

You just arrived and don't have your bearings, but that's fine – we don't either. Take these binoculars. Who's that big, naked, long-fingered figure crouching on yonder hilltop? You can see others looking, too: someone throwing up, someone cowering but curious. Maybe, subjectively, you look from the creature's perspective, making everyone here somebody's other. And perhaps this all reminds you of something big but ungraspable, the prickly texture of being alive: questions on questions, fuzzy longings, glimpses of unnameable mystery, strangeness accepted because it's right in front of you. Nour El Saleh's painting *Spleen* is, characteristically, a convocation of unanswerable queries: where, when, who, what level(s) of reality? (The exhibition title, *Interface*, might suggest the confected environments of video games.) All of this reflects, in turn, the fact that the artist only arrived shortly before we did. She almost always begins painting without knowing what she's going to paint, working towards a heightened hinge zone where it's clear something is about to happen, but not what.

Within all of this, some certainties. El Saleh paints bodies *in extremis*, as if flesh were semaphoring inward emotional states, as if emotions reshaped physiognomy, sat literally close to the bone. Hands and feet, here, are as articulate and emphatic as eyes. Figures feel deeply, and sometimes we can intuit what: the relatable desire for change, mingled with fear of its consequences. Smaller figures, alternative selves perhaps, pop out of portals in skin (see *Spoon-feed*) or appear cradled in a bigger figure's bony digits (*sleepy lavender*). In the reversible *Fracture plane*, a body transforms into a moth. In *Flytrap*, a moth-like human flies across the sky, like in a dream: to fall or soar or, the title hints, to be trapped after chasing light. Weather can feel like a character, an abstract cue.

Part of El Saleh's skill is to withhold so much while beckoning viewers in, to teeter on narrative's edge while affirming that audiences will never get the full story. There is a level specific to her Lebanese upbringing, easter eggs tucked into compositions that not everyone has the cultural heritage to access. But there are also clear signals of reception's universal partialness – a reversible painting, for instance, can never be fully grasped – which turns viewers, collectively, into a community of the knowingly not-knowing, a condition those without faith might call the price of being alive. Art is where we voluntarily face and wonder about that, a conduit between here and the boundless unknown. Or, if you like, an interface.

Martin Herbert

About the artist:

Nour El Saleh explores notions of place, belonging and selective/relative memory. Working instinctively without prior planning, the works reveal fragments of familiar yet inhabitable environments with ecosystems suitable only for those who are created within them. Without being an exception to that rule – she visits frequently as an observer, relying on her medium as a mode of research and inquisition into the regulations and dynamics that may come to play within those hypothetical spaces. Bodies; animal and humanoid, appear on the surface, where they indiscriminately meld into each other and are inseparable from the land that they inhabit. Heavily referencing human anatomy, they are scrutinized beyond the bounds of biology. Through delicately feathered strokes, flesh is made to look tender, porous and translucent - expanding the visceral possibilities of openings and entries to the body that are neither functional or sexual.

Nour El Saleh (she/her) was born in Beirut, Lebanon in 1997, she immigrated to London, United Kingdom in 2015, where she is now based. She completed her postgraduate degree from The Royal Drawing School in 2022 after receiving a BFA at the Slade School of Fine Art in 2019 and a FA with Distinction in Art and Design from Central Saint Martins in 2016.

She has recently exhibited at Cassina Projects, Italy (2025) General Expenses, (2024) Des Bains, UK (2024), Xxijra Hii, UK (2023), Quench Gallery, UK (2023), Edel Assanti, UK (2022), Castello di San Basillio, Italy (2022), Cassina Projects, Italy (2022), Christies, London (2022), Plaza Plaza, UK (2021), V.O Curations, UK (2021); Lowell Ryan Projects, Mexico (2020); Kuva Gallery, Finland (2019); Daniel Benjamin Gallery, London (2018).

She was recently in residence at Castello San Basilio, Italy (2022) Palazzo Monti, Italy (2022) and Dumfries House, Scotland (2023).