

Before Our Eyes

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Vleugel 19

Looking is never a neutral act. By looking, or looking away, we inevitably take a stance.

Before Our Eyes was conceived at a time when we are confronted daily by news of genocidal violence in Gaza and the brutal policies of the US government. Fundamental human rights and international law are being violated openly and unashamedly.

How do artists respond to such times? Art cannot stop violence. But it can do something else: it can slow your gaze, sharpen your attention and confront you with your own position as a viewer. At the same time, the constant deluge of shocking images raises pressing ethical questions. What are the implications of depicting real violence and suffering? Should art prompt the viewer to reflect or take action? Does it have the power to do so?

The artists in *Before Our Eyes* have made careful choices about what to show and what not to show. Their work redirects the gaze back to you: what do you see? Which questions does the work raise in your mind? And how do you respond to what you see happening in the world?

It may not always be immediately clear what you are looking at, or a work may at first seem to have no direct link to the theme of the exhibition. Consider this an invitation to slow down, look more closely, and reflect critically on what you see. The texts in this brochure are intended to guide you in doing so.

Angharad Williams

Solo Performance is a silent film in which you see a close-up of the artist's face. She is looking past the camera; her lips are moving, but what words are they uttering? Williams deliberately omits the sound. Intimacy turns into distance: we don't know what she is seeing, saying or thinking.

The film reflects on the relationship between seeing and speaking. Can we speak out about what we see? Or do words fall short?

The film repeats in an endless loop. Williams mouths the same words over and over, like a mantra or a prayer. Her silence could be understood as a form of protest: a rejection or interruption of what is going on in the world. At a time when many artists – including in Europe and the US – are limited in their freedom of speech, opting for deliberate silence can be a powerful statement in itself.

Angharad Williams, *Solo Performance* (detail), 2025. Ektachrome film transferred to HD video. Courtesy of the artist and FANTA-MLN. Photo: Brian Kure.



Marlene Dumas, *Last Man Standing*, 2023. Oil on canvas, 50 × 40 cm. Private collection, Madrid. Courtesy of the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London. Photo: Peter Cox.

Marlene Dumas

Marlene Dumas painted the portraits *Last Man Standing* and *Loss* in response to the Israeli army's genocidal violence against Palestinian civilians in Gaza. Instead of showing the events directly, she depicts two faces looking out over the devastation.

Dumas' portraits are painted from her imagination. She made the conscious decision not to base them on photos of real people. The paintings express the powerlessness of the victims and that of the artist. Art can address injustice but not stop it:

*If you're asking me whether art can bring about change, then I say yes.
Because it can bring about a change in consciousness.
But if you're asking me whether art can stop the horrors of war, I say no.
Because it is a reflective process that lacks such an immediately effective power.
If you're asking me whether art always tries to do the impossible, I say yes.*

Marlene Dumas, 2024*

*Statement on Ahmet Öğüt's artwork *Bakunin's Barricade* at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 2024–2025.

Rabih Mroué

The *Black Boxes* are collages, made from 10 years of newspaper photographs, in which Rabih Mroué juxtaposes fragments of violence in the Middle East: the 2006 Israel-Lebanon war, the so-called Arab Spring and the war in Syria.

The work invites you to reflect on how one eruption of violence often leads to the next, and how the media reports on such events. By displaying the collages behind a special lens, Mroué simultaneously creates distance and proximity: although you are viewing the images through a filter, the 3D effect of the lens brings you closer to them.

Mroué combines the images with a sound-track. He places fragments from different time periods side by side. In this way, the artist asks whether history can be understood as one continuous catastrophe, and whether we are only spectators to its unfolding.



Rabih Mroué, *Black Box IX* (detail), 2006-2016. Collage on paper, LED light, sound, headphones, wooden boxes, 34 × 34 × 22 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Steir-Semler Gallery, Beirut/Hamburg.

What is the difference between looking and bearing witness?

Marianne Berenhaut

How can art bear witness to tragedy? The way artists approach this question today is strongly influenced by their predecessors in the second half of the last century. They often chose not to depict the horrors of the Holocaust, out of respect for the unimaginable suffering of the victims.

As a child, Marianne Berenhaut had to go into hiding in order to escape the Nazi persecution of the Jews. Her assemblages of found objects often recall that trauma, without referring to a particular memory or event.

À chacun sa taille consists of 150 discarded mirrors. Together they form a broken image, or rather an image of brokenness. That vulnerability is echoed in *Jardin d'enfants*. Six broken children's chairs evoke various associations of childhood, from growth and development to fear and violence.

