

Galila Nawar

Cairo-based oil painter Galila Nawar is one somewhat haunted by a past. Her finely-layered, almost white-washed-looking portraits exude a depth of melancholy that resonates with anyone who has felt the losses of time and the distorted visions of memories that hover, insistently, somewhere in the hallways of our minds. Nawar's large, portrait-style paintings, pieced meticulously and laboriously together with coloured layer after layer of finely-dripped oils, appear almost translucent, colourless, like faded watercolours, despite the contrasting reality of their nature and texture and making.

Nawar, who studied painting at Central St. Martin's College of Art and Design, London, and also has a degree in psychology, is as precise about the conception of her technique as she is about the choice of her subject.

Her first publicly exhibited body of work, *Photo Album*, is the result of an adaptation to canvas of the emotions that emerged and evolved in the hours and weeks and months of staring, no less, at a selection of family photographs from the 30s, 40s, 50s and 60s. Her choice of the photograph as a medium to work from, and the canvas as one to work to, was constructed with the same calculated precision as the paintings themselves, and it is in that gap between the photograph and the self that the work has unfolded.

"As a young girl I used to spend many hours in the dark room next door watching photographs being developed," she says of the photographic studio, Bella, that adjoins her studio (once her father's) in downtown Cairo. "I would watch the layers of the photograph slowly come into formation from out of a haze. Layer after layer."

The Swimmer
Oil on canvas, 197 x 87 cm



Summer
Oil on canvas, 200 x 120 cm



School
Oil on canvas, 190 x 112 cm



It is that same process that she has replicated with the layers of her oils, choosing to work from some of the remaining photographs that emerged from the studio next door, bringing them into formation, layer after layer, but instead of bringing them to life, almost fading them away, to that point of hazy distortion when they are neither really here, nor there, neither really present, nor absent.

The sophistication of Nawar's technique of taking the photographic dark room developing process and working it in reverse through oils – as well as her conscientious and conscious use of the canvas - speaks of an equal sophistication of artistic vision that is often quite lacking in the formation of art from the region. But it perhaps makes sense that this Cairo-born and bred artist has an appreciation for the almost-cinematic possibilities of the canvas, for she grew up not only surrounded by still images, but also Egyptian cinema in its golden days, where her mother was a rising star. The noticeable influence of the cinematic and visual narrative in her work makes as much sense to her concept as it does to technique, and the visual language she is choosing to use speaks equally to the Golden Age of cinema and the Dark Room as it does to the contemporary visual language of art and the image today. She reclaims with her technique the place of the painting in an artistic landscape where the photograph had once declared the painter obsolete.

Where Nawar will take the deliberation of her stroke, and what she will conceive through the interplay of reality, memory, emotion, cultural history and imagination, may perhaps be a departure from the album of family photos, but also perhaps not, for in Nawar is not only a personal story, but also, somehow, the capturing of a collective memory – not just of a city and country and national history, but of a feeling that is pertinent to humanity across boundaries of space as well as time.

- YR



Boy Alone
Oil on canvas, 190 x 97 cm

Annoussa
Oil on canvas, 198 x 110 cm

