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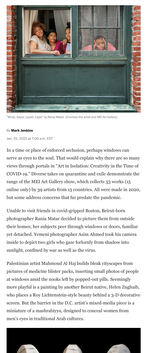
In the galleries: Middle East artists examine sheltering in place amid pandemic



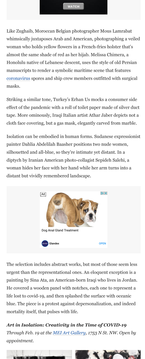
"Birds, Rocks, Leaves, Leaf," by Elena Bulaur. (Courtesy the artist and MO Art Gallery)

By **Mark Jenkins**
Jan. 30, 2020 at 7:00 a.m. EST

In a time or place of enforced seclusion, perhaps windows can serve as eyes to the soul. That would explain why there are so many views through portals in "Art in Isolation: Creativity in the Time of COVID-19." Diverse takes on quarantine and exile demonstrate the range of the MO Art Gallery show, which collects 35 works (3 online only) by 29 artists from 15 countries. All were made in 2020, but some address concerns that predate the pandemic.

Unable to visit friends in covid-gripped Boston, Beirut-born photographer Rania Matar decided to picture them from outside their homes, her subjects peer through windows or doors, familiar yet detached. Yemeni photographer Aiten Ahmed took his camera inside to depict two girls who gear forlornly from shadow into sunlight, confined by war as well as the virus.

Palestinian artist Mahmoud Al Haj builds bleak cityscapes from pictures of medicine blister packs, inserting small photos of people at windows amid the nooks left by popped-out pills. Seemingly more playful is a painting by another Beirut native, Helen Zughbi, who places a Roy Lichtenstein-style beauty behind a 2-D decorative screen. But the barrier in the D.C. artist's mixed-media piece is a miniature of a nonbelligerent, decorative fence to conceal women from men's eyes in traditional Arab cultures.



"Allow Me Life," by Aiten Ahmed. (Courtesy the artist and MO Art Gallery)

Some of the depictions of landscapes are actual and unabashed. Saudi photographer Moath Alofi evokes desolation with a wide shot of desert sprinkled with abandoned cars. Palestinian artist Jack Persekian, however, time-travels by collaging a photo of contemporary Jerusalem with a view of the same area in the 1950s, when it was a Moroccan neighborhood. Both pictures evoke a sense of loss.

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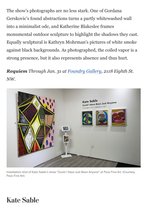
Like Zughbi, Moroccan Belgian photographer Mona Lamrabat whimsically juxtaposes Arab and African women, photographing a veiled woman who holds yellow flowers in a French-Dutch bulletin that's almost the same shade of red as her hijab. Melissa Chimera, a Honolulu native of Lebanese descent, uses the style of old Persian manuscripts to render a symbolic maritime scene that features coronavirus spores and ship-crew members outfitted with surgical masks.

Striking a similar tone, Turkey's Erhan Uz mocks a consumer side effect of the pandemic with a roll of toilet paper made of silver duct tape. More ominously, Iraqi Italian artist Alice Ahmar depicts not a cloth face covering, but a gas mask, elegantly carved from marble.

Isolation can be embodied in human forms. Sudanese expressionist painter Dalila Abdallah Bunder positions two nude women, silhouetted and all-blue, so they're intimate yet distant. In a diptych by Iranian American photo-collagist Sepideh Sadeki, a woman hides her face with her hand while her arm turns into a distant but vividly remembered landscape.

The selection includes abstract works, but most of those seem less urgent than the representational ones. An eloquent exception is a painting by Sina Ala, an American-born Iraqi who lives in Jordan. He covered a wooden panel with notches, each one to represent a life lost to covid-19, and then splashed the surface with zenith blue. The piece is a protest against depersonalization, and indeed against mortality, that pulses with life.

Art in Isolation: Creativity in the Time of COVID-19 Through Feb. 19 at the MO Art Gallery, 1753 N St. NW. Open by appointment.

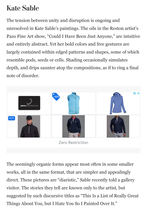


"Tunnel," by Courtney Soukkarieh. (Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Tokyo, Tokyo, Japan) (Courtesy Fusion Gallery)

"This Way Ala Ka Gallows, Ladies and Gentlemen," by Sina Ala. (Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Tokyo, Tokyo, Japan) (Courtesy Fusion Gallery)

Requiem

A dark year recently ended, but the artists of Foundry Gallery are not yet thinking of spring. That's evident from the title of the gallery's all-member show, "Requiem," as well as the artworks' funereal color schemes. One of Joy Pennell's pieces is a wall of black charcoal that feels intentionally oppressive, and the work's polymer-clay sculptor Fran Abrams ditched her usual vivid hues in favor of gray, black and white.



The show's name was likely suggested by Patsy Fleming's "Requiem in the Cows," which pairs a gray cow on black and white are punctuated by simple animal forms that recall prehistoric cave paintings. Several other contributors employ pastel or even bright colors but subordinate them to aggressive black gestures. Hester Obin does this abstractly in "Grieving," and Barbara Pilskin figuratively with "The Bright Sun Brings Hope," whose distorted faces don't seem all that optimistic.

A few pieces refer specifically to the events of 2020. Amy Barkow-Wilson's two impassioned, text-heavy paintings both demand racial justice and despair of achieving it. A pandemic-era interior scene by Judy Seidel Pattern (the team of Karin Cergnelli and Mari Malone) contemplates a lamp, a plant and a pair of feet from a lounging person's point of view. On a similar theme of their obviously linked to recent events is Courtney Applegate's elegant charcoal-and-pencil drawing of hands, interlocked yet disconnected.

The show's photographs are no less stark. One of Gordana Gordevic's found abstractions turns a partly whitewashed wall into a minimalist relief, and Katherine Blakeslee frames monumental outdoor sculptures to highlight the shadows they cast. Equally sculptural is Kathryn Mohrman's pictures of white smoke against black backgrounds. As photographed, the coiled vapor is a strong presence, but it also represents absence and thus hope.

Requiem Through Jan. 31 at Foundry Gallery, 2318 Eighth St. NW.

Installation view of Kate Sabb's show "Could I Have Been Kinder? Paint Your Art Anyway." (Courtesy Pace Fine Art)

Kate Sabb

The tension between unity and disruption is ongoing and unresolved in Kate Sabb's paintings. The oils in the Reston artist's Pace Fine Art show, "Could I Have Been Just Anyway," are intuitive and entirely abstract. Yet her bold colors and free gestures are largely contained within edged patterns and shapes, some of which resemble pads, seeds or cells. Shading occasionally simulates depth, and drips saunter atop the compositions, as if to ring a final note of disorder.

The seemingly organic forms appear most often in some smaller works, all in the same format, that are simpler and aggressive direct. These pictures are "diaristic," Sabb recently told a gallery visitor. The stories they tell are known only to the artist, but suggested by such discursive titles as "This Is a List of Really Great Things About You, but I Hate You So I Painted Over It."

The pictures are reminiscent of early 20th-century European abstraction, yet with a physicality that's closer to American postwar abstract expressionism. The most recent pictures add another flavor: neon hues that the artist says "wreak havoc on the work." Wreaking havoc is one of Sabb's evident impulses, but maintaining balance is clearly just as important.

Kate Sabb: Could I Have Been Just Anyone Through Feb. 8 at Pace Fine Art, 4508 Howard Ave., Kensington. Open by appointment.

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