At the age of 91, Berenhaut is still making new work that speaks about loss as well as resilience. 'I think it's wrong to believe that the most painful memories stay with us longer than happy ones,' she says. 'Life comes and goes'.

Marianne Berenhaut, *À chacun sa taille*, 1971–1973. Mirrors, polished metallized glass, variable dimensions. Collections de la Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, inv. APC 27416. Photo: Isabelle Arthuis.



Marlene Dumas

The painting *History* is based on a photograph of a Jewish girl and her grandfather. Dumas reworked the canvas multiple times over the course of more than twenty years. Gradually, the memory captured by the photo became further and further removed. The face of the grandfather also transformed, layer by layer, until a new figure emerged.

Separated from their original context, the images Dumas selects undergo a metamorphosis: lines blur, details fade away or are emphasised. While old photographs suggest that an event is already behind us, Dumas' paintings breathe new life into the past. In this way, the meaning of the image remains in flux, just like our view of history: we inevitably link past events to the present, which leads us to see them from a new perspective.



Marlene Dumas, *History*, 2003-2024. Oil on canvas, 200 × 100 cm. Pinault Collection. Photo: Peter Cox.

Are there images that should not be shown?

Ryan Cullen

In these two paintings, Ryan Cullen examines how violence is represented and justified. He selects existing images and crops them to focus the viewer's attention on a specific gesture.

The Search Party is based on a photograph from the US army archives that depicts a military training exercise. In the close-up, the extreme violence remains largely outside the frame. However, the restraining grip alone visualises the objective of military aggression: to subjugate the opposition by force.

Incorporate, differentiate, manage shows an aikido technique that can be used to fend off an attack. According to practitioners, aikido is intended solely for self-defence, not for attacking an opponent. At the same time, defence is often invoked as a justification for military force, even when there is no concrete threat. Together, the works question who has the right to use violence and who has the power to decide on its legitimacy.



Ryan Cullen, *The Search Party*, September 2023. Oil on linen, 120 × 150 cm. Courtesy of the artist and KIN, Brussels.
Photo: Harald Thys.

Luc Tuymans

Luc Tuymans created a large mural especially for this exhibition. At first glance, it may not be immediately clear what you are looking at. Often Tuymans' images do not immediately reveal their origin and meaning, inviting multiple possible readings.

The title of the work, *The Maggot*, does, however, reveal that you are looking at an immense, magnified maggot. This little creature can symbolise decay: maggots appear when something starts to rot. In this light, you could read the work as a comment on world

politics today, in which respect for democratic values and international laws is rapidly being eroded. At the same time, the maggot carries another meaning: because maggots eat dead tissue, they were once used to clean wounds.

The message of *The Maggot* remains ambiguous. It is an image that both repels and attracts. This dual movement can also be found in Tuymans' technique: from up close, the mural dissolves into short, loose brushstrokes; only by taking some distance can you discern a recognisable image.



Luc Tuymans, *The Maggot*, 2025. Oil on canvas, 77.8 × 84.4 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Mohammed Sami

In Mohammed Sami's works, what you don't see is at least as important as what you do, leading you to question what you think you are seeing: is the stain on the carpet in *Emotional Home* water, oil or the residue of a dramatic event?

For Sami, concealing and revealing go hand in hand. In *Weeping Walls III*, the interplay of light and shadow suggests that something once hung on the wall. *Permanent Night* looks like an abstract painting at first glance, but turns out to be a boarded-up window. Here, Sami subverts the classical notion of a painting as a window on the world. What exactly happened is deliberately kept hidden from the viewer.

Sami's paintings are inspired by moments that evoke personal memories for him, without showing those memories themselves. With this approach, he breaks the expectation that, as an artist who had to flee from Iraq, he should have to share his experiences with the viewer. Instead, he holds up a mirror: what you think you see says more about yourself than anything else.

How does meaning emerge in the space between what is shown and what is hidden?



Mohammed Sami, *Emotional Home*, 2024.
Mixed media on linen, 290 × 380 cm. ASOM Collection.
Courtesy of the artist and Modern Art. Photo: Modern Art.

Sirah Foighel Brutmann & Eitan Efrat

Printed Matter is based on the archive of freelance photojournalist André Brutmann, who lived and worked in Israel and Palestine between 1982 and 2002. He covered major news items such as the first and second Palestinian Intifada and the assassination of the Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. He also photographed everyday life. If a roll of film was not yet full, he would fill it with photos of his family. In this way, professional and private images would share a single contact sheet.

