Prisoners, Drawn by an Artist Who Was One

New York Times by Lina Sinjab and Anne Bernard, 2018

Azza Abo Rebieh got her guards to give her pencils and paper, then began sketching the faces and habits of fellow inmates in Syria's notorious detention system.

This is Hiam, a 65-year-old woman smoking a cigarette and sipping matteh, a warm herbal drink popular in Syria. It is a moment of solitude in a soul-crushing place; the bed is a prison bed. Hiam spent two and a half years in prison, most likely for the simple reason that she came from an area that rebelled against President Bashar al-Assad's government.

The artist who drew her, Azza Abo Rebieh, was one of 30 women sharing a cell with Hiam in the Adra prison in Damascus. Then 36, Ms. Abo Rebieh was on her own surreal journey through the Syrian security system, detained because of her art and her activism.

Ms. Abo Rebieh's artwork, from the start of Syria's uprising in 2011, held up a mirror to a society in turmoil. Risking arrest, she painted graffiti murals about the protest movement. After security forces cracked down and some in the opposition took up arms, she helped smuggle food and medicine to people displaced by fighting.

In September 2015, Ms. Abo Rebieh got a call from an activist friend asking her to meet at a cafe. It was a trap: When she arrived, security was waiting.

Ms. Abo Rebieh, a member of the educated middle class, found herself imprisoned with women who were barely literate, and mostly arrested at random. She became a kind of spokeswoman and sounding board, conveying their needs and requests to guards and helping them talk through experiences.

Her art then became a mirror for fellow prisoners who had none: She drew them so they could see themselves. She drew them all in shaded black and white, their grimacing faces and thin limbs influenced by one of her favorite artists, Goya.

Ms. Abo Rebieh was released in 2016, but her case was still open. She fled to Lebanon, where she is stuck because she is still wanted in Syria. Last year, she won an art residency in Spain, to study Goya and paint Syria's ghosts as an echo of his. But the Spanish government denied her a visa.

Recently, supported by the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture, she had a solo exhibition, including many new works, at a Beirut gallery, 392rmeil393. She has continued to create art about the women she met in detention.

"I want to draw them so they are not forgotten," Ms. Abo Rebieh said in her small living room, where

from her prison art hangs on the wall, along with string dolls she made in prison from olive pits and yarn from worn blankets. "This is the message. I keep remembering that I am out and they are in."

Ms. Abo Rebieh shared some of her works with The New York Times, and spoke in English and Arabic about her experience in detention and the women she met there. (Where quoted, her remarks have been edited for length and clarity.)

The Crushed Bird

Before Ms. Abo Rebieh's arrest, the British Museum bought three of her works.

One was an etching from 2011, called "They Carried Him – The Shame." Ms. Abo Rebieh based it on a video that had spread on social media, showing security officers dressing a male protester as a woman and driving him around the artist's home city, Hama.

"They Carried Him – The Shame" Trustees of the British Museum

Another, "Still Singing," reflects on a protester whose chant "Yalla Irhal Ya Bashar" ("Come on, Leave, Bashar") became a symbol of the uprising. Demonstrating and chanting was enough to get people shot or arrested. They could just disappear. The government has only recently begun to acknowledge that hundreds, possibly thousands, of people have died in detention without any notice to their families.

After her arrest, Ms. Abo Rebieh spent 70 days in the detention cells of one of Syria's feared security agencies, crammed into a small, filthy cell with 15 other women. The prisoners had lice in their hair and moths in their blankets. They could visit a toilet, littered with excrement and cockroaches, for a few strictly timed minutes each day. Tens of thousands of people have disappeared into such places, their families unable to learn their fates.

While there, Ms. Abo Rebieh got to draw only once. Her interrogator knew she was an artist and had a special request for her: Draw hatred.

"He gave me a pencil and a paper and forced me to draw," she recalled. She had been blindfolded so she could not see who was interrogating her, but her blindfold was lifted to let her draw. "I sat there with my hands trembling."

She drew a toothless old man with an evil look, squeezing a bird in his hands.

"Wow," the interrogator said, as the others crowded around, impressed. "This is us. We do this."

Afraid, the artist demurred, saying, "This is not you, this is someone else."

"No, no," he replied. "This is what we do. We know it, we are happy with it."

"And this," he said, pointing to the crushed bird, "is you."

"The Ladies of Cell Number 4"

Conditions improved when Ms. Abo Rebieh was moved to Adra, an official prison, where she was finally able to persuade guards to bring her paper and pencils, and she began drawing the people she was confined with: "There were no mirrors inside the prison, so the drawings I made of the women made them see how they look. They are even more beautiful than the way I draw them. There is nothing to do, so you make up your face, your hair; some girls ask their parents to buy them makeup. They are very young. They dance at night, and compete over who dances better. Sometimes they cry when they dance.

