

RAWAN ALMUKHTAR

13.09.–19.10. 2024

Rawan Almkhtar presents his first solo show at MEYER*KAINER in Vienna in parallel to this year's *curated by* theme, 'untold narratives.'

As a continuation of the *HIJRA* series the artist began in 2018, Rawan Almkhtar's paintings for this exhibition maintain a reflection and assertion of personal experience in the face of an art political logic implicated onto the artist with a background of exile. How much must one share of his own experience and position to be legible in a contemporary art context? Yet how can one ignore the context in which art is created?

Almkhtar fled Iraq in 2015 and traveled the Balkan route via Turkey, then by sea to Greece, and then toward Croatia, before making it to Vienna, Austria. Always in movement, snapshots of the people with whom Almkhtar fled stay vivid in his mind. The horror, the humor, the path remembered not by its coordinates but by how it felt to move along and by any means through, are the unnameable feelings emergent when imminent death is countered by almost slapstick moments like putting on a life jacket backwards. An 11-year old girl singing the entire way. Two women enraptured in each other's arms. The odd comfort of a man projecting his desperation by shouting out absurd and unsolicited practical advice.

Almkhtar wishes to hold these encounters—these individuals and not their sum—by heart, to memorize each person by processing the aftermath of their shared journey through the act of painting. Yet without the capacity to fully grasp or reveal the people or their stories or for a painting to substitute a memory, there is only an urgency, implied by the immediate effect of abstracting the corporeality of representation that renders the pinning down any one moment or person paradoxical. If memory is mediated by representational forms, the aesthetic dimension of memory is one of always moving on, a story kept within each layer of the painted surface, the bodies penetrating the painting again and again in precise rhythm rather than crude stroke. Almkhtar finds in these feelings an aesthetic for migration, taming trauma through a disciplined lens both graceful and rigorous against expectations normalized by the fetishization of the migratory subject. His formulation draws attention to the ways in which aesthetic practice might be constituted by and through the acts of migration itself.

The journey of exile does not end at its destination. Upon arrival, the subject is only confronted with new oppressions, immediately labeled as a refugee and subject to the gaze of discourse from the very institution within which refuge is sought. How do you abstract the dominant gaze while bearing witness to the gaze, by pre-empting what the gaze observes? Almkhtar is meticulous in this regard, and while his paintings find their style in photorealism, the artist frames how and what the viewer sees, expanding the possibilities beyond the assumed objectivity of representing the real. There is a refocusing of the gaze, and in this case it is the gaze of the subject, the silent observer experiencing the very act which is now observed by the painting's viewer. Almkhtar anticipates and occupies this space between perception of forced migration and task of representation by acknowledging its forever limbo. The painted canvas metamorphoses into something corporeal, collapsing the distinction between the migrant and post migrant, asking if the 'post' in 'post migrant' and 'post migration' presumes a transcendence in physiological state once a body crosses a border, if it is even able to in the first place. By deconstructing the subject of the migrant imaginary, Almkhtar blurs and then blurs again the faces, the borders, the binaries, the bodies. Disorientation mounts, and it becomes impossible to essentialize, which is exactly the point. Faces are covered, concealed to maintain anonymity and intimacy, severing the gaze of Almkhtar's experience with the media's cold attempts to ontologize and politicize a human experience.

Bodies eclipsed in space and time meld physically into the next one until there's an inability to disconnect, obscuring the anatomy of the painting itself while negotiating the agency of the migrating body in its perpetual becoming, analogous to its changes in the processes of crossing. The migrating bodies and their painted representation reshape the places to which they belong by taking space beyond the lines they're allowed to be in, complicating the linearities of process and contexts. The comfort of cold colors shocked by the orange of a life jacket, painting as a process in order to process, in different lights some figures appear and then disappear under another light, textured by the refractions of light as if refracting a gaze each time the viewer switches angles.

–Cecilia Bien