The film starts with the birth of Brutmann's daughter Sirah in 1983. You can hear the voice of her mother, journalist Hanne Foighel, as she browses Brutmann's archive. From her perspective as a mother and a journalist, she reflects on the images and the memories they evoke.

In the adjacent room, you can see five contact sheets from October 1982. They show photographs Brutmann took in the Sabra and Shatila Palestinian refugee camps in Beirut, two weeks after a massacre was carried out by Lebanese Falangists, facilitated by the Israeli army. Brutmann and other press photographers visited the camps under the supervision of the army, after much of the evidence had already been erased.



Sirah Foighel Brutmann & Eitan Efrat, *Printed Matter*, 2011. 16 mm film transferred to HD video.
Courtesy of the artists.

Hamishi Farah

In *Lot's Wife*, Hamishi Farah reflects on the position of the witness.

The canvases are based on tourist photos of two rock formations on the Dead Sea coast. Due to their human-like forms, they are known as 'Lot's Wife', in reference to the Bible story in which Lot and his family flee Sodom before the city's destruction. When Lot's wife, going against the command of an angel, looks back once more, God turns her into a pillar of salt.

One of these rock formations is located in Palestinian territory that has been under the control of the State of Israel since 1948. Instead of offering the Jewish people a safe place in Europe after World War II, Western powers supported the creation of a Jewish state on Palestinian territory. This decision was often legitimised through references to Biblical history.

The paintings were created in a context in which German cultural policy has made it increasingly difficult for artists to speak out against the Israeli violence in Gaza. Here, Farah raises questions about who is allowed to bear witness, whose voices are heard and how this relates to power and position. Farah's choice not to depict violence directly is both an artistic and an ethical one: shocking images often evoke strong emotions but rarely incite action. The work redirects the viewer's gaze back to themselves: what do you do in response to what you see?



Hamishi Farah, *Lot's Wife*, 2025. Graphite, pumice, and acrylic on linen, 180 × 120 cm. Collection of Andrea Succo, Venice. Courtesy of the artist; Arcadia Missa, London; and Maxwell Graham, New York.



Rosalind Nashashibi, *Electrical Gaza*, 2015. 16 mm film and animations transferred to HD video, color, 4:3, Dolby sound, 17'53".
Courtesy of the artist.

Rosalind Nashashibi

Electrical Gaza shows daily life in Gaza under Israeli occupation, just days before the July 2014 bombing and ground offensive. The film shows Gaza as you rarely see it: vibrant and bustling, albeit with the constant threat of violence and blockades looming in the background.

The film begins and ends at the Rafah border crossing, where people try to enter or leave Gaza. Scenes sometimes transform into animations reminiscent of Studio Ghibli films. For Nashashibi, Gaza is an enchanted place:

a parallel world, cut off from the outside, where moments of magic alternate with the harsh reality of occupation.

The film takes on a new, painful meaning in light of the recent genocidal violence perpetrated by the Israeli army: many of the people you see in the film have since been murdered and their homes destroyed. At the same time, the film bears witness to the human face of the Palestinians and thus represents an act of resistance against their ongoing dehumanisation.

Rosalind Nashashibi

Rosalind Nashashibi's paintings are often inspired by historical artworks, which she connects with the lived reality of the Palestinian people.

The Indifferent Man draws on the painting *L'Indifférent* by French artist Antoine Watteau (1684–1721), which depicts a nonchalant young man. Nashashibi created her work in response to the art world's silence on Israel's ethnic cleansing of Gaza.

Swans and Pots (four) shows four swans with empty pots and pans. The work evokes images of Gazans waiting anxiously at food distribution points, following the food blockade imposed by the State of Israel and prior to Israel's expulsion of UNRWA in October 2024.

The swans stand for the pride and strength of the Palestinians, who continue to resist their oppression under extremely difficult circumstances.

For Nashashibi, the swans are also a way of avoiding the direct depiction of human suffering. The colourful, abstract paintings she displays alongside these works demonstrate how her work balances the urge to make things visible with a deliberate choice of restraint.

In a new work on paper made especially for this exhibition, Nashashibi depicts the return of Palestinians to their homeland. Like the swans, the horses symbolise beauty, power and dignity.



Rosalind Nashashibi, *The Indifferent Man*, 2024. Oil and charcoal on linen, 130 × 150 cm. Courtesy of the artist and GRIMM Amsterdam | London | New York.

What is the role of imagination in resistance?

Artists

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