On New Year's Eve, the guards let us have a party. I drew on the girls' faces, one a cat, one a butterfly. The guards agreed to allow it for one night only. So we wrote them a card, saying 'The ladies of Cell Number 4 congratulate you on the New Year.'

When the guards saw that we called ourselves 'ladies,' they went crazy. They said, 'You are terrorists, not ladies.'"

"Rama al-Eid wanted every woman in the prison to be her mother. She was young and we nicknamed her Chocolate. She is a very beautiful girl with big eyes. She had been a national champion in badminton.

"Rama is from Daraa, where the uprising first began. She was imprisoned while she was still a teenager and accused of activism against the regime. When she turned 18, the judge sentenced her to six years and eight months in prison."

Nayfee

"This is Raeefeh. She is from Homs. She spent, like, four years in jail. She is a very lovely girl. She worked in the prison as a waitress in the cafe. They let the girls work to have an income.

"Simply because she is from Homs she is seen as a criminal. She was accused of giving news to the media about what's happening in Homs. She sleeps with her teddy bear."

Tal El Mlouhi is a blogger who had been in detention since 2009, when she was 19.

"She acts like a princess. Inside, she must have lost her mind. When the guards come and count us, she has to be in very good form and put on a perfume so when the counting starts she appears in perfect form. You look at her and you pity her."

"Hiam didn't know how to read or write, but she asked me to teach her drawing. She loves rabbits, I taught her to draw them. Then she started to draw her home and the flowers around it.

"When I left prison, she sent me a letter – someone wrote it for her – saying: 'I don't need to learn how to read and write. You taught me how to draw, and drawing is the best expression for me. I can draw a home now and I can draw my dreams.'

"Hiam was delightful, and never made you feel miserable inside the prison. At 65, the mother of five was accused of jihad al-nikah ['sex jihad', or providing sex to jihadists, which Syrian officials claim, without proof, is a rampant practice.]. There was no real evidence. When you ask her, 'Why you are in prison?', she would jump and say joyfully, 'Jihad al-nikah!' She spent two and a half years in prison. No one could visit her, as she was from rural Homs and it was hard for any of her family members to reach her because they could be arrested at checkpoints on the way."

Maryam haunted the artist perhaps more than any other inmate. A mother of six, she spent months in a secret government jail in Aleppo. She was interrogated about the whereabouts of her sons in a rebel neighborhood, and then sent to Damascus to be tried for terrorism. She was lucky enough to come before a sympathetic judge, who instantly realized that she had lost her mind and ordered her released.

But things are not so simple in Syria. One branch of the intelligence services can release you, only for another to arrest you again; with little coordination between branches, names can linger indefinitely on the wanted list. That is what happened to Maryam. Before the bewildered, illiterate woman could find her way home, she was thrown in another jail in Damascus.

Ms. Abo Rebieh drew her from memory after her release. Maryam's pale, aging face is drawn in

charcoal, the eyes wide open, their expression scared and wondering. The woman's hands lie on her lap, palms up in supplication or disbelief. This is how she always sat with Ms. Abo Rebieh, repeating the same question over and over: "Why am I here?"

After a while, Ms. Abo Rebieh lost her temper:

"I lost my mind as she kept asking me every four minutes. I used to look after her, wash her hair, feed her. But she kept asking, and I lost it. I shouted and told her don't ask me any more, and then I burst into tears."

Ms. Abo Rebieh drew and painted Zeina after her release.

"This is Zeina when she asked to breathe. We were arrested in September and had summer clothes on. By wintertime, we got so cold with no warm clothes on us. They had confiscated our money and refused to give us any clothes. They brought us blankets full of moths and she had asthma and couldn't breathe. She knocked on the door and asked the guard to breathe for a minute. She sat there to take a deep breath and broke into tears. A scene I can't forget."

Leaving

On a cold day in January 2016, five thin, tired women arrived from the town of Madaya. Ms. Abo Rebieh was not aware of what was happening outside the prison walls. She did not know that Madaya had been besieged, with several children dying of malnutrition. When the food came – just a few pieces of potato – the women devoured it as if, she said, they were eating lamb chops.

"They explained: 'We are from Madaya. We spent six months under siege and we didn't eat anything except water and spices.' One added, 'When my child cried to eat I would beat him until he went to sleep and then I beat myself till I fell asleep next to my child every single day.'"

Not long after, Ms. Abo Rebieh was released. But she still faced more prison time because of the open case. She bribed her way out of Syria and escaped to Beirut. "I felt guilty that I left and they are still there," she said. "I was eating walking and sleeping with the security in my mind outside the prison." She saw a psychologist, who urged her to draw everything: "He wanted me to believe that I am out of prison."

At first, Ms. Abo Rebieh felt blocked and depressed, but then, the work began to flood out: a series of more developed etchings of her prison experience.

This is the military security detention cell. Like tens, perhaps hundreds of thousands of other missing people, the prisoners were being held incommunicado. Their families had no idea where they were.

They went on a hunger strike, demanding only that their families be told their whereabouts. Some refused medicines, risking death from heart conditions and epilepsy.

When a guard shouted at them, Ms. Abo Rebieh said, she yelled back: "What would you do if your daughter disappeared and you knew nothing about her for 60 days?"

"After I did all this work, I felt relieved. Like I was holding these things inside me, and now they are out," Ms. Abo Rebieh said.

"We should keep telling the story of prisoners," she said. "My art is dedicated to that."

About the Artist

Born in 1980, Hama, Syria.
Lives and works in Beirut, Lebanon.

Education

- 2002 Damascus University, Faculty of Fine Arts, Printmaking Department.
- 2021 Online art residency organized by Coculture and Ettijahat & Martin Roth Initiative/Germany.
- 2020 Bogliasco foundation / Italy Art residency for one month under Artist Protection Fund fellow.
- 2019 American Academy in Rome Italy: Art residency for 4 months under Artist Protection Fund Fellow.

Residencies

- 2021 Online art residency organized by Coculture, Ettijahat and Martin Roth Initiative, Germany.
- 2020 Bogliasco Foundation: Italy Art residency for one month under Artist Protection Fund fellow.
- 2019-20 American Academy: Art residency for 4 months under Artist Protection Fund fellow, Rome , Italy.

Solo Exhibitions

- 2019 On A Thread, 392 Rmeil Gallery, Beirut, Lebanon.
- 2018 Traces, 392 Rmeil Gallery, Beirut, Lebanon.

Group Exhibitions

- 2021 Repairs and Stitches, Cite internationale des arts, Paris, France.
- 2021 In This Moonless Black Night, Middle East Institute, Washington D.C.
- 2020 Cinque Mostre Convergence, Rome, Italy.
- 2019 Seven Spices, 392 Rmeil Gallery, Beirut, Lebanon.
- 2019 The Pencil Is a Key: Drawings by Incarcerated Artists, The Drawing Center, New York.
- 2018 Art into The Night, Alice Mougabgab Gallery, Faqra, Lebanon.
- 2018 Three and a Half, 392 Rmeil Gallery, Beirut, Lebanon.
- 2018 Cultures and Stereotypes, ARTLAB, Beirut, Lebanon.
- 2017 Tens of thousands of disappeared must not be forgotten, Station Beirut Gallery, Beirut, Lebanon.
- 2017 Creative memory of the Syrian revolution, Paris, France.
- 2014 The Boot, British Museum, London.
- 2012 Syrian anonymous exhibition, Paris, Italy and Istanbul till 2014.
- 2012 Syrian Art Relief exhibition, British Museum, London.
- 2011 Morpho Gallery Exhibit, Chicago, USA.
- 2010 Triennial De Chamarelieh, AMAC, Paris, France.
- 2010 Miniprint De Cadaqués, Barcelona, Spain.
- 2009 Women's Day Exhibit, Goerge Kamel Gallery, Damascus, Syria.
- 2008 7th Lesserda Art Print Biennial, Sofia, Bulgaria.

- 2007 Graphic Art Dry Point Biennial,Uzice, Serbia.
- 2006 Triennial De Chamarelieh, Paris, France.
- 2006 Graphic Shab Exhibit, Albal Gallery, Damascus, Syria.
- 2005 Color of Damascus Exhibit, Mustafa Ali gallery, Damascus, Syria, Rome, Italy.
- 2003 Latakia Biennial, Latakia, Syria.
- 2002 Grafinnova Biennial, Ostrobothnian Museum,Vaasa, Finland.
- 2002 Regular Participant at the Damascus Annual Exhibition and Damascus Youth Exhibition till 2010.

Awards and Official Prizes

- 2006 Damascus First prize in the Annual Youth Exhibition.
- 2005 Damascus Third prize in “Color of Damascus” Exhibition , curated by The European Commission Delegat and exhibited in Roma , Italy.
- 2002 Graduation project : Won a prize at the Ostrobothnian Museum Youth Engravers Competition “Gravinnova”, Vaasa-Finland.

Museum Acquisitions

- 2014 British Museum acquired three print works: “The Boot”, “Accused of Homosexuality” and “Still Singing”.



Transformation
(Left) Aquatint and Etching printed on Hahnemuhle paper | 50 x 35 cm | 2022 | (Right) Azza Abo Rebieh in her studio | Portrait © Mohammad Khayata

SALEH BARAKAT GALLERY



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