

The two works from the series “Artificially Aged Paintings (Wet, Dry, Wet, Dry, Wet, Dry),” 2010–, that completed the show confirmed this. These primed canvases have been subjected to alternating aridity and humidity, and thus have wound up with surfaces that evoke historical abstraction. Balula’s painting series begun earlier (“River Paintings,” 2008–; “Burnt Paintings,” 2010–; “Buried Paintings,” 2010–) conform to an ecosystem in which the seasonal cycle, the process of germination, climatic and atmospheric swings, or the degree of humidity take the place of work in the studio. Here, instead, the exposure of the paintings to organic elements was re-created artificially—a hybrid between the analogical trace of the impression, characteristic of the earlier paintings, and the digital trace of his more recent sculptures.

—Riccardo Venturi

Translated from Italian by Marguerite Shore.

Simone Fattal

BALICE HERTLING

Simone Fattal abandoned Beirut in 1980, when Lebanon was mired in civil war. Leaving her home, her studio, and her painting practice behind, and settling in Sausalito, California, the Syrian-born artist enrolled in a sculpture course. One day, her teacher said to her, “Here is the earth. She is alive.” Fattal quickly embraced terra-cotta as a medium.

At the entrance to Fattal’s exhibition “Sculptures and Collages,” four upright figures in terra-cotta (all dated 2011) stood, seemingly headless, with abbreviated torsos, on neat metal plinths. The sculptures, which the artist often refers to as soldiers or warriors, are practically architectural, functioning as gateways to another time, another place, as well as gatekeepers to the magical space Fattal created here. The legs of these emphatically vertical figures hold a wide and sturdy stance. “My characters continue to be the link between our contemporary situation and our history,” she recently explained. “If they seem to have come from high antiquity, it is because this history is ours, and the link for me is essential. I am trying to position myself in this line that started with Sumer, and that is uninterrupted through today.”

On the surrounding walls, five collages brought Fattal’s research and studio practice to life, revealing her web of visual references and the trajectory of her geographical and cultural crossings. Although Fattal has long made collages, she has not previously exhibited them. She sees these works as a means to respond to our precise moment in history. *1948: Le grand renversement* (1948: The Great Upheaval), 2011, refers



View of “Simone Fattal,” 2015.

to the Arab-Israeli War, a crisis of postcolonial boundaries and religious and cultural sectarianism that erupted in the year given in the title. The landscape she creates in this work seems to almost burst open, as magazine and newspaper clippings featuring Arabic script and Islamic artifacts appear to repel one another as they spread across the background of a Felix Gonzalez-Torres takeaway poster from the 2007 Venice Biennale. Fattal's hand is most present in the strokes of paint she has layered into *Les Ménines*, 2008, a collage incorporating a detail of Velázquez's iconic painting with colorful clippings of images, including the light-filled interior of a tiled dome, figurative mosaic work, and tall glasses of orange juice with ice.

As if pulled from Fattal's rib cage—which is pictured in the chest X-ray featured in the collage *Plus bêquetée d'oiseaux que des à coudre* (*François Villon*) (More Needled by Birds Than a Darning Thimble [*François Villon*]), 2012—a cluster of nine small “goddess” sculptures in terra-cotta rose to life on a white platform at the center of the space. One figure was seated, one stood on three legs, and one, much paler than the rest, wore a coiled metal necklace on her headless shoulders. Several were enclosed in a smooth and unadorned verticality. A throne-like terra-cotta construction sat on the floor just next to the platform, facing the goddesses and the warriors and creating a visual dialogue between the forms.

Even with the recent boom of auction sales, institutions, and international biennials in the Middle East and with shows such as the New Museum's “Here and Elsewhere,” the art of the Arab world and its diaspora is still less visible than it should be globally. And how appearances of the sacred will be dealt with in modern and contemporary art is still unclear, especially with art and religion so clearly separated following the Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment, and modernism. But those were European movements, expressed in European languages. Fattal is challenging the postcolonial idea that East and West are in conflict, suggesting instead a shared history, a shared sense of the sacred, a shared and living earth.

—Lillian Davies