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Close encounters with machines that watch us



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BEIRUT: Privacy has become a luxury. Cameras perched at every street corner, satellites in orbit with telescopic lenses and, more recently, drones fitted for surveillance and sometimes assassination. Then there are less picturesque, more pernicious, NSA-style agencies who occupy themselves with surveilling our virtual selves as well.

It's every bit as pervasive as George Orwell forecast in his 1949 dystopia "1984" – worse, perhaps, since in Orwell's fiction individuals were less buoyed by the consumer economy.

It is Orwell's novel – and its omnipresent authoritarian Big Brother figure – which Lebanese artist Tagreed Darghouth says served as catalyst for her latest solo-exhibition "Vision Machines, shall you see me better now?" at Agial Art Gallery.

These works continue the artist's critique of nuclear weapons in which she sought to draw attention to the cartoonish nicknames often applied to weapons of mass destruction. The new works explore the territories of privacy while questioning hidden forms of violence and the misconception of the Other.

An unease accompanies the viewer's encounters with Darghouth's "vision machines." The large-scale paintings of surveillance cameras – fixed and borne aloft by drones, blimps, aircraft and satellites – which usually observe from a cautious distance, seem all too close.

The show is divided into three series of canvases – "No Where to Hide," "Shall You See Me Better Now?" and "Vision Machines."

"No Where to Hide" features acrylic renderings of aircrafts, all 150x150 cm. The artist's brush strokes seem almost forceful as they capture eerie scenes of these vehicles of the sky hovering amid muted bleak backgrounds.

Droplets of paint stream down the canvas, enhancing their already ominous appearance. Guns and missiles bulging from the aircraft remain an unnerving reminder that these are also objects of violence.

"Vision Machines" is comprised of acrylics depicting satellites, drones and blimps, all of them 120x120 cm, enforcing the notion that this breach of privacy comes in different forms.

In one work the artist has apparently submerged a canvas in orange paint, which only proves to heighten the satellite's cold grey exterior.

A blimp, featured in another piece, seems harder to spot than the rest. Depicted in a hue similar to that of the shy framing it, the airship appears to be perfectly camouflaged, with remnants of its form peering through the paint, like an inanimate spy in hiding.

Portrayals of surveillance appear much more direct in "Shall You See Me Better Now?" Menacing CCTV cameras extend on each canvas from different angles. In some works these jarring figures are subdued by hues of pink and green. In other works, the camera's lens advances toward the center of the canvas, confronting the viewer directly.

The collisions Darghouth engineers between these prying instruments and the people into whose lives they pry provide a context for an interesting shift in power dynamics. It's an engaged viewing experience that makes the observer the subject of scrutiny.

"Vision Machines, shall you see me better now?" is on view at Agial Art Gallery through Sept. 26. For further information please contact 01-345-213.

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