

Touch The Painting

Nour El Saleh - Exquisite Farces

VO Curations, London

On until 11th October 2019 (FREE)



Nour El Saleh, *Wrong Side of the Table*, 2019

I have a secret. A secret list. A secret list of artists I would collect if I could. Only I (and probably Google) know about it. Dorothea Tanning, Frank Auerbach, Nathaniel Mary Quinn, Norman Lewis, Phyllida Barlow are all part of my fantasy collection. In June this year I added Nour El Saleh to that list - when I saw her works for the first time at her graduation show at the Slade School of Fine Art. I have stalked her ever since.

Nour's works are one of a kind. They need to be experienced. Not through Instagram pictures (that I am bound to post...). But in person. The magnitude of the paintings, the detail and the absurdity of the content stir something deep inside the viewer. Her paintings attract and intrigue for the impossibilities that they depict. And as the viewer immerses in

them, nausea, anger, revolt, fear - all those feelings that we are not too proud to feel or show - start to emerge (if you let them). Trying to make any sense of Nour's works is not just a waste of time it is missing the point. They are to be felt, not reasoned with.

In making her paintings Nour lets the process guide her. She writes short stories and she draws as part of her practice which ultimately inspire her final work. But when she starts a

painting she lets the paint, the light and the shade guide her imagination never knowing what the finished work will look like. She compared it to seeing shapes in the clouds.

Exquisite Farces is a solo exhibition of six large canvas and two relatively smaller works on paper. A couple of old favourites are joined by paintings made during the residency that culminated in the show. The works on paper are also new to the public eye even though Nour has probably made them before the paintings.

I stood in front of Dance Monkey, Dance! for a while. A painting two meters tall by two and a half meters wide. The work is dominated by a large head worn by a life size woman. The woman doesn't wear the head like a mask - over her own head - she wears it in a way that her head comes out of this big

head's mouth. The woman's facial expressions are strained in concentration as if she was a spiritual medium taking control over what surrounds her. Her eyes are mostly closed and her lips a shade of blue. She wears a dress with a sleeping (or dead) goose's head hanging out of its pocket. Her hands move in a way as if she was talking through them. In fact her hands have mouths, eyes and noses in them. A mouth with sharp teeth appears in the fold of her right hand between the thumb and the fore finger.



Nour El Saleh, Dance Monkey, Dance!, 2019

This hand seems to be talking to another head. This one is small. It wears a court jester hat. The tiny head is being held by a human hand whose long nails are painted in blue polish. This human hand does not belong to a person but to a rat with a partially humanized face. The woman's left hand is pulling a very thin thread from the rat's red hat. Her left hand also has a mouth, nose and eye. The rat, wearing a vest with a large sun on its back, seems to be coming out of a large opening in the wall. Inside this opening there is a woman sitting on a wooden chair. Both the chair and the woman have their backs to the main scene. However the woman has turned her face to watch the rat and the head-wearing-woman. She bites the nails of one of her hands (she has three hands, I think). She looks scared.

I could go on about the many other hands, the shadows, the socks the rat wears and the white sheet over the wall paper, but I won't. And no, there is no monkey in the painting.

Dance Monkey, Dance! represents well Nour's current body of work. Other equally detailed and intriguing works are included in the exhibition and are definitely worth a climb to the 12th floor of Tower Building (there is a lift). Rats, jesters, people coming out of other people are common themes in her works. Nour's hard work and technical ability is evident. But what I admire the most is her willingness to take risks.

Thanks to Nour El Saleh and VO Curations for the images and for welcoming me to the exhibition before it opened to